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The Role of Social Networks in the Internationalisation of Startups: LinkedIn in Portuguese Context

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Abstract. *This study aims to explore the role of social networks in the internationalisation of startups. For this purpose, the social network LinkedIn is used, and two case studies of Portuguese technological startups are employed. The findings indicate that social networks can contribute to the acceleration of the internationalisation process and decrease their costs. Their relevance is greater in the initial phase of the internationalisation process. However, its relevance is limited in more advanced phases of this process. LinkedIn can be used by startups to obtain several benefits such as brand awareness, identification of new opportunities, customer feedback, among others. The results of this study are essentially useful in a practical dimension for companies that plan to start or improve their internationalisation process sustained on social networks.*

Keywords: social networks, internationalisation, digital marketing, start-ups, social media content, LinkedIn.

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Introduction

Startups play an important role in the social and economic context, contributing to several areas such as technological advance, opening of new markets, increase in the quality of services, or decrease in the unemployment rate (Corl, 2019). Furthermore, the relationship between the growth in the number of start-ups and the evolution of academic qualifications becomes clear. Therefore, and as Kane (2010) points out, startups particularly attract young university graduates

The definition of a startup is not entirely unambiguous and can be seen from multiple perspectives. Blank (2010) defines it as "a temporary organization looking for a scalable and repeatable business model". On another vision, Ries (2011) defines the startup concept as "any organization aiming at creation of new product or service in conditions of extreme uncertainty". A startup may be considered a young company, but not all new organizations are startups. It is common to associate the idea of a startup with a new organization or business start-up, usually of an innovative nature and linked to technology.

An organization with a high maturity in the market and a startup have remarkable differences between them. There are differences in strategic approaches and relevant differences in the financial, human, and technical resources available. Consequently, Lam and Harker (2013) state that there is a link between marketing and entrepreneurship, in which the importance given to marketing activities does not assert itself as a priority nor is it carried out in a planned manner. Hence, and in a startup, most marketing decisions are focused on the entrepreneur (Berthon et al., 2008).

Communication and brand creation are key elements in a strategy, but according to Bresciani and Eppler (2010) are typically not a priority for the entrepreneur. It is therefore common for this issue to be relegated to a secondary level, with greater emphasis on issues related to the product or financial sustainability. However, the success of a start-up cannot only be based on its reputation, network, or a quality product or service. According to Boulocher-Passet et al. (2019), a successful startup often involves internationalisation. Rasmussen and Tanev (2015) complement this vision by pointing out that many innovative businesses need scale to become sustainable (Fonseca et al., 2020) and expansion into new markets will enable them to attract more customers.

In a digital world on a global scale, technology takes on a leading role. One of these technologies is the social networks that provide greater proximity to consumers, regardless of geography, and facilitate access to a wider range of specialized professionals (Appel et al., 2020; Grizane & Jurgelane, 2017). The role of social networks has been mainly explored considering their dimensions of promoting visibility of companies, networking with partners, suppliers, and clients, and in leveraging social capital (Han et al., 2019; Pourkhani et al., 2019; Williams, 2019). This role of social networks is nowadays widely recognized by startups. Although, Maciejewski and Wach (2019) stress that to foster the process of commercial expansion and the development of the business area of a startup, it is essential to consider the challenges inherent to international trade, such as location, partnerships, taxes, or cultural differences. In this sense, this study seeks to explore the role of social networks in the internationalisation of startups, focusing on how the LinkedIn social network can facilitate the internationalisation process, namely at the level of market choice and the entry-mode of the internationalisation process. Furthermore, we aim to explore how LinkedIn's content management is performed with a goal of internationalisation and analyse the process of optimizing the profile of people with internationalisation functions on LinkedIn. In the analysis of this phenomenon was explored both the personal accounts of the start-up founders and company profiles because many times they are associated and used indifferently. This study is organized as follows: Initially, a literature review is carried out to contextualize the role of social networks in marketing, and then the role of social networks and LinkedIn in internationalisation is explored. After that, the methodology of the study is presented, in which the methods adopted in the analysis of the results are described. Consequently, the findings are reported and discussed. Finally, the main results of this study are outlined, and several future work topics are suggested to mitigate the limitations of this study.

Literature review

The role of social networks in marketing

The social media term arises spontaneously associated with the Internet, mobile devices, and tools that enable users to interact with each other and share opinions and content. It involves

the construction of communities or networks, in which participation and engagement are encouraged. Social media is supported by software that makes use of digital technologies to receive and send content (Appel et al., 2020).

