

Significance of Digital Technology in Transforming Marketing: Findings from a Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Markets and society today depend heavily on digital technology, and digital transformation is quickly emerging as a major area of corporate innovation. But since digital transformation is so complicated, businesses are still unable to properly recognize and take advantage of its prospects. This research looks into how businesses are presently using digital technology. The essay examines how digital transformation affects traditional marketing, including its function, structure, and tools, as it has the potential to alter the conventional value-creation process, which is largely engaged in marketing. The research employed a qualitative methodology by conducting in-depth interviews with managers employed by several Italian enterprises. The findings indicate that businesses utilize digital technology extensively, even if they frequently fall within the category of conventional tools, and that businesses are more "digitalized" than "digitally transformed." Digital technologies have an influence on marketing by enhancing the capabilities of pricing, channel management, market analytics, and client connection building to facilitate value co-creation. Through the use of varied knowledge and cross-functional experiences, organizational processes are becoming more effective and adaptable, while professional abilities are enhanced in numerous ways. The primary challenges and dangers associated with implementing digital transformation are examined in relation to research and management consequences.

Keywords: marketing, digital transformation, customer engagement, market analytics, marketing skills, marketing organization

I. INTRODUCTION

Technology is continuously changing society, bringing about changes in the political, cultural, and economic spheres. This transition, however occurring at different intensities across industries, is positively influencing the corporate world. According to data from Anitec-Assinform's most current report (2021), TLC & media, industry, and finance are the three Italian industries with the largest absolute value investments, coming in at €8.815, €7.909, and €7.989 million, respectively. In this perspective, some technologies—including cloud computing, mobile business, and the Internet of Things (IoT)—can be seen as already mature, while others, like blockchain and artificial intelligence, appear to be emerging. Digital investments in the industrial sector are primarily focused on increasing customer interaction, strengthening employee connections, cutting time-to-market via agile manufacturing and supply chain management, boosting operational efficiency, and advancing data exploitation.

The subject of digital transformation (DT) is becoming more and more popular in light of this development. DT has become a "hype" or "buzzword" due to the various definitions that academics and practitioners have put out; yet, there hasn't been enough focus on defining and conceptualizing DT (Gong & Ribiere, 2021; Hausberg et al., 2019). Academics concurred that there are many and significant ramifications for DT. Furthermore, DT involves a variety of internal and external actors by rethinking the market approach and value proposition, altering organizational processes and structures, and, in certain situations, innovating the business model. These activities go beyond the adoption of one or more digital technologies (Broekhuizen et al., 2021). Marketing may have a significant impact in this situation because of its vital role in bridging the gap between companies and the market. It can assist a business in adjusting to the ever-evolving demands and trends arising from the outside world. However, in order to meet the problems posed by digital transformation, marketing theory must be updated with fresh ideas, reasoning, and methods that reflect the field's continuous progress (De Luca et al., 2020). The future of marketing, according to Kumar et al. (2021), is in businesses' attempts to have a comprehensive grasp of their clients' requirements and behaviors across platforms, devices, and a range of goods and services. In order to do this, it is essential to look at how new digital technologies are affecting marketing tactics in order to determine which areas may benefit from more research as well as how they are presently being used.

In response to these demands, the current study investigates how businesses today see and use DT and how it influences marketing via altering its structure, function, and internal procedures. The major goal is to comprehend the intricate link between DT and marketing by looking at (i) how marketing procedures and resources may benefit from DT, and (ii) how DT can enhance the value creation process that the marketing function is a part of. The body of research on this subject is very shattered since most of the studies have only looked at a particular marketing action or choice, and their conclusions have frequently been inconsistent. Therefore, more research is advised. In particular, this exploratory study makes two contributions. Firstly, in contrast to previous research, this study takes a comprehensive approach to the consequences of digital transformation by examining marketing as a strategy and process in its whole. In this regard, the results point to some significant shifts in the structure, function, and administration of marketing. The report also analyzes the risks and obstacles to digital transformation that the organizations may face and how they are attempting to overcome them. We get some helpful suggestions for managers and legislators from these risks and obstacles.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Digital Transformation

