

The pandemic Covid-19 and the online selling process in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs): a preliminary perspective

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Abstract

The global pandemic scenario, marked by the new coronavirus (covid-19), makes evident the need for companies to react in their strategy (communication, distribution and sales). In this sense, this study aims to understand the value proposition by investing in the quality of the online sales process in the food sector based on the dimensions of service quality, identifying attributes that customers recognize value. It is intended to apply a questionnaire using the WEBQUAL model to understand the perceptions of customers on the company's website. In the end, we intend to understand the importance of the quality of the digital commerce process in companies in Portugal as a blue ocean strategy. In particular, the contribution of the quality of the digital commerce process (quality of processes) in the segment of food companies in Portugal. The research methodology is exploratory. The method used is descriptive, quantitative and based on the administration of an online questionnaire that applies the WEBQUAL model. In an interdisciplinary perspective, this study presents inputs for marketing, strategy and the quality of services. At the end, lines of future research will be presented.

Keywords: Covid-19, market orientation, Blue ocean strategy, WEBQUAL.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic turned out to be a huge public health problem with an impact on companies and consumers at the national and international levels. Measures were implemented in Portugal in response to COVID-19: limitations on travel rights, closure of commercial establishments, and prohibition on holding events. Teleworking was also encouraged and distance learning was promoted. Consumers and companies had to adjust their behaviour, the mode of purchase and the place of purchase were changed. The companies took steps to continue the business because there is no knowledge of the end of the pandemic by Covid-19. They were forced to rethink strategies and processes to ensure that they have the necessary tools to remain open after the pandemic. The experience in the digital commerce process by some companies has proved to be a sustainable competitive advantage. Sustainable competitive

advantage must preserve what is distinctive in a company. Digital commerce assumes itself as an important vehicle for communication and product distribution, which is fundamental for companies today. Companies must control what they achieve, namely the portfolio of products and services to the customer. Strategy is the way to achieve the goals. Companies must follow blue ocean strategies, market space where industries that do not exist at the moment are found or blue oceans are created from innovations in red oceans with opportunities for profit and growth. There is a concern for the blue ocean strategy for technological advances and globalization. Lower barriers between commercials, product information and prices become instantly available and monopoly markets tend to disappear (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). Strategic options are limited by the environment and the development of a corporate strategy begins with an analysis of the conditions of the industry in which it operates. To choose the strategic vision, one must consider: the structural conditions in which organizations operate, the resources and competencies and the strategic mind-set (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014). The adoption of quality (Quality Management System) is a strategic decision by an organization that can help improve global performance and provide sustainable development (NP EN ISO 9001: 2015). An organization that is focused on quality promotes a culture with processes, behaviors and attitudes that provide value in meeting the needs and expectations of relevant customers and stakeholders (NP EN ISO 9000: 2015). It is relevant to understand the quality perceived by customers to make continuous improvements and readjust strategic and operational decisions. According to Kumar, Singh and Kaur (2012), the analysis of the quality of the websites is an essential tool for the improvement of the websites and future decisions of the commercial department. Therefore, this preliminary study aims to understand the corporate strategy of companies by investing in value for quality of service in the food industry segment in Portugal, identifying attributes that customers recognize value, through the application of the WEBQUAL model.

Strategy and markets

The market consists of two spaces: the red ocean and the blue ocean (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005, 2008). Red oceans have the following characteristics: existing industries in which industry boundaries are defined and accepted; competitive rules are known; companies try to outperform their competitors; they get crowded and the profit and growth prospects are reduced. In the blue oceans are found all the industries that do not exist at the moment; untapped market space, creation and growth opportunity, highly profitable. The authors argue that some blue oceans are created beyond the existing limits of the industry, most are created from the red oceans, extending the limits of the industry to an untapped market space. Thus, the red ocean represents all the industries that exist and high competition prevails, the blue ocean considers all industries that do not yet exist, represents the unexploited market and where there are opportunities for high growth and profitability. They add that in the blue oceans there are new opportunities for profit and growth. A study was carried out on 108 companies (which started their activity) and found that the majority of businesses are located in red oceans (86% of businesses representing 62% of revenues and 39% of profits). The blue oceans represent (14% of businesses that obtain 38% of revenues and 61% of profits). The performance benefits of creating blue oceans were evident (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005).

The competitive strategy is the creation of a unique and valuable position, involving a set of different activities (Porter, 1996). It means choosing a different set of activities to provide a unique mix of value. There are three fundamental principles underlying the strategy: strategy is the creation of a unique and valuable position, involving a set of different activities; the strategy requires trade-offs* in competition to choose what not to do, the strategy involves creating an adjustment between the company's activities (Porter, 1996). Michael Porter (1996) presents three generic strategies: cost leadership, differentiation and focus.

