

## COMPETING IN PLATFORM ECOSYSTEMS: A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR COMPLEMENTOR FIRMS' MARKETING AND INNOVATION CHOICES

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### Abstract

The expansion of digital platform ecosystems has transformed business competition by creating interconnected environments where platform leaders and complementor firms collaboratively generate value. Complementor firms play a significant role in enhancing ecosystem attractiveness through innovation, customer engagement, and service diversification. However, increasing competition and dependence on platform governance create strategic challenges for complementors in balancing innovation and marketing strategies. This study aims to examine the strategic choices of complementor firms and propose a framework explaining how marketing and innovation capabilities influence competitiveness within platform ecosystems. Using a qualitative approach, the study explores strategic patterns adopted by complementors, including innovation-oriented, marketing-oriented, and hybrid strategies. The findings indicate that marketing strategies improve customer engagement and ecosystem visibility, while innovation strategies strengthen competitive differentiation and product sustainability. The study further highlights the influence of platform governance on complementor adaptability and performance. This research contributes to platform ecosystem literature by providing a strategic framework for complementor competitiveness in dynamic digital markets.

**Keywords:** *Platform Ecosystems, Complementor Firms, Marketing Strategy, Innovation Strategy, Digital Competition.*

### INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has accelerated the emergence of platform ecosystems as one of the dominant business models in the global economy. Digital platforms such as Amazon, Apple App Store, Google Play, Alibaba, Shopee, and Uber have transformed traditional market structures by facilitating interactions among multiple stakeholders, including producers, consumers, developers, and service providers (Agarwal et al., 2021). These ecosystems generate strong network effects, where the value of the platform increases as more users and complementors participate. Consequently, platform-based business models have become central to innovation, value co-creation, and competitive advantage in the digital era. The rise of platform economies has also reshaped industrial competition by shifting strategic focus from firm-centric competition toward ecosystem-based competition, where success increasingly depends on collaboration, interoperability, and ecosystem positioning (Rao & Jimenez, 2011).

Within these platform ecosystems, platform leaders and complementor firms play interdependent yet asymmetrical roles. Platform leaders provide the technological infrastructure, governance mechanisms, standards, and market access that enable ecosystem participants to operate and innovate. Meanwhile, complementor firms contribute products, applications, services, and innovations that enhance the platform's overall value proposition and attract users (Bauer & Prado, 2020). Despite the mutual dependence between both actors, complementors often operate under significant constraints imposed by platform governance, including algorithmic control, revenue-sharing policies, data access limitations, and platform rules. At the same time, competition among complementor firms has intensified as ecosystems become increasingly crowded and dynamic. Complementors must continuously compete for visibility, customer attention, and ecosystem legitimacy while simultaneously maintaining innovation

capabilities and marketing effectiveness to survive in highly competitive digital environments (Lévêque, 2018). This growing complexity creates important strategic challenges for complementor firms, particularly in balancing innovation and marketing strategies. On one hand, complementors are required to innovate continuously in order to differentiate their offerings, create unique customer value, and sustain competitiveness within the ecosystem. On the other hand, they must also invest in marketing capabilities to improve visibility, customer engagement, and platform ranking in environments heavily influenced by algorithms and digital promotion mechanisms (Rakhimova & Galyaviyev, 2025). However, excessive innovation may increase costs and uncertainty, while excessive conformity to platform standards may reduce differentiation and limit strategic autonomy. Furthermore, complementors are highly dependent on platform governance and ecosystem dynamics, where sudden policy changes, algorithm updates, or shifts in platform priorities can significantly affect firm performance. These conditions create strategic tensions between differentiation and platform conformity, forcing complementor firms to carefully align their innovation and marketing decisions with ecosystem requirements while preserving their competitive uniqueness (Rovenskaya et al., 2025).

