

Strategic communication for startups: analysis of its intervention in the use of social networks

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to identify the variables that are related to digital social networks for the consumption promoted by startups. Among the theoretical references is the study of the relationship between digital social networks and communication, and the conceptual and critical analysis of startups. The research focused on the study of multiple cases to obtain the necessary information, and semi-structured interviews were conducted in a virtual environment to 10 Latin American startups. In order to identify the variables, it was necessary to create categories and from these the following variables were derived: communication, relationship, disclosure, speed, customers (users), interactivity, coverage, cost, diagnosis, content of publications and monitoring. The answers obtained from the startups contributed to the understanding of digital social networks, startups and communication through the variables created by this triangulation.

Keyword: startups, social networks, digital communication, variables

I. Introduction

Information technology has brought about intense changes throughout the world. These changes have determined the growth and strong presence of the Internet. The International Telecommunication Union estimates that approximately 4.9 billion people, or 63 percent of the world's population, used the internet in 2021, which represents a 17 percent increase from 2019, and an estimated 782 million people went online during that period.

In 2015, when world leaders established the Sustainable Development Goals, only 40.91% of the world's population had access to the internet, meaning that, in the last 6 years, the reach of the internet increased dramatically among the global population.

With this perspective of technological advances and open markets, the development of information and communication technologies opened up the world for any type of organization. This continuous progress led to the appearance of new services through the Internet, developing new forms of communication.

Among these is the spread of digital social networks, interactive virtual environments where users exchange information, contacts, experiences and opinions. Recognizing this unavoidable trend and motivated by the speed, coverage, low cost and high level of interactivity. Companies approached the use of digital social networks, seeking to get closer to their customers and generate sales.

In the business world, most organizations started using social networks as communication tools with their customers. It should be noted that if companies want to effectively reach their customers, they must do so through the media that their customers actively use. However, startups, known for their creativity, dynamism and innovation characteristics, joined the digital media to promote their businesses.

In this context, this article takes as a reference the problem of startups, social networks, and consumption in communication seeking an answer to the following question: What are the variables of digital social networks that stand out in the communication of startups? To answer this question. The study must start by knowing

the concepts and opinions about digital social networks, startups and communication, understand the perception of companies about digital social networks, identify the reasons for their use and know their communication strategies in digital social networks.

2. Social Media and communications

Social media are connected by a network of people, by companies, or by communities, who create connections around common interests, which can be friendship, leisure, profession or even a common cause. There is a dynamic network of relationships that promote interactivity and the search for information. In terms of privacy, one can choose to be private or public, but as a general rule, everyone can generate content and consume it at the same time. In addition, people can share their own information and opinions, in different formats, whether text, videos, images, audios and everything that is within their reach.

In the words of Freire (2018), the main characteristics of the so-called "social media" are: the concept of community, through the creation of networks of users who interact, dialogue and contribute communication and knowledge; flexible technology and bandwidth necessary for the exchange of information and freely applicable web standards; and a modular architecture that favors the creation of complex applications more quickly, at a lower cost. Whereas in Web 1.0 users were mere recipients of services. In Web 2.0 they produce content (blogosphere), participate in the value (exchange) and collaborate in the development of technology. In short, the communication process generates an active flow of participation.

Recuero (2009) refers that there are four basic values that cover the use of social networks by the business sector: (1) visibility, social media allow a greater connection between companies and users; (2) reputation, refers to the perception of the behavior of people or companies and influences the decisions of both parties; (3) popularity, relates the company to the audience, that is, the position of the user within the social network; (4) authority, refers to the power of influence of the user in the social network, this as a result of its reputation. Considering its global reach, speed and coverage, it is necessary

to highlight some of the key aspects of social networks in their lives:

- Immediate information (Twitter)
- Disseminate ideas, content, claim causes (Facebook)
- Disseminate art and culture in general (YouTube)
- Being part of the brands and following trends (Instagram)

These are some of the things people do with social networks, although it is possible to list many actions that people do unconsciously within these portals.