Kim and Mauborgne (2005) argue that the "blue ocean" strategy focuses on making competition irrelevant, creating a new market space where there are no competitors. The solution to face the competition is to bet on the creation of blue oceans where innovation with value predominates (creating value for the company and buyers, making the competition obsolete) is not to compete

in the red ocean environment. The authors concluded that the creation of blue oceans can be created from the company's core business. The blue ocean strategy is achieved only when the company's entire system of utility, price and cost activities is correctly aligned. It is this system-wide approach that makes creating blue oceans a sustainable strategy. The blue ocean strategy is part of the company's range of functional and operational activities. It is a strategy that covers the entire system of activities of the company. The strategic objective, Blue Ocean, is to create new rules, to reject trade-off based on differentiation and low cost and to change strategic thinking, changing from a structuralist vision (strategic thinking based on a defensive position against the competition) to a reconstructionist that increases the value for the company and buyers (space where competition is irrelevant) (Kim & Mauborgne, 2004, 2005). The success of a strategy depends on the development and alignment of value, profit and people. The researchers also defend the concept of the blue ocean strategy strongly related to leadership in order to increase the productivity of employees: focus on the activities that leaders need to be to stimulate motivation and obtain results; keep an eye on the market and distribute leadership across all levels of management. They add the following steps to achieve blue ocean leadership: observe current leadership; develop alternative leadership profiles; select future leadership profiles; institutionalize new leadership practices. In the relationship between the leader and the led, trust and cooperation are essential (Kim and Mauborgne, 2014).

To design a blue ocean strategy, three tools are mentioned: the strategy screen, a table of the four possible actions and the relationship to eliminate, reduce, elevate and create. The strategy screen, is a diagnosis and action that aims to identify alternatives in the industry (understand what the competition is doing and identify factors to compete) and in non-customers; the framework of the four possible actions allows to redesign the strategic profile and create new value. Through identification: elimination, identifying factors in the industry that must be eliminated because they do not compete; reduction, determining the factors that must be reduced, companies can over-serve their customers and increase costs; elevation, determining the factors that they must add value according to the industry standard; and creation, identify the factors to create that the industry does not yet offer.

In elimination and reduction, companies obtain information on how to reduce costs in relation to the competition and the other two questions provide information on how to increase the value for buyers and achieve new demand (Kim, & Mauborgne, 2005). When a company applies the framework of the four possible actions to a given industry, it gets a new look at what is actually perceived. The third tool using the eliminate-reduce-increase and create ratio is a complement to the analysis of the structure of four actions that allows companies to not only ask the four questions but also to act to create a new value curve. With the application of this combination (eliminate, reduce, increase and create) it allows to obtain four immediate benefits: to look for differentiation and low costs seeking to eliminate value / cost trade-off; identify companies that are only focused on increasing and creating by raising their cost structure and designing more products and services.

The researchers applied the practical application to the wine sector in the United States and the results allowed to identify that the characteristics for a good strategy are the focus, the divergence and the slogan. The focus does not spread efforts on all factors of competition; the divergence is related to a new value curve different from that of competitors; the slogan of the strategic profile must be clear and attractive (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). They also applied the structure of the four actions (eliminate, elevate, reduce and create) to a communication technology company in the logistics area, to the company CJ-GLS (develops an electronic logistics business model), in order to analyze how the company achieved a competitive advantage through innovative information technology that allowed to create a space in the electronic business logistics market. The rapid growth was due to the implementation of a blue ocean strategy (3PL market) and not to the attraction of competitive customers. In order to carry out this study, interviews were conducted with the directors: executive, IT, research in logistics, responsible for information and several collaborators. Success factors and problems in the implementation of the blue ocean strategy were identified. The success factors for implementing

a blue ocean strategy were mentioned: the highly motivated information systems team, strong leadership from top managers and the availability for innovation (Kim et al., 2008).