According to a study carried out by Hootsuite (2020), it is estimated that in January 2020 there were 3.8 billion active social media users, corresponding to 49% penetration and a growth of 9.2% over the previous year. Social media represents the online communication channels dedicated to community-based consumption, interactions, content sharing, and collaboration. It is considered one of the most important channels for companies to achieve a high rate of brand awareness in the market and succeed with their customers (Edosomwan et al., 2011).

The use of social by salespeople provides better and greater communication with the customer. The response time to customer requests is shorter and it also facilitates the customer's contact with the salesperson. Everything contributes to customer satisfaction. Therefore, companies are encouraged to use social media by the sales force (Agnihotri et al., 2016), which is about finding and being found. Social Selling uses social media to find the right prospects, create relationships of trust, and achieve the sales goals set for the company (Agnihotri et al., 2016).

Social networks also provide an inbound marketing perspective, allowing potential foreign clients to find the company and consequently facilitate its internationalisation. According to Renata Amidžić (2019), the opportunity motivation is found to be related to the entrepreneur's perception, and socio-demographics factors. Inbound marketing implements a set of marketing strategies based on the idea of creating and sharing content aimed at a specific target audience, to gain permission to communicate with their potential customers directly, creating a long-term relationship (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015).To facilitate the reading of these contents, it is important that the company keeps in mind the target in order to define aspects such as the message, the way it is written and the language, the content strategy.

Social networks in the internationalization process

The use of networks to leverage internationalisation is not recent. Johanson and Mattsson's (1987, 1988) in their network model of internationalisation addressed this situation. For Johanson and Vahlne (2009) internationalisation is based on developing relationships, establishing new partnerships, or exploiting existing ones. From a business perspective, social networks present themselves as a challenge and an opportunity. They are an information distribution channel, since they allow their users to participate and interact with the brands, contributing to an increase in their reputation (Horn et al., 2015). However, the lack of strategy in building the online presence of companies often means that many pages are empty of content, outdated and without relevant content for their followers (Hofacker & Belanche, 2016). Similarly, requests for clarification by clients remain unanswered. Moreover, other challenges are faced by companies as the language of communication with the client (e.g., English should be uniformly adopted, or the message should be customized for each language). These elements, as well as the choice of the best social network according to the target audience, are fundamental to the success of the internationalization process based on social networks.

Chetty and Agndal (2007) consider that companies that take advantage of networks have what they call share capital, which represents the performance achieved in the use of

social networks to increase the company's capabilities. According to these authors, social capital plays three roles: efficacy (usefulness of the firm's social capital and how this enables the firm to make a mode change), serendipity (unexpected events arising from a firm's social capital that trigger a mode change), and liability (concern with maintaining partnerships that are below expectations). According to Wu (2017), social capital plays an important role in exploring the possibility of internationalisation of a company.

Social capital helps to reduce costs, develop knowledge, and provide opportunities for change (Chetty & Agndal, 2007). Social networks contribute to the existence of business networks and, currently, an internationalisation strategy must include the use of social media (Paniagua et al., 2016). Through social media companies can accelerate internationalisation (Maltby, 2012) and reduce the costs inherent to a global presence (Maltby, 2012; Mejri & Ramadan, 2017). These two findings are relevant to the establishment of two propositions:

P1: The use of social networks contributes to accelerating the internationalisation process.

P2: The use of social networks helps to reduce the costs of the internationalisation process.

Social networks provide the establishment and development of international relationships, contributing to increasing initial credibility, access to additional relationships and established channels, help firms in lowering costs and minimizing the risk of internationalisation (Zain & Ng, 2006), locate foreign individuals and organizations, interact with foreign customers, partners, and other stakeholders, demonstrate evidence of the value provided by their solutions (Arnone & Deprince, 2016), discover business opportunities (Chandra et al., 2009), decrease in time, increase in geographical scope (Batas & Liu, 2013), ease in the internationalisation process (Batas & Liu, 2013; Zain & Ng, 2006), reduction in transaction costs (Mejria & Ramadan, 2017; Zain & Ng, 2006), decrease in risks and uncertainties (Mejri & Ramadan, 2017).

In addition to the various advantages mentioned, social networks interfere in the strategy of companies because they influence the intention of internationalisation, the choice of the market for internationalisation, the decision on the entry-mode, and influence firms' internationalisation pace and pattern (Zain & Ng, 2006). Therefore, it will make sense that social networks are an element to be considered in marketing information systems and should be strategically encouraged. Consequently, it is also important to explore how social networks have changed the entry-mode decision with startups. To this end, the proposition below was formulated:

P3: The use of social networks plays a key role in changing the entry-mode decision.

However, social networks also require the company's investment capacity, since starting and developing relationships is time-consuming, arduous, and requires resources (Chetty & Agndal, 2007; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). It is also relevant to explore the size of the investment needed to develop this strategy within the startups. Therefore, the following proposition has been formulated:

P4: The use of social networks has associated costs in the process of internationalization.

