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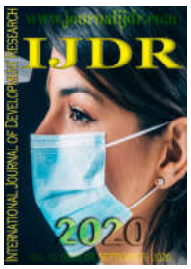

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

PERCEPTIONS OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED COMPANIES ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA AND BUSINESS PROCESS: A EXPLORATORY APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze companies' perceptions about the use of social media and models of customer service processes. Data were collected in two stages, June 2019 and March 2020, resulting in 182 and 256 respondents. The collection in two steps aimed to confront the data on the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic occasion, which forced an abrupt halt in the operation of companies. We conducted this study out using the quantitative survey method. When comparing the two moments of collection, the results showed an increase in the number of companies that perceive the importance of using social media of strategic form and that started to adopt them as a service channel, as well as an increase in the number of companies debating the improvement of service processes.

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, in the corporate environment, social media are useful tools for interaction between companies and clients, besides allowing the companies to monitor, assertively, the interests, propensities, and necessities of these clients. According to Jue et al. (2010), rapid changes are a feature of post-modern societies. The economic uncertain, the lower development cycles, the more horizontal organizational structures, and the constant transformation of the social institutions are coevolving at a fast pace, demanding the companies quick adjustments to new realities. Amid this unstable environment, social media's emerging phenomenon can create opportunities for experimentation of new forms of business products and contact with clients. Simultaneously, the technological changes provide the emergence of a less passive and more critical consumer (JUE et al., 2010). With the rapid growth of the internet, social media with a massive number of diversified profiles are emerging. There are many guidelines on how to implement social media on customer service, that just enough to identify flaws in online communication to enable a reassessment of current practices and promote the improvement of the use of these customer relationship platforms more efficiently and effectively. In this context, it is necessary to highlight the gap between the adoption of social media and its use strategically or the lack of business process models that guide the use of such media (VELLOSO; YANAZE, 2014). According to Pflanzl and Vossen (2014), one of the challenges in modeling processes to guide the use of social media stems from the fact that the external environment is dynamic and requires rapid and constant changes in business processes. In the case of the use of social media as a customer service channel, the scope of this research, Pflanzl, and Vossen (2014) believe that companies: do not realize the importance of modeling services by digital means; maintain the culture that the customer is more in person than digital; maintain the perception that making investments in digital exposure is for large companies; being afraid of exposing themselves to digital media, claiming that there may be rejection by part of their clients; justify the non-adoption of technologies by claiming that there is no expertise on the part of customers; claim that most of the revenue comes from face-to-face assistance.

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In conclusion, the challenges are moving companies that the use of social media can be a way to reinvent interaction with the customer. In 2020, the presence of companies on social media and the interaction with their customers through them became one of the few ways to minimize revenue losses, unlike other times when it was discussed the adoption of social media as a way to maximize profits. This fact was due to a decrease in economic activities due to the pandemic provoked by the Sars-Cov-2, which placed people in several countries in social isolation, abruptly changing the way companies operated in their sales channels. It became a motivation to study the use of social media in corporations and their perception of business processes. The survey was conducted in June 2019 and repeated in March 2020, on the occasion of the Sars-Cov-2 virus pandemic. The second stage's objective was to check if there was a change in the perception of companies about the themes. In addition to this introduction, this paper has four more sections. Section 2 presents the literature review. Section 3 exposes the survey method adopted for conducting the research. In section 4, we analyze the data collected. In Section 5, the conclusions are presented, in addition to the research's suggestions and limitations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In its broadest sense, the business process area has been approached in a multidisciplinary way by different areas of knowledge, such as Business, Computer Science, Information Science, Engineering, Information Technology, among others. Notably, in the areas of Information Technology and Computer Science, several studies have been conducted successfully in the field of business processes, in particular, related to process modeling and tools to support this activity. However, for the current challenges, it is essential to analyze the area of business processes on other biases (SAKR, 2018). In this sense, the number of studies that cover social media use and how they affect the business process is a subset that lacks debate and investigation. This section will exhibit the literature review of the main concepts that cover the theme. In this sense, we structured the subjects into two sections. Initially, the business process's ideas will be pointed out, and later, we present studies on social media and how its use affects the business process.