In response to these challenges, this study aims to identify the strategic choices available to complementor firms in platform ecosystems and to examine how marketing and innovation strategies interact in shaping complementor competitiveness. Specifically, the study seeks to explore how complementors balance ecosystem dependence with strategic autonomy, as well as how they integrate innovation and marketing capabilities to enhance performance within digital platforms. Additionally, this research proposes a comprehensive strategic framework that explains the relationships among platform governance, innovation strategy, marketing capability, and competitive outcomes for complementor firms. By developing this framework, the study is expected to contribute to the growing literature on platform ecosystems and provide practical insights for managers seeking to compete effectively in increasingly complex digital business environments.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Platform Ecosystems**

Platform ecosystems refer to interconnected digital environments in which multiple independent actors interact, create value, and exchange resources through a common technological infrastructure managed by a platform owner. Unlike traditional linear business models, platform ecosystems operate through value co-creation among ecosystem participants, including platform leaders, complementors, consumers, developers, and third-party service providers (Rovenskaya et al., 2025). The platform serves as an intermediary that facilitates transactions, communication, innovation, and collaboration among these actors. Examples of platform ecosystems include Apple's App Store, Amazon Marketplace, Google Play, Alibaba, and Uber, all of which depend on interactions among diverse stakeholders to generate value and sustain growth. The increasing adoption of digital technologies and internet connectivity has accelerated the expansion of platform ecosystems across various industries, transforming competition from firm-centric rivalry into ecosystem-based competition (Mlčúchová, 2022).

One of the defining characteristics of platform ecosystems is their scalability, modularity, and interdependence among participants. Platform ecosystems are highly scalable because digital infrastructures allow firms to expand user participation and transactions with relatively low marginal costs. They are also modular, enabling complementors to independently develop products or services that integrate with the platform's architecture (Mlčúchová, 2022). Furthermore, ecosystem participants are interconnected through shared standards, data flows, and technological compatibility, creating strong interdependencies among actors. This interconnected structure enables rapid innovation and value creation but also introduces complexity, as changes in one part of the ecosystem can significantly influence other participants. Consequently, platform ecosystems require effective coordination and governance to maintain ecosystem stability, innovation, and long-term competitiveness (Gasser, 2015).

### **Complementor Firms in Platform Ecosystems**

Complementor firms are independent organizations or individuals that provide products, services, applications, or technologies that enhance the value of a platform ecosystem. These firms operate within the ecosystem by leveraging the platform's infrastructure, user base, and technological standards to deliver complementary offerings to customers (Mlčúchová, 2022). Examples of complementors include mobile application developers on Apple's App Store, third-party sellers on Amazon Marketplace, and content creators on YouTube. Complementors play a crucial role in expanding platform functionality, increasing service diversity, and improving customer experience, thereby contributing significantly to ecosystem attractiveness and growth. Without complementors, platform ecosystems would struggle to maintain innovation, user engagement, and competitive

advantage (Schrieck et al., 2021). The role of complementor firms extends beyond merely supplying products or services, as they are also important sources of innovation and market expansion within the ecosystem. Complementors frequently introduce new features, technologies, and customer solutions that enhance the platform's overall value proposition. Through their innovations, complementors help platforms attract new users, increase transaction activity, and strengthen network effects (Rietveld, 2018). In many cases, complementors also contribute specialized expertise and niche market knowledge that platform leaders may not possess. However, despite their contributions, complementors often face structural disadvantages because platform leaders maintain control over governance mechanisms, customer access, and ecosystem visibility. This creates an environment where complementors must strategically manage both collaboration and competition within the ecosystem (Loh & Nicolle, 2023).

### **Marketing Strategies in Platform Ecosystems**

Marketing strategies within platform ecosystems differ significantly from traditional marketing approaches because they are heavily influenced by digital interactions, platform algorithms, and ecosystem dynamics. Complementor firms must compete not only based on product quality and price but also on ecosystem visibility, customer engagement, and digital reputation. In platform environments, marketing success often depends on a firm's ability to optimize search rankings, customer reviews, platform analytics, and recommendation systems (Parker et al., 2020). As platforms become increasingly data-driven, complementors rely on digital marketing capabilities such as targeted advertising, content optimization, social media integration, and personalized customer experiences to improve visibility and attract users. Consequently, marketing within platform ecosystems is highly dynamic and requires continuous adaptation to platform governance mechanisms and changing consumer behaviors (Sánchez-Cartas & León, 2021).