The LinkedIn in internationalization

B2B buyers place emphasis on social media content to support their buying decisions. A survey developed by Demand Gen Report (2015) concluded that social media channels that

have the biggest impact on the research process to buy are: LinkedIn (61%), Blogs (58%), YouTube (54%), Facebook (50%) and Google + (46%).

LinkedIn is a social network that in January 2020 had 663.3 million users (Hootsuite, 2020). It provides an evolutionary relationship based on the interactions that individuals develop between themselves in a non-structural way, thus constituting an informal network. Mainly used for professional networking, it is a tool used in several functional areas like sales, human resources, and marketing. This social network is privileged by companies to perform social selling (McCabe, 2017). According to Ćelić et al. (2018), the most influential trend, which has emerged as a result of the development of information and communication technologies, is business over the internet.

LinkedIn can be used in both outbound and inbound perspectives. From an outbound internationalisation perspective, the company seeks to reach the external market, while in an inbound strategy it is the customers of the external market who reach the company (Glowik, 2020). Both perspectives are not mutually exclusive and can be complementary. It is relevant to explore how companies exploit LinkedIn in their outbound and inbound strategies. Therefore, the proposition below was formulated:

P5: LinkedIn is used both in the outbound and inbound perspectives.

In both perspectives, the company should seek to become an authority in the area. To this end, it is important to create content that meets the objectives of the company and the target it is intended to achieve. Accordingly, the company must have a content creation plan that conveys trust in the company and in the products/services. However, this content must be created taking into consideration the context in which it will be presented (Bodnar & Cohen, 2012). This plan should contemplate regularity in the publications, message, and language appropriate to the target audience, but keeping in mind that the LinkedIn social network is used from a professional perspective (Golbeck, 2015) and not from a leisure perspective.

A difficulty in the process of internationalisation is building a solid network of distributors or representatives, or even finding partners to create, for example, a joint venture. Considering the specificity of the LinkedIn network in which the use of a profile with the possibility of detailing a set of user information, including a description of the business functions performed, becomes easier compared to other networks, such as Facebook, or Twitter, to find the key people in the companies that are constituted as target (outbound). Thus, LinkedIn facilitates the process of searching for profiles of people in the potential target market, finding partners, obtaining information about people, such as emails, and other data about institutions (Golbeck, 2015).

However, before starting the research process, it is convenient to solidify the profile of the people who will perform this task, creating the so-called champion profile, which presupposes filling out a set of information in the profile in the respective sections. The corporate page should also not be underestimated, incorporating all the information that is considered pertinent and that is transversal to the markets that are intended to be reached. To direct the specific communication to a market we can use the functionality of LinkedIn "ShowCases Pages". The presence in groups that are directly or indirectly related to the sectors of activity that are intended to be reached in the process of internationalisation must also be dynamized by the company, as well as make content available through the Slide Share functionality (LinkedIn, 2019). Content management activities emerge as a key activity in the

presence of companies on social networks. For this purpose, the proposition below was defined:

P6: The management of contents in LinkedIn is a relevant activity in the internationalisation process.

All initiatives developed on any social network, and LinkedIn is no exception, must be monitored and metrics properly analysed. In the case of LinkedIn, the Social Selling Index provides an assessment of the user's profile from the perspective of social selling and is based on four pillars: calculating effectiveness in establishing the professional brand; locating the right people; interacting using insights; cultivating relationships of trust (Dover & Peterson, 2016). But the outcomes of the internationalisation initiatives supported by the social network is what will be crucial to measure success. This means that the achievement of internationalisation will be the end of the sales funnel, i.e., the funnel of the internationalisation process. Accordingly, the following proposition was defined:

P7: The adoption of metrics is relevant for monitoring the internationalisation process in LinkedIn.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology through the realization of two case studies. In a qualitative research there is a concern with the process and not only with the results and the product (Queirós et al., 2017). The data collected are essentially descriptive. In this study, the qualitative approach enables us to know in-depth how social networks in general, and LinkedIn in particular, are used in the internationalisation process. This approach allows the findings associated with each research question to be properly contextualized. Furthermore, the conclusions can be interpreted in the light of the specificities of each organization.

Figure 1 gives an overview and concise view of the different phases of research design. The "contextual" phase is responsible for identifying in the literature the relevance of social networks in marketing and in the process of internationalisation. Furthermore, it is also important to understand in this phase how LinkedIn can be used to support the internationalisation process of companies. Next, in the "fieldwork" phase the case study protocol is defined and interviews are conducted with the chosen case studies. Finally, the "analytical" phase is responsible for the data analysis following a thematic analysis, the findings are compared considering each case study and the evidence collected in the literature review and, finally, the conclusions of this study are extracted.

