THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION: EXPLORATORY STUDY.

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ABSTRACT

In corporate communication, corporate citizenship, the means of communication used, as well as the means to motivate employees are critical to the effectiveness of internal communication. The main objective of this study is to understand the strategic alignment of companies and their internal stakeholders through internal communication, more specifically through the use of new information and communication technologies. The study is expected to contribute to the creation of a methodology that provides businesses and researchers in this area with a way to harmonize and enhance collaborative communication for internal motivation and thus increase satisfaction and loyalty. The method consists of literature review on communication, Internet and social media, as well as the use of a digital survey completed by 58 business executives. This showed a high degree of agreement on the need of employees to take part in the process of communication and relative disagreement as to the current communication transparency within organizations. Businesses indicate that they use social media for recruitment processes and selection of new staff. However, there is no doubt that internally the most commonly used communication tools are Intranet and Internet, email and

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face-to-face meetings. Companies also reveal that there were no changes because of the use of social media as a social tool. The main advantage of using social media internally is speed of communication. The interactivity provided by social media is a matter of contention.

Keywords: Collaboration, Internal Communication, Social Media, Social Networks.

INTRODUCTION

The use of social media and digital communication by formal businesses is a very current topic and is part of the management agenda. However, even though the potential of this means of communication has clearly been identified, companies still lack the skills to take full advantage with maximum efficiency.

The aim of this research is to find out about knowledge and practices of Portuguese companies in the use of social media to increase the efficiency of internal communication.

In the corporate world colleagues communicate through social media on the Internet and Intranet. These networks have solutions to internal and external obstacles to work issues in companies, as well as to formal and informal knowledge storage. This is called social business, which would be "connecting with several stakeholders through new technologies" and could constitute a way of engaging with these people and doing better business (HETSCHKO, 2014, p. 26).

Thus the main research question is as follows: What knowledge and practices do Portuguese companies have when using social media to increase the efficiency of internal communication?

It is fundamental to understand internal corporate communication. There are a number of studies in this area but not enough studies on the use of social media as a means of internal communication in private companies. This is the reason behind the choice of this theme for this study.

Society needs to understand how this Internet based tool can improve the performance of companies in a competitive environment and how these organisations use it.

For the managers of these organisations, the decision to use or not to use this tool generates a set of decisions such as budget issues, available technology, security restrictions, ethical issues and even labour law, so for them this is a crucial topic at the level of company performance.

For the academic world this study is justified by the fact social media are a subject under discussion, but mainly opinions based on amateur reports without valid measurement that indicate their usefulness and their importance with scientific methods, for new research. Thus the object of this study is justified, since it has been fostering discussions in society, organizations and the academic world.

It is limited by the fact that the aim is to study internal communication, which often complements corporate external communication. However, this delimitation established by the section is necessary for research not to extend and not to deviate from its main objective.

The general aim of this research is to determine how much knowledge and what are the practices of businesses in Portugal in the use of social media to increase the efficiency of internal communication.

The specific objectives are as follows: 1) To find out how Portuguese companies use social media on the Internet for internal communication; 2) To determine if social media cause changes in internal communication; 3) To identify the main advantages of using social media as a tool for internal communication.

The method used for this study was based on an exploratory strategy, from the available literature on the subject, corporate communication, internal communication, using social media on the Internet and social business. Afterwards constructs or research variables were extracted, which contributed to drawing up a survey to be used online.

Quantitative studies are necessary to understand this phenomenon with more clarity and depth. There are studies that try to create a conceptual model to allow for research on the efficiency of internal communication in a more accurate manner, such as Lopes (2013) and others who try to understand how social media are used to transfer knowledge, including among the internal clients of organizations (MUSSI; FARACO; ANGELONI; PERES, 2013).

Besides the introduction, three sections were developed. The first section debates the literature for the theoretical framework of the study. The second section describes the methodology used for this research. The third section analyses the collected data. The last section highlights the main aspects of the research, its limitations and suggestions for future studies.

Thus the main contribution of this work is to analyse the use of social media on the Internet as a tool for organizations to carry out adequate internal communication.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The internal communication practices which may contribute to promoting quality in organisations still do not get the attention they deserve. Information must be received so that the members of an organisation can compromise and, at the same time they should understand and accept the individual and collective roles in this process and this requires communication to exist. According to Almeida, Souza and Mello (2010, p. 19), communication should be used as 'an instrument to promote quality'. This happens both in private and public organisations (REINALDO; MAYER; NOGUEIRA, 2010). In public organisations there is also the need to attend to the citizen as well as the internal client inside the government (DAMIAN; MERLO, 2013).

