

Entrepreneurial Strategies for the Female Sector: Leveraging Instagram Sales During the Pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic significantly influenced the purchasing behavior of consumers, who began to see in the tools available in the virtual environment the necessary allies to satisfy their consumption desires. Given the relevance achieved by the virtual environment, organizations began to explore more intensively the various digital platforms to enhance their reach to their customers. The traditional electronic commerce then evolved into what we call Social Commerce (S-commerce), which allowed a substantial increase in the way of interacting and promoting sales. Despite the limitations and incipient studies on how organizations use their strategies and explore digital media tools to leverage sales, it is perceived as relevant to understand how the process of joining these organizations to digital media and the influence they have passed to exercise in the reformulation of its strategies and business models. Focusing on the Instagram environment, the objective of this research is to characterize the sales strategies used by three female-owned enterprises, through Instagram, during the pandemic by COVID-19. As a methodological research strategy, the study of multiple cases was used. Three Brazilian female-owned enterprise were analyzed, being: a jewelry company, a women's adult footwear company and a beauty salon. The entrepreneurs responsible for the companies were submitted to a semi-structured questionnaire, which was conducted in loco. As a result, it was observed that the most used Instagram tools are feed resources, stories and metrics. On the other hand, the sales strategies most used by entrepreneurs were e-WOM, recommendations and feedbacks and, finally, encouraging user participation. In conclusion, it was noticed that both the entrepreneur and the company that wants to implement sales strategies in digital media, need to understand the functions and objectives of the set of tools made available by Instagram. Once the functionalities present in these resources are understood, entrepreneurs and managers can formulate their strategies in an assertive way, being more efficient in their commercial transactions, since the actions aim to promote involvement with the public that follows the business. Instagram proved to be a tool with great potential for business in the female sector.

Keywords: Instagram, sales strategy, female sector, social commerce, COVID-19

1. Introduction

The years 2020 and 2021 were marked by the pandemic of the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2: COVID-19) which led to changes in buying and selling behavior due to restrictions on isolation and closing of trade (Attar, Shanmugam and Hajli, 2020; Bhatti *et al.*, 2020; Anacleto *et al.*, 2021; Le, 2021). Many companies have adopted social networks as a marketing and sales strategy in their business model, characterizing Social Commerce (S-commerce). In this context, Instagram is one of the most widespread networks, comprising tools capable of boosting sales and facilitating communication with consumers (Bhattacharyya and Bose, 2020; Kristian *et al.*, 2020; Anacleto *et al.*, 2021; Molina-Prados, Muñoz-Leiva and Prados-Peña, 2021).

However, the lack of knowledge of the tools and strategies that can be used on Instagram makes it difficult to leverage sales at a time when entrepreneurs had to reinvent themselves quickly to survive in the market (Anacleto *et al.*, 2021). Studies point out that it is not enough only using Instagram just to have a virtual presence, it is necessary to develop research that helps to understand and explore the new features offered by each tool, which in theory can improve the techniques and strategies applied to digital marketing on electronic retail (Pinheiro and Macêdo, 2021; Dolega, Rowe and Branagan, 2021).

Instagram is in constant development and therefore has a dynamic character, however, new studies must be developed regularly to keep up with consumer trends and needs (Corrêa, 2018; Bhattacharyya and Bose, 2020). Furthermore, in the context of female sector, the search for studies that aim to improve the techniques and strategies applied to digital marketing represents a way to diversify sales channels, gain visibility and remain in the market (Gonçalves *et al.*, 2019; Soares, 2020; Escher, 2021).

To fill these gaps, the objective of this research is to characterize the strategies adopted by the female-owned enterprises, working in the female sector, to leverage sales through Instagram, during the pandemic moment.

As practical contributions, it is clear that this study can help entrepreneurs in making decisions about the best Instagram tools and strategies useful to leverage the business. In addition, the study can guide practitioners to rethink the way to undertake, especially through Instagram. Based on the cases analyzed, the study demonstrated how the main tools available, when associated with negotiation strategies, help to improve sales operations and consolidate S-commerce as a business model.

The article is structured in six sections: i) this brief introduction, ii) theoretical background, iii) methodology, iv) data presentation v) discussion, and vi) conclusion.