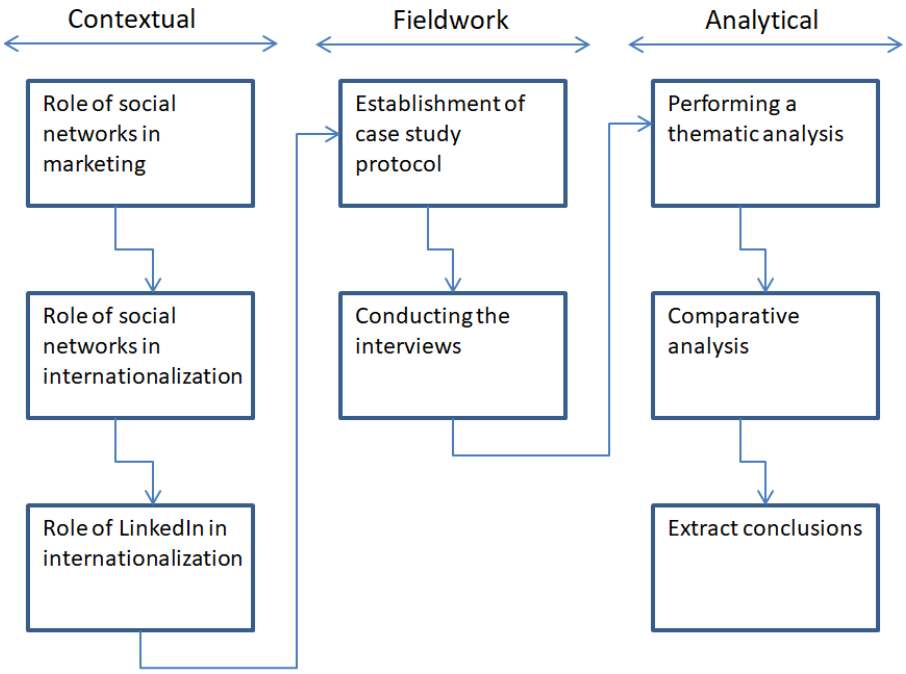


Figure 1. Research design

Source: Authors own research results/contribution.

The composition of the case study protocol is shown in Table 1, in which a mapping is made between the formulated research questions and the questions posed in the interview. A total of 15 research questions (RQ) are posed considering the 7 research propositions (RP). This approach aims to have an interview that is both comprehensive and concise, allowing it to be conducted through digital means, given the current Covid-19 pandemic scenario, and lasting no more than 45 minutes. The aim was to have semi-structured interviews, in which there was a previous script, but that was not too rigid and inflexible to be able to explore the specificities of each startup. Furthermore, five initial questions were asked to each company to obtain contextual data on its activity, respectively: (i) When was the company founded? (ii) What is the size of the company considering its number of employees? (iii) What is its sector of activity? (iv) In what year did your company initiated the internationalisation process? (v) What are the social networks used to support the internationalisation process?

Table 1. Case study protocol

RP	RQ	Interview question	Relevance
P1	RQ1	Have social networks been used since the beginning of the internationalisation process?	Chetty and Agndal (2007) state that social networks increase the company's capabilities in the internationalization process. In this sense, it becomes relevant to realize at what stage they were adopted.
	RQ2	What has been the impact of social networks in accelerating the internationalisation process?	Maltby (2012) and Sarmento et al. (2016) report that startups get benefits from accelerating their internationalization processes by adopting social networks.

