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DOCTORAL THESIS

SUMMARY

Organizational and Cultural Factors influencing the Adoption of
Promotion Strategies in the European SMEs

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SUMMARY

Small and medium-sized companies represent 99 percent of all businesses in the EU and are critical components of a healthy society and economy. Europe stands to benefit significantly from investment in the growth of SMEs: 93 percent of companies in the EU employ between one and nine employees. However, as previous research has demonstrated, SMEs face several barriers to innovation and digital transformation, including financial constraints, widespread ignorance about the potential benefits of digital technologies, concerns about data security, fear of cultural change, deficiencies in the quality of local digital infrastructure, and a lack of digital skills among employees. Europe's policymakers have begun to address SMEs' reluctance to embrace new digital technology, establishing numerous knowledge platforms to show the usage and efficacy of various digital tools.

This research aims to determine the most important organizational factors and the main cultural dimensions that influence adopting promotion strategies within small or medium-sized companies. Therefore, this research evaluates the influence of internal and external factors in the development of promotion strategies in SMEs from several European countries, a topic that raises interest at the national and European level, framing the recent trends in the development of public policies for small businesses and medium-sized companies.

The thesis is composed of six chapters addressing theoretical framework and the current state of scientific knowledge in the field of organizations and communication, with a focus on promotion and digital innovation (Chapters 1, 2, and 3), the methodological approach of the research (Chapter 4), the quantitative and qualitative research description and data (Chapter 5) and a final chapter dedicated to conclusions, recommendations, and practical implications (Chapter 6). To better understand the relevant factors influencing countries from different European regions, Romania, Portugal, and Spain were chosen to analyze their small and medium-sized business sectors more thoroughly. As a former communist country, Romania ranks among the lowest EU countries in new firm creation (Andrez, Tataj, Dalle, and Romanainen, 2020). To the contrary, in terms of SME innovation, Portugal is a leader (EIS, 2020) and it is relevant to examine its case to learn about innovation and development best practices. Although it evolved in a similar geographical and cultural region as Portugal, Spain proves an innovation performance below the EU average (EIS, 2020). These countries belonging to the three different performance groups were chosen to understand significant indicators and relevant factors that might impact the private sector.

As presented, this study employs both quantitative and qualitative techniques, and it was designed to explore the organizational and cultural factors correlated with the adoption of promotion strategies in SMEs in several European countries. The countries that were selected were Romania, Portugal, and Spain. The quantitative method is based on an instrument developed after the selection of the most important organizational factors and the operationalization of their concepts. Thus, the questionnaire is intended to evaluate organizational characteristics as independent variables and promotion strategy adoption as a dependent variable. A qualitative approach was preferred to investigate the effect of cultural factors on the adoption of promotion strategies because it allows identifying differences and similarities in decision-making, strategic perspectives, and priorities among business owners in Portugal, Romania, and Spain.

Nowadays, organizations have to communicate on different channels with more fragmented audiences, which become more selective in terms of messages they want to receive. The emergence of strategic communication is an opportunity to study purposeful, organized formal communication programs. When discussing SMEs cases, the adoption of communication strategies is strongly related to the company's internal resources. Hence, the business owner is usually the key leader in deciding external communication and the person responsible for coordinating all strategic efforts. Promotion and publicity are considered among the most important functions of public relations and, depending on several factors, it might become the responsibility of various, different members of an organization.