Scholars and practitioners alike are using the phrase "digital transformation" in their discussions and agendas, and the idea is now a "hot topic." Recent years have seen a huge increase in conceptual and empirical study on DT across a variety of domains, and several literature reviews have been released (Krishen et al., 2021). Between 2000 and 2021, there were 3,109 more articles, conference papers, books, and book chapters in the Scopus database that included the term "digital transformation" in the title, keywords, or abstract. The subject of digital transformation (DT) may be examined from two main angles: that of the corporation implementing digital technology, or that of the clients the organization is trying to reach. The first perspective—which acknowledges that the issue is interdisciplinary and involves changes in strategy, organization, technology, supply chains, and marketing—is the subject of this study (Verhoef et al., 2021). Digital technology may improve a company's operational effectiveness and the efficiency of its current procedures (Pascucci, 2017). Additionally, they may open up fresh avenues for business model changes, such digital servitization (Frank et al., 2019; Gebauer et al., 2021; Grandinetti et al., 2020) (Ancillai et al., 2022). The dual nature of digital transformation implications allows for the differentiation of digital transformation into three stages (Verhoef et al., 2021). Digitization is the process of converting analog information into a digital format; digitalization is the application of digital technologies to enhance current business processes; and DT is the creation of a new business model utilizing digital technologies. According to this conceptualization, most businesses, particularly SMEs, are still in the second stage of transformation (Gong & Ribiere, 2021), making digital transformation (DT) the most widespread and complicated stage of change. The digital resources, organizational structure, growth plan, and measurements of organizations are subject to distinct pressures at each stage. Since DT is a dynamic process, there is no "one best way" to apply it; instead, each company must develop its own strategy (Checchinato et al., 2021). As a result, DT can have varying degrees of maturity. Despite the increasing amount of research on digital transformation, some writers have stated that the phenomena is still understudied (Fernandez-Ravira et al., 2021) and that more understanding of the actual nature of change and transformation is still necessary (Gong & Riviere, 2021). Furthermore, it appears that businesses are not yet completely utilizing the potential of digital technology, since many have not achieved the anticipated outcomes, despite the chances brought about by technological advancement. Thus, according to Hinterhuber et al. (2021), DT is "a substantial problem of practice". In this context, a "digitalization paradox" has been brought to light by Gebauer et al. (2020), according to which "companies invest in digitalization but struggle to earn the expected revenue growth" Given this, the following is our first research question (RQ1): RQ1 How do businesses see DT? Specifically, how and why do they use digital technology for that purpose?

2.2. Marketing in the Age of DT

One industry experiencing DT on a large scale and experimenting with new technologies, such blockchain, IoT, and AI, is marketing (Grewal et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2021). People are now continuously connected, which has drastically changed the customer journey due to digitalization. Furthermore, there has been a remarkable surge in client empowerment in the digital age. Customers no longer accept to be passive recipients of the messages that businesses provide them since there is a plethora of information available to them and possibilities for involvement (Auh et al., 2019; Akhavannasab et al., 2018). This shift necessitates creative methods of marketing communication and makes it necessary for businesses to communicate swiftly, honestly, and consistently with specific consumers. A customer-centric strategy, which puts the needs of the customer first in organizational plans, has been adopted by businesses as a result of all these changes (Shah et al., 2006). As a result, business-customer interactions are changing, and businesses in both B2B and B2C industries should make investments to develop better, tighter, and more enduring ties with their clients. Digital technology have aided businesses in their pursuit of this goal. In order to identify more profitable customers, guide investment decisions, promptly respond to customer requests,

and deliver customized offerings and experiences, for example, businesses can use CRM technologies to gather customer information through multiple touchpoints and share the necessary information across the organization (Nasir, 2015). An organization that is customer-centric is built on its customer data. As a vital tool for establishing and preserving client connections, customizing goods and services, adjusting the marketing mix, and streamlining real-time marketing operations, data are taking on a more and more essential position in marketing. Today's businesses work in "data-rich environments," such as social media and the web, which have brought about an explosion of real-time data, particularly unstructured data, which has the potential to change how marketing operations are managed and open up new business prospects (Wedel & Kannan, 2016).

A "data-driven approach" to marketing has been made possible by the proliferation of data, advancements in algorithmic intelligence (AI), and more potent computing and storage capacities. These factors enable the transformation of data into business insights, decisions, and actions, as noted by Anderson (2008) and Pascucci et al. (2022). This approach enables businesses to personalize their offerings and optimize marketing choices for clients in real-time (Wirtz et al., 2017). Marketing analytics has emerged as a new area of marketing research due to the increasing importance of data-driven decision-making in contemporary organizations (Sheth, 2021). However, many organizations have failed to properly incorporate the data into their decision-making processes, and the growing amount and diversity of data remain largely untapped by enterprises (Tabesh et al., 2019). Because of this, many businesses have not been able to fulfill their "big data dreams" (Mazzei & Noble, 2017). The primary causes of this failure have been found by prior study to be a lack of organizational resources (such as infrastructure, human resources, and competences) as well as technical and cultural hurdles (Tabesh et al., 2019). In fact, companies looking to make money from (big) data analytics have to possess the following components: Three key elements are needed for an organization to succeed: first, a culture and leaders who understand the value of data, analytics, and data-driven decision making; second, a governance structure that avoids silos and makes it easier to integrate data and analytics into the organization's overall strategy and processes; and third, a critical mass of marketing analysts who together offer both substantive marketing knowledge and sufficiently deep analytics expertise (Wedel & Kannan, 2016). To put it another way, this development is changing how marketing strategies are created and carried out, which results in a general restructuring of the marketing mix management (Caliskan et al., 2021). Consequently, new organizational structures, competencies, and a novel marketing strategy—Digital Marketing: Krishen et al., 2021—are needed. Remarkably, scholars have created the new "Marketing 4.0" (Kartajaya et al., 2016; Jara et al., 2012), predicated on the idea that consumers want to be involved in the manufacturing process in addition to seeking out goods and services to meet their requirements. This element necessitates a change to a more inclusive, interactive, and collaborative strategy, which Marketing 4.0 seeks to facilitate in order to strengthen bonds between brands and customers (Dash et al., 2021).

