



An Exploratory Study on Digital Transformation and Communication within the Moroccan Firms

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the beginning of the third millennium, firms around the world in various economic sectors have been powerfully affected by the evolution process of digital technology and associated internet developments.

The use of Internet and new digital technologies has been considered as a great revolution that will allow companies to benefit from new opportunities, in order to extend their activities and profitability, specifically through decreases in costs. While some companies have been investing rapidly in this new field with the aim to take advantages of new opportunities, others seem to fail in following such developmental pattern.

The main research question in the present paper is to understand perceptions of a sample of Moroccan firms operating in Casablanca, regarding the currently observed process of communication-based digital transformation worldwide. In this sense, our study turns to be exploratory, that is based on open interviews, within a focus group of professionals in the digital sector, rather than on collected data and effective orientations. Such exploratory analysis will be followed by upcoming empirical studies for a more comprehensive understanding of the profession.

Our research paper aspires thereby to better grasping the process of digitalization of communication channels among the firms' professionals, as selected. The ultimate target is to know how well firms are evolving in utilizing newly integrated digital tools, with respect to innovation and trademarks.

To address this issue in an exploratory perspective, we have resorted to a focus group-based

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enquiry with six professionals of firms operating in Casablanca. The methodological framework relies upon qualitative data, as collected through the conducted interviews.

The major research finding of the present paper is that the pattern of digital transformation and communication seems to follow the one observed worldwide. Nevertheless, in spite of strong customers' expectations, some hesitations and inadequate fundraising allocations partially explain the relative slowness of the process. In terms of policy implications, a suitable public-private partnership is still needed so as Morocco can foster digital transformation for economic and social development as well as improvements in the population's standards of life, especially through investment in human capital for better attractivity-generating progress.

Keywords: Digital transformation; marketing; communication; trademark.

1. INTRODUCTION

Choosing a digital transformation strategy is no longer a luxury for today businesses. Indeed, Companies are invited to intensively and perpetually invest in their digital strategies, if they really want to survive and develop. In this way, Benjamin Bayart, a specialist in this area, generally considers the following idea as a starting point for his conferences and speeches: "Historically, humanity had experienced great revolutions in disseminating knowledge and information. Thus, around the 4th century BC, the humankind moved from oral societies to writing-based ones, following the emergence of writing techniques among civilized nations. Then, in the 15th century, the invention of printing by Gutenberg historically marked the transition between the middle ages and the renaissance. Internet network developments would be seen as major shifts towards more significant developments in communication and information technologies. As with any revolution, the currently observed digital progress has to bring about spectacular changes to which markets must adapt to let firms survive and compete" [1].

To find reliable solutions to the emerging multiple crises that dramatically strike economic activities and reshape consumers' behaviors, today's firms consider digitalization not only as a simple technological equipment, but also, and more importantly, as a competitive advantage-generating tool for effective and efficient strategies of information and communication.

With prospects to outlining practices and trends in terms of companies' digital communication, we have selected three major axes that seem to be more reliable, in line with our preliminary research findings. Hereafter are some key elements with respect to such axes: The first element deals with the online communication through social networks, as exponentially

growing worldwide; and the second one deals with the so-termed "user centric" strategy, consisting of a new instantaneous communication, notably because the digital arena has transformed the way in which customers get information. One can understand that this transformation does not concern only time issues, but it refers also to the space in which communication intervenes.

In this direction, Antoine Dupin [2] has pointed out that "social media can be defined as a set of online platforms creating social interactions around digital contents (photos, texts, videos) among different users who share various aspects of interests and affinities. Today, these platforms receive large people's attention and their audience is constantly moving forward, thanks to the continuously growing interest in these new forms of social interactions, as channeled among companies and institutions. Their developments present a turning point in the information flow process, allowing for new devices in terms of communication and marketing".

