

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ONLINE MARKETS: WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN UBERLÂNDIA-MG"

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Article Info

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Abstract

The dynamic transformation of society brought about by technological advancements, particularly the internet and information and communication technologies (ICTs), has ushered in a new era of global connectivity and virtual social interaction. This shift, as identified by Castells (2002), has led to the creation of virtual spaces that transcend physical boundaries, enabling communication on a worldwide scale among individuals, institutions, corporations, and profit-driven entities. This paper explores the expanding digital landscape where human presence and organizational activities extend beyond conventional constraints, as highlighted by Brocklehurst (2001).

The integration of these technologies into daily life has reshaped contemporary relationships, exemplified by the growing number of individuals engaging with the internet, particularly through mobile devices and social media platforms. The "Digital 2019" survey, conducted by We Are Social and Hootsuite, underscores this trend in Brazil, revealing that 70% of the population used the internet daily in 2018, with a staggering 94% actively participating in social networks. Among the prominent platforms, such as Youtube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Messenger, and Twitter, Instagram experienced the most substantial growth in advertising reach (Kemp, 2019a, 2019b).

In light of these transformative shifts, this study examines the profound implications of ICTs on societal structures, communication dynamics, and the nature of human interaction in an increasingly interconnected world.

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1. Introduction

The internet and information and communication technologies are striking aspects of the period of change that society has been going through for some decades (Castells, 2002). These technological advances have allowed the emergence of virtual spaces for social relations, which enable communication, on a global scale, between people, institutions, companies and even for-profit organizations (Castells, 2003, 2006). With this, the presence of people and organizations starts to occupy a broader and more diffuse space, no longer restricted to the physical and delimited presence (Brocklehurst, 2001).

These technologies have become essential for people's lives and for the establishment of their contemporary relationships (Dijck & Nierborg, 2009). Proof of this is the increase, over the years, in the number of people who use the Internet daily, especially by cell phones and to access social networks (Kemp, 2019a). Data from the “Digital 2019” survey, conducted by We Are Social and Hootsuite, show that 70% of its Brazilian population used the internet daily in 2018, and of this percentage, 94% was active on social networks, which corresponds to an increase almost 8% compared to 2017. The main platforms accessed were Youtube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Messenger and Twitter, respectively, and, among social networks, Instagram was the one that grew the most in the reach of the advertisements made in it (Kemp, 2019b).

The increasing use of social networks and the expansion of forms of relationships between people and companies have an impact on the strategies and images of companies before their audiences (Cipriani, 2014), allowing even greater sales (Oliveira, 2019). In the case of ventures led by women, the social networks have been relevant since before the start of the enterprise, and remain so even after its consolidation (Fontana, Oliveira, Ramos & Massaro, 2021).

Given the above, added to the relevance that informal entrepreneurship (Santos, Luz & Brasil, 2018) and female entrepreneurship (Jacobi, 2020) has in the Brazilian scenario, this article aims to identify the reasons for the use of social networks by informal entrepreneurial women in the market of candy makers in the city of Uberlândia-MG. To this end, a qualitative, exploratory and field research was carried out, through interviews with 14 informal entrepreneurial women in the market of candy makers in the city of interest.

The development of this research is justified by the social and economic relevance of the city of Uberlândia in the state of Minas Gerais/Brazil (Guimarães, 2010), in addition, in this city, the candy makers are a type of business that stands out in terms of the use of networks social, especially Instagram, for its activities aimed at the consumer market (G1, 2012, 2015, 2016; Diário de Uberlândia, 2019). Thus, it is expected to contribute to the knowledge of how informal entrepreneurs relate to their customers. It is noteworthy that the authors of this study reside in the city and have already developed other surveys with entrepreneurs in the sector of interest, which facilitated the beginning of data collection.

The article continues with a theoretical framework on virtual social networks and their organizational use. Then, the methodological procedures adopted in the research are presented, a discussion of the results found and, finally, the final considerations about the study carried out.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 The social networks and the reasons for use by organizations

The internet has enabled the emergence of new means of interaction between people and organizations, which are commonly called social networks (Lévy, 1996; Castells, 2002). It is a broad term, as it encompasses direct interactions between people, and interactions that occur in the cyber environment, intermediated by computers or mobile devices (Recuero, 2009). Thus, it is understood that social networks, also called social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), are, above all, “relationships between people, whether they are interacting for their own sake, in

defense of others or in the name of a organization, mediated or not by computerized systems” (Aguilar, 2007, p. 02). Based on this, this article will follow the understanding that social networks are virtual environments for interaction between social actors, in which people and organizations, or their representations, establish connections with each other through the internet (Recuero, 2009).