Online trends and WEBQUAL

The digital world has come to challenge companies, approaching everyone everywhere (Malheiro et al., 2019). Challenges that extend to all levels, not only economic, but also at a relational level, since the relationships themselves, and the way in which people relate and behave, have also undergone modifications. Its indefinite nature, among the news about the various unlawfulnesses that have occurred in the digital medium, make the online consumer develop a certain prudence in the use of this medium, especially in regard to their trust in it. Thus, it is clear the need for companies operating in this medium, in addition to addressing new business models and take advantage of the great benefits offered by this new digital era, including in their strategies the needs and expectations of their customers, achieving what build a reliable image (Vilas Boas et al., 2019). In the current context, strongly marked by the coronavirus pandemic, online services assume a recognized importance (as an attempt to react and respond to the health crisis, economic and social crisis). Thus, this section aims to address the importance of online services (trends and developments in the Portuguese market) and also the WebQual model as a tool for managing and improving the service provided. According to the General Directorate of Health (DGS) in Portugal, the new coronavirus, designated SARS-CoV-2, was first identified in December 2019 in China, in the city of Wuhan. This new agent has never been identified in humans before. The source of the infection is still unknown. The route of transmission is still under investigation. Person-to-person transmission has been confirmed and infection already exists in several countries and in people who had not visited the Wuhan market.

The evolution of online commerce

The most common form of trade is one that is based on the existence of a physical store, a supplier/seller, a customer and all the dynamics that derive from the interaction between the three, the so-called "brick-and-mortar" (Barnes et al., 2004). In this type of channel (traditional/offline) it is possible to expose the product, touch, smell, test, change or even return, which allows the consumer to enjoy a complete shopping experience, although limited by the operating hours and location (Vilas Boas et al., 2019). It was for many years the main form of transaction and sale of goods of the society but that quickly was transformed, not only by the evolution of the technology, but also by the needs and demands that the consumers and the own economy came to present (Koufaris, 2002). According Vilas Boas et al. (2019), online commerce brings countless advantages for consumers, such as, for example, getting alternatives at any time, compare products and compare prices (Pallant et al., 2017). 65% of respondents admitted using the Internet to compare prices in other stores, 61% to search for information about products or services and 49% to see reviews. In the first place of research by products, where 52% of consumers cited at least one channel without connection and 59% an online channel, which shows that, despite the growth of online commerce, both types of commerce still have a significant weight in the consumer purchase process (KPMG International, 2017). In the event that there is a change in the quality of the information, it should be taken into account that the use of information technology, allow stores to be able to attract and retain more consumers.

In specific Portuguese context, and according to the e-commerce barometer in Portugal, in 2014, 66% of the sites in the study said they had increased their sales volume compared to the previous year, and 24% said that this volume was over of 1 million euros (ACEPI, 2015). According to ACEPI's annual study, e-commerce and online purchases are growing in Portugal and at the end of 2016, some 873.000 Internet domains were recognized in .pt. In 2017, online purchases in Portugal amounted to 4.6 million euros, only in the B2C market, and the expectation for 2018 is for growth. Indicators for the development of the digital economy in Portugal revealed that in 2025 the percentage of the population that uses the Internet will be moved to 91, and 59 the

percentage of consumers who use the Internet to make online purchases. The fashion and clothing sector and the technology sector have the highest online sales rate, although the study also foresees a significant increase in the food and supermarket sector (ACEPI, 2018). With this change in online commerce, consumer behavior has also changed. The digital age brought with it a new profile, the online consumer profile. According to the results published recently by Statistic National Institute (INE) on the use of information and communication technologies (Vilas Boas et al., 2019), presented in Figure 1, in 2018, 79% of Portuguese families had Internet access at home (INE, 2018).

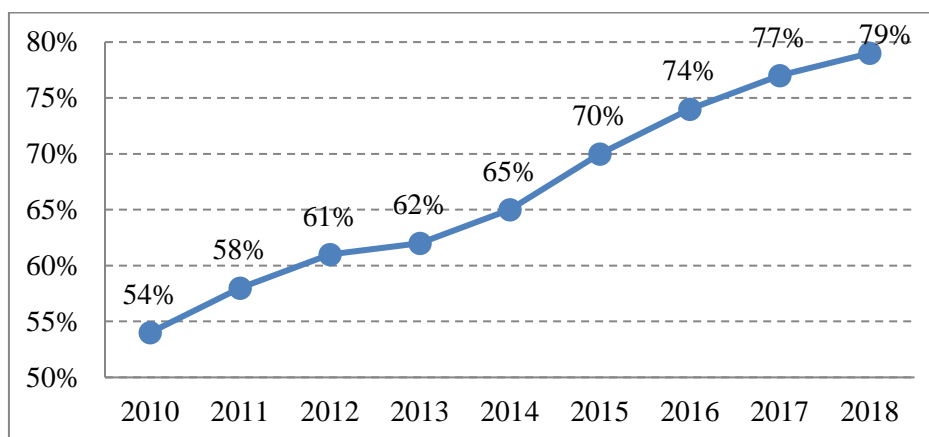


Figure 1: Proportion of households with Internet connection, Portugal (2010-2018).
Source: Vilas Boas et al. (2019).