Nevertheless, adopting systems and models aiming at competitiveness and quality improvement in organisations depends on the commitment of its employees. If this is promoted in the context of true leadership, it should spread to all levels of the organisation. This effort is targeted at the customer, who, more than ever, is the very reason for the organisation to exist. Thus and according to Aracelli (2011, p. 3), 'companies are increasingly implementing communication strategies for online media, until they become a key part of the communication strategy of the company, product and brand'. A study by Xavier, Camacho and Ferreira (2010) pointed out the changing role played by internal communication throughout the process of integration in an organization, which demonstrates the importance of this factor to the staff. Besides, Lima Junior (2013, p. 10) reinforces that the actor (organisation) should 'adopt Web techniques and technologies with greater depth'. Vieira and Claro (2013) understood the real potential of internal communication technologies such as the Intranet and collaborative tools, when coupled with the complex process of communication and people development, thus benefiting organisations. On the other hand, Lunardi, Dolci, and Wendland (2013) studied the use of mobile Internet in companies and concluded that it increases productivity, gets more customers, increases revenues and reduces operational costs. At the same time, organisations limit the use of social media on the Internet by employees during working hours, which was studied by Yokoyama and Sekiguchi (2014).

The factor that should drive all the elements for total quality improvement should be commitment. This will determine the successful implementation of team development, training, systems and communication in the company. This was shown in a case study by Reicher and Fonseca (2012) who understood that there is a clear relationship between good internal communication and employee commitment to the organisation.

Sebastião (2012) stresses that organisations should leave the task of communication channel development and maintenance, information management and maintenance of internal channels to public relations experts, always trying to take into account the interests of individuals and a good working environment for everyone, but with the awareness that with the information and communication technologies available today, there is no possibility of further centralisation of access power to these systems.

When talking about the relationship between commitment and quality, communications plays a role in achieving that commitment. However, as Waters *et al.* (2009, p. 103) stress, 'the transparency of communication activities' is critical. Communication is a key factor when it comes to corporate strategies to promote commitment with quality, as it will be through quality that the members of the organisation understand and accept their individual and collective roles in this process. Therefore, internal communication is an instrument to promote quality in organisations, which takes advantage of being something natural and inherent to the human being. Communicating is sharing experiences, ideas and feelings among social beings, influencing each other and ultimately changing the reality they are in and opening the world they are all part of.

For Vieira, Marques and Correia (2013, p. 57) 'internal communication will eventually have an effect on organisation performance' and they suggest techniques for improving communication: 'segmentation of internal audience, promoting internal communication and readjusting communication policies'.

As far as marketing is concerned, communication will be the basis of the whole market, since to develop a good product, establish an attractive price, and getting it to the target audience it is fundamental that companies communicate with quality with the different audiences, and as Claro refers (2002, p. 2) 'it is necessary to develop a culture of communication which is present in every action perceived by the customer'.

The daily effort made by organisations to meet people's desires and expectations as far as consumption is concerned, implies constant updating of new marketing tools as a way of global communication. Putting pressure on the organisation to be present in new content delivery systems and, as Tulgan puts it (2009, p. 6), 'globalisation and technology have been shaping change since the dawn of time'.

Therefore, analysing Internet use and new marketing tools as a way of global communication is not so much about equipment, infrastructures or technology as something innate to the organisation, for everything is communication, which means that the process of communication is a continuous challenge of fulfilling people's daily desires and expectations,

just as Chleba (2000, p. 37) refers 'the great challenge is to gather these components to create a new language that takes into account people's desires and expectations when using the computer as a vehicle of information and entertainment distribution'. This language opens the door of organisations to markets that were unthinkable both in terms of entry and as operation, for when moving around in the world of digital communication they reach an infinity of desires and tastes which they were not aware of until that moment, since according to Edelman (2010, p. 64) 'the Internet has upended how consumers engage with brands'.

The Internet is transforming the market economy and making most of traditional strategies and their structures and functions obsolete. The way of doing business is unsustainable, and a reason to fail, for, according to Edelman (2010, p. 64) today's consumers are 'promiscuous in their brand relationships: They connect with myriad brands'.

Objectively, times indicate that change is life's constant and in fact what we know today will be obsolete tomorrow and it is difficult to believe that what today is conventional wisdom, will no longer be tomorrow. Everything follows an accelerated pace, relevance is short-term, in a world characterised by constant change and instant response, where only significant time is lived.