The emergence of social media has had a significant impact on marketing practices and how businesses manage their brands. Customers are becoming "pivotal authors" of brand stories, and businesses must take notice of this and adjust firm-generated content appropriately (Gensler et al., 2013). Customers have a say in how their products are customized thanks to digital technologies like virtual, augmented, and mixed reality. These technologies have the potential to improve customer experiences across the customer journey (Hoyer et al., 2020; Flaviàn et al., 2019) and increase customer participation in the design of new products (Mourtzis & Doukas, 2012). It is noteworthy that there is variation in the level of customization that customers desire, and brand managers must have a deeper comprehension of these variations in order to create and implement chances for consumer customization that work (Pallant et al., 2020). Pricing considerations are impacted by digital change as well. Personalized and dynamic pricing is now possible because of the increasing availability of data and pricing algorithms. With this approach, rates can vary daily, hourly, or for each individual client based on acquired and analyzed data. Particularly in the service industry, this pervasive behavior is common (Abrate et al., 2012). Lastly, according to Hansen and Sia (2015), DT enables customers to use and transition between several channels with ease during their customer experience. As a result of these advancements, "omnichannel management," as opposed to "multichannel management," is becoming more and more recognized as a new strategic approach for managing the concurrent and harmonious interaction between channels and delivering the seamless customer experience that consumers demand (Verhoef et al., 2015).

Over the past 20 years, there has been a significant surge in digital marketing research as a result of all these evolving trends. However, according to Kristen et al. (2021), digital marketing is still developing and has not yet reached maturity. Furthermore, because earlier research has mostly concentrated on certain marketing activities and has produced inconsistent results, the body of literature now in existence is quite fragmented. As a result, the following is our second research question (RQ2): RQ2 What effects is DT now having on marketing initiatives and the connections between businesses and their clients? Digital developments bring with them many opportunities, but they also surely bring with them certain obstacles. Three major challenges have already been identified by Leeflang et al. (2014) for digital marketers: the capacity to produce and apply profound consumer insights; the maintenance of brand reputation in a marketing environment dominated by user-generated content; and the evaluation of the efficacy of digital marketing. Because of the growing disparity between the development of businesses' digital marketing skills and the expanding complexity of markets and technology, the question of human resources and capabilities continues to be particularly important. A "digital talent gap" caused by increased data complexity is exacerbated by the difficulties in finding workers with the ability to combine marketing, analytics, and quantitative abilities

(Leeflang et al., 2014). In this context, Herhausen et al. (2021) have distinguished two gaps in marketing capability: the "knowledge gap," or the separation between the digital marketing transformation and the body of existing scholarly knowledge supporting it, and the "practice gap," or the discrepancy between managers' actual practices and their ideal digital marketing capabilities. According to Matarazzo et al. (2021), SMEs' DT is often fundamentally facilitated by dynamic capabilities, particularly sensing and learning skills. These writers contend that DT is a learning process since it necessitates the addition of new personnel and some organizational structure modifications, highlighting the importance of the "soft" dimension of DT above the technology dimension. Eller et al. (2020) have found that hiring staff with the necessary skills is a major obstacle to SMEs' successful digitalization, and that a digital strategy that includes specific KPIs and processes for process monitoring is a fundamental driver of digitalization. Graesch et al. (2021) highlight the necessity of closer alignment between marketing and information technology (IT) with respect to knowledge and skills.

Most authors concur that little focus has been placed on the corresponding skills that businesses require to completely leverage digital technology. Examining the cause of this disparity, examining the applications of digital technology, and determining the most important domains might be both intriguing and beneficial. Consequently, the following is our third research question (RQ3): RQ3 What effect does DT have on marketing competencies and organizations? The effects of DT on the function and importance of marketing inside the organization are a topic of additional discussion in the marketing literature. Some academics claim that because marketing choices are being made in other departments, marketing is becoming less significant and marginalized (Homburg et al., 2015; Verhoef & Leeflang, 2009). Similarly, evolution "has precipitated a managerial sense of crisis for marketing, triggering a transformation that has repercussions for the future of the discipline and its practice," according to Quinn et al. (2016) (p. 2104). However, other authors contend that as technology has advanced, so too has the role and scope of marketing within organizations. Originally focused on the creation and management of creative communication, these days also include the application of data-driven and technologically enabled marketing strategies that are both financially responsible and pertinent to businesses and their clients (Shah & Murthi, 2021). It would be fascinating to investigate how DT could have altered the role of marketing and the primary ramifications of this development in light of this conversation. Consequently, the following is our fourth research question (RQ4): RQ4 In what ways could DT have altered the general function and significance of marketing in businesses?