2. Theoretical background

E-commerce (eletronic commerce) has shown a significant growth rate in Brazil and in the world, being also driven by the pandemic. Digital platforms have strongly influenced consumer relations, which in theory allows us to infer that S-commerce will continue to rise (Anacleto *et al.*, 2021; Karine, 2021). In this context, Instagram stood out worldwide for integrating several online store profiles, especially among micro-entrepreneurs (Addo *et al.*, 2021). Its followers are attracted by the features of the app and the popularity of the network (Alkhowaiter, 2016). In addition, it is observed that S-commerce has become a differentiated marketing tool to improve sales, since it facilitates contact with the consumer and reaches people from different regions (Bhattacharyya and Bose, 2020; Shin, Park and Kim, 2020; Herzallah *et al.*, 2021).

2.1 Instagram tools

S-commerce is characterized by electronic commerce through social networks and has innovated the way consumers and companies have conducted their business (Esmaeili and Hashemi, 2019; Kanani and Glavee-Geo, 2021). Instagram has made marketing strategies possible for organizations through a set of tools that support strategies and promote user engagement, as can be seen with: *feed*, *stories*, IGTV, *reels*, live streaming, paid traffic and metrics (Corrêa, 2018; Addo *et al.*, 2021; Shah *et al.*, 2021; Szeto *et al.*, 2021; David *et al.*, 2022). Table 1 presents the summary of these tools.

Table 1: Instagram tools

Tools	Description
Feed	Through photos and videos, it facilitates user interaction and engagement and allows the entrepreneur to customize their profile (Corrêa, 2018; Priyaningrum, Pawito and Wijaya, 2020; Sarker <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Yadav and Mahara, 2020; Shah <i>et al.</i> , 2021; David <i>et al.</i> , 2022).
Stories	Feature that allows the user to show everyday moments through photos and videos, with content deleted after 24 hours (Terra, 2017; David <i>et al.</i> , 2022).
IGTV (Instagram TV)	Tool for long videos of up to 60 minutes for verified or high-reach accounts. It is used for corporate profiles and <i>influencers</i> (Haenlein <i>et al.</i> , 2020; David <i>et al.</i> , 2022).
Reels	Intended for the creation of short (up to 15 seconds) videos, with sound and visual effects. Enables the creation of organic content stimulating engagement with the target audience (Szeto <i>et al.</i> , 2021).
Live streaming	Allows recording and streaming of live videos. Businesses and content creators can entertain their followers from home and achieve more visibility through partnerships (Addo <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Corrêa, 2018).
Paid traffic	Used by business accounts to boost feed posts. The entrepreneur can customize the post targeting (Corrêa, 2018).
Metrics	It is the engagement data made available by Instagram, providing knowledge of consumers' preferences, needs and desires, using the efforts of this interaction to develop efficient publishing strategies and increase engagement (Ferraz and Geraiis, 2019).

2.2 Sales strategies through Instagram

The digital transformation environment has led companies to associate the use of Instagram tools with sales strategies as a way to help them differentiate from the competition (Iivari, Sharma and Ventä-Olkkonen, 2020; Anacleto *et al.*, 2021). Among the strategies made possible by the Instagram platform and used by the enterprises, seven stand out: paid ads, keeping users' attention with quality posts, strategic alliances with other companies and *influencers*, e-WOM, celebrities with many followers, recommendations and feedbacks, and stimulation to user participation. Table 2 summarizes these strategies.

Table 2: Strategies through Instagram

Strategies	Description
Paid ads	Precisely segments a potential customer the moment they become interested in a product. Improves the performance of marketing strategies (Corrêa, 2018; Ferraz and Geraiis, 2019; Chen and Huang, 2020).
Keep users' attention with high quality posts related to important topics	High quality posts related to important topics to manage user consumption. Enables followers to like, comment, share and make a purchase on a particular page (Chen and Huang, 2020).
Strategic alliances with other companies and influencers	The partnership with other companies and influencers attracts varied audiences interested in the profile content. Through shared tags it is possible to reach a large number of followers in order to increase store exposure(Chen and Huang, 2020).
Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM)	It is any statement by consumers, positive or negative, about a product, service or company (Ali, Hussin and Dahlan, 2020; Grange, Benbasat and Burton-Jones, 2020; Hossain and Kim, 2020).
Celebrities with a lot of followers	It is the involvement of celebrities who have a large following. The link between entrepreneurs and these celebrities boosts the business brand for several users (Latiff and Safiee, 2015).
Recomendations/feedbacks	Can be constructive or destructive about the company's services or products that affect brand loyalty. It is essential to position the entrepreneur in the face of feedbacks (Solem, 2016; Khoa and Nguyen, 2020; Addo <i>et al.</i> , 2021).
Encouraging user participation	It is the forced interaction of users with Instagram tools, enhancing user engagement and facilitating brand repositioning, leading to sales leverage (Alonso-Dos-Santos, Jiménez and Carvajal-Trujillo, 2019; Abdelsalam <i>et al.</i> 2020; Ali, Hussin and Dahlan, 2020; Sarker <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Lin, 2021).