This is because in fact media proliferate at great speed, as Lieber (2011, p. 94) indicates '*social media* includes a variety of electronic communications — most commonly networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, Plaxo, chat rooms, and the like'. Mass media also include all blogs, such as Twitter (microblog), wikis, online magazines, diaries, staff newsletters, among others. Websites for posting and watching videos such as YouTube and virtual worlds as Second Life and World of Warfare are also included under the social media umbrella term. There is also the fact that information is available to users in the cloud (cloud media*)* which allows access and rapid use (SQUIRRA, 2013). In the same way, Michel, Michel e Porciúncula (2013, p. 135) state that 'the adaptation of organisations and communicators to the modalities of digital interaction happens at several levels and at different speeds, according to the needs of the organisation and its updating capabilities'.

There is also the fact that human communication has been mechanised and become superficial to levels never seen before and because of this Berlanga-Fernández, García-García e Victoria-Mas (2013) propose parameters to develop a deeper and more critical level of thought, in favour of a more human communication in tools such as Facebook, research target of these authors.

Social media inside and outside the context of organisations, in a context of creativity components, together with technology, new communication systems are under great

manipulation pressure and adaptation to the new reality. And, as Porter (2003, p. 1) states 'Internet is no more than a tool — although a powerful one — that can contribute to support or damage the strategic positioning of a company'.

The Internet is an extremely important technology and it is not surprising that it has deserved so much attention from business men, executives, investors and business analysts. Caught in the global enthusiasm, many assumed that the Internet changes everything, making all the old rules on companies and competition obsolete. This is a natural but dangerous reaction, since according to Porter (2003, p. 2), 'it has caused many companies, dotcom companies and operators alike to make bad decisions — decisions which reduced the attractiveness of their industries and their competitive advantages'.

Until recently, the negative effects of these actions have been blurred by distorted signs from the market. Today, however, the consequences are evident, since as Claro (2002, p. 10) states 'instead of only receiving our mental model of reality, we are now driven to invent it and reinvent it'.

It is time for a clearer vision of the Internet and just as Patino, Pitta e Quinones (2012, p. 234) suggest, to understand that 'the Internet affected more than promoted'. We need to abandon the rhetoric on 'Internet Industries', 'ebusiness strategies' and a 'new economy' and see the Internet as it is: a technology that allows for a powerful set of tools which can be used wisely or unwisely in almost all industries and as part of any strategy. According to Araceli (2011, p. 3), it helps 'to design a human image of the brand and to listen to its users, thus generating business opportunities'.

In Portugal, Remondes (2011) carried out a research with small and medium-sizes enterprises from the Euro-region North of Portugal-Galicia and analyses the impact of the use of new technologies on internal marketing and internal communication of those companies but he did not deal with social media on the Internet and this study aims to be based on the teachings of that research.

Remondes (2011) states that the great impact of new technologies rests on the creation of information and the development of collaborative communication, which refers to the need to understand the use of social media on the Internet as that tool. The author refers to blogs as a possible tool to be used.

In Brazil, Portugal and around the world, social and political resulted from the interaction among people on social media on the Internet, as Acuña (2011) and Bittencourt (2013) state. Even religious organisations use social media to spread their dogmas and the words of their leaders (SBARDELOTTO, 2013).

It is important that companies monitor what is said and what is shared on social media on the Internet to get information on the market, opinions on brands, customer service and satisfaction and mainly dissatisfaction of an external audience (ALARCÓN-DEL-AMO; LORENZO-ROMERO; GÓMEZ-BORJA, 2011). Audiences ultimately report actions which are not considered right by society and which may or not be related to the truth, but which should be dealt with quickly and contained, giving a solution to the situation presented by the Internet user on the actions of the organisation (OLIVEIRA; VALADÃO JÚNIOR; MIRANDA, 2013). It is necessary to find out when social media on the Internet are used by companies to build relationships with their customers, including internal ones, as, for Rocha, Jansen, Lofti and Fraga (2013, p. 280) 'social media constitute an opportunity to improve the interaction with the target audience of a company, because they allow us not only to get to know it better but also reach it very rapidly'.

Bolsin and Hoppen (2012, p. 14-15) carried out a case study on the use virtual social media of organisations and found out that 'the social practices on (...) (the networks) involve interactions that result from the creation of identity between actors and networks and this makes them meaningful for the collective'. Marques and Pinheiro (2014, p. 47), aware that information and knowledge have always been and still are power sources, even more so when the laws that constitute information policies take on the role of intermediaries between conflicting interests on the Internet arena. As an example, the law that regulates the use of the Internet in Brazil, "Marco Civil da Internet" (Civil Rights framework for the Internet) presented an analysis on the origin and content of that legal instrument, trying to describe mