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Management Conference



Tertiarization & sustainability new challenges for management in the digital era

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Short Papers

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Tertiarization & sustainability. New challenges for management in the digital era

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Short Papers

edited by

Arabella Mocciaro Li Destri, Marta Ugolini and Lara Penco

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Between innovation and skepticism: AI's role in international strategic decisions for the food and beverage sector

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Abstract

The expanding integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in international business strategies has transformed decision-making processes. Nevertheless, skepticism persists, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This study explores AI adoption in international strategic decision (ISD) processes, focusing on managerial resistance to AI-driven decision-making, and identifying key psychological and functional barriers. Using a card-based game methodology, it investigates two Italian SMEs operating in the food and beverage sector. Findings reveal concerns over AI's compatibility with business culture, trust in algorithmic decisions, and the perceived trade-offs between AI efficiency and human expertise. Moreover, the discussion indicates that AI is seen as a complementary tool rather than a substitute for human judgment, with significant barriers linked to digital skills, transparency, and risk perception. This study enriches the body of research in international business by shedding light on the phenomenon of AI while also underlying the factors contributing to resistance or cautious adoption of AI-driven technologies in ISDs. Furthermore, it provides practical recommendations and actionable insights for firms seeking to integrate AI into their strategic operations effectively.

Framing of the research. Digital transformation is a key priority today, requiring firms to integrate innovative technologies to improve data management. This transformation includes many technologies and advancements that are considered state-of-the-art, such as AI, additive manufacturing, the Internet of Things (IoT), and robotic automation (Strange et al., 2022). Among these, AI has emerged as a transformative force, fundamentally reshaping decisions by overcoming human limitations (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2022).

Extensive research has documented the multifaceted advantages of AI for businesses, including improved decision-making capabilities, enhanced competitiveness, and increased operational efficiency (Magistretti et al., 2019; Denicolai et al., 2021). In the international business (IB) context, AI holds the potential to revolutionize firms' internationalization strategies by improving market selection processes, optimizing manufacturing locations, and refining global trade policies (OECD, 2022). As firms face the complexities of global competition, understanding the role of AI in shaping international strategic decisions (ISDs) becomes imperative. AI alters traditional paradigms, equipping firms with new tools to gain a competitive advantage in global markets (Feliciano-Cestero et al., 2023).

One particularly critical ISD that AI can influence is International Market Selection (IMS), a strategic decision process through which firms identify and prioritize foreign markets for expansion (Francioni et al., 2015). The literature has long recognized IMS' role in determining the success of strategic performance and IB operations (Brouthers et al., 2009; Martín Martín et al., 2022). Given the complexities of evaluating foreign market opportunities (He et al., 2016), selecting the wrong markets can result in substantial losses and missed opportunities, underscoring the need for methodical, and data-driven decision-making (Papadopoulos & Martín Martín, 2011). Other ISDs linked to IMS include the entry mode choice (Francioni et al., 2015), the selection of market segments and key international partners, such as distributors, suppliers, and customers.

Prior studies have explored the application of AI in international decision-making, such as Fish (2006) employing Kohonen Self-Organizing Maps to facilitate market selection. More recently, the capabilities of large language models, such as ChatGPT, have demonstrated potential in identifying optimal foreign markets for new product launches and clustering international markets based on shared attributes. These advancements suggest that AI could catalyze accelerating firms' global expansion efforts. By leveraging AI-driven analytics, firms, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that often lack formal internationalization strategies (Vissak & Francioni, 2013; Musso & Francioni, 2014), can identify high-potential markets with greater precision.

However, despite its promising potential, technical and organizational barriers persist, such as AI complexity and data quality concerns (Paschen et al., 2020). Moreover, a critical gap exists in understanding the psychological and

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