3. Methodology

The work has an essentially qualitative approach and was conducted through the case study method in the context of three companies in the women's sector: jewelry, shoes and beauty salon. The case study is an empirical investigation within its real-life context (Yin, 2009), in which the researcher is the key instrument of the study (Godoy, 1995). The research involves collecting field data through interviews and applying questionnaires to obtain information from the users studied (Burgess, 2002; Yin, 2009). It is an exploratory research that seeks to understand the use of strategies to leverage sales by Instagram, used by three female-owned enterprises.

Data collection was carried out through a questionnaire conducted in semi-structured interviews, at two different times. The first interview collected exploratory data and the second confirmed, validated and collected additional information and synthesized the ideas. Table 3 presents a characterization of the companies and the duration of the interviews.

Table 3: Characterization of the companies interviewed

Company	Sector	Time to market	Duration of interviews
A	Jewelry	7 years	Moment 1: 60 minutes Moment 2: 35 minutes Direct observation of the activity
B	Shoes	6 years	Moment 1: 50 minutes Moment 2: 47 minutes Direct observation of the activity
C	Beauty salon	5 years	Moment 1: 45 minutos Moment 2: 50 minutes Direct observation of the activity

To collect information related to Instagram strategies and tools used by three female-owned enterprises during the pandemic moment, a questionnaire was structured containing three parts: i) characterization of companies and entrepreneurs related to the use of Instagram (9 questions), ii) mapping of Instagram tools (4 questions) and iii) mapping the strategies that encourage users to complete sales through Instagram (5 questions).

For data analysis, the interviews were transcribed in order to identify patterns of responses and similarities between the micro-enterprises studied.

4. Data presentation

4.1 Characterization of respondents

Entrepreneurs from companies A, B and C were interviewed in order to understand the tools and strategies used to leverage sales. The interviewee from company A has incomplete higher education while companies B and C are already graduated. All have businesses on Instagram unlinked from their personal use accounts.

The interviewees have been using Instagram for more than 3 years and dedicate between 1 to 5 hours a day to use the application in order to increase the approach, keep and attract new customers, which proves to be effective in boosting the business. Although the pandemic was not the reason for the beginning of interactions with Instagram, it provided a significant increase in sales for these companies and a greater capture of new customers.

4.2 Characterization of Instagram tools

In order to understand the use of the tools, Table 4 was structured, which presents the entrepreneurs' perspectives regarding the purpose of the Instagram tools.

Table 4: Entrepreneurs' perception according to the purposes of the tools

Tools	Resume of perceived purposes
Feed	Serve as a showcase for displaying products and services provided by the company.
Stories	Bringing the company closer to the customers by showing the day-to-day of the entrepreneurs.
IGTV	As they are longer contents, it makes it possible to inform customers about a specific subject (for example tips, messages for commemorative dates, etc).
Reels	Approach customers in more lively and interactive ways.
Live streaming	Get a live interaction with the customer to showcase products and services and share knowledge.
Paid traffic	Capture new customers.
Metrics	Gain knowledge of your target audience, their preferences and what these customers want to see on their profile.

The most used tools were the "feed", "stories" and "metrics". According to them, "feed" and "stories" have a great potential to obtain followers engagement in the business and a significant feedback from the customers. The "metrics" are fundamental to analyze the data collected by the social network. It is possible to analyze users' interest in the content presented and the need for changes in strategies to increase feedback. It was also noticed that "live streaming" and "reels" are little used, but when handled, the feedbacks exceeded the expectations of the interviewees.

It was observed that the only tool not used was "paid traffic", by entrepreneur B. The reason is related to the lack of knowledge about how to make the announcement, observing the needs of your business. For the entrepreneur, it was possible to reach users through interaction only with the other tools.