Another important aspect of marketing strategies in platform ecosystems is the integration between customer engagement and innovation activities. Complementors must continuously gather customer feedback, analyze user data, and monitor platform trends to develop offerings that align with evolving consumer preferences and ecosystem demands (Chen et al., 2021). Strong customer engagement not only improves brand loyalty and customer retention but also enhances algorithmic visibility and ecosystem legitimacy. At the same time, marketing strategies must support innovation efforts by effectively communicating product uniqueness, technological advantages, and customer value propositions. Therefore, successful complementor firms are those capable of integrating marketing and innovation capabilities to strengthen competitive positioning, sustain ecosystem relevance, and achieve long-term growth within increasingly competitive platform ecosystems (Panico & Cennamo, 2020).

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the strategic choices of complementor firms within platform ecosystems, particularly regarding their marketing and innovation decisions. A qualitative method is considered appropriate because the study seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and strategic behaviors of complementor firms operating in dynamic digital ecosystems. The research adopts a multiple case study design involving complementor firms operating on major digital platforms such as Amazon Marketplace, Apple App Store, Google Play, Shopee, and Tokopedia. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with business owners, managers, developers, and marketing executives who are directly involved in strategic decision-making processes. In addition, secondary data such as company reports, platform policies, digital marketing materials, and ecosystem documentation will be analyzed to enrich contextual understanding and improve data triangulation. Purposive sampling will be used to select firms that actively participate in platform ecosystems and possess relevant experience in managing innovation and marketing strategies within digital platforms.

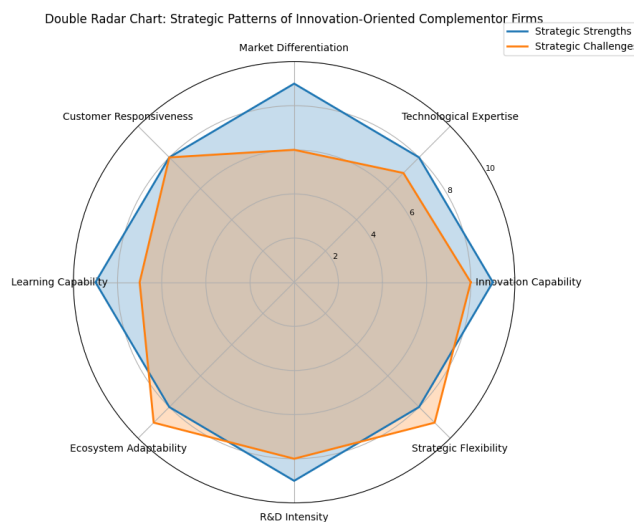
The collected data will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, strategic behaviors, and relationships among platform governance, innovation capability, and marketing practices. The analysis process will involve data coding, categorization, theme development, and interpretation to generate a comprehensive understanding of complementor competitiveness in platform ecosystems. To ensure research credibility and validity, the study will apply triangulation techniques by comparing interview findings with secondary data and cross-case evidence. Member checking will also be conducted by sharing interpretations with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of the findings. Through this qualitative approach, the study aims to develop a comprehensive strategic framework that explains how complementor firms balance innovation and marketing strategies while adapting to platform governance and ecosystem dynamics.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Strategic Patterns of Complementor Firms

Innovation-oriented complementor firms primarily compete through continuous product development, technological advancement, and unique value creation within platform ecosystems. These firms focus heavily on developing differentiated features, advanced functionalities, and innovative solutions to distinguish themselves from competitors operating on the same platform (Kretschmer et al., 2020). Their competitive advantage is largely driven by research and development capabilities, technological expertise, and the ability to respond rapidly to changing customer needs and platform trends. In highly competitive digital ecosystems, innovation-oriented complementors often seek to create niche markets or disruptive offerings that provide superior customer experiences and increase user adoption (Rietveld et al., 2019). As a result, these firms rely strongly on innovation as a mechanism for maintaining relevance and sustaining long-term competitiveness within dynamic platform environments.