It seems until now that digitalization generates more opportunities since it is able to create additional contents, and to easily develop ways of interactions with costumers, as levers to creating additional brand values. For this reason, firms are strongly encouraged to renew their communication strategies'. Moreover, communication strategies have to take into account two levels of communication: External and internal communications. The first communication level allows firms to adapt their strategies to the existing business environment, specifically with efforts to consider the economic, social and commercial context. The second communication level deals with communication acts as produced within firms [3].

In conformity with developments above, external communication, to be considered here as the key

purpose of our research, has to be viewed among firms as a very important devoted to improve their production process, and to keep a long-run growth development pattern. In that sense, firms are invited to implement a communication strategy that is able to take into account the economic, social and commercial context. Nevertheless, as above- highlighted, digital revolution has heavily disrupted old communicational models, and any attempt to adapt to the economic, social and commercial situation should keep in mind the requirements of worldwide-spread digital transformation new standards.

As far as we are living under an intensive flow of communication, especially under a marketing communication using omnichannels to send a relevant message to a brand's customers regardless of the customer engaging with the brand, or the channels used to engage.

In this perspective, firms use different channels that would be shops, websites, social networks, phone, and catalogues which are all in fact interconnected, and firms profit from this interconnection to strengthen their expansions.

Moreover, while experiencing a context of communication-marketing, stemming from the emergence of new communication channels, the term of "Omnichannel" or "Omnichanneling" refers to the fact that all the possible channels of contacts and sales between firms and customers are mobilized and fully used. Therefore, the omnichanneling-based strategy" provides a unique universe of consumption that permits to gather the integrality of possible distribution channels. Such various channels may consist of shops, websites, social networks, phones or catalogs, which are integrated together into the firm, with valuable benefits from interconnection. In such sense, the issue is about a sole structure of channels rather than a simplistic inter-channel coordination.

Customers are concerned with easier permanent interactions with trademarks. Hence, the "Omnichanneling-based strategy" has to crowd in customers' commitments and improve their experiences through good practices.

As above-mentioned, "omnichanneling orientations" are so profitable for both parties, so as firms become more close to their consumers' expectations, in an environment where those consumers can interact with companies about

prices, quality, and so on. This means hence that the "Omnichanneling-based strategy" turns to promote customers' commitments and improve firms' experiences, regarding their linkages with clients [4].

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS, HYPOTHESES AND FOUNDATIONS OF EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

The design of communication strategies through social networks, websites, emailing, affiliation and online advertising are seen to be the most appropriate tools for effective digital communication that permits to generate higher growth of trademarks.

The key overall hypothesis of our exploratory study is that the pattern of digital transformation and communication may be derived from interviews with professionals rather than second hand-collected data. Accordingly, the specific research hypothesis is that, though customers' expectations are somewhat higher, hesitations and budget constraints would significantly explain the existing slowness in the transition to the digital age.

What about practices within the Moroccan firms with regard to international trends towards digital communication, at the expense of traditional communication channels? This question is seen here as the key issue to deal with in the present research paper, keeping in mind that benchmarking to the developed world may be crucially interesting. The more accurate research question has thereby to be whether Moroccan firms follow the same pattern of digital transformation as in industrial nations.

The overall question, as previously posed, may be decomposed into the following specific research questions:

- How well information stemming from professionals themselves can help to better grasp digital communication trends within firms?
- In what extent such specific information is preferable to official digits and orientations in the sector?
- How can interviews with professionals with professionals improve our comprehension about transformation of digital communication in Morocco?

To answer such questions, our research paper relies on a survey regarding the digital communication universe in Morocco. Such survey concerns more precisely a sample of firms operating in the economic capital of Morocco: Casablanca.

Our study aspires to better grasping the digitalization of communication channels among firms and even the utilization of newly integrated digital means of communication. To do so, it imports to study the way through which new communication strategies are designed and set by firms, and to analyze their stakes in terms of communication, notably in order to explore the current evolution of the digitalization impact with respect to innovation within firms and trademarks.

In terms of objectives and expected results, our study aspires to better grasping the digitalization of communication channels among firms and even the utilization of newly integrated digital means of communication. To do so, it imports to study the way through which new communication strategies are designed and set by firms, and to analyze their stakes in terms of communication, notably in order to explore the current evolution of the digitalization impact with respect to innovation within firms and trademarks.