P2	RQ3	What are the costs the company incurs with the internationalisation process?	To comprehend the role of social networks in the process of internationalization it is necessary to know the costs of internationalization processes as mentioned by Eriksson et al. (1997).
	RQ4	Have social networks reduced these costs?	Social networks enable companies to reduce the costs of a presence in an increasingly global market (Maltby, 2012; Mejri & Ramadan, 2017).
P3	RQ5	What is the entry-mode of the internationalisation process adopted by the company?	The choice of entry mode can be influenced by several factors and is a relevant aspect that should be known to characterize the internationalization process of a company (Johnson et al., 2008).
	RQ6	Have social networks played a key role in defining or changing this entry-mode?	Zain and Ng (2006) highlight the role that social networks play in internationalization processes.
P4	RQ7	What are the costs associated with the use of social networks in internationalisation?	The use of social networks is not cost-free and needs resources for this purpose. In this sense, it is important to know these costs as discussed in the study by Johanson and Vahlne (2009).
P5	RQ8	Is LinkedIn used by the company from an outbound or inbound perspective?	Glowik (2020) addresses the relevance of inbound and outbound perspectives.
	RQ9	For what purpose?	It becomes relevant to know how LinkedIn can be used in each perspective to support the approach advocated by Glowik (2020).
P6	RQ10	What is the strategy for content distribution (e.g., profile publications, corporate pages, and groups)?	LinkedIn offers a diverse set of resources for content distribution. Knowing the various forms and benefits is relevant (Golbeck, 2015).
	RQ11	Who manages this content?	Knowing who manages these contents is a relevant and a supplementary element to the study made by Golbeck (2015).
	RQ12	How regularly is this content updated?	It is also relevant to know how regularly these contents are updated (Golbeck, 2015).
P7	RQ13	Are there indicators to monitor LinkedIn's performance?	The existence of indicators is mentioned in the study by Dover and Peterson (2016), in which the Social Selling Index is presented.
	RQ14	How are these metrics evaluated?	Knowing how these metrics are evaluated allows us to deepen our knowledge about the role of metrics (Dover & Peterson, 2016).
	RQ15	What is the impact of these metrics on the strategy's reformulation?	Exploring the strategic impact of these metrics is complementary to the initial study developed by Dover and Peterson (2016).

Source: Authors own research results/contribution.

A case study approach may include a single case study evidence or multiple case studies (Gustafsson, 2017; Yin, 2017). Both approaches are considered scientifically credible. However, the adoption of multiple case studies allows the evaluation of the same evidence

according to multiple contexts. Two Portuguese startups were selected to integrate these case studies. A key criterion in the selection of these companies was to have an orientation towards internationalisation. Another key element is to use the LinkedIn social network in this internationalisation process. Furthermore, the availability to conduct the interview in a short period of time established was another key factor for their inclusion. The authors also sought to choose two case studies that had different approaches to the internationalization process using LinkedIn. The use of two case studies allows exploring the 15 research questions previously defined in each company. The first case study (CS1) is a shoe e-commerce company that has more than 99% of its production in the external market. It operates in both mature and emerging markets. The second case study (CS2) is a healthcare company offering a digital physiotherapy solution. The company is dedicated both to the marketing of products and services in the international market, as the electronic device is complemented by access to a cloud application that enables the tracking and evaluation of the performance of individuals. Currently, 90% of its turnover is in the foreign market, coming mainly from mature markets such as the USA, UK, and Australia.

The interviews were conducted on the Skype and Zoom platform between the 7th and 24th of April 2020. In these interviews participated one of the founders of each startup and the person responsible for the marketing section. When the positions are held by the same people, the invitation was addressed to another of the founders of the company. The objective was to guarantee a minimum of two people from each company in the interview. The interviews were later transcribed into text and validated by each company. This was a process that provided refinement and validation of the findings obtained from each interview. After this step, a thematic analysis was carried out to identify the common and divergent points for each research question. The thematic analysis was performed using the webQDA software. The response given to each question was uploaded into the software and then a quantitative analysis of the number of repeated terms was performed. The stop words (e.g., verbs, conjunctions, determinants) were ignored in this process. After that, and in a second phase, identical terms were grouped to characterize each theme. According to Clarke and Braun (2013), the thematic analysis offers great flexibility and allows highlighting similarities and differences in the data set. This is a fundamental point in this study since it is intended to understand the impact of different approaches in the use of LinkedIn in the process of internationalisation of these two companies.

Results

The analysis of the results was carried out using a thematic analysis. Table 2 organized the identification of the themes considering the RQs previously established. For each RQ, the study identifies the convergent and divergent points between the study cases. The aim is to simplify the interpretation of the results. In total, 14 convergent and 22 divergent themes were found, which indicates that specific factors of each company are determinant to perceive the paths followed in the internationalization process.

Table 2. Thematic analysis process

RQ	Goal	Convergent points	Divergent points
RQ1	Adoption phase	Yes, from the beginning	

RQ2	Implementation pace	Accelerated and expedited process	CS2: Difficulties in sustainable the process
RQ3	Internationalisation costs	Marketing costs	
		Logistical costs	
		Human resources costs	
RQ4	Reduction of costs	Marketing and logistical	CS1: Human resource costs
RQ5	Entry-mode	N/A	CS1: Export
			CS2: Joint Venture
RQ6	Changes in entry mode	N/A	CS1: No impact
			CS2: Had a strong impact
RQ7	Social networks costs	Premium account	N/A
		Content management	
RQ8	Outbound or inbound	N/A	CS1: Mainly inbound
			CS2: Both inbound and outbound
RQ9	Detail of objectives	Brand awareness	CS1: Knowing different values and cultures
		Identify new opportunities	
		Customer feedback	CS1: Analyse competitor strategy
			CS2: Network contacts with influencers
			CS2: Customer-centric innovation
RQ10	Content distribution strategy	Profile publications	CS1: Groups
		Corporate page	
RQ11	Content managing		CS1: Marketing people
			CS2: Founders
RQ12	Content update	Multiple interactions per day	
RQ13	Performance indicators		CS1: Yes
			CS2: No
RQ14	Evaluation of metrics		CS1: ROI, Number of visitors, Number of comments, Number of shares
			CS2: N/A
RQ15	Reformulation of strategy		CS1: Number and type of publications
			CS1: Interaction level
			CS2: N/A

Source: Authors own research results/contribution.