In addition to the tools mentioned in the literature, the entrepreneurs reported frequent use of "direct" and "highlights". The "direct" is a form of communication between the entrepreneur and the customer. In relation to the "highlights", entrepreneur A addresses that it aims at the fixed exposure of some products available in her business, while entrepreneurs B and C emphasize that it serves to pass on some information about the enterprise, such as: payment method, time scheduling, address, promotions, tips, among others.

4.3 Characterization of sales strategies by Instagram

Table 5 presents the entrepreneurs' perceptions regarding the purposes of the strategies to leverage sales.

Table 5: Strategies under the perception of entrepreneurs

Strategies	Resume of perceptions
Use of paid ads	Reach new customer.
Keep users' attention with high quality posts	Get customer interaction through posts to maintain the profile engagement.
Strategic alliances with other companies and influencers	Expand business profile for new customers.

Strategies	Resume of perceptions
e-WOM	Obtain knowledge about feedbacks regarding products and services, in order to fidelize de customer.
Celebrities with a lot of followers	Reach potential new customers.
Recommendations and feedbacks	Analyze criticis and eulogies to make improvements to strengthen the brand and fidelize the customer.
Encourage user participation	Generate proximity and connection with the customers for possible profile engagement.

Regarding the sales strategies used by the entrepreneurs, it was found that the main ones were: i) “keep users' attention with high quality posts”, ii) “e-WOM”, iii) “recommendations and feedbacks” and iv) “encourage user participation”.

To “keep the attention of users”, entrepreneur A, reported that she kept content available whose target audience was interested in viewing, such as the products available for purchase, knowledge of the pieces, self-esteem tips, among others. The entrepreneur mentioned that as a result of sharing quality content, greater interaction with the customer is obtained, which increases engagement with the company's profile.

The “e-WOM” allows reaching a wider range of consumers who have a real interest in the company's products and services. As it is a tool in which customers can recommend the products and services they have tried, it represents an interesting strategy that allows influencing other followers.

The “recommendations and feedbacks” allow entrepreneurs to know the preferences of customers and their opinions. Through destructive criticism it is possible to repair the error and implement the necessary improvements.

Finally, “encouraging user participation” enables greater profile engagement, increasing content delivery to a greater number of users. Participation includes commenting on the feed, responding to stories and interacting during the live.

On the other hand, the strategy “celebrities with many followers” was considered the least used. Entrepreneurs A and B never used, and reported that they were never interested in establishing this type of partnership, since such functions do not focus efforts only on the female audience, since celebrities have a heterogeneous audience. Entrepreneur C, who uses it occasionally, mentions that she did not obtain a positive result. According to entrepreneur C, this strategy made it possible to increase the number of followers without converting into sales, due to the fact that new followers live in regions different from the place where the business is located.

In addition to the strategies presented in Table 5, Entrepreneur A reports that “It is necessary to have a differential in relation to its competitor (...), strategies that differentiate it from other ventures, such as: online service outside business hours, face-to-face service on Sundays, free deliveries within the city, search for a lower value for shipping goods throughout Brazil (...) among other strategies” (Entrepreneur A).

4.4 Use of Instagram at the pandemic moment

With reference to the use of Instagram and in order to understand the adaptations that entrepreneurs made in the business, the pandemic moment was divided into three: i) Moment 1 (December/2019 to January/2020) - characterized by uncertainty and lockdown, ii) Moment 2 (January/2020 to December/2021) - characterized by the start of vaccination, and iii) Moment 3 (January/2022 to March/2022) - characterized by mass vaccination and decline in the number of cases and deaths.

Table 6 illustrates the purpose of the actions and the respective Instagram tools adopted by female-owned enterprises at different times of the pandemic.

In this scenario, involving the 3 pandemic moments presented, it was possible to observe that the entrepreneurs focused on increasing interaction and proximity with customers, intensifying both existing online relationships (Entrepreneur A), and the search for a new online relationship (Entrepreneur C). For this, they used “feed”, “stories”, “reels” and “lives”. At moment 1, Entrepreneur C, whose activities were carried

out 100% in person, began to offer online products, such as mentoring and offering knowledge to customers. At moment 3, there was a focus on facilitating the purchase of customers through Instagram using the “shop storie” (Entrepreneur A) and the “outlet” (Entrepreneur B).