The first chapter details paradigms and theories of organizations and continues with approaching different dimensions for studying and understanding organizations, applied to the modern context and digital changes. Organizations changed and evolved synchronously with the social, political, and cultural viewpoints of humanity. The study of organizations is a topic of interest not only for psychologists but also for sociologists, economists, historians, and anthropologists, and they all brought valuable contributions to this field. Since the beginning of humankind's history, significant events and discoveries have changed the way of living and improved living conditions. The previous significant transformations were studied to understand their reasons, implications, and impact on further developments. Throughout modern times, researchers have been studying an array of topics and questions related to the social interactions between members of an organization, how individuals affect the organizational life and how they are affected, how organizations work. All these issues were covered using different lenses or paradigms. For the use of the present study, the next chapter

includes a compressed overview of the paradigms in the organizational field, the organizational field, followed by the structure's evolution (functional, divisional or matrix) until now, leadership theories, organizational behavior, and organizational culture evolution inside an organization. The role and activity of public relations inside an organization can be identified and recognized only by understanding how different variables have interacted and impacted the society and the organization itself throughout the time.

In the Digital Society, most of the components of human interaction have been impacted, and technology is present in a variety of industries and activities. Communication and public relation have evolved to adapt to the new digital environment, building valuable relationships between actors. Hence, the emergence of the Digital Era has impacted public relations at different levels. The second chapter examines how the new communication technologies influenced how organizations could conduct research and deliver the message (Lordan, 2001). The first step of building the public relations program could now include access to different data gathering sources such as the Internet, research software, online content analysis, and the message's distribution through a digital environment. The beginning of the 21st century came with a lot more information available to everyone, a higher speed in information exchange, various channels of interactions, two-way communication, a breakdown of boundaries between the organization and the environment, a lack of control of information ownership and increasing costs in developing a diversity of new forms of disseminating the information. The accelerated information flow forces practitioners to overwork to gain audiences' attention, while they also must struggle more to build confidence as the public becomes more skeptical as it has access to more information.

Inside organizations, strategic communication is focused on how it communicates based on a planned application of communication. Nowadays, companies must differentiate across different channels, in front of different audiences, from different perspectives. The emergence of strategic communication is an opportunity to study purposeful, organized formal communication programs. The term strategic is often associated with power and decision making, with leadership styles and organizational climate of the company. The standard view of strategic communication implies that communication practice is a management function. Based on Kendall's strategies categorization (1992), Smith (2020) classifies communication strategies in proactive and reactive public relations strategies (p. 82). The communication strategies started by the organizations can be proactive as they are implemented based on company's objectives rather than because of a needed response. The proactive public relations

strategies include action strategies such as sponsorship, activism, special events, organizational performance, alliances and coalitions and communication strategies such as newsworthy information and transparent communication (Smith, 2020, 83). The strategies implemented to respond to a negative situation are called reactive public relation strategies and they include pre-emptive action strategies, offensive response strategies, defense response strategies, diversionary response strategies, vocal commiseration strategies, rectifying behavior strategies and strategic inaction (Smith, 2020, 98). Operating in this context, promotion strategies are proactive public relations strategies that use controlled media to access large audiences. To stimulate the demand for a product or service, promotion „is concerned with ensuring that customers are aware of the products that the organization makes available" (Rowley, 1998, 384) and a promotion strategy meets objectives such as: sales increase, market share improvement, brand recognition improvement, market education or competitive advantage generation. Hence, promotion strategies are used to convince audiences to buy things, ideas, and lifestyles therefore, they can be considered a socio-cultural intervention in our daily lives (Wernick, 1991). Promotion comprises forms such as advertising, sales promotion, sponsorships, financing cultural or sports activities, patronage, articles in specialized publications, attendance at fairs and forums, open days' events, mentoring and advising activities for similar institutions through the temporary assistance of staff. Advertising consists in a controlled method of placing messages in the media and it had to adapt to „structural changes as consumers migrate from traditional media to online platforms" (Kirchhoff, 2009, 2). In this context, advertising used to be defined as „paid messages from an identified sponsor using mass media to persuade an audience" (Thorson & Rodgers, 2019, 29) to cover the need of a company to pay to appear in newspapers, television news, radio etc. Nowadays, the digital communication through Internet made owned media (organizations' own websites, pages, apps) increasingly important, along with earned media (content liked and/or shared by user with other users). Messages are often personalized to their target audience and the sponsor of the ads became harder to discern. In the same context, the organizational structures have been changing. After a long period when mass communication theories regulated the public relation activities, Coombs (2001) indicates that the relationship management approach is starting to receive more attention as the mass communication theory seems too limiting. Relationship management focuses on communication as the principal means of controlling the organization-public relationship (Heath, 2001). Thus, in the digital age changed the definition of advertising by focusing only on two attributes: „a message from an advertiser, and the intention to persuade" (Thorson & Rodgers, 2019, 30).