Social media have become an important marketing tool. From this perspective, Coulter and Roggeveen (2012), highlight that, with greater presence, companies resort to online social networks as an important place to establish their marketing. This is because, according to Rocha et al. (2011), companies can use social networks as a tool to segment their campaigns according to the profile of users and communities existing in the networks. In this way, social networks have become part of the communication strategy of companies.

Alvarenga (2014) asserts that there are many opportunities associated with virtual social media, including: the creation of new products and services; collaboration and communication channels; marketing and advertising tools; recruitment of human talent; improved relationship with customers, suppliers and business partners, brand perception, building online reputation, obtaining feedback, and reducing time and costs.

3. Startups

It is necessary to start from the definition of Startup, which according to Montoya (2016) refer to "that society that, despite its youth and lack of resources to advance, manages to obtain results in the market" (p. 144). In this way, Startups scale in the significant number of existing organizations and can get to obtain significant external investments or in turn be picked up by companies with trajectory.

Dorf and Blank (2000) point out that "a Startup is a temporary organization in search of a

profitable and scalable business model that can be repeated" (p. 18), being those of a technological nature the ones with the greatest possibility of growth, without leaving aside other business models that arise under this modality.

Likewise, Román (2017), when talking about Startups (in his translation "start-up") mentions that these are companies that have recently started, however, they have important growth aspirations, so, they are in constant search of visibility and support by other organizations with more trajectory in the market, but especially those with competitive and recognized.

Talking about Startups in general also implies involving terms such as technology, entrepreneurship and innovation, considering that the products or services that are conceived under these mechanisms usually do not exist in the market and, therefore, will be quoted and of interest to users; as well as, with more options to find someone to inject capital, partner or get involved in its planning.

At the communicational level, Startups come to propose new development alternatives and in combination with professional knowledge can achieve successful business models. But, prior to incorporating the experiences around the world, it is required to deepen in the background that lead to the approach of this type of organizations; and, as Valero-Pastor and González-Alba (2018) point out, the media sector is in precariousness and in many occasions, even large and recognized organizations have opted to close facing the current contexts, being the best scenario to stay, but with a decrease in staff and multitasking professionals.

Valero-Pastor and González-Alba (2018), citing Kûng (2017), insist that this type of journalistic initiatives (startups) "take advantage of the low barriers to market entry in the digital environment, allowing access to thematically and geographically segmented audiences" (p. 558). Startups also seek to introduce innovative products and, as for media startups, the purpose is no different, and taking advantage of the range of platforms and tools to generate content, innovation is within the reach of those who decide to venture into this field.

For Manfredi (2015), quoting Steve Blank,

emphasizes that startups are looking for new business models, so those in the information field are destined to "seek a repeatable and scalable model" (p. 54), especially in an uncertain context where businesses lose their relevance early if they do not respond to current demand, so it is vital to analyze the landscape, identify user demand and satisfy it.

Startups are important and not only in the communication field but in general, considering what Lopez Agudelo (2016) pointed out, citing the Global Ranking of Startup Ecosystems (2015), which states that, "beyond wealth, Startups generate jobs and with it the net growth of jobs" (p. 5).

Evidently, as they emerge as new business models, they also increase the possibilities of demanding new professionals, i.e., those who have the skills and competencies to respond to the work environment. Specifically, communication startups require innovative, dynamic, multifunctional, constant profiles that direct their knowledge and capacity to the new technological tools, which will be used to a great extent. In addition to this, there is an increasing demand to specialize the contents and attend neglected market niches or with specific needs, for which the final product and its constitution will be worked under this dynamic.