However, and with the reality of the new coronavirus strongly felt in Europe, particularly in Portugal, online commerce is increasingly important in the first months of 2020. The results mainly in an attempt by companies, and consumers, to minimize the economic impact of the pandemic and, at the same time, have greater access to essential products and services (e.g. food and beverages, pharmacy or clothing).

WEBQUAL

Quality is a central element in corporate strategy. Companies compete for quality, customers look for quality and markets are transformed by quality (Golder et al., 2012). According to the standard (NP EN ISO 9000: 2015) the quality of an organization's products and services is determined by its ability to satisfy customers and the impact on relevant stakeholders. The quality of services is considered a determining factor for the success of companies and assumes importance due to the increase in the offer (Igreja & Sousa, 2020), the experience of the companies, the cost and the demand of customers (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Companies to be able to match or even exceed customer expectations need to understand the dimensions they value, in order to improve the services provided (Zeithaml, 1988). The technical and functional dimension constitutes Service quality. The technical dimension is related to what the customer actually receives from a service (result). The functional or process dimension concerns the way the service is delivered, the customer's perception of the interaction during the service provision (Grönroos, 1982). Technical quality affects customers' perceptions of service quality (Grönroos, 1982, 1990; Rust & Oliver, 1994). In some services, technical quality may be difficult to assess. If this dimension of quality is not possible to estimate customers, they depend on functional quality, namely on empathy and the trust transmitted by the service provider (Kang, 2006).

The WebQual model is considered a method of assessing the quality of websites that is based on the perceptions of consumers' quality on the websites. This model has been applied in several

areas of online commerce: bookstores, online auctions and small businesses (Stuart J. Barnes & Richard T. Vidgen, 2001). The researchers Loiacono et al. (2007) reached an instrument with 36 items, organized into four constructs (utility, ease of use, entertainment, complementary relationship) and 12 dimensions (Loiacono et al, 2007).

The utility construct is composed of the dimensions: adequacy of information to the task, interactivity, degree of reliability and response time. The dimension adequacy of the information to the task is related to the personalization of the information according to the objectives of the users (clear and easy to understand information). The interactivity dimension characterizes the resources available on the website in order to facilitate the user to obtain information appropriate to specific needs.

The reliability dimension is related to the respect for the privacy of users' information, technical reliability on websites and the provision of updated content in a secure environment. The response time dimension is the time to obtain a response after requesting with the website, the user must quickly access and perform any operation from his environment (Loiacono et al., 2007). The ease of use construct is made up of dimensions: ease of understanding and intuitive operations. The ease of understanding dimension is related to the pages displayed on the site being easy to read and the sections easy to understand. The intuitive operations dimension is related to the ease of use of the website.

The entertainment construct is made up of the following dimensions: visual attractiveness, degree of innovation and emotional appeal. The visual attractiveness dimension is related to the stimuli that can lead to a pleasant browsing experience and innovative character of the website. The degree of innovation, is related to the creativity and innovative design of the website, and the emotional appeal, is related with the emotional effect of using the website and with the intensity of involvement (the user feels satisfied, excited and sociable) (Loiacono et al., 2007). The complementary relationship construct consists of the following dimensions: consistent image, online integration and comparison with other sites. The consistent image dimension is related to the website providing an image consistent with the company's image. The online integration, the website must allow the user to be able to complete his online transaction. The dimension comparing with other channels, is related to the user comparing the service provided through the website with the same service provided through alternative channels (namely the fax or telephone) and the website should allow the same tasks to be performed through the Web in the best way (Loiacono et al., 2007).

Methodology and preliminary results

This study will follow, in methodological part, a stage of primary data collection and systematization in the Portuguese context (in the first half of 2020). In particular, we intend to observe the performance and responsiveness of some food companies in Portuguese (i.e. dairy products). It is intended to understand the reactive strategies of organizations in the context of the pandemic (i.e. coronavirus) and the extent to which market strategies are adopted in these unpredictable scenarios. Thus, the WebQual model will allow researchers to assess the quality of websites that is based on the perceptions of consumers' quality on the websites. In this sense, it will also be intended to develop an analysis of social networks, in order to capture good practices for responding to the covid-19 crisis (communication and response strategies with online service). See, for example, the case of the '*Lacticínios das Marinhas*', that sells dairy products, (figure 2) that published a new home delivery service on social networks (using electronic commerce and online shopping).

On the social network, a company located in the north of Portugal (in Esposende) put the following message "During this difficult period, we don't want anything missing! Now you can receive the best Marine products in your home at no extra cost. By private message and Order now!". At the same time, check if the public organization has several posts with the message

'everything will be fine', in an attempt to create hope, empathy and positive thinking with Portuguese consumers.