III. METHODOLOGY

Using a multiple case study approach, this study conducted an exploratory examination of DT in 11 Italian businesses that operate in various industries. The case study technique is particularly appropriate given the novelty and complexity of design theory (DT) since it highlights the richness of the phenomena and firmly establishes the conclusions in the diverse empirical data that is gathered (Eisenhardt, 1989). Case studies are especially helpful in promoting a full, realistic, and holistic knowledge of a particular phenomena by offering in-depth answers to "how" and "why" research questions. Furthermore, Hausberg et al. (2019) have explicitly demanded further case studies outlining the merits, drawbacks, and advantages of DT implementations. Based on in-person and virtual meetings, the study team conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews (n = 20) with people who held important positions in digital transformation (DT), such as chief officer (CO), chief digital officer (CDO), or chief marketing officer (CMO). Because semi-structured interviews allow researchers to follow a controlled method while still allowing respondents to freely discuss their experiences and perspectives, they matched the study's exploratory purpose (Yin, 2009).

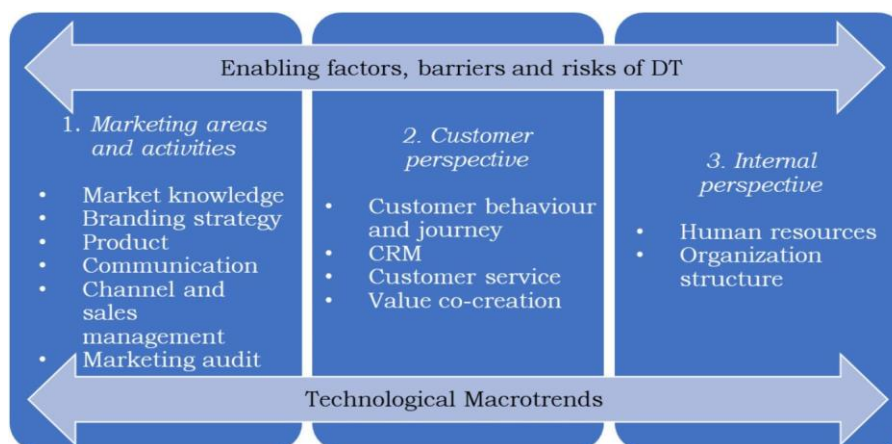


Figure 1: Framework of analysis

The approximately two-hour-long, Italian-language interview was audio recorded, transcribed, and then examined. According to the theory of theoretical saturation, the number of interviews conducted within each company was decided upon. As a result, interviews continued until the information obtained was deemed adequate for the analysis's scope and no more pertinent information could have been obtained through interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The interview guide was designed to examine digital transformation (DT) from four perspectives: the technologies that have been adopted (technological macrotrends); the consequences of technology adoption for marketing processes; the effects of technology adoption on human resources and organizations; and the consequences of technology adoption for customer relationships. The interview guide was thoughtfully created using the previously examined DT and marketing literature as a reference.

Secondary data were acquired from business presentations, company reports, newspapers, magazines, and websites in addition to the main data from the interviews. These made it possible to triangulate data, which gives a phenomenon's analysis from several angles more depth (Denzin, 1984). The general structure that directed the creation and examination of the case study is shown in Figure 1. Regarding the sample, companies from the Marche area were chosen through a deliberate process (Patton, 2005). There are n.145.609 enterprises in this area as of 2021, or 2.8% of all Italian firms. The two primary industries are manufacturing and commerce. Marche has a greater entrepreneurial density (i.e., more businesses per 1000 people) than Italy (87 vs. 97, according to <https://statistica.regione.marche.it>). Because of its entrepreneurial spirit, the Marche Region offers an intriguing backdrop for researching the phenomena of businesses going digital. Businesses have been chosen to show the main areas of this industry and to give an accurate image of the current state of affairs while taking into account various sectors, demands, and criticalities from the standpoint of the DT phenomenon.

Table 1: Details of investigated firms

| Firms | Industry | 2023 turnover (in €) | # of employees | Mar- ket |
|----------------------------|--|----------------------|----------------|----------|
| Algam EKO Srl | Musical instruments | 18.3 million | 56 | B2B –B2C |
| Ariston Thermo Spa | Thermal comfort, burners, and components sectors | 1.89 Billion | 7,643 | B2B –B2C |
| Biesse Spa | Mechatronics | 710 Million | 4,210 | B2B |
| Diasen Srl | Construction | 8 million | 35 | B2B –B2C |
| Doucal's Srl | Footwear | 13 million | 75 | B2B |
| Eden Viaggi - Alpitour Spa | Tour operating | 726 Million | 4,500 | B2B –B2C |
| Go World | Tour operating | 3 million | 58 | B2B –B2C |
| IT Consult | Consultancy (knowledge management) | 1.2 million | 20 | B2B |
| Magazzini Gabrielli Spa | Retail | 910 Million | 21000 | B2C |
| Salumificio Ciriaci Srl | Food | 14 million | 45 | B2B –B2C |
| Simonelli Group Spa | Mechanical | 74 million | 210 | B2B –B2C |

Enon. As a result, the sample spans different sectors and sizes since the goal was to obtain a wide range of DT situations (see Table 1). Furthermore, we only chose integrated businesses because of their history, which guarantees that they have dealt with DT obstacles and conflicts and had to weigh trade-offs between traditional and novel business practices (Verhoef et al., 2021). In light with our study objective, all of the chosen companies must be engaged in digital transformation

in some capacity and understand the value of making investments in cutting-edge technology. Despite being a regional analysis, the results are significant since Marche is one of Italy's most industrialized areas and its industry distribution is quite comparable to that of Italy, with a predominance of small and medium-sized businesses.

The gathered data have been analyzed in accordance with Eisenhardt's (1989) recommendations for cross-case and within-case analysis. Every example was carefully examined in order to get understanding of the connection between DT and marketing. After then, the examples were compared in order to examine parallels and divergences and get a deeper comprehension of the DT phenomena.

Table 2: The current status of companies' DT

| Firms | Digital technologies | Areas of application |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Algam EKO Srl | Mobile technology/smart apps Social media | Communication |
| Ariston Thermo Spa | AI Blockchain Social media | Service Assis- tance (CRM) Internal Organization Communication |
| Biesse Spa | Big Data IoT Social media | Branding Service production Communication |
| Diasen Srl | Social media | Communication CRM |
| Doucal's Srl | ERP Social media Smart glasses | Production Communication Training |
| Eden Viaggi - Alpitour Spa | Big data Blockchain Mobile technology/smart apps Social media | Service production Communication |
| Go World | Big data Social media | E-commerce Communication |
| IT Consult | Josh platform MailChimp Microsoft Dynamics Social media | Production Email automation CRM Communication |
| Magazzini Gabrielli Spa | Big data ERP Mobile technology/smart apps Social media | Service production Promotion Communication |
| Salumificio Ciriaci Srl | Mobile technology/smart apps Social media | Production Communication |
| Simonelli Group Spa | AI Big Data IoT Mobile technology/smart apps Social media | Service production Product maintenance Communication |

IV. RESULTS

In the examined firms, DT is a continuous process that has been adopted and seen in different ways. Table 2 provides a concise overview of each company's present DT status by highlighting the primary technologies used and their corresponding business domains of use. Algam EKO is a company in the musical instrument sector. Digital technologies are primarily used by the firm in its interactions with suppliers and consumers. In particular, it has been active on social media since 2009, particularly on YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram, and has been embracing mobile technologies and smart

applications since 2016. AI applications are being developed with the goal of bringing the in-store experience online through the production of impromptu movies in association with businesses. Blockchain and IoT technologies are not yet used by Algam EKO. Ariston Thermo is involved in the burner, component, and thermal comfort industries. As an international corporation that expanded via several acquisitions, digital technologies have been employed to foster more unity among the team members. They began by offering support services. Because the boilers have sensors inside of them, the firm can detect problems early and sometimes solves the issue entirely over the phone without having to visit the clients' homes. This resulted in the introduction of a completely new customer service model as well as significant commercial insights on the gathering, storing, and use of data. The firm is only getting started with AI and IoT. Blockchain and IoT integration is still a goal for the near future. Ariston Thermo is a relatively newcomer to the field of digital communications. It is there on social media platforms, but because social media is not controlled centrally and systematically, it still needs to rediscover its essence. According to the Chief Digital Officer, "Everyone does his own thing, so we're still figuring out who's doing what and how to make it a trend again." (Spa Ariston Thermo)

Biesse is a company in the electronics sector. In 2016, the business introduced "Sophia," an Industrial Internet of things (IIoT) platform that uses sensors attached to machines to track consumer activity and provide real-time data. Sophia enables big data analytics for the optimization of both production processes and goods and services, cloud computing for data management in open systems, and IIoT for bidirectional connection between customers' and products' processes. The Group's branding strategy benefited from the introduction of new digital technologies as well. This included reinventing the brand to be more inventive, digital, clear, and straightforward, as well as increasing its presence in digital channels including social media platforms. The construction industry is owned by Diansen. More and more customers are using social media, particularly Instagram, to locate specific content after being referred by experts. Since 2017, the business has made the decision to strengthen its social media presence by improving the information offered, the degree of contact, and user engagement. This is because customers have grown more engaged and have begun interacting with the firm through these channels. DT encouraged the business to use tools including CRM software, digital content platforms, and email marketing platforms to increase its effectiveness in digital marketing. Even while Diansen believes AI may be helpful for production processes, they haven't yet begun utilizing more advanced technologies like Big Data, AI, or Blockchain.