Another of the characteristics for which the importance of startups in communication is recognized is that they allow having "a new way to do journalism", in such a way that it is "an alternative to face the crisis of news companies and explore a new era of the profession" (Dávila, 2017, p. 63). Thus, the business model and the profession itself need to adapt, seeking to innovate in the business environment and "empowering the startup culture" (Aceituno et al., 2018, p. 92).

Another point in favor of Startups is the way in which they are sustained as an economically profitable business model, whose antecedent shows that traditional media and those that have ventured into digital media had advertising as a source of financing, which is currently insufficient. Faced with this, Fernandez and Ufarte (2012) argue the need to diversify sources and see in "small innovative companies or Startups with growth potential and more chances of finding someone to generate investment" (p. 326).

In addition, by seeking to be absorbed by other organizations with a longer track record and recognition, presenting themselves as innovative models will provide better opportunities to excel.

4. Methodological design

In order to identify the most influential variables in social networks for startup communication, this article proposes a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive approach. In order to meet the objective, a bibliographic and documentary research was conducted, as well as a multiple case study. To obtain the data, it was decided to conduct semi-structured interviews, whose information was taken on the basis of content analysis.

The research focused on finding the aspects of reality and the points of view of the individuals interviewed, the analysis focused on the understanding and interpretation of the phenomena, relationships, motivations, experiences, interactions and attitudes that involve the use of social networks in the communication of startups, in order to know the variables of study. Muñoz-Bonilla & Suarez-García (2019).

In order to gather as much consistent information as possible and to reach interesting generalities, as well as greater depth in the search for understanding of the object under study, it was decided to conduct a multiple case study, in which the selection of the companies interviewed to achieve the universe of the research, was given for convenience and according to the availability of the interviewees (YIN, 2003)

To obtain the necessary information, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually. In this way, it was possible to collect descriptive data in the language of the individuals, explore their points of view and intuitively develop an idea of how they interpret the aspects related to the research context, in response to the fact that qualitative methodology is characterized by being inductive, holistic, humanistic, as well as by the role played by the researchers (Taylor and Bogdan, 2010). The interviews were organized on a script with ten questions, oriented on three categories: 1) perception of the interviewees on social

networks; 2) motivation for the use of social networks; 3) communication strategies of the companies in social networks; 4) the use of social networks; and 5) the use of social networks.

The content analysis research method was applied in order to interpret the material collected. For this purpose, as recommended by Abela (2002), the research was divided into three phases: 1) pre-analysis, organization of material, reading the transcription of the interviews and selection of the data to be analyzed; 2) exploration of the material, coding, classification and categorization of the content; 3) processing of the results, inference and interpretation of the data; 4) analysis of the results, inference and interpretation of the data to be analyzed; 5) analysis of the material, coding, classification and categorization of the content; and 6) interpretation of the data to be analyzed.

5. Analysis

To give way to this research work with ten startups, from different countries in South America, whose activities involve the creation of applications, software, virtual stores, landing pages, website hosting, web systems, geo technology, events, delivery and development of innovative solutions on different platforms and technologies. The companies have been in the market for only 5 years, have an average of 2 to 9 employees and all of them use at least three social networks, the main ones being: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Tick Tock and Whatsapp.

The interviews were organized on a script with 10 questions aimed at finding out the startups' perception of social networks, identifying the reasons that determine their use, finding out their communication strategies and, finally, identifying the variables that predominate in the social networks and the companies' communication. Once the data were organized, they were categorized, classified and interpreted as presented in tables 1, 2 and 3 below.

As a predominant characteristic, for the startups interviewed, social networks are public communication environments, where information and entertaining and/or commercial

content can be generated and shared interactively. It was also observed that, in the professional sphere, social networks play a fundamental role in relations with consumers, since companies use these networks to identify, quantify and build customer loyalty; they also disseminate their products and services at low

cost and definitely manage to close deals. Table 1 shows a summary of the answers given by the startups on their perception of social networks, which allowed the identification of two influential variables: communication and customer relations.