Thus, from an economic standpoint, the promotion culture is „an essential shaping force in the development of healthy markets" (Davis, 2013) through supporting mass production to fulfil the needs of a more and more globalized, urbanized world. Promotion industry must "adapt to embrace the new reality of interactive content, emerging media, and production/consumption methods" (Sheehan & Morrison, 2009, p. 40) and new tools and activities must be tested, adapted, and incorporated in traditional public relations practices to reach customers and to create the needed relationship with organizations' publics.

In the context of a more digitalized and connected world, particular aspects of our culture and society are constantly adapting and evolving. Digital technology has become important in our lives, and it is mandatory to understand what the word 'digital' means to understand how it impacts our daily life and our society. Hence, the third chapter examines the particularities of the European SMEs. In their case, creating a strong relationship with customers, partners and community is an important goal as small businesses often fail because people are unaware that they exist or what they do. Social media presence has become a way to create two-way communication between an organization and its audience as it offers the opportunity for simultaneous interaction at a low cost. Promotion using ads on social media platforms and other digital platforms helps create awareness for a small local business. A study investigating public relations practices in North-West England revealed that „the fundamental understanding and approach to the use of public relations found in many SMEs may be quite different from that found in larger business organizations" (Moss, Ashford & Shani, 2003, 209). One significant distinction is that, in the case of SMEs, the company owner, rather than a public relations department or team, is more likely to be responsible for executing communication strategy. Yet, the promotion strategies of small and medium-sized companies represent an insufficiently researched area, with the attention being focused in previous years on multinational organizations, already known brands, governmental institutions (Olins, 2015; Powers and Zambrano, 2016). There are studies that analyze the influence of organizational factors on management (Sánchez, Guerrero-Villegas, and Hurtado González, 2017), but also studies that study the impact of cultural factors on the effectiveness of brand strategies (Aguirre-Rodriguez, 2014). However, there is a gap in the role that these factors play before the company message is transmitted outside it. Establishing and defining the promotion strategy takes place within the management department and, through the linguistic and communication aspects involved, is considered a culture-oriented element (de Mooij, 2019). Therefore, as part of management, the promotion is directly influenced by internal, organizational, management factors, but also

by external, socio-cultural factors that influence the entire strategic planning and implementation process.

The fourth chapter discusses the research approach employed to conduct this study, relying on a selection of relevant variables such as leadership style, organizational culture, company size and company age; how and why hypotheses were developed to investigate the link between the organizational factors and the adoption of promotion strategies; how sampling design was made and how participants were selected, and how the instruments were built. The role of this chapter is to describe the methodology and procedures used in the study, as well as to offer information on how the research was conducted. The general objective of this research is to identify organizational and cultural factors correlated with the adoption of promotion strategies in SMEs. Romania, Portugal, and Spain were selected for a more comprehensive study of the small and medium-sized company sectors in order to get a better understanding of the essential variables impacting organizations from various European regions. Being built as a hypotheses-testing study, the present research measures the influence that organizational and cultural factors have on the adoption of promotion strategies in Romanian, Spanish and Portuguese SMEs. The mixed-method approach was selected to provide a structured, theoretical-driven measurement of organizational factors influencing the adoption strategies inside SMEs, complemented by open-ended, exploratory, qualitative data regarding cultural dimensions and influences on the topic investigated.