Doucal's contributions to the shoe sector. External context development was the main driver of digitization. Due to the original company's focus on the product, DT began with manufacturing at Doucal's and moved on to marketing. Since 2015, social media communication has been a part of marketing, which has always involved communication. Doucal's has been utilizing enterprise resource planning (ERP) software since 2018 to automate and manage key company activities, but it hasn't yet introduced artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain systems, the Internet of Things, or mobile technology. Taking production into account, cutting artists use smart eyewear equipped with a miniature camera to record movements in real time. On anonymous workstations, filming is separated into two categories: the shoe model and the particular processing. This makes the intangible assets clear and accessible, even at a distance and across several platforms—for instance, during the onboarding of new employees.

The trip operator is called Eden Viaggi - Alpitour. The app "My Alpitour World" was created in July 2016 with the goal of serving as clients' personal travel advisor at every turn, from making reservations to returning home and providing tailored services while on vacation. To locate and communicate with clients Since 2010, Eden Viaggi-Apitour has mostly used social media, especially YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. The organization has been skeptical about AI thus far in its field, particularly in light of the usage of chatbots for customer service. The marketing director also mentioned that it is challenging to find questions that can be sufficiently standardized for a machine or algorithm to provide a satisfactory response. As of 2019, the business has also been creating personalized forecasts and business ideas utilizing big data and analytics. Although IoT technologies were not used, blockchain technology is being used, and the hotel division is developing an NFT. Another travel company is Go World. The organization believes that larger participants in the industry with more complicated decision-making and control processes will benefit more from the use of AI, IoT, and blockchain technology. Similarly, Go World chose not to employ smartphone technology or applications as they believe they are more suited for B2C situations rather than B2B, which is where the majority of the company's business is conducted. However, the business also uses social media to communicate with its clientele, and in 2019 it began developing plans for a new e-commerce platform that would leverage analytics and big data to market tailored goods. In addition, travel agent training has been conducted using an e-learning platform.

IT Consult operates in the field of knowledge management. In particular, it uses the "Josh platform" to develop document management software. As a result, the business is completely immersed in the dynamics of the digital transition. The primary challenge was defining digital marketing initiatives and integrating them with other well-established business strategies. IT Consult primarily uses Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube for customer interaction and communication; it does not use IoT, blockchain, or artificial intelligence. The business also uses Microsoft Dynamic for CRM and "MailChimp" for marketing automation in emailing. A major retailer in the large-scale distribution sector is Magazzini Gabrielli. Specifically, the process of digitalization includes communication activities, which were traditionally conducted through separate physical

and digital channels. The majority of efforts focused on the necessity of integration in the wake of the omnichannel trend. The business planned its marketing initiatives along the customer journey using big data and analytics. In 2020, Magazzini Gabrielli began utilizing social media, particularly Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, for communication and promotional purposes. The OasiTigre app, which functions as a form of digital fidelity card, was also released in 2021. The business had not yet made use of IoT, blockchain, or AI technology. Salumificio Ciriaci is a company in the food sector. It was established in 1937 with the goal of creating authentic, high-quality items that were produced using conventional techniques. A rebranding plan has been introduced to strengthen the supply chain by connecting the product's quality to the territory's quality, after a recent generational and management shift. In this context, a social media communication plan has been put into place. The business also unveiled an app-enabled cold room monitoring system in 2020. But up until now, it didn't make use of blockchain, AI, or IoT technology.

Lastly, the mechanical industry is owned by the Simonelli Group. The business hasn't yet made advantage of blockchain technology. An IoT initiative to support product preventative maintenance is now underway. They are also observing the use of big data to CRM. The business started creating a product-related app system and leverages social media. The system is composed of two platforms and a linked machine; the latter is more focused on the coffee culture that serves consumers and caters to aficionados, while the former is more technological. As a result, DT has assisted in providing clients with a system package as opposed to a distributor-customer chain.