Table 6: Historical account of the pandemic moments

	Moment 1	Moment 2	Moment 3
Company A	Bring knowledge of the manufacture of the pieces and show the importance of self-esteem for women through Feed and Stories.	Get new customers and increase the company's revenue, using the lives. A way to show details about products and get closer to customers.	Get closer to the customer and offer discounted products using the Stories Store.
Company B	Migrate 100% of sales from face-to-face to online using Feed and Stories.	Get closer to customers and increase sales, weekly launching products on Stories and Reels.	Get closer to the customer using the outlet practice and the development of lives, always posting high quality content through Feed and Stories.
Company C	Bringing knowledge about planning, management and deepening the services provided, using online mentorships through lives.	Seek new strategies to capture new customers during the return of the face to face. Show the complete process of all services provided through Feed and Stories.	Continuously post content through Feed and Stories. Seek new knowledge through training courses for the implementation of actions to increase revenue.

5. Discussion

As a result, it was observed that during the pandemic, the businesses studied had a significant increase in sales and greater capture of new customers. This was only possible from the use of Instagram. The main findings of the research were:

1) Regarding the tools

The most used tools were the “feed”, “stories” and “metrics”. They measured the interaction between the entrepreneur and the customer, as well as between the customers themselves, providing recommendations, feedbacks and opinions about products and services (Yadav and Mahara, 2020). In this way, it can be abstracted that Instagram technologies are capable of enhancing social interactions, being considered an important component of S-commerce, thus resulting in greater volumes of commercial activities (Esmaeili and Hashemi, 2019; Attar, Shanmugam and Hajli, 2020; Abdelsalam *et al.* 2020; Shekhar and Jaidev, 2020; Addo *et al.*, 2021).

The “paid traffic” and “reels” tools are rarely used, but when properly used, they allow for a good level of customer engagement (Sarker *et al.*, 2020). Entrepreneurs often use the “direct” of the Instagram, which is a form of communication between the entrepreneur and the customer.

2) Regarding the strategies

The four main strategies (Abdelsalam *et al.*, 2020; Attar, Shanmugam and Hajli, 2020; Addo *et al.*, 2021) used were: i) “keep users' attention with high quality posts”, ii) “e-WOM”, iii) “recommendations and feedbacks” and, finally, iv) “encourage user participation”. The strategy “Celebrities with many followers” was considered the least used. The complementary strategies identified were: greater flexibility in opening hours and free deliveries within the city.

3) Regarding the use of Instagram in the pandemic moment

The actions focused on increasing interaction and proximity with customers through the use of “feed”, “stories”, “reels” and “lives”. Subsequently, the focus became to facilitate the purchase made by customers through Instagram, using the “shop storie” (Entrepreneur A) and Outlet (Entrepreneur B) functions. Entrepreneur C, as it was a 100% physical company, saw on Instagram the possibility of continuing the business in a time of lockdown, developing mentorships and taking knowledge to customers. Instagram proved to be a tool with great potential for business.

6. Conclusion

This article presented the tools and strategies used on Instagram by three female-owned enterprises in the female sector, during the COVID-19 pandemic, to sales leverage. The research has as findings the identification of the main tools and sales strategies through Instagram, a partir da perspectiva empírica vivenciada por female-owned enterprise. It was observed that the combination of tools and strategies made possible through Instagram provided the engagement and social interaction of customers (Sarker *et al.*, 2020) with the profiles of the companies, contributing to boost sales in the female sector (Abdelsalam *et al.* 2020; Addo *et al.*, 2021).

It was observed that the knowledge of women entrepreneurs in relation to some of these tools is still limited, which represents a vast environment to be explored to strengthen the adoption of social commerce. Instagram proved to be a tool with great potential for business of the female sector. The non-use of some tools, whether due to lack of knowledge, fear of using them and not achieving the desired result or even lack of resources, may be postponing possibly satisfactory results and making companies miss valuable momentary market opportunities.

In this way, the research contributes to the theory of social commerce and serves as a guide for other entrepreneurs who want to use sales strategies through Instagram to leverage sales. In addition, Instagram technologies promote an enhancing of social interactions to improve sales on digital commerce (Shekhar and Jaidev, 2020; Addo *et al.*, 2021).

This work also has some limitations. The female-owned enterprises are from the same region where they were interviewed. Another aspect is that only the social network Instagram was studied at the time of the pandemic. This same research applied in other regions and markets could present differences in the results, as well as the approach using other social networks. As future work, it is also suggested to research medium and large companies to compare the results. Finally, this study can help entrepreneurs and businessmen to improve their business strategies, as well as assist in the proper selection of Instagram tools that have been shown to be useful for leveraging the analyzed ventures.

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