Communication is seen here to be currently considered as a challenge for firms planning to communicate with key economic agents. Within their communication plans, firms have to target various stakeholders. Thus, messages to be created and disseminated towards such actors should take into account some of their particularities and specific characteristics [5].

In this direction, we deal in this study with various kinds of contents that firms should channel about digital media as well as new practices for targeting the concerned public online. In doing so, we will attempt to test whether challenges of digital communication are henceforth integrated into firms' communication strategies.

3. DIGITAL COMMUNICATION TRENDS

Floriane Salgues [6] wrote a seminal paper on January 25th 2018, which informs well about the current and future trends in terms of firms' digital communication development, especially in France. Anyway, one can understand that the digital advertising market (Search, display,

localization, emailing, comparators and mobile) is significantly promising, as highlighted through the phenomenal growth of digital advertising, estimated to nearing 4.1 billion euros in 2017, that is an up-warding growth rate of about 12 percent, as presented on January, 25th, 2017, by the well-known "SRI". The "e-Pub", with 34.4 percent of market share (+3.4 points, when compared to 2016), confirms thereby its advancement over the media, with only 27.2 percent for TVs, 17.8 percent for the press, 9.7 percent for Posters, 57.7 percent for radios and 5.2 percent for yearbooks.

It stems from trends in terms of advertising communication that conventional media are currently outpaced by the internet-based media, i.e. mainly information and communication through social networks. This is commonly a "heavy trend" devoted to channeling firms towards digitalization, specifically in order to boost communication with economic agents, notably consumers.

Within the framework of our research paper, we aspire to testing whether such trends conform to some Moroccan small, medium and big-sized firms. To conduct such testes, we propose to resort to a focus-group technique among professionals operating in such corporate sector. It imports in this regard to note that digital technologies are seen to be as the major innovation and the most important vector of the post-industrial revolution in the developed world. Even though developing countries in general and Morocco in particular have recently deployed significant efforts towards digital transformation of firms, it seems that the "digital divide" in this arena is still larger between the two groups of nations, and highlights a new criterion of underdevelopment. Although developing nations have recently worked in favor of digital infrastructure development, such as data centers, e-commerce, e-learning and e-government, further developments are still needed if decision makers in these countries should want to reduce the existing and persistent gap in NTICs. For instance, one can be interested in comparing internet penetration rates across regions: 80 percent in Europe, 73 percent in America, against only 34 percent in Africa. As far as computer-based equipment rates, they reveal higher disparities around the world; for example, such rates in 2019 amount to 80 percent in France against nearly 50 percent in Morocco.

4. THE DIGITAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY AND THE TRADEMARK IMAGE

Thomas Stenger and Alexander Coutant, as researchers at the "*Institut de la communication du CNRS*" in France, have published online the outputs of a research entitled "*Social Media: clarification and Cartography for a sociotechnical Approach*" [7]. Such research work has shown that "branding-oriented firms" (notoriety and image), or the trademark, have, according to the hierarchy of advertising effects, to let others know the mark and construct its image and then stimulate the preference of buyers, as they are ready to purchase the mark.

Various materials of digital marketing allow to cover and to respond to the existing expectations, such as the buzz-based messages devoted to extoll the trademark and videos, especially in order to enrich discourses and convince costumers.

Thus, digital marketing is seen to enhance the foundations for image branding and development of a trademark or a firm. However, the most important novelty of digital marketing consists of the performance aspects of advertising campaigns, aiming at generating higher traffic online as well as selling and elaborating databanks.

Indeed, thanks to the newly developing tools, it becomes possible through advertising campaigns to provoke and trigger purchasing processes in shorter time scopes. In some cases, it would be somewhat difficult for a firm to create a trademark that is clear and acceptable for potential customers.

More accurately, Aaker [8] defines a trademark as "an image which creates a value in many ways, helping customers to process information, differentiating the mark, generating rationales to buy, triggering favorable feelings, and providing a basis for further trademark developments".