V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our results offer fresh and intriguing perspectives on the fundamental research issues that drove our investigation. Concerning RQ1 (How do businesses conceptualize DT? Specifically, how and why they use digital technology for it?), our findings support the body of research showing that businesses are dealing with diverse DT trajectories as a consequence of demand from both internal and external sources. They leverage a range of digital technologies, some of which are yet underutilized (AI, Big Data, blockchain systems, and IoT, for example). This conclusion implies that DT is viewed and executed by enterprises in diverse ways, in keeping with previous research (Gong & Ribiere, 2021; Verhoef et al., 2021). However, DT is often a continuous process that begins with digitization and progresses through the "digitalization" phase to reach the DT stage. The businesses under investigation, which employed common technologies like social media, mobile, and smart applications, were still in the "digitalization" stage of the process, which is defined as encoding analog information into a digital format in order to enhance current business procedures (Verhoef et al., 2021). A select few businesses, including Simonelli Group and Biesse, have almost made it to the last stage of digital transformation (DT), which requires a significant adjustment to internal processes, organizational structure, and company strategy. According to Hinterhuber et al. (2021), most of the businesses surveyed are aware of the potential benefits of digital technology, including enhanced professional performance, faster and more controlled operations, and efficiency gains in business processes. Practically speaking, however, DT is not without its challenges because it necessitates significant organizational and cultural shifts. Additionally, managers typically take a cautious approach to DT since they are aware of the hazards (loss of customer interaction, potential digital divide inside the organization, etc.) that might compromise the company's competitiveness and long-term survival. The material that is now available has mostly concentrated on the DT's motivators and triggering circumstances. Therefore, the present study's identification of these DT hurdles and the strategies used by businesses to get over them is an innovative and novel contribution. This contribution can inform helpful recommendations and possibly beneficial actions for businesses working through a digitalization process, as will be covered later in this section. But this study's comprehensive examination of the connection between marketing and the DT phenomenon is its most significant contribution. According to recent research by Krishen et al. (2021), there is still a need for more evaluations of digital marketing research because the results have frequently been inconsistent. Furthermore, research has concentrated on specific marketing decisions or actions, such as pricing (Abrate et al., 2012) or distribution (Hansen & Sia, 2015), rather than marketing as a whole process and strategy, leading to a highly fragmented body of literature.

This study, on the other hand, looked into how digital technologies can alter the strategic and operational aspects of marketing, which can alter (i) the management of relationships between businesses and their clients, (ii) the structure of marketing competencies and initiatives, and (iii) the overall function and significance of marketing within the organization. Regarding the first question (i.e., RQ2: What effects is digital technology currently having on marketing initiatives and business-customer relationships?), digital technologies have made it easier for businesses to gather, store, process, and distribute data (Sheth, 2021; Wedel & Kannan, 2016). By improving the coordination and synchronization of production and distribution processes (i.e., the transfer from warehouses to distributors, order management, and associated services), such information may be easily communicated and utilized to align products to a range of demands. Overall, our findings show that by encouraging innovative approaches to managing the operational and strategic facets of marketing processes, DT may enhance an organization's ability to respond quickly to client requirements. For example, at the product level, the organizations

that participated in the interview acknowledged that digital transformation (DT) improved the efficacy of product conception, realization, and testing in addition to making it easier for customers to locate, learn about, buy, and use goods and services. One example that was brought up was the use of virtual reality for product testing, which resulted in cost and lead time savings. The examined firms paid close attention to digital channels at the communication level since they enable personalized and interactive communication. Consistent with earlier research (Zhang & Lin, 2015, for instance), social media platforms are presently utilized by all the examined companies, irrespective of industry and company size, as they acknowledge the potential to facilitate customers' effortless access to information and goods, which became especially important during pandemic emergencies. The substance of marketing messaging was also altered by digital transformation, which fostered brand strategies by emphasizing company values above product technical specifications. At the same time, the necessity of managing numerous touchpoints in an integrated manner was recognized and expressed with concern. In terms of distribution, businesses emphasized how DT promoted an omnichannel strategy to boost client happiness and loyalty. Additionally, several businesses saw that by highlighting the critical need for new managerial roles and training initiatives, DT forced an extended reform of sales management. Lastly, DT enabled dynamic pricing and personalized offers at the price level. As a result, there is now a more tailored approach to the market, built on constant communication with consumers who can more readily and successfully communicate their demands and take part in the value-creation process than in the past. Furthermore, by fostering consumer empowerment, the growing quantity of information can also affect the demand side (Auh et al., 2019; Akhavannasab et al., 2018). Both B2B and B2C environments have seen changes to the customer journey. A few of the larger organizations that were analyzed discussed the "hybridization" of the customer experience, citing the fact that the abundance of information available forces players to follow standard B2C paradigms even in the B2B market. Even if it necessitates significant investments, this hybridization forces the organization of marketing operations in a customer-centric manner (Shah et al., 2006). CRM is particularly useful for improving marketing targeting and disseminating customer intelligence throughout an organization, frequently in real time. Accordingly, CRM may be thought of as a type of "facilitator" for relationship management and client interaction at various points in the customer journey (Nasir, 2015). Overall, in a DT setting, the company-customer connection is typically reinforced, resulting in greater stability and long-term satisfaction since people are more satisfied with themselves when they feel heard (Col-lins, 2022).