The advantages of virtualization were not so clear to organizations at the beginning of this process (Mendonça, 2013). It was with the passage of time that information and communication technologies came to be seen as an organizational resource, with impacts on the way of doing business (Saccol, 2005). Thus, understanding that the internet can be a source of competitive advantage (Porter, 2001; Cipriani, 2014), organizations started to be concerned with the elaboration of an institutional strategy adapted to the new, increasingly virtual context (Hercheui, 2011), in order to take advantage of the potential for faster and more interactive communication (Labadessa, 2012), both with the internal and external audiences (Caldeira, 2003).

In this sense, it is important to recover the understanding of marketing. Kotler and Armstrong (2007) conceptualize it as an administrative and social process through which people and organizations obtain what they need and desire, through the creation and exchange of value among themselves. Marketing, therefore, refers to the creation and maintenance of profitable and valuable relationships for customers and organizations. Sheth, Eshighi and Krishanan (2002) highlight that, in the age of the internet, customers have gained more power in this relationship of creation and exchange of value, defining what information they need, what offers they are interested in and what price they are willing to delete. For this reason, Mangold and Faulds (2009) and Rosa, Casagrande and Spinelli (2017) reinforce that organizations cannot ignore the phenomenon of social networks, since they influence consumer behavior, thus becoming potential tools in design and implementation of marketing strategies.

Before exploring this phenomenon, organizations need to understand that people have different motivations for the use of a given social network, since they have particularities in relation to the interaction that is provided and the content that is made available (Foster, Francescucci & West, 2010). Based on this, in order to decide to use a social network, the organization must study how this use will be, the metrics to measure the value added to the business by him, and how risk management will be; after the decision, it will be necessary to develop actions to build an engaged and collaborative community; and, finally, absorb and explore the learning generated by clients (Culnan, Mchugh & Zubillaga, 2010).

Some studies have identified reasons that lead companies to use social networks, which are summarized in Figure 1.

Authors	Description of the reasons
Santi (2011), Serra, Storopoli, Pinto and Serra (2013), Carvalho e Murback (2014)	Relationship tool; Disclosure of the company; Conducting sales and research.
Bustamante and Barreto (2013)	Information sources for marketing.

Mendonça (2013)	Brand visibility; Creation of a relationship channel; Controlled presence on social networks; Increased sales; Immediate opinion survey with greater amplitude; Customer acquisition; Promotion of products or services; Creation of a prospecting channel; Better knowledge of the customer base; Increase of the virtual audience; Maintaining reputation; Apprenticeship; Loyalty; Vehicle for social change.
Carvalho and Murback (2014)	Increase in the number of sales.
Nascimento, Jimenez and Campomar (2014)	Capture of customer perceptions; Capture of the entire purchase decision process.
Brito, Nascimento and Lopes (2018)	Interaction with the client; Disclosure of products.
Sartini, Silva and Fagundes (2018)	Interaction; Disclosure of products; Ease of use; Visibility of the company; Sales assistance; Practicality in communication; Increase of the virtual public; Recent Instagram improvements.
Saraiva (2019)	Communication and relationship the with consumer; Reach and retain new customers; Disclosure of the brand and products.
Fontana, Oliveira, Ramos and Massaro (2021)	Interaction and relationship with customers; Strengthening and influencing the brand; Lower costs; Measurement of results; Product disclosure; Sales channel; Financial emancipation; Customer acquisition; Increased visibility and reach of the company.

Figure 1. The reasons for the organizational use of social networks Source: prepared by the authors, based on the reviewed literature.

Even if the reasons for using social networks indicate advantages for companies, there is no indicator that corroborates the relevance of this virtual presence (Mendonça, 2013), or that easily converts the results of this use into value for the company (Bustamante & Barreto, 2013). The lack of knowledge about the dynamics and functionalities of digital platforms and the lack of specialized professionals are other aspects that still make its

use incipient (Romano, Chimenti, Rodrigues, Vaz & Nogueira, 2014), especially when looking at small companies (Serra, Storopoli, Pinto & Serra, 2013; Oliveira, 2019), which has, as the biggest challenge, the conquest of clients, essential for the continuity of its activities (Agência Sebrae de Notícias, 2019).

It is considered, through the literature presented above, that there are many reasons for the use of social networks by companies, indicating advantages for their marketing actions, especially in communication and relationship with customers. In addition, these companies need to know the specifics of each social network.

After this theoretical framework, the article goes on to the methodological procedures adopted in carrying out the research.

3. Methodology

The present study aims to identify the reasons for the use of social networks by informal entrepreneurial women in the market of candy makers in the city of Uberlândia-MG. To this end, a research with a qualitative approach and with an exploratory purpose was carried out, adopting the field study as a strategy (Godoy, 1995; Gil, 2008). Such characteristics were chosen because it understands that this type of research allows a more indepth knowledge about the listed problem, making it more explicit and familiar, thus allowing to reach the proposed objective. In addition, it is emphasized that this research starts from that carried out by Sartini, Silva and Fagundes (2018), who identified the reasons for the use of Instagram by small entrepreneurs in the market of candy maker in that city. Currently, it is expected to expand the results found by them, but focusing only on informal entrepreneurial women.