However, innovation-oriented complementors also face substantial challenges due to high development costs, technological uncertainty, and dependence on platform governance structures. Frequent platform updates, changing technological standards, and evolving customer preferences require complementors to continuously adapt their products and services (Aitken et al., 2020). In addition, innovative complementors may encounter risks associated with imitation, algorithmic disadvantages, or platform leaders introducing competing products. Despite these risks, firms with strong innovation capabilities are often better positioned to achieve competitive differentiation, premium pricing opportunities, and stronger ecosystem legitimacy. Therefore, innovation-oriented complementors tend to prioritize technological flexibility, learning capabilities, and ecosystem responsiveness as key strategic priorities (Susanto, 2023).



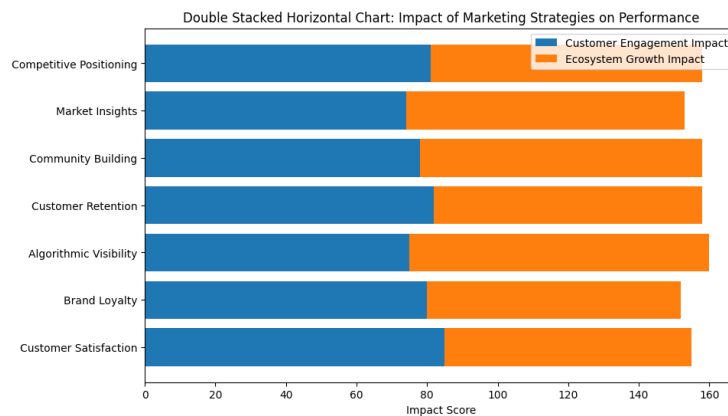
**Figure 1.** Double Radar Chart of Strategic Strengths and Challenges of Innovation-Oriented Complementor Firms

Figure 1 illustrates the strategic profile of innovation-oriented complementor firms operating within platform ecosystems by comparing their key strategic strengths and challenges across multiple dimensions. The chart demonstrates that these firms possess strong capabilities in innovation, market differentiation, learning capacity, and research and development intensity, indicating their emphasis on technological advancement and continuous product improvement as primary sources of competitive advantage (Agarwal et al., 2021). High scores in customer responsiveness and ecosystem adaptability further suggest that innovation-oriented complementors are capable of adjusting rapidly to evolving customer preferences and platform dynamics. However, the chart also highlights several strategic challenges, particularly related to ecosystem adaptability, strategic flexibility, and platform dependence. These challenges reflect the uncertainties associated with rapid technological changes, algorithmic governance, and intense competition within digital platforms (Rao & Jimenez, 2011). Overall, the figure suggests that while innovation-oriented complementors achieve competitive differentiation through strong innovation capabilities, they must continuously balance innovation investments with strategic adaptability to sustain long-term competitiveness in dynamic platform ecosystems.

### Impact of Marketing Strategies on Performance

Marketing strategies play a critical role in enhancing customer engagement within platform ecosystems, where customer attention and interaction significantly influence business performance. Complementor firms that effectively utilize digital marketing tools such as personalized communication, social media campaigns, customer reviews, and content marketing are more likely to establish strong relationships with users (Bauer & Prado, 2020). High levels of customer engagement increase customer satisfaction, trust, and emotional attachment to the brand, which subsequently contribute to customer loyalty and repeat purchasing behavior. In digital platforms, customer engagement also affects algorithmic visibility because platforms frequently prioritize products or services with higher interaction rates, positive ratings, and active customer participation (Lévêque, 2018).

Furthermore, strong customer engagement enables complementor firms to gain valuable market insights and feedback that can support continuous improvement and innovation activities. Engaged customers often provide recommendations, user-generated content, and product evaluations that enhance ecosystem legitimacy and attract new users through positive network effects (Rakhimova & Galyaviyev, 2025). Customer engagement also strengthens community-building efforts within the ecosystem, allowing firms to develop long-term relationships beyond transactional exchanges. Consequently, complementor firms that prioritize customer engagement strategies are more likely to achieve improved brand reputation, customer retention, and competitive positioning within increasingly crowded platform environments (Gasser, 2015).



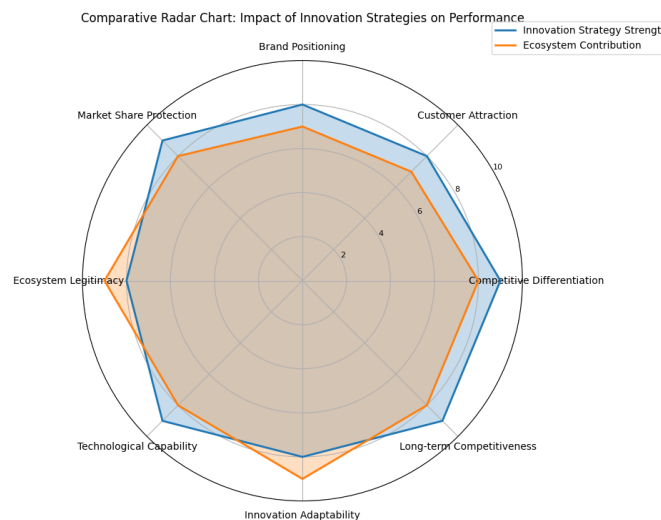
**Figure 2.** Double Stacked Horizontal Chart of the Impact of Marketing Strategies on Organizational Performance

Figure 2 illustrates the significant contribution of marketing strategies to organizational performance within platform ecosystems through two major dimensions: customer engagement impact and ecosystem growth impact. The chart demonstrates that marketing strategies strongly influence customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, customer retention, and competitive positioning, indicating that effective digital marketing activities play a critical role in strengthening relationships between complementor firms and platform users (Loh & Nicolle, 2023). High levels of customer engagement reflect the effectiveness of personalized communication, social media campaigns, customer reviews, and content marketing in building trust, emotional attachment, and long-term loyalty among customers. In addition, the chart highlights the substantial impact of marketing strategies on algorithmic visibility and community building, suggesting that active customer interactions and user participation contribute positively to ecosystem legitimacy and platform exposure. The ecosystem growth dimension further indicates that marketing strategies support business expansion by increasing market insights, attracting new users, and strengthening competitive positioning within crowded digital environments (Agarwal et al., 2021). Overall, the figure emphasizes that marketing strategies are not only essential for improving short-term customer engagement but also serve as strategic drivers of sustainable ecosystem growth and long-term organizational competitiveness within platform ecosystems.

### Impact of Innovation Strategies on Performance

Innovation strategies are essential for complementor firms seeking to achieve competitive differentiation within highly competitive platform ecosystems. By developing unique products, advanced functionalities, or superior customer experiences, complementors can distinguish themselves from competitors offering similar services on the same platform. Innovation enables firms to create unique value propositions that enhance customer attraction, improve brand positioning, and reduce direct price competition (Rao & Jimenez, 2011). In digital ecosystems where imitation is relatively easy and competition is intense, continuous innovation becomes a critical mechanism for