On the one hand, the organizational culture and the leadership style were selected as relevant for this study as they are more likely to impact a SMEs' business model and strategy and lead to changes in market orientation, communication, and performance of a company.

On the other hand, a secondary objective focuses on identifying other significant aspects, such as cultural factors, that influence adopting promotion strategies inside a small and medium-sized company. Designed as an intercultural comparative study, this study analyzes the adoption of promotion strategies from a cultural perspective to investigate the impact of certain cultural dimensions. The Response promotion strategies were selected for this research as relevant for the new digital environment. The adoption of the Response promotion strategies was investigated in relation to Uncertainty Avoidance and Long-Term Orientation dimensions.

The results of this findings are presented in the fifth chapter. The questionnaire revealed that, even if there is a high incidence of offline promotion strategies in SMEs, most respondent business owners admit they use online promotion tactics and activities. The small sample size

of Spanish and Portuguese respondents couldn't allow the comparison and analysis of this variables between countries, but they were further examined in the qualitative research step. Two statistically relevant correlations were identified between the adoption of promotion strategies inside SMEs in Spain, Romania and Portugal and the company size and organizational culture. More specifically, the larger the company, the bigger chances that the SME could develop and implement a promotion strategy. A statistically more relevant correlation was identified between the organizational culture and the adoption of promotion strategies, more specifically between the innovative organizational culture and the Response promotion strategy focus. These findings prove the importance of organizational factors and the impact they have on SMEs' activities and performance and the role each of them plays in the adoption of communication strategies. From the perspective of a more digitalized world, an innovative organizational culture empowers the SMEs to adapt to this fast-changing environment and to adopt the new technologies and tools recommended for growth and survival.

Despite European statistics from the previous year, even if there is a high incidence of offline promotion strategies in SMEs, almost all entrepreneurs admit they use online promotion tactics and activities. Even if participating SMEs do not have a proper promotion strategy in place, the pandemics force the majority to start paying more attention to the news channels and new tools for marketing and sales. Companies increased their investment in digital commerce as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic since they were forced to limit their offline activity. This is supported, for example, form data from Spain where the implementation of lockdown measures in mid-March 2020 has hastened the adoption of e-commerce. According to the Central Bank of Spain, internet transactions increased from 15% to 22% during the imprisonment. This relatively new approach resulted in an accelerated adoption of online promotion activities inside Romanian, Spanish and Portuguese SMEs, as more than 95% of the respondents admit to using at least rarely a form of online promotion activity. Companies with a digital presence have an advantage as social distancing measures will continue to limit the interactions for months to come (Craven, Liu, Mysore & Wilson, 2020). The fact that preferred promotion activity for almost all SMEs (98%) is based on sales and discounts could be explained by the need of immediate sales, the lack of sufficient cash-flow and lack of financial resources. Firms prefer internal funding such as manager's savings or retained earnings as more attractive for building capital, notion conceived and formulated in the pecking-order theory by Myers (1984) and Myers and Majluf (1984). Abundant research in European countries (Kapper

et al, 2006 in Poland; Ramalho & Vidigal da Silva, 2009 in Portugal) showed empirical evidence of pecking-order theory inside SMEs. Hence, cash-flow as relevant variable for this theory impacts variables such as liquidity, profitability (Mateev, Potziouris & Ivanov, 2013). Almost half of participants in this study attended fairs and industry forums (38%) an offline promotion strategy preferred particularly in very specialized industries where business to business partnerships occur in physical formats. The value of this type of activity is highlighted by the relatively high number of virtual fairs and conferences organized after 2019 when physical meetings were restricted. Digital platforms and tools offered organizers an adequate context to establish one to one meetings between business owners, large audience speeches and conferences or virtual direct interaction between consumers and brand though chat messages. Open days events (less than 1%) obtain low percentage as they either require a high amount of work for planning and organizing and no immediate or short-term benefits are achieved. Financing of cultural events and sport patronage (14%), sponsorship and mentorship activities (23%) and articles in specialized publications (14%) are also less popular amongst SMEs in this research as they require resources such as financial budged or free time from one of their internal specialists for mentorship or content creation.