Discussion

Through the analysis and discussion of the results, this study allows exploring the validity of previously established propositions. In summary, the following conclusions can be highlighted in Table 3.

Table 3. Propositions analysis

Proposition	Evidence
P1	It can be accepted and concluded that social networks contribute to accelerating the process of internationalisation at an early stage of the process, but whose benefits will be difficult to sustain at a later stage of this process.
P2	It can be accepted and concluded that social networks help to reduce the costs of the international process.
P3	It cannot be accepted. The role of social networks in changing the entry-mode decision is inconclusive and it is necessary to carry out in-depth studies in this area in order to understand whether social networks gain a greater predominance according to the entry-mode decision made by the company.
P4	Similarly to P2, it is also possible to confirm P4 and conclude that some costs are associated with the process of internationalisation even when using social networks.
P5	It can be accepted. The role of inbound marketing strategy is most relevant. However, outbound strategy can also be used to establish contacts with potential partners in international business development.
P6	It can be confirmed and concluded that content management is a relevant activity for the internationalisation process using LinkedIn.
P7	It can be confirmed. Metrics are relevant, although they are not always adopted considering the limitation of resources for this purpose. However, their adoption is relevant in a process of continuous improvement.

Source: Authors own research results/contribution.

Social networks and the internationalisation pace

In both case studies, social networks have been used since the beginning of the internationalisation process. The fact that the founders were used to using social networks in their daily and personal activities facilitated their adoption in their business activities. Having a presence in social networks enables companies to be close to their target audience, which enhances business growth. Appel et al. (2020) advocate that relationships and personal references based on trust can help companies in the speed and flexibility of response to global markets. CS2 states that interaction on social networks tends to be more relaxed, which also provides much closer support to users. The question posed by these companies was essentially in the definition of what social network would be used, how the content would be updated, what kind of message would be passed, and how the interaction process would be organized.

A convergent point in both case studies was the relevance of social networks for accelerated and expedited the internationalisation process. The fundamental question raised by both companies was how social networks could be used to make a difference in the internationalisation process. According to Sarasvathy et al. (2014), what makes the

difference in international entrepreneurship is not necessarily the social network, but the model as the entrepreneur uses it. This confirms the vision obtained in both case studies, and the need to use the various social networks conveniently and strategically. Consequently, it is not possible to just choose one social network to support the internationalisation process, forgetting the role of the others in the consistency of the message that is intended to be conveyed. In this sense, social networks must be part of an integrated vision of the internationalization process, and it is essential that there are qualified and specialized human resources in this field.

An interesting factor stressed in CS2 is the difficulty of making the process of internationalisation sustainable through the exclusive use of social networks. In both cases, the role of social networks in an initial period in acquiring advantages at the level of connection and knowledge about international markets was noted. However, these benefits at a later stage are negligible. Therefore, at a later stage of the internationalisation process, the same relationship can hardly be used simultaneously to connect to a market and to gain knowledge about that market. However, it can still act as a mechanism for interaction with partners and users in those markets. In this sense, it becomes clear the greater relevance of social networks to gain knowledge about a target market. However, getting deeper knowledge about the market is a more complex process and difficult to sustain using only social networks.

Social networks and the internationalisation costs

The process of internationalisation instils new costs in companies. Richter and Wulhorst (2013) group these costs according to four perspectives: (i) liabilities of newness, associated with the fact that the company is a novelty in the target market; (ii) incidental liabilities of foreignness, which arise from the process of adaptation of the company to a country-environment unfamiliarity; (iii) discriminatory liabilities of foreignness, which arise from the unequal treatment of local stakeholders and governmental agencies; and (iv) liabilities of multinationality, arising from working in a multinational environment. For companies, these costs increase in marketing, logistics, and human resources. The adoption of social networks essentially reduces marketing and logistics costs. The reduction of these costs is very important for startups since many of them have small teams and have little financial liquidity. In the area of marketing, social networks are an attractive and low-cost means for both inbound and outbound marketing; from a logistical point of view, they make it possible to reduce travel and stay costs in a foreign country. Furthermore, CS1 emphasized the importance of adopting social networks, in particular LinkedIn, as a way of attracting highly qualified and specialized human resources. Through this model, the costs associated with recruitment processes can be lower. This confirmation is also evidenced by Subhani et al. (2012), in which associated other advantages like a better and more complete perception of the job offer and the company, ease of access, and professional networking.