The field research started with a publication, available throughout September 2019, on the Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp profiles of the research authors, so that this publication could be reposted or targeted to possible research participants. In all, 23 people expressed an interest in participating in the research. It was necessary to confirm with each interested party whether they were informal entrepreneurial woman the market of candy maker in the city. Of these, only 14 people met the research conditions, and thus constituted the study sample.

The empirical material was collected through semi-structured interviews, following and adapting the script by Sartini, Silva and Fagundes (2018). Each interviewee was asked to read and sign a declaration of acceptance of voluntary participation in the research, allowing, under the terms contained therein, the recording of the audio for the purposes of transcribing the interviews, and being guaranteed anonymity by her and other people or organizations that he may have cited.

The interviews were conducted in person throughout September and October 2019, and lasted around 15 to 20 minutes, with recorded audio, the transcript of which totaled 41 pages. As already foreseen in the declaration of acceptance of participation, it was necessary to contact, afterwards, each interviewee for her to read and sign the transcript of his interview, to certify its veracity.

The empirical material of the interviews was analyzed through Content Analysis by Bardin (2011). To this end, three steps were followed: first, the transcription and reading of the interviews was carried out; second, the material was explored in order to categorize it; and third, the material categorized by theme was interpreted. Three categories were defined *posteriori*, namely: contributions and reasons for using social networks; the reasons for not using Instagram; the reasons for a possible use of Instagram.

After detailing the methodological procedures, the article goes on to present its results.

4. Results and discussion

Each of the 14 interviewees represents an informal candy maker. Some characteristics of these ventures are summarized in Figure 2.

Interviewee Code	Years of experience in the market (in 2019)	Social Networks used
E1	2 years	Facebook.
E2	1 year	WhatsApp.
E3	3 years	Facebook, WhatsApp.
E4	2 years	WhatsApp.
E5	2 years	WhatsApp.
E6	1 year	WhatsApp.
E7	3 years	WhatsApp.
E8	1 year	WhatsApp.
E9	1 year	Facebook, WhatsApp.
E10	2 years	Facebook, WhatsApp.
E11	1 year	Facebook, WhatsApp.
E12	2 years	WhatsApp.
E13	1 year	WhatsApp.
E14	1 year	WhatsApp.

Figure 2. Characteristics of the researched enterprises

Source: prepared by the authors, based on the research data.

The Figure 2 allows for some considerations. The Informal entrepreneurial women have between 1 and 3 years of experience in the market of candy maker in Uberlândia-MG; therefore, a recent experience. As for social networks, WhatsApp (92.8%) and Facebook (35.7%) are used. Thus, it is understood that social networks are important tools for these informal candy makers.

To broaden this discussion, we sought to analyze the contributions of these social networks in the view of the interviewees. As for Facebook, there are the following advantages:

[...] helps in the wide dissemination of our products, not only for the likes and shares of the publications we make, but for the markings that our customers make and for the evaluations that users can leave in our profile. In general, Facebook is a means that helps us to get closer to our customers, in addition to contributing to expand our reach, which even helps in the elaboration of our products (E1, translated by the authors).

We managed to publicize our products and promotions, with virtually no financial cost (E3, translated by the authors).

We've been using Facebook for a long time. Our customers are here (E11, translated by the authors).

The WhatsApp, in turn, had the following advantages:

It is much faster and more practical. The customer who knows your product, when he wants to buy, already sends a message and we agree (E13, translated by the authors).

[...] You don't have to spend time to take good pictures, make beautiful publications (E7, translated by the authors).

WhatsApp is an easier way to be close to customers, especially when he already knows the product. Not to mention that it is much easier to create a specific message, personalized for him (E10, translated by the authors).

The excerpts highlighted above reinforce the reasons presented by the studies summarized in Figure 1. The social networks, in particular, Facebook and WhatsApp, allow low-cost interaction with customers, in addition to product promotion and order and sales. However, only representatives of the two enterprise that have physical stores said that actions on social networks, more precisely on Facebook, require more planning, in order not to impact the evaluation of customers on the network.

These results reinforce the data from AgênciaSebrae de Notícias (2019), by indicating that the relationship with customers is essential for the continuity of business activities, especially for attracting, retaining and winning new customers. However, despite the fact that Instagram has relevance, even in relation to the engagement of its users, as shown by Fonseca (2019), informal entrepreneurial women do not use this social network for their candy makers, in contrast to the study by Sartini, Silva and Fagundes (2018). Thus, we sought to identify what are the reasons for not using Instagram by these informal candy makers. The responses of the interviewees were summarized in keywords, whose categorization is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The reasons for not using Instagram by informal candy makers in Uberlândia-MG

Description	Percentage of entrepreneurial the cited
Customers prefer other social networks	92.8%
Little interaction	71.4%
Unknowledge of its use and functions	57.1%
Little practicality	57.1%
Standardization of communication	28.5%
Recent updates	14.2%
Demand more time and resources	7.1%

Source: prepared by the authors, based on the research data.