5. THE METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The empirical section of our research paper presents a synthesis of data we have gathered while meeting our focus group professionals. In what follows, we proceed to a summarized outlining of the methodology we have used to

collect data. We will then present our main empirical findings.

Given the exploratory nature of our research, and in line with research works by Andreani and Conchon [9], as well as Bourgeon and Renault [10], we have adopted a qualitative research methodology, as mainly focused on a variety of witnesses among a small sample of professionals. This means that our sample of professionals (6 profiles stemming from digital communication careers), such as those concerning traffic management, development, digital strategy, account management, development, digital strategy, account management, agency management and growth Hackers) does not necessarily turn to be highly representative of the whole population. Therefore, we have decided to outline our empirical results as synthesized outcomes. The reader of the present paper should in turn consider such results as trends rather than statistically observed facts [9]. Finally, we will end up this research work with the outlining of some shortages and future research tracks.

As many researchers, like Gardere [11], have pointed out, management and information sciences should be seen as "conceptually reconcilable, such as the two arenas of science work interactively in favor of the two requirements of data collection on marketing information and communication interactivity. We will see within the framework of digital marketing techniques in a world where communication strategies are steadily developing, how these strategies have upset the previously existing classical patterns. It is precisely from these various angles that we have decided to deal with this research area with a need to benefit from knowledge channeled through disciplines seen as different but complementary: Marketing and communication. By combining the marketing strategies of firms and communication sciences, we propose large conceptual and empirical visions devoted to answer our main research questions. In such a way, a preliminarily literature survey on digital communication has allowed us to design our interview guide with professionals [9]. Such interview guide has been made up of questions, as distributed into a set of themes:

- Theme 1: The universe of digital communication in Morocco.
- Theme 2: Evolution of practices and trends.
- Theme 3: Profiles of Moroccan customers.

To deeply investigate the three the three mentioned themes, our research paper turns to be a survey-research (enquiry) among six professionals within Casablanca's firms during the month of January 2019. To take into account the diversity of professions and degrees of expertise within the sector, the following kinds of occupation have been considered: A Traffic Manager, a Developer, an Agency Director, a Digital Strategist, an Account Manager, and a Growth Hacker.

Such enquiry has been conducted on the basis of a focus group with the six participants selected in line with their various experiences. The reason which is behind this focusing criterion is that those professionals work within the six selected firms, and interact with other companies and customers involved in digital communication concerns.

Through our focus group methodology, we seek to better understand how well the expertise of professionals impacts trends in digital communication. Within our sample, the five themes divided into a set of questions should be seen as the core of interviews, keeping in mind that no limitations or constraints have been imposed to the interviewed professionals, the objective being to collect sincere and authentic information regarding our research questions.

6. PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In what follows, we propose to outline some specific and more reliable responses to our research questions, as incorporated in our original interview guide, with respect to our various verbatim items. Then, a synthesis of the set of responses will be presented.

Hereafter, we present responses to two major questions tied to the theme on "The universe of digital communication in Morocco".

To the question related to the first verbatim associated with the role of trademark personality in communication, the following responses have been collected:

- The traffic manager has replied that he is mainly concerned with the respect of briefs as fixed by advertisers.
- For the same question, the developer has responded that he respects the consumers' narration; but, when the

customer is not well-informed about market evolution, we propose to him some advise activities.

- By contrast, the digital strategist has reacted to the question, while encompassing the role of advise in choosing best marks.
- For the account manager, he has claimed that he manages only three big clients: Ford, Tramway and Huawei in Casablanca; and concerning the mark personality, he accounts only for briefs as received with the objective of respecting the existing trademark personality.
- As for the agency director, he has stressed the importance of advice on the most reliable communication.
- Finally, the growth hacker has replied that he is interested in data processing rather than trademark personality.

The second verbatim consists of grasping the feedback impact of online community on business activity.