Despite the limited number of complete promotion strategies identified in all three countries, the slightly higher percentage found in Portuguese and Spanish business environment might be caused by a higher globalization of companies and a better exposure to the international markets. Interacting in a higher degree with foreign customers and partners, Portuguese and Spanish business owners understood and implemented promotion strategies earlier and from a more complex perspective. This explanation is supported by a linguistic advantage, both Spain and Portugal being able to build international business relationships with Brazil or countries in Latin America in their mother tongue. Moreover, both countries have an important share of the economy based on tourism; hence, cultural interactions and market adaptation could have been supported and influenced by constant exposure.

As exposed through the interviews, entrepreneurs from all three countries proved a clear preference for promotion strategies with immediate response focus. Advertising, sales promotion, attendance at fairs and forums are indicators for an Immediate Response focus of the promotion strategy. Relevant for the objectives of this study is the fact that most of the activities mentioned for the immediate response strategies are in the online environment. Entrepreneurs' replies emphasize the relevance of the new media channels' adaptability and accessibility. The option to pay for advertisements or to use only free features makes social

media one of the most frequently mentioned promotion strategies by entrepreneurs. Related to other promotion strategy focuses, it is important to mention is that compared to Spanish and Romanian entrepreneurs, none of the Portuguese respondents considered educational activities or dissemination of information, and this can be the consequence of the fact that this type of promotion strategy implies a long-term result and conversion.

The results of the quantitative study identify factors such as company size and the organizational culture as relevant in different degrees for the promotion strategies adoption organizational. On the one hand, with a relatively weak correlation, we noticed though that the company size influences the adoption of the promotion strategy. On the other hand, a statistically more relevant correlation was identified between the organizational culture and the adoption of promotion strategies, more specifically between the innovative organizational culture and the Response promotion strategy focus.

In terms of responsibility for designing a promotion strategy inside SMEs, the questionnaire reflected that business owners are mainly in charge of communication and promotion activities inside the companies. This is consistent with high-ranking countries on Power Distance dimensions suggesting that business owners tend to keep ownership of the communication strategies instead of finding an employee or an agency to take the lead. Most of the time, the business owner is responsible for the promotion strategies, even in small companies with more than nine employees.

In the Digital Age, organizational processes and culture have been transformed by implementing new, innovative tools technologies. This research investigated the influence of internal factors such as company size, company age or leadership style on adopting promotion strategies among SMEs. Towards a more holistic approach to the strategy adoption and communication processes, external factors such as the cultural dimensions of Hofstede were explored.

Nowadays, a successful company is competitive and creative. Innovativeness is critical in the modern globalized market since most commercial and operational activities moved in the digital environment. An innovative organizational culture implies more openness to new technologies, new market approaches, and more interest in digitalization and internationalization. Hence, when discussing small and medium-sized enterprises cases, the innovative work environment fosters creativity and competitiveness.

However, differences between countries were noticed in terms of perceived barriers in adopting a promotion strategy. Specific external barriers such as exaggerated bureaucracy was only mentioned in Romanian interviews, while technical skills and knowledge limitations were never considered in their case. On the contrary, Portuguese, and Spanish entrepreneurs highlighted the lack of technical tools or skills and they mentioned the need to continually learn and train in the communication field. They also consider their responsibility to develop a promotion and to work on the external communication strategy, compared to the Romanian entrepreneurs who would expect help and support from external sources of power such as governmental institutions or communication agencies.

In conclusion, both expectations regarding the cultural preferences towards a Response promotion strategy have been confirmed to be related to a low-ranking Long-Term Orientation and a high-ranking Uncertainty Avoidance culture. Even if there are distinctions in motivation and constraints to adopting a promotion strategy or selecting a particular focus, the majority of entrepreneurs selected digital promotion activities as their main external communication focus.