Business Processes

In the business process area, it is necessary to understand the field and enter the many phases of business process management (BPM), that is, in its life cycle. A business process comprises several events that make up an activity, and activities make up a task. In addition to events, activities, and tasks, a process has decision points, that is, stopping points in time, where a decision will be made, and that such a decision affects the execution path. A process also involves several factors, physical objects, and immaterial objects. Finally, the execution of a process leads to one or more results, consumed by one or more customers (DUMAS, 2013). In the light of the above, Dumas (2013) defines a business process as a collection of events, activities, tasks and decision points that involves several actors and objects, and that collectively lead to a result that is valuable to at least one client. The author also defines business process management (BPM) as a method for discovering, analyzing, redesigning, executing, and monitoring business processes. This definition reflects the fact that the business process is the critical point of BPM.

The business process lifecycle helps to understand the role of technology in process management. Information Technology (IT) is an essential instrument for improving business processes. It is not surprising that IT specialists, such as systems engineers, usually play a significant role in BPM initiatives (GRIFFIN, 2004). Traditionally, efforts to the adoption of BPM seek to consider the requirements raised by IT specialists, business specialists, and eventually end-users. This approach is top-down in which processes are not traced by those who execute them. The top-down approach works well for structured, highly repetitive tasks that change little over time (EROL et al., 2010). Nevertheless, for evolutionary, unstructured, and ad-hoc processes, traditional BPM is usually challenged by presenting a considerable divergence between process models and execution reality. It also fails to leverage ideas for improvement and innovation (BRUNO et al., 2011).It then becomes challenging to study the practice of managing business processes in dynamic contexts, as is the case with customer service through social media.

Social Media and Business Processes: During the past two decades of technological development, many companies have benefited from the internet, as they have created online businesses alongside their physical ones. At this time, many companies, purely digital, have emerged. One aspect that differentiates online and offline business environments are related to social media. Due to the popularization of smartphones and the daily availability of new applications, which affect people's lives daily, social media emerged as an alternative communication between customers and companies (MANGOLD; FAULDS, 2009). At the current time, social media is one of the essential tools for improving contact between individuals (C2C) between customers and companies (B2C) and between companies (B2B). The adoption of social media corporately can affect employees, internal company communication, product/service innovation, and the way a company works. As such, social media management, and business process management (BPM) are related disciplines (LOOY, 2016).

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is defined as a group of applications based on the ideological and technological foundations of the web. They are considered social channels that use the internet and mobile technologies to establish communication. Social media can be divided into many categories, such as a)blogs; b)content communities; c)social networks; d)chats; e)network sites; f)virtual games worlds; g)virtual social worlds; h)forums; i)rating and review sites; j)podcasts and videocasts; k)sharing sites multimedia and projects. However, this distinction is not apparent, as new social media platforms and applications appear and expand rapidly (ANANDHAN et al., 2018). SAFKO (2010) states that companies do not need to use all types of social media and not all social resources available in a given media. Instead, they should focus only on social media and their functionalities, which are more strategic. In their systematic review of the literature, Prodanova and Van Looy (2019) assert that the research on social media associated with BPM is increasing but still relatively limited. Ayoub and Elgammal (2018) recognize that the use of social media affects business processes management and that the interconnection of these disciplines represents a paradigm shift and a gateway to greater efficiency in business processes. Organizations that recognize this interconnection adopt customer-centered approaches to improve all stages of the BPM life cycle and

creates a feedback cycle from customers and other stakeholders to continuously improve the business process throughout the various stages of its life cycle. Yet, the authors claim the distance between the social media world and the business world has not yet resolved. In essence, most of the proposed social media adoption solutions are adopting a marketing or exposure strategy products or services. Pflanzl and Vossen (2014) present challenges associated with the implementation of social media aligned with the management of business processes. The problems listed are linked to elements such as people, information technology, methods, governance, culture, and strategic alignment. Understanding how companies adopt social media in their business processes represents facing this challenge, which is the motivation of this study. The next section describes the survey method as a proposal for analyzing the use of social media and business processes.