To such question, responses may be summarized as hereafter:

- The feedback relies mainly on meeting objectives (traffic manager).
- The feedback is received as comments or means of communication, aspiring to add chat-generating sections (developer).
- We received various feedbacks; and therefore, there is always a need to work on different products and services with the hope to meet relational aspects with customers (digital strategist).
- Feedbacks generally concern nexuses with clients, price and after-sale services (account manager).
- It is generally a purely informative feedback on products and services, or HR-based specific demand, aiming at joining the group as collaborators (agency director).
- Feedbacks are seen to be tied to an increasing turnover among the concerned clients (growth hacker).

The main question of the second theme on "Evolution of practices and trends" is whether professionals have recently identified an evolution of digital practices among Moroccan firms.

To such question, responses seem to be unanimously affirmative. Nonetheless, the Digital

Strategist added that digital solutions allow firms to optimize the working environment because such adapted solutions meet their needs.

Moreover, the account manager has relativized things; and stressed that the evolution in this area is seen to be slower, especially because the allocated budget is smaller than what is observed in the developed world.

Concerning the third theme on “Profiles of Moroccan customers”, the key question consists of whether the interviewed professionals are aware of Moroccan customers’ expectations about firms’ digital communication and clients’ experiences.

Reactions to such question may be summarized as hereafter:

- The Moroccan customer aspires to getting the best offer at good moment (traffic manager);
- The most important expectation of the Moroccan customer is transparency (digital strategist);
- Moroccan customers expect benefits from trademarks rather than from sale-based orientations (account manager);
- Moroccan clients are different somewhat from the international (agency director).

Under a synthesis perspective, and on the basis of the above-outlined specific responses and others, it stems from the studied verbatim items that when the advertiser takes touch with the digital communication agency, there exists beforehand a “trademark personality”, to be used according to the brief decided by the firm. Such “trademark personality” is the same as that which is channeled through traditional vehicles of communication. Nevertheless, certain professionals may sometimes provide some advises if the selection of tones and narratives is not reliable for an optimal communication strategy.

In this sense, before using digital communication, firms have already had a “trademark personality” that is constructed, relying on their usual axes of communication.

The main things we have learned from such verbatim items are that there exist really Moroccan online communities, which are planning to communicate with firms through social media. Generally, this consists of

“informative demands”, such as prices, relationships with customers and “post-selling services” (after-sales services).

Witnesses from the interviewed professionals reveal that the axes of communication channels have experienced some changes, especially with the development of social media, with the necessary to adapt tones to targets. Indeed, as revealed through previous studies, techniques devoted to digitally target customers help firms to better know their targeted public and then to readapt the communication contents accordingly.

In addition, three important ideas have emerged: on one hand, market competition seems to be the major reason why managers are committed to digital communication strategies. However, on another hand, professionals have also encompassed the role of the awareness about the attention shifts of customers who are less sensitive to classical communication channels, in order to gain higher rapidity and easing. In this regard, many papers have been written, the most pioneering of them would be works by Tapscott [12]. Indeed, Tapscott has identified eight characteristics to describe such generation of connected costumers. According to him, the modern generation is one which is considered as “bits-loving” generation, or the “Net Generation”.

Four of these characteristics may be applied to their linkages with media:

- They aspire to be free in all things they do: free to choose and to talk, since freedom is like the air they breathe.
- They like to adapt things to their needs and to personalize them. They have grown up with the possibility to use the media they want, and to change them as they like.
- They need speed in all things, not only when they use videos.
- Innovation is a major component of life for them. Customers like novel technologies, not because they are just cool, but because they are more useful than classical tools.

The “Net Generation” imposes such criteria which we know for specific goods and services, such as freedom, rapidity, innovation, and personalization.

Responses are seen to be non-unanimous around the issue tied to the budget for which firms are ready to develop their digital communication. By contrast, witnesses reveal

the fact that there exists a marketplace in the field of digital communication, even though that market is considered as less developed when compared to what prevails in industrialized nations. In all cases, such marketplace seems to be adequate so as professionals have costumers who are attracted by new proposals of digital communication.