maintaining relevance and protecting market share. Consequently, complementors that invest in technological capabilities, creativity, and research and development are generally better positioned to sustain long-term competitiveness (Rakhimova & Galyaviyev, 2025). Moreover, innovation-based differentiation strengthens ecosystem legitimacy and increases the strategic importance of complementors within the platform ecosystem. Innovative firms often contribute significantly to ecosystem growth by introducing new technologies, applications, and customer solutions that expand platform functionality and user engagement (Rovenskaya et al., 2025). As a result, platform leaders may provide greater support, promotional opportunities, or strategic partnerships to complementors that generate substantial ecosystem value. However, maintaining competitive differentiation through innovation also requires continuous investment and adaptation because technological advantages can quickly become obsolete in fast-changing digital markets. Therefore, complementor firms must develop dynamic innovation capabilities that allow them to continuously evolve and respond to ecosystem changes (Mlčúchová, 2022).



**Figure 3.** Comparative Radar Chart of the Impact of Innovation Strategies on Complementor Firm Performance

Figure 3 presents a comparative radar chart illustrating the impact of innovation strategies on the performance of complementor firms within platform ecosystems. The chart compares two major dimensions: innovation strategy strength and ecosystem contribution, across several strategic indicators including competitive differentiation, customer attraction, brand positioning, market share protection, ecosystem legitimacy, technological capability, innovation adaptability, and long-term competitiveness (Gasser, 2015). The figure demonstrates that innovation strategy strength is particularly high in competitive differentiation, technological capability, market share protection, and long-term competitiveness, indicating that complementor firms rely heavily on continuous innovation, technological advancement, and research capabilities to sustain competitive advantage within highly dynamic digital ecosystems. Strong innovation capabilities enable firms to create unique value propositions, improve customer experiences, and reduce direct competition in crowded platform markets (Schrieck et al., 2021).

In addition, the chart reveals that ecosystem contribution is especially significant in ecosystem legitimacy and innovation adaptability, suggesting that innovative complementors play an important role in enhancing platform value creation and supporting ecosystem growth. By introducing new technologies, applications, and customer solutions, complementor firms contribute to stronger user engagement and platform development, which may increase their strategic importance within the ecosystem (Rietveld, 2018). However, the figure also indicates the need for continuous adaptation because innovation-driven competitiveness requires ongoing investment, flexibility, and responsiveness to rapidly changing platform dynamics and technological trends. Overall, the chart highlights that innovation strategies not only strengthen internal firm competitiveness but also enhance ecosystem-level contributions, reinforcing the strategic importance of innovation capability for achieving sustainable performance in platform ecosystems (Loh & Nicolle, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the growing importance of complementor firms within digital platform ecosystems and emphasizes the strategic challenges they face in balancing innovation and marketing activities. As platform ecosystems continue to expand across industries, complementors increasingly compete not only through product quality and technological capabilities but also through ecosystem visibility, customer engagement, and strategic adaptability. The findings indicate that complementor firms adopt different strategic orientations, including innovation-oriented, marketing-oriented, and hybrid approaches, each offering distinct advantages and limitations within dynamic digital environments. Marketing strategies contribute significantly to customer engagement, platform visibility, and ecosystem growth, while innovation strategies enhance competitive differentiation and long-term product sustainability. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that platform governance mechanisms strongly influence complementor competitiveness by shaping access, visibility, and strategic flexibility within the ecosystem.

The study also proposes a comprehensive strategic framework that explains the interaction between marketing capability, innovation capability, and platform governance in determining complementor performance. The framework suggests that successful complementor firms are those capable of integrating innovation and marketing strategies while simultaneously adapting to evolving ecosystem dynamics and governance structures. The findings contribute to the literature on platform ecosystems by extending understanding of complementor competitiveness beyond traditional firm-centric perspectives toward ecosystem-oriented strategic analysis. From a managerial perspective, the study provides important insights for complementor firms seeking to strengthen ecosystem positioning, reduce dependency risks, and achieve sustainable competitive advantage in highly competitive digital markets. Future research may expand this study by incorporating quantitative approaches, cross-platform comparisons, or longitudinal analysis to further examine the evolution of complementor strategies in rapidly changing platform ecosystems.

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