This research identifies as relevant for the promotion strategies adoption organizational factors such as company size and the organizational culture. Relevant to add is that, depending on their culture, business owners tend to choose differently between various promotion strategies. The most prevalent promotion focus for small companies is Immediate Response due to their lack of cash flow and need for liquidity, but also because of high anxiety of unknown situations in the future and low interest in strategic planning.

Limitations of the Research

This subchapter details several methodological limitations of the research such as small sample size and difficult access to respondents from Portugal and Spain, lack of physical interaction during semi-structured interviews, lack of resources for better online data bases, contrasting number of participants from each country in the quantitative study.

Due to external factors, the research was conducted online through tools such as Google forms for questionnaires and Zoom platform for remote meetings. The pandemics context made the physical interaction with the business owners impossible in any of the countries as social distancing restrictions were in place during study period. Exclusively online data collection could impact the study results since totally non-technic business owners or organizations may

not be included in the sample. Moreover, the increased use of digital communication in recent years has made it more difficult for cold e-mails to capture the recipient's attention. The Digital approach of the business owners in Portugal and Spain was more difficult as they could experience reluctance towards an unknown sender, university, and country. Also, reaching the participants' inboxes was challenged by many layoffs or breaks for SMEs active in industry sectors affected by pandemics.

A relevant challenge was also the limited access to Portuguese and Spanish respondents for the quantitative research. Even if data base information was enriched by snowball recommendation from respondents, the final number of Spanish and Portuguese entrepreneurs was not enough in order to run more statistical tests or to further compare more variables. Hence, a critical limitation of the quantitative analysis is the inability to compare all three nations due to the low number of respondents from Portugal and Spain in comparison to Romania. Sample size and the lack of a statistically significant number of participants limited the number of tests as most required a representative population distribution. Therefore, the relationships between data could not be explored and analyzed at full potential, and various points remained underdressed.

The external context of the global COVID-19 pandemic disrupted business activity, especially in the case of small and medium-sized companies that did not have a crisis management plan or technology for rapid adaptability. Hence, reaching affected entrepreneurs and gaining their trust and interest in filling in the questionnaire and afterward participating in the qualitative study was a challenge that filtered some of the potentially interested respondents. The limitation of the health security constraints also influenced the selection of the three countries: Romania, Spain, and Portugal. The research structure was designed considering the availability of data, access to respondents, the research timeframe, the external context and travel limitation during COVID-19 pandemics and the associated costs for access to information. Physical observation methods or face-to-face meetings were not possible due to sanitary restrictions. Hence, based on languages spoken by the researcher, access to databases and native speakers, the three mentioned countries were chosen for this research. In order to test the conclusions and their relevance for more European countries, further research is required in different cultures with different scores on cultural dimensions. Additionally, more respondents for quantitative research would allow further comparison and investigation of organizational factors' influence on the adoption of promotion strategies amongst European small and medium-sized enterprises.

Further, the selection of the participating countries in this study was limited to the researcher's linguistic knowledge and a more relevant comparison and result may be possible between countries and cultures with higher differences between Hofstede's dimensions scores.

Theoretical Contribution and Practical Implications

From a theoretical point of view, this study aims to contribute to the growing literature on promotion strategies and the internal and external factors that impact their adoption. Current research on this topic is based mainly on big companies with established procedures and PR departments. In this context, few studies focus on small and medium-sized companies as complex systems operating in a dynamic and globalized, yet particular external environment. Small and medium-sized companies are organizations impacted by internal and external factors and this research explores both types of variables contextualizing and understanding the results through a holistic approach. The study's originality comes from developing a comparative framework, which entails an in-depth analysis of organizational variables and their effect on the adoption of promotion strategies inside SMEs, and as an investigation of the role played by cultural dimensions.