Table 1: Perception of social networks

Category	Startup	Idea
Perception of social networks	S1	Public platform that allows users to interact and generate content. Sales Facilitator
	S2	Common socialization environment, where it is possible to communicate with customers from all over the world at a viable cost.
	S3	Simple, efficient and accessible means of communication between company and client.
	S4	Communication tool with which it is possible to prospect clients.
	S5	Digital groups that contain both commercial and entertainment information, and that allow the promotion of companies and the closing of business.
	S6	Space created and used through digital devices, which enable entertainment and interaction, optimizing the user's time in the search for information and communication
	S7	Channel that allows to establish relationships, where people create profiles that allow to maintain contact at a distance.
	S8	Collaboration and productivity tools.
	S9	An environment for sharing and disseminating products or services, allowing people to stay connected, as well as being a space for identifying and building customer loyalty.
	S10	A system designed to know and centralize omnichannel customer data based on heterogeneous sources that unifies them in its repository and then enriches them with attributes to generate audiences and profiles.

Source: Own elaboration.

Social networks, then, are understood as any space of connection between beings. These spaces can be either face-to-face or virtual. They are understood as all spaces that allow the exchange of information between users. Social networks are channels to initiate the relationship with customers regardless of the company's segment. The important thing is to have a clear

objective and to know which is the best way to follow. It is necessary to understand what are the reasons that lead entrepreneurs to use these tools, for this we searched with the Startups interviewed the reasons that led them to use social networks, in Table No. 2 are presented in an expanded manner.

Table 2: Reasons for using social networks

Category	Startup	Idea
Reasons to use social networks	S1	Problem solving with users: branding, leads, sales, customer retention.
	S2	Ease of finding potential customers. Disseminate relevant content to customers. Convert leads into customers.
	S3	Low cost, ease of access, interactivity, feedback, dissemination, attracting new customers and opinion makers, showcasing products, news and market trends.
	S4	Coverage, speed, ease, low cost, product disclosure and interaction with customers.
	S5	Speed in the dissemination of information, products, more accessible marketing, coverage, knowledge of other brands and competitors.
	S6	Immediacy, facilitates the massive promotion of the company and its products or services, practicality through the use of mobile devices. Low cost, real-time interaction, referrals.
	S7	Brand positioning, direct relationship with the customer, agility in the process of interaction with customers, time management, automation.
	S8	They are spaces full of brands and content creators using creativity and exploring all the tools to ensure their space in the social network, allowing proximity.
	S9	Dissemination of relevant content to your audience. Inbound Marketing.
	S10	They allow to create relevant content and able to develop a business model that uses social networks to promote the visibility and credibility of startups.

Source: Own elaboration.

Among the reasons that stand out are: 1) disclosure of the company's brand, products and services; 2) agility, speed and efficiency in the communication process; 3) localization, attraction and retention of clients; 4) ease of access to cyberspace; 5) interactivity with clients; 6) coverage and dissemination of publications; 7) low cost; 8) sales; 9) credibility; 10) benchmarking. Among these, the following are identified as influential variables: dissemination, speed, clients (users), interactivity, coverage and cost.

For Startup 10, the market has changed a lot and it is necessary to adapt to these changes,

understanding the logic of these changes and the thinking of users, and reinforces saying that "it is necessary to create relevant content and capable of developing a business model that has social networks as allies to promote visibility and credibility". Startup 7 says: "if we have an online communication tool, practically free, that serves thousands of people, we have to use it and use it well to strongly disseminate what we need our users to know". S6 says that through its fan page, the name of its company gained greater visibility, affirming that "thanks to the recommendation of friends and clients, the number of likes rose from 250 to 1250 in five

days, so the company was able to reach a larger public in a short time and at no cost". For S4, social networks have allowed them to obtain data to better know their target audience and understand their behavior, allowing them to build strategies that serve the consumer efficiently. It is evident from these statements that, thanks to social networks, there is an interesting differential in the relationship with its customers.