Both companies stressed the importance of social networks in their scalability process. This is a very relevant element for start-ups as it helps them to grow rapidly in several geographical markets. In domestic markets like Portugal, this external growth factor is even more relevant. Despite the reduction in internationalisation costs through the adoption of social networks, new costs arise, even if they are smaller in size. The greatest of these is content management, which requires qualified and available professionals. The content published by the company needs to be adequate for the proposal of each social

network and the theme that attracts the followers of that company. The feedback given to the user or partners must be almost instantaneous. Moreover, digital content must be highly appealing and appeal to interactivity as Voorveld et al. (2018) suggest. Finally, each social network has specific costs. In the case of LinkedIn, both companies have a premium account.

Social networks and the internationalisation entry-mode

The entry-mode of the internationalisation process is an element that presented significant discrepancies. CS1 reports the export of their goods both to more mature countries (e.g. Germany and USA) and to emerging countries (e.g. Romania, Brazil, Angola, Mozambique). There are several reasons for the company's choice of this model, such as market diversification, risk reduction, and tax incentives. Despite the high diversification of destination markets, a strategic factor defined by the company was the export to Portuguese speaking markets. The main reason for this option was the existence of previous contacts of the founding team in those markets. Some of these contacts emerged and were enhanced by the adoption of social networks. Social networks have contributed to solidify these relationships and to break the barrier of physical distance. In CS2, joint ventures were chosen. A joint venture is a commercial agreement between two or more companies that decide to pool resources to carry out a specific task in a given period of time (Beamish & Lupton, 2009). This strategy was adopted by CS2 to accelerate business expansion and share the risks of the process. However, this requires CS2 to have a broad knowledge of its partners and the establishment of contracts in which the responsibility of each partner is well defined. Additionally, another key factor in this decision making was the increased knowledge of the target markets that local players have and, consequently, help to reduce the risks of the internationalisation process.

There was also disagreement over the role of social networks in determining the entry-mode. In CS1, social media did not play a decisive role, but merely acted as a way to offer greater visibility to the company and greater contact with the company's customers. However, in CS2, the LinkedIn social network had a determining impact on the identification of local players in those target markets which, at an early stage, proved important for the establishment of initial contacts. The little bureaucracy of the company with a flat structure allows the decision-making processes at the entrance of a new market to be agile and shared. Nevertheless, maintaining a close relationship with partners requires other means of contact and proximity, which cannot be achieved exclusively using social networks.

LinkedIn usage in the outbound and inbound

LinkedIn is essentially used in an inbound marketing strategy. In the e-commerce platform offered by CS1, the Internet is a fundamental channel for consumers to start the purchasing process. In this case study, it was observed that the adoption of inbound marketing techniques is fundamental for the company to be found by those consumers who are online looking for information about products and services similar to their own. In CS2, an inbound strategy is also relevant as a form of contact with its customers. However, the outbound strategy is also used to establish contacts with potential partners in international business development.

These marketing techniques are used for various purposes, such as: (i) brand awareness; (ii) identify new opportunities; and (iii) customer feedback. These objectives are common to both case studies. However, several specific objectives also emerge. In CS1,

knowledge of different values and cultures is important, as well as a way of analysing competitor strategy. In this way, the company can be more reactive to changes in the target market. In CS2, other elements emerge like the establishment of network contacts with influencers and the development of customer-centric innovation. This approach seeks to extend the innovation process to other elements outside the company, in which customers play a key role in generating new ideas and innovative products/services for the company (Almeida et al., 2019). For startups, innovation is a critical success factor in the development of their activities (Tukiainen et al., 2019).

LinkedIn and contents management

In both case studies, profile publications and corporate pages are the dominant approaches. Nevertheless, CS1 states that corporate pages tend to be too static and offer a low level of engagement with a diverse type of target audience, although the introduction of showcase pages has been a feature explored by the company. To circumvent this limitation, CS1 also opted to participate in several specific groups considering their sector of activity and target market. This approach gradually proved to be ineffective, as LinkedIn gradually began to impose some restrictions on group participation and message notifications. Another limitation that has meanwhile been corrected by LinkedIn is the export of the contacts in ".csv" to an external application (e.g., SugarCRM). This is a highly relevant feature for CS1, as it allows them to have a relationship management system integrated with LinkedIn. The integration of social networks with CRM applications is seen in CS1 as a key element to increase the efficiency of the internationalization process and reduce costs.