The methodology's inductive and exploratory nature led to the building of Romanian entrepreneurs' profile by bringing out their perspectives and the difficulties they face in communication matters compared to their Spanish and Portuguese counterparts. Moreover, the study's uniqueness stems from the peculiar socio-economic environment in which it was conducted, with respondents compelled to analyze more in-depth issues such as promotion tactics, technological dependence, and changes in consumer behavior.

On the one hand, the findings of this research may serve as a foundation for governmental institutions, communication agencies, and other relevant stakeholders to better understand the needs and dissatisfactions of small company owners. Specialized or accountable organizations may address their expectations and lack of expertise to strengthen the private sector and SMEs. By exploring similarities and differences across three European countries, this finding could also be used in future research on more appropriate regional measures to be taken to support small entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the national culture transcends the individual, strongly embodied in our societies and institutions. Hence, understanding its dimensions and their impact on various organizational aspects helps create reliable predictions regarding risk-taking

behaviors, strategic planning, and response to new regulations or measures. Findings in this research reveal the influence of the national culture throughout all interactions between SME owners and colleagues, external collaborators, institutions, or clients. In a globalized world, all actors involved must be aware of cultural differences between nations or groups, and they must plan and design their cross-culture relationships in a conscious manner.

On the other hand, small entrepreneurs could explore and identify best practices amongst their counterparts in similar countries with comparable market characteristics. Understanding and adopting innovative ideas developed by other entrepreneurs may result in increased effectiveness and resource savings. Future research with a more significant number of participating countries and respondents may facilitate the development of a database of tools and practices suitable for small and medium-sized companies across Europe.

Recommendations and Future Directions of Research

This research can offer the grounds for a further, more in-depth analysis in a European context. By extending the investigation to more countries, relevant data on small and medium-sized companies and their needs in terms of promotion could be obtained. Also, expanding the exploratory study to include all cultural dimensions might reveal additional data and perspective of the respondents.

Data from broader areas and culturally different countries might reveal helpful information about facilitators and barriers in becoming more visible and selling their products and services online. Research on different regions, with different cultural profiles might reveal interesting information in terms of similarities and distinctness in preferences, expectations, and struggles. A more significant number of participants would help confirm the reliability and legitimacy of the correlation identified in the present research. Hence, a similar study with a relevant sample size for all nations investigated might uncover new correlations or relationships between variables and permit further data analysis using statistical tests. Collecting additional data would enable the development of a more precise advice and practical meaning of the findings.

Another potential direction that that was not expected at the outset of the research and emerged from the qualitative interviews is the gender differences in how men and women approach strategic planning in general and external communication in particular. Depending

on their cultural background, entrepreneurs of various genders may have a different view on the relevance of implementing a promotion plan and the emphasis on which the campaign should be focused. Similarly, data on an entrepreneur's age might be gathered and analyzed to identify any significant outcome in correlation to leadership style, corporate culture, or other organizational characteristics.

Furthermore, this study can be used in order to develop promotion strategy public policies and regulations adapted to small and medium companies by addressing the needs and struggles that entrepreneurs in all countries face. The results of this research revealed a critical need of education and skills development in terms of promotion strategies among SME owners. A relevant outcome highlights that more than half of the SMEs owners are directly and the only ones responsible for thinking and designing a communication strategy inside the company. This implies that when it comes to implementing a promotion plan, company owners play a significant part in decision-making and in order to improve a SME's visibility and access to market and consumers, entrepreneurs must be address through programs, trainings, and counseling.

Last but not least, this research could be followed by a similar approach using alternative frameworks for cultural factors as there are several criticisms to Hofstede's model and its cultural dimensions. External factors influencing the adoption of promotion strategies inside SMEs might be explored using different cross-cultural frameworks such as GLOBE. The latter adds new cultural dimensions and groups nations together based on their cultural similarities. The area of cultural dimensions and particularities of a nation or group continues to be fraught with unanswered questions.

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