Furthermore, there is awareness about the higher influence of online communities over the e-reputation. The feedbacks of online communities are scrupulously studied and daily disseminated to advertisers in order to avoid any abnormality about the adaptation of communication.

It seems that co-branding with celebrities or "influencers" may be an efficient tool to make a target stick or, for instance, to create a buzz for a given event. In order to create a buzz for a trademark, Moroccan professionals adapt their actions to those prevailing locally and globally. This means that they should be continually informed, and ready to achieve a suitable watch about better stories worldwide to then implement ideas, according to the advertiser's expectations.

Since professionals are internationally seeking ideas to be applied on the ground of communication strategies, this seems to be appropriate for their occupations while permanently connected to the internet network. This is a source of dynamism and growth because professionals in the Moroccan digital sphere are seen to implement communication solutions, as they stem from abroad, suggesting thereby that the digital concern is universal. Sources for inspiration are mainly social networks, well-known trademarks, competitors, or some sites gathering communities of professionals.

In addition, since our study compares the observed trends in the developed world with the specific case of Morocco, we have formulated a question about the contents that are mostly advantaged among customers and advertisers. One of the most important trends we have observed while conducting our literature review is that video contents have become the most dominating material in the digital arena.

Within this framework, Laurent Solly argued that videos are platforms of communication, services and innovations. There are many scripts of videos and other formats of communication like

books, stories, augmented reality integration, etc. Indeed, videos are becoming the most advantaged marketing platform for firms. Following results from our interviews, videos also from the most used material for communication in the Moroccan case. Finally, according to professionals, the Moroccan customers are still waiting for goodwill and transparency from the existing trademarks.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

We have attempted to show in this research that the internationally observed trends in digital communication of firms are generally comparable to those observed for Moroccan firms. The difference, never the less, is that the number of firms which have succeeded in sustainably setting up a strategy of digital communication turns to be lower in Morocco.

However, Moroccan firms which have seriously invested in the digital arena are seen to develop practices that are similar to trends observed in western countries. In this sense, in Morocco, the impact of the digital process as well as the budgets allocated to this operation are less important than those observed in countries where digital practices have been implemented many years ago. Nevertheless, digital practices of Moroccan firms seem to follow the same pattern as in the developed world, especially in terms of tones and trademark personality that are adjusted to targets, adaptation of videos contents, online targeted advertising, buzz seeking, communication strategies oriented towards customers rather than to sailing, transparency, and scrupulous watch for e-reputation. The reason is that such firms face the same challenges of perpetuating activity, developing new levers of growth and standing out from competition.

Particularly, in the Moroccan context, business demand for digital communication continues to grow. This is mainly due to market constraints, forcing firms to stand out from competition, to improve their visibility, credibility and image among customers, and thereby to design and implement digital communication strategies.

In spite of significant progresses in digital transformation and communication among firms, further effort is still needed if Moroccan decision makers want to achieve more reliable

improvements in the profession, especially within the framework of effective public-private partnerships. To do so, more investment in human capital should be undertaken, with additional effort in fostering technological progress, especially in rural areas, gathering almost 50 percent of the whole population. Decision makers should also work in favor of providing small and medium-sized firms with incentives and encouragements devoted to the reduction of the existing digital divide across firms as well as in comparison with other countries, notably in the developed world.

Our research presents some shortcomings on the theoretical front, especially because of lacking researches in this area, notably in the Moroccan case. Because the digital communication arena is in permanent development, adequately targeted surveys of firms, activity sectors and digital professions are still needed to better understand the topic we have dealt with. Moreover, empirically speaking, our study is limited here to a small sample of professionals operating in Casablanca, as the economic capital of Morocco. It imports therefore to undertake compartmentalized research works with respect to other cities and regions, specifically with the use of larger professionals' samples. Finally, it imports to note that our exploratory study has to be complemented through upcoming empirical studies, especially to better understand the existing slowness in digital transformation and communication as well as to grasp how decision makers can design and implement effective policies to address this issue.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, Participants' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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