The content management in LinkedIn is in CS2 still performed by the founders. There is no specific marketing department for this function, although in the short term its introduction is planned. In CS1, it is the marketing department that assumes this function. Since its inception, the marketing department has been directed towards the digital channel. In both companies, the interaction is constant and daily. In both cases the importance of managing this process, which involves not only publication, but also the entire process of defining the strategy, planning the publications, collecting the material, and monitoring, was evident. Although the strategies are different, in both cases studies the content management in LinkedIn is a relevant work and time-consuming. The existence of technical staff in this area is important, despite the difficulties of startups in having human resources specialized in a non-core area of their business.

LinkedIn metrics

Only in CS1 metrics are adopted to measure LinkedIn performance in the internationalisation process. The company classifies the metrics in three segments: (i) corporate page performance; (ii) publications performance; and (iii) followers' behaviour. In LinkedIn's corporate profile, it is possible to follow visitor metrics considering the type of traffic and visitor demography. There is a concern to constantly perceive the evolution of these indicators. Several metrics are used such as Return on Investment (ROI), number of followers, number of comments, and number of shares. These metrics are then used to learn and improve the messages that are conveyed. This evaluation is performed quarterly and according to the target market. This enables the company to customize the message considering each market.

In both companies the personalization of the message is always done in English. CS2 states that this decision allows the company to reduce the logistical complexity associated with the management processes of a social network. Furthermore, the target market of its internationalization processes has English as its official language. However, CS2 does not use metrics. It was reported that the adoption of metrics may be relevant but may not condition the company's operational activity. The company's rapid growth meant that available resources had to be optimized for short-term needs. In the future, the inclusion of metrics is planned as this role will be developed by a dedicated marketing team. This makes it clear how important metrics are from a medium to long-term perspective. In the short term, metrics are often ignored and the founders of startups tend to focus on core activities of their business.

Conclusion

Digital marketing is a powerful tool at the service of companies. The Web environment helps companies get closer to their target audience and, consequently, it becomes essential to know how to communicate correctly and effectively. Social networks, in particular LinkedIn, enable companies to contact partners and customers at a relatively low cost and regardless of their geographical location. Therefore, social networks can be exploited by companies in several ways and facilitate or enhance internationalisation processes through access to new international markets.

The results of this study are relevant to understand the role of social networks in accelerating the internationalisation process and reducing its costs. Accordingly, P1 and P2 were confirmed but P3 was rejected because the internalisation entry-mode is defined by the strategy followed by the company. Nevertheless, the adoption of a social network also has several costs since it is also necessary to consider the whole process from the definition of the strategy and planning of publications to the monitoring of the process. It is also necessary to offer high levels of engagement and immediate feedback on requests. All these situations are resource consuming. Accordingly, P4 was confirmed.

LinkedIn can be used by companies in the outbound and inbound perspectives, which confirms P5. The management of contents in LinkedIn is a relevant activity and startups may consider dedicated resources for this task. Accordingly, P6 was also confirmed. The adoption of metrics is particularly appropriate when integrated into a process of continuous improvement. However, it was not possible to conclude that the adoption of social networks altered the internalization entry-mode. Finally, social networks are essentially relevant in the initial process of internationalisation, but it is difficult to maintain their exclusive sustainability at more advanced stages of this process. Accordingly, P7 was also confirmed.

This study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. From a theoretical perspective, it is possible to extend the studies carried out by Golbeck (2015) and Dover and Peterson (2016) that analyse the role of LinkedIn in the internationalization processes of companies but do not explore the practical practices and challenges posed by the adoption of LinkedIn in the specific context of startups. The practical contributions are even more relevant by helping to understand the role of social networks in the internationalisation process using the LinkedIn social network. The findings of this study are relevant for companies that desire to start a sustained internationalisation process on social networks. It is also relevant for companies that already adopt LinkedIn but want to improve their interaction channels with clients and partners. Some limitations can be pointed out in this

study. In the first place, a qualitative study was important to understand the context dynamics of each startup and to understand in depth the challenges that are posed throughout this process, but it offers clear limitations in the generalization of its results. In this sense, and as future work, it would be pertinent to complement this study with a quantitative analysis that allows quantifying the impact of the adoption of LinkedIn in the internationalisation process according to multiple perspectives. Another limitation of this study is that the characteristics of each target market were not considered. Mature and emerging markets have very significant cultural differences and LinkedIn adoption rates are also very heterogeneous. Consequently, an internationalisation strategy has to meet the unique characteristics of these markets. Also, and as future work, it would be relevant to explore the role of these characteristics in determining the social network to be embraced.

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