METHODS

To analyze perceives' companies about the importance of using social media in their services and their maturity in standardizing these services through process models, exploratory research and descriptive analysis were carried out. The method chosen to carry out the research was the survey, which is a direct documentation tactic to obtain answers to questions the informer himself can fill it out. The issues inherent to the study were asked through a questionnaire available at https://forms.gle/Xcqwj8CGPN2ByaA67. Along with the inquiry, we sent a consent term, clarifying the research objectives and the non-disclosure of the responses data so as not to identify the companies or the respondents. The questionnaire requests the respondents' e-mail to prevent them from answering more than once, and through this, we were able to compute 82% of companies in the sample, only those considered in the analyzes. The quiz consists of 30 closed questions and one open question divided into seven categories, which are: Company's Data; Respondents' Data; Using Social Media; Human Resources; Strategic Importance of Using Social Media; Strategic Importance of Process Modeling; Business Strategies.

The "Company's Data" section aims to collect data on its location, scope, and size. The section "Respondents' Data" seeks to outline the interviewee's profile. The "Using Social Media" section collects data on social media use in a corporate manner. The "Human Resources" section seeks to collect data about the existence of employees responsible for the customer service process via social media and the sector responsible for managing social media. The "Strategic Importance of Using Social Media" section collects data on the use of social media as a means of increasing revenue and the strategic debate on the adoption of social media. In this section, companies' perception of target audiences' experience in the use of social media is also sought. The "Strategic Importance of Process Modeling" section aims to collect data on companies' perceptions of business process standardization. Finally, in the "Business Strategy" section, we find to receive companies' impressions about the use of social media soon. For control answers, the five-level Likert scale was used. The questionnaire was built on Google's form tool. We sent the survey to be answered online on two occasions. The research is classified as longitudinal to compare responses over time. The first submission (phase 1) took place in June 2019, and the second (phase 2) took place in March 2020. Surveying two rounds were motivated by the threat of a worldwide economic recession, caused by the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic, which changed consumer habits, forcing companies to rethink their business processes. The sampling took place in a non-probabilistic manner and for convenience, by sending an e-mail containing the questionnaire link to people in the researcher's networking and working (as entrepreneurs or as employees) in the labor market. They were asked in the e-mail to forward them to new potential respondents.

Data Analysis

We sent the questionnaire to 221 and got 199 responses in the first phase. Of these, we discard 17 because they contained obvious inconsistent answers. In the end, 182 questionnaires answered were available for analysis. In the second phase, we send the survey to 275 companies, and we got 263 responses. Of these, seven were discarded for reasons similar to those in phase 1, leaving 256 questionnaires for analysis. The data (first five questions) in the "Company's Data" section made it possible to trace a profile of the companies included in the samples, with the same pattern in both moments of the gathering. The companies' profile in the samples is mostly local-based and small-sized (with up to 50 employees), providing services, and do not have information technology departments in their structure. We profile respondents through analysis of the "Respondents' Data" sections' data (questions 6 to 10) in the two phases of the collection. The majority of them are female, aged between 26 and 45 years old, and most of them have a higher degree. In addition to these characteristics, the vast majority of them are owners or partners and do not work in the companies' IT departments. Next, we discuss the data in the "Using Social Media" section.

Question 11 asks to inform if the company has an e-commerce platform. The vast majority of them (85% in June 2019 and 73% in March 2020) do not have e-commerce platforms, suggesting that both samples are about companies whose expertise is mostly sales or services provided in person. Question 12 inquires if the company corporately makes use of social media. By analyzing the data, we can see almost a reversal of the percentage when considering samples from June 2019 and March 2020. In June 2019, only 21% of companies said they use social media corporately, while in March 2020, this percentage rose to 72%. Question 13 asks if the company does customer service through social media. When analyzing the number of companies that use social media to provide customer service, the percentage goes from 16% in June 2019 to 67% in March 2020. Question 14 asks the interviewees to tell if the information from the customer service made through social media is used strategically. In June 2019, only 13% of companies said they handle customer service information, while 41% said they use it in March 2020. The analysis of the data collected in the section "Using Social Media" in the two moments of the collection shows that:

- the vast majority of companies have more significant expertise in face-to-face assistance;
- there was an increase in the number of companies that started the use of social media corporately;
- there was an increase in the number of companies that began to serve customers through social media;
- there was an increase in the number of companies that started to use customer service information through social media, strategically;

The analyzes show a change in the companies' posture about using social media when considering the two moments of collection when the data shows that a more significant number of companies use social media as alternatives to contact their customers. The conclusions are justified by the change in companies' behavior concerning presence in digital media due tothe Sars-Cov-2 pandemic. The next section, "Human Resources", deals with human resources made available by the company for the use of social media to provide customer service and manage these platforms. Question 15 inquires to state if there is an employee responsible for customer service on social media. We noticed a meaningful difference between the two collection moments. In June 2019, 17% of the companies claimed to have an employee responsible for customer service on social media, against 64% of companies in March 2020. Question 16 asks to answer if those responsible for customer service through social media work only in this occupation. In June 2019, no company had an exclusive employee perform the task in question, against 94% of companies in March 2020.

Question 17 asks to allege whether those responsible for customer service have had training in the area of social media in the last year. In both moments of the survey, we observed that the vast majority of employees responsible for customer service hadno specific training in the area of social media in the past year. In June 2019, no respondents claimed that employees responsible for customer service were trained in social media. In March 2020, the percentage of qualified employees is 19%, showing an increase. Question 18 demanding the interviewees to mark an average on a linear scale from 0 to 10 to the team's knowledge of customer service on social media. We observed that the standards related to the experience in social media of the employees responsible for customer service, increased when comparing the two moments of the survey. We saw that 100% of the companies stated that in June 2019, the collective knowledge in social media of the customer service employees was no more than 5. In March 2020, 41% of the companies stated that their employees had experience averaged above 5. Question 19 asks the interviewees to inform if a department or an employee is responsible for the management of social media in the company. We noticed that in both stages of the research, that the percentage of companies that claim to have or not an employee or a sector taking care of the management of social media in the company did not have significant changes in their percentages. Prevailed the non-existence of a department or employee to manage the social media platforms adopted by companies. It is essential to note the data in this question and the data that state that most companies do not have an IT sector. Most interviewees who indicated that their companies do not have an IT staff or IT department also claim that their companies do not have a department or employee responsible for managing social media. From the joint analysis, we saw that companies understand that managing social media is the responsibility of the IT staff or IT departments. Question 20 asks to report if employees responsible for handling social media work exclusively in this field. 11% of companies have said so, in June 2019, that the employees only worked in the IT department, against 83% in March 2020. It is necessary to emphasize the importance of the area perceived by the companies when we compared the data from the two collection moments. Question 21 inquires to inform if the person responsible for managing social media has training in how to manage social media in the past year. There was a massive change in the number of companies, 0% in June 2019, and 71% in March 2020, which stated that those responsible for managing social media had specific training in this field last year. This fact demonstrates a change in the companies' perception of the importance of adopting social media, given that their opinion of having employees trained to maintain these platforms better. Question 22 asks respondents to choose on a linear scale from 0 to 10, according to their perceptions, the knowledge of those responsible for managing the company's social media. In the two stages of the research, the highest percentage of companies concentrated in perceptions of responsibility for managing the social media are aware, with averages between 4 and 5 (50% of the companies in June 2019 and 53% of companies in March 2020). Lastly, there was an increase in the number of companies that perceive employees responsible for managing social media with the knowledge below or equal to 5. We assign this fact with the rise of employees with little experience, as well as the fact that companies give more attention to tasks related to the management of social media, which raises their perception about the existence of employees with in-depth knowledge of such tasks.