Figure 2: Reaction strategy of the company 'Lacticínios das Marinhas' (Portugal).
Source: Facebook.

Since this strategy is relatively recent (30 days), it is too early to evaluate the results of this initiative. However, a qualitative analysis of social networks shows a high acceptance by the public, particularly with regard to the number and type of reactions and sharing with the community (viral marketing). The pandemic situation led to a greater use of the Portuguese company's digital channels, using technological means and avoiding proximity and physical contact. In particular, and due to the pandemic situation, Lacticínios das Marinhas decided to reinforce the measures of the contingency plan implemented and ensure the protection and health of employees, while maintaining the provision of services. The measures in question, came into force as of 16.03.2020 and are broadly reflected in the following:

- Lacticínios das Marinhas did not receive any supplier at its facilities until further notice.
- Elimination of sales to final consumers on the premises.
- Customers (Wholesalers and Retailers) who pick up orders at the premises should place orders via phone or e-mail and call the office as soon as they arrive and should remain in the vehicles until pickup is authorized.
- Drivers must also avoid contact with employees.
- Only accept payments for orders via MBWay, ATM or bank transfer. Cash payments were not accepted. The reactions that were manifested on social networks were positive and consumers showed a strong sense of social responsibility and a greater acceptance of the digital solutions presented by the Portuguese company. Future studies will allow us to monitor and analyze the evolution of this initiative and, consequently, measure the positive impact on sales and customer loyalty.

Conclusions and future research

The global pandemic scenario, marked by the new coronavirus (covid-19), makes evident the need for companies to react in their strategy (communication, distribution and sales). In this sense, this study aims to understand the value proposition by investing in the quality of the online sales process in the food sector based on the dimensions of service quality, identifying attributes that customers recognize value. Technological evolution is the great cause for most of the changes that have occurred, from cultural, social, political, economic, personal and even psychological changes, all of them on a global scale. The environment and the relationships that are built in it stopped happening only in physical space, happening also in a space without defined location: the virtual space. The development of technology has brought with it innumerable positive aspects: the global communication that today is fundamental; the democratization of knowledge throughout the world, made possible through the connections that information systems have acquired; the medicine that attended to great evolutions; the very world that has become a small town where everyone is connected, and endless other advantages.

The inclusion of trust and perceived risk was due to the fact that online commerce, due to its technological nature, operates in an environment of doubt and uncertainty. However, the needs and expectations of the consumer have undergone changes with these technological advances, so that companies in this sector had to reinvent themselves and, inevitably, evolve themselves as well. The improvement of behavior models originated the development of new business models, which in turn originated new forms of communication between companies and consumers, and vice versa. In specific, the WebQual model is considered a method of assessing the quality of websites that is based on the perceptions of consumers' quality on the websites. This model has been applied in several areas of online commerce: bookstores, online auctions and small businesses.

Thus, the WebQual model will allow researchers to assess the quality of websites that is based on the perceptions of consumers' quality on the websites. In this sense, it will also be intended to develop an analysis of social networks, in order to capture good practices for responding to the covid-19 crisis (communication and response strategies with online service). See, for example, the case of the '*Lactínios das Marinhas*' that published a new home delivery service on social networks (using electronic commerce and online shopping). Since this strategy is relatively recent, it is too early to evaluate the results of this initiative. However, a qualitative analysis of social networks shows a high acceptance by the public, particularly with regard to the number and type of reactions and sharing with the community (buzz marketing). Future studies will allow us to monitor and analyze the evolution of this initiative and, consequently, measure the positive impact on sales and customer loyalty. In an interdisciplinary perspective, this study presents inputs for marketing, strategy and the quality of services. However, this study has some limitations, namely because it was developed during a coronavirus mitigation phase in Portugal. Temporary limitations prevent, for now, this manuscript from presenting more conclusive data. In view of this Public Health threat, response phases have been defined that include three levels and six sub-levels, according to the risk assessment for COVID-19 and its impact for Portugal. Currently, Portugal is in the Mitigation phase, in which there is local transmission in a closed environment, as well as community transmission. On March 19, 2020, a state of emergency was declared as a consequence of the evolution of the pandemic in Portugal. The risk assessment is constantly updated. The World Health Organization does not recommend travel, trade or product restrictions to countries with a COVID-19 outbreak. Travel bans to affected areas or denied entry to passengers from affected areas are generally not effective in preventing the importation of cases. Therefore, the approach centered on the study of online commerce is very relevant in this scientific investigation. However, it is a preliminary contribution to the management and quality of services (online) in the Portuguese context.

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