Taking as a starting point the information collected, it can be inferred that startups use the networks as a communication tool and as a channel to relate with their customers, essential factors for the consolidation of the company's image in the market. Table 3 shows the main communication strategies used in social networks by the companies interviewed.

Table 3: Communication strategies in social networks.

Category	Startup	Central idea
Communication strategies in social networks	S1	Use of tools, such as Instagram stories, through real-time content.
	S2	Gathering professional staff through LinkedIn.
	S3	Use of personas. Active performance, Post relevant content to customers.
	S4	Find potential customers. Posts content relevant to target audience. Your focus is on the beginning of the sales process. Converts visitors into customers.
	S5	Publish news about products or services. Attracts new customers and opinion makers. Seeks feedbacks developed.
	S6	The startup carries out advertising according to the profile of the users.
	S7	Actions in social networks with influencers, content marketing.
	S8	Posting of videos, animations and music, publication of widgets.
	S9	Banners, podcast and videocast. Email marketing sent with information that allows to interact with the target audience.
	S10	Clipping, brand and media monitoring, through online research.

For the startups interviewed, communication strategies in digital social networks are included in their marketing plan and basically consist of analysis and diagnosis of the digital environment, action plan and content, publications and monitoring of social networks, presented in this study as variables. The companies agree that there was a great improvement in relation to contact with customers and their image, after having included

social networks in their planning. And they emphasize that what began as a way of attracting the attention of customers and investors is now part of the daily communication activities of the startups.

Regarding the diagnosis of the virtual environment, they highlight the analysis of customer profiles, the use of personas and benchmarking. Based on this, the companies plan the content of their publications, designed

to publicize the brand, products and services, always ensuring that the campaigns are adapted to the profile of customers, news and market trends. At this point, it is necessary to have a profile that defines the frequency of the posts and the topics addressed.

6. Final considerations

According to what has been studied, digital social networks are synonymous with communication. For startups, digital social networks, in addition to being a source of entertainment and information, are a business communication tool. According to the variables identified, they are communication and relationship tools. The use of social networks by startups can be summarized as follows: 1. Interact with customers, as a platform for conducting business as a means of disclosure of companies and their products; 2. Enable the basis for planning their actions that through the information generated and provided allows developing or redesigning their products, services and promotional content; 3. Reduce costs of costly disclosure, but rather direct and more far-reaching; and 4. Exponentially expand its image.

Startups are companies that are at an initial point, whose business model is characterized by serving a considerable number of customers and generating profit in a short time, without a significant increase in values to be paid, considering that they are generally conditioned to limited resources and a lot of competition. Thus, the need to reach consumers and spread the company's image is enhanced with the opportunity provided by the networks through the mobilization of digital resources, to achieve the success of the project.

This research has also identified some of the main concepts and tools used in the digital communication strategies of startups. This allowed to understand the vision of entrepreneurs in relation to digital communication and its advantages and disadvantages. Internet is a medium that attracts consumers, becoming a useful tool for companies that want to be more connected to their public.

One of the concerns of both traditional companies that have not yet migrated to the

digital world and startups in birth, is to know how to create an efficient digital strategy.

According to Statista (2021), in Latin America there are 431.35 million internet users, being the cell phone one of the most used devices. This is one of the main justifications for a company to understand the main concepts of digital strategic communication and build a planning. In this context, startups must consciously assume to know their target audience, to focus on innovating permanently in their business strategy and have as allies the communication platforms and technologies that can contribute to the construction of a solid positioning and communication strategy.

The suggestion remains for those startups that have not yet started with this type of planning, to establish a structured work, trying to focus on the profile of customers and their perception of the products and services offered by the company. Identifying trending topics, directing strategies, controlling and validating participation and credibility in the networks with the help of software, for example. With this as a starting point, it is possible to adjust the communication proposals and the relationship with customers to the business objectives and the target market.

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