By analyzing the questions in "Human Resources" section, we conclude that there was an increase in the number of companies, in March 2020 that has an employee responsible for customer service in social media, as well as an increase in the number of companies that claim that such employees work exclusively in this role. This fact was possible thanks to the rise in companies that trained their employees for this task. Finally, there was an increase in average related to the know-how of these employees in the use of social media for customer service. Such data indicates the perception of companies, in March 2020, regarding the necessity to use the customer service channel through social media. Regarding the management of social media, there was an increase in the number of companies that have a department responsible for taking care of social media. There is also an increase in the number of companies claiming to have employees who work exclusively in this area, as well as employees who had training in social media management. Such data denotes companies' perception in March 2020, concerning the importance of having the activity of control of social media adopted and delegated to trained employees. Despite the above, and still related to the management of social media, there is a significant increase in the number of companies that perceive their employees' knowledge on the subject, lower than 5, when comparing the two moments of the survey.

The "Strategic Importance of the Use of Social Media" section of the questionnaire consists of four questions, which are examined below. Question 23 asks respondents to inform whether there is a systematic and strategic debate on the use of social media in the company in recent months. The overwhelming majority of companies in March 2020 (72%) claim that companies have been discussing systematically and strategically using social media, in the last months. Still, it does not treat the matter genuinely, against 23% in June 2019.
Question 24 inquires interviewed the level of importance of the use of social media as a tool to increase sales. There was a discrepancy between data when the samples were compared at the two moments of the collection, indicating a change in the topic's perception. In June 2019, only 10% of the companies considered social media "very important" to increase sales. We observed that in March 2020, this percentage skyrockets to

90%. It is important to note that, in June 2019, 13% of respondents considered the use of social media to increase sales to be "No important". This percentage was zero in March 2020. Question 25 asks the interviewees to report how they consider the target audience to be familiar with social media. It is important to remember that these data represent merely the perception that companies have about their target audience's expertise with social media, and there was no research about it. We observed that a shift in the opinion of the companies between June 2019 and March 2020. In June 2019, only 31% of companies said that their public had experience (some experienced or highly experienced). In March 2020, 81% of companies claimed that their audience has some experience. We must emphasize that, in both moments of the collection, none of the interviewees stated that their public had no experience at all.

Question 26 asks the interviewees to indicate the main obstacle in implementing customer service through social media. In June 2019, 12% of the companies declared that there were no obstacles to such implementation, against 66% of them in March 2020. We must emphasize other barriers, listed with similar percentages in both moments of the collection: "scarcity of specialized human resources" (24% in June 2019 and 23% in March 2020, respectively) and "lack of employees awareness" (8% in June 2019 and 6% in March 2020, respectively).

By analyzing the question in the Section "Strategic Importance of the Use of Social Media", it was also possible to verify when comparing the two collection stages that there was an increase:

- the number of companies that claim to systematically debate the use of Social Media in the past few months, although without the proper relevance;
- the number of companies that consider the use of Social Media to increase revenue to be "very important";
- the perception of companies about the expertise of their public with social media;
- the number of companies that declare that there are no adversities to the accomplishment of social media assistance.

Such statements indicate the tendency of answers in an effort that companies realized as of greater importance in the use of social media strategically when compared to the two stages of the collection. The "Strategic Importance of Process Modeling" section of the questionnaire consists of three questions, which are examined below. Question 27 asks the interviewees to report if the issue of "Improving Service Processes" has been debated systematically in the past few months. It was noticed a substantial increase from 25% in June 2019, to 66% in March 2020, of companies that express that they discuss improvements in the service processes, but still without the appropriate relevance. Question 28 asks to indicate the level of importance in standardizing the service processes. We noticed that the vast majority of companies in March 2020 (79%) considered it very important to standardize customer service processes. In June 2019, only 25% of companies manifested they regarded as such standardization to be very important. Question 29 asks the respondent to indicate the main obstacle to implementing tools to standardize customer service in the company. In March 2020, 98% of companies expressed a "shortage of specialized human resources", "lack of employee awareness", and "lack of adequate tools", against 54% in June of 2019. We believe this is because companies pay more attention to the topic.

By analyzing the question in the "Strategic Importance of Process Modeling," it was possible to perceive when comparing the two moments of collection:

- there was an increase in the number of companies that claim to discuss improvements in the service process, systematically and strategically, even if without due relevance;
- there was an increase in the number of companies that consider the standardization of customer service processes to be "very important";
- there was a decrease in the number of companies that recognize that there are no barriers to implement standardization tools for customer service processes.