We have empirical data to support our RQ3, "What is the impact of DT on marketing organization and competences?" from the expanding use of digital technologies, which also had an impact on the internal resource and capability management and organizational structure of the marketing function. Improving cross-functional coordination across business units is often necessary to enhance the strategic and analytical dimension of marketing. This encourages the adoption of informal integration mechanisms and a notable bolstering of coordination efforts. Our results support Graesch et al.'s (2021) assertion that maintaining a fair balance between digitisation and market objectives requires integration of the marketing and IT domains. Overemphasizing the technology aspect might lead to the creation of a value proposition that isn't really in line with what customers actually require. To promote inter-functional coordination and the sharing of shared goals, it is therefore essential to enhance communication between marketing and other corporate activities, particularly those in charge of the digitization process. This effort may occasionally call for the hiring of new professionals, the modification of current competencies through recurrent training sessions, or the creation of a novel solution to organizational issues that is predicated on dismantling "silo culture" and creating flatter, more flexible structures that allow information to flow quickly between marketing and other company departments. In addition, as other academics have noted, our analysis indicates a critical requirement for cultural transformation in order to properly implement DT (Leefflang et al., 2014; Wedel & Kannan, 2016). A factor impeding the company's progress in the field of digital innovations has been identified in some of the examined companies: cultural inadequacy of management. This is primarily intended as a lack of a culture of change that is necessary to reduce individual resistance to technology and related organizational changes. This conclusion emphasizes the necessity of initiating an acculturation process for a firm's internal workforce as well as the marketing department in order to facilitate the dissemination of a common culture, language, and way of thinking that aligns with the innovative goals of the organization. Ultimately, the study findings support our RQ4 (How would DT have affected the overall role and importance of marketing inside firms?) by recommending an improvement in the strategic function of marketing within the examined enterprises. The current pandemic issue has also increased awareness of the strategic relevance of marketing, as seen by the interviews. This has made it more clear that new and improved tools and procedures are needed to protect the competitive position (Savelli et al., 2021). But as DT put more pressure on the industry, it became clear that marketing's traditional function of matching the variety made possible by technology with the wants of customers was no longer relevant. In fact, personalization is steadily displacing standardization in the face of digital technology, increasing opportunities to meet the demands and desires of consumers. Therefore, marketing's function as a "reducer" of market complexity—which raises the potential of matching output variation to diverse needs—is somewhat modified by digitalization. As such, marketing's function is evolving to become that of a producer of suitable languages that facilitate efficient communication between departments inside a company as well as between that company and its clients. Our research indicates that, without losing sight of its market orientation and customer culture, marketing is increasingly serving as a strategic role for businesses and as a connector of many abilities (Shah &

Murthi, 2021). The analyzed companies showed that, in order to improve internal coordination and collaboration, they needed to integrate marketing with other business units more effectively and pay more attention to strategic marketing decisions, such as targeting and positioning, when the focus shifted from the product to the language. According to this viewpoint, traditional marketing is on the decrease, making room for a less centralised and more participatory strategy where consumers (in B2B as well as B2C settings) take a more active part in creating value.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study used a multiple-case study technique to examine the intricate interaction between DT and marketing. To sum up, this exploratory analysis has two contributions. Firstly, the present research considers marketing as a full strategy and process, producing a holistic picture of DT consequences, in contrast to previous studies that have been fragmented and explicitly focused on individual actions or decisions. The results show some significant alterations in the function, structure, and administration of marketing. In a technologically advanced environment where consumer and company behavior is changing quickly, marketing should help create new business models and improve existing ones. While the investigated firms employed different approaches to marketing, DT expanded its strategic role: marketing objectives seemed less tied to policy (i.e., 4P) management; decision-making had a wider time horizon; analytical and control activities were conducted more systemically; and channel relationship management became more intense. Furthermore, there has been a trend towards the flattening and simplification of organizational structures, and the interdependencies between marketing and other business activities have grown even more crucial. These indications point to a systemic and customer-focused strategy as the optimal choice. All things considered, DT suggests that marketing will be better able to comprehend the difficult societal and commercial trends in a more profound and original way. This shift may help a business provide cutting-edge goods and services that satisfy the target market, benefiting both clients and the business overall. Our research's conclusions demonstrate that DT ushers in a new phase of marketing evolution. The increase in compliance between marketing theory and practice, particularly among SMEs, is in line with the digital technology leap. It is often recognized that the "Marketing-non-marketing all'italiana" has been determined in part by the prevalence of SMEs. (Varaldo et al., 2006), which exhibits unusual traits in contrast to managerial theory norms. The theoretical/conceptual and practical aspects of marketing appear to be realigning favorably as a result of digital transformation, which facilitates and eases the execution of several strategic tasks including market analysis, market segmentation, and marketing mix customization. This development has also brought attention to how important marketing is to a company's success and ability to compete.

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