Altogether, seven different reasons for not using Instagram by informal candy makers in Uberlândia-MG were categorized. All entrepreneurial women interviewed said that customers prefer other social networks, and in doing so, they reinforced the advantages of using Facebook and WhatsApp for their informal enterprises.

The social networks I use seem to me to be sufficient for my business, my clients are there [on Facebook]. Therefore, I do not see a need to use Instagram (E11, translated by the authors).

[...] We are satisfied with the results that Facebook has brought to our business (E1, translated by the authors).

However, it was realized that informal entrepreneurial women were not sure which social networks their customers prefer, and therefore whether their customers did not use or did not like Instagram. In addition, it is noteworthy that, of the 14 women interviewed, 8 (57.1%) never used Instagram, even with a personal profile.

Therefore, this same percentage said they were unknow of the use and functions of this social network, in addition to little practicality in it, especially when compared to WhatsApp. The standardization of communication, recent updates, and the demand for more time and resources for communication established by Instagram were the other reasons listed by the interviewees.

We never use Instagram, even with a personal account ... We never saw a need (E2, translated by the authors).

[...] it is a very limited network, in terms of publications: either you publish a photo in standardized formats, or videos of specific duration (E7, translated by the authors).

Instagram gets in the way of more than it helps people's work. Think: you have to have time to take good pictures, make good publications. If you don't have time, you have to pay someone to do this (E5, translated by the authors). Having identified the reasons for not using Instagram by informal pastry shops, we sought to find out if there is any possibility of using this social network, and, if so, what the reasons would lead to this use. All women interviewed replied that there is no intention to use Instagram. However, 5 of them (35.7%) said that improvements in the form of communication would lead them to invest in shares on Instagram.

[...] there is a lot of fantasy in this social network, with the use of filters, buying followers and likes. Thus, we are unable to make real comparisons with our competitors. It is a pattern that is at least biased, artificial (E7, translated by the authors).

Instagram would need to improve its way of demonstrating publications and, mainly, their shares. Today, it is difficult for you to locate a publication, especially those that are sent via Direct. In Messenger of Facebook, there is the search engine for terms. So, through Facebook, with certain terms, we managed to reach a potential customer, which is no longer possible through Instagram (E10, translated by the authors).

This result is in line with the BBC report (2019), which highlighted that there are companies that do not agree with the communication model that social networks force them to adopt; in fact, some of them have already closed their accounts on Facebook and Instagram, as they understand that their presence on these platforms is not a vital component for the success of their business.

The seven reasons reported for the non-use of Instagram by the women surveyed are related, in some way, to the communication offered and established in this network, even if entrepreneurial women are unaware of their resources. In addition, when comparing these results with those of the research by Sartini, Silva and Fagundes (2018), it is understood that Instagram has not been used by these informal entrepreneurial women due to the lack of identification of advantages that led other companies in the same market and city to use such a social network. After presenting and discussing the results, the article moves on to its final considerations.

5. Conclusion

The increasing use of social networks and the expansion of the forms of relationship offered by the internet are commonly seen as important and strategic resources for the companies that use them. In view of this, this article aimed to identify the reasons for the use of social networks by informal entrepreneurial women in the market of candy makers in the city of Uberlândia-MG, and, to achieve this, a qualitative, exploratory and field research was carried out.

As a result of the interviews with 14 informal entrepreneurial women, it was found that they use WhatsApp and Facebook, as they understand that these networks are satisfactory tools for communicating with their customers. The Instagram, in turn, is not used by any of the women interviewed because it does not identify advantages in its use, both in relation to customers and in relation to their own resources and interests. In all, seven reasons were identified that detail this organizational not use of the referred social network. Although, when of research, they were not interested in using Instagram, some informal entrepreneurial women cited that improvements in the way of communication could lead them to invest in actions on the social network.

These results allow to affirm that the general objective of the research was reached. The informal entrepreneurial women working in the market of candy maker in Uberlândia-MG use of social networks, but not all of them. The lack of knowledge of the resources and functionalities available in each social network, as well as the lack of knowledge of the presence of customers in them, are some of the reasons why these informal entrepreneurial women do not explore this social network. This is the strength of the study: unlike the previous researches, that identified the impacts and the reasons for the use of a social network by organizations, this research contrasts, when identifying the reasons for the organizational not use of these means.

This is an exploratory study. Therefore, it is necessary to deepen the relationship of two themes presented here: female entrepreneurship and informality.

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