Finally, in the "Business Strategies" section, we sought to understand the perception of companies regarding the use of social media corporately soon. Question 30 asks to express their expectations about using social media to expose them to companies in the coming months. We notice that, in June 2019, the overwhelming majority (60%) of the companies stated that they expect to increase the use of social media in the following months. When looking at the March 2020 data, this percentage increases to 86%, denoting that companies' awareness about the strategic importance of social media has increased. Question 31 inquires to report concerning the same perception globally. The data collected show that in March 2020, 90% of companies believe that social media should expand worldwide, against 56% in June 2019. By analyzing the questions in the "Business Strategies" section, we perceive, when comparing the two stages of the survey, the rise of awareness by companies, and the benefit of using social media in customer service.

In summary, we conclude that there is an increase in the number of companies using social media in customer service. They were delegating such tasks to employees responsible for this role and adapting their organizational structures, departments, or employees to be responsible for managing social media platforms when comparing the two stages of the survey. There was also an increase in the number of companies debating the issue "Improvements in Service Processes", showing concern in associating organizational tasks with model processes. Lastly, according to the study, there is an intention to continue using social media in customer service soon.

Conclusion

This survey's objective was to investigate the comprehension of the use of social media in micro and small businesses in customer service processes. We apply the questionnaire in two stages, June 2019 and March 2020, making it possible to check if there were changes in perception by the companies in the sample about the topics investigated. This prospective study used the survey method as a way to obtain data given by the interviewed themselves. The samples consisted mostly of companies with local operations, up to 50 employees, and without an IT department. The samples consisted of the interviewees in the vast majority of them being women, aged between 26 and 45 years old and mostly with higher education.

The vast majority of them are business partners and do not work in the information technology departments of their companies. As for the "Using Social Media", the analyzes showed a change in the companies' posture about the use of social media when considering the two moments of collection when we found a more significant number of companies using social media as alternatives to contact their customers. As for "Human Resources" it was possible to notice when comparing the two survey stages, an increase in the number of companies with employees responsible for social media management activity, and the number of companies with employees responsible for customer service through these media. As for the "Strategic Importance of the Use of Social Media", the results collected showed an increase in the systematic debate on the topic "use of social media corporately" in companies, when comparing the two stages of the survey. It also concludes a higher perception by the companies in accepting their public using alternative contact channels, such as social media, as well as an increase in companies claiming that there are no barriers for the implementation of assistance through these when seen in the two stages of the survey.

Regarding the "Strategic Importance of Process Modeling", considering the two collection moments, an increase in the number of companies was noticed, systematically debating improvements in the service processes, as well as an increase in the number of companies considering there are barriers to the implementation of standardization tools of customer service processes. Since more companies debate the adoption of standardized service processes, there is a greater tendency to try to implement it, justifying the increase in the perception of the existence of difficulties to do so. Ultimately, through the data in the "Business Strategies" section, we concluded that more companies, when comparing the two collection moments, have expectations of increasing the use of social media in their companies, soon, as well as understand this increase globally. We noticed the divergence of responses in those companies perceived greater importance in the use of social media strategically, between June 2019 and March 2020. We assign the change of perception to the implementation of social isolation measures to contain the advance of the Sars-Cov-2 virus, which forced the closure of commercial establishments considered non-essential or allowed the operation of those that offered essential products or services with restrictions. The change in the perception of companies concerning the themes, in the two stages of the survey, could be seen. Companies' need to create alternative channels to contact their clients, due to the quarantine adopted in the world to contain the spread of the Sars-Cov-2 virus, caused social media and business processes to be seen entirely and sometimes taken as ways to minimize the resulting losses of revenues.

Suggestions and Limitations

The questionnaire's application in two stages brought very divergent perceptions about social media associated with customer service and the importance of standardizing business processes in terms of service. As future work, we suggest a new questionnaires' round to investigate if the companies' perceptions about social media and business processes converge with the results of the analyzes presented, as well as the confrontation the results of this survey with other research that may justify the change in the perception of companies on the subject.

As research limitations, we noticed that sending the questionnaire by e-mail may have limited the sample size since many internet users face these e-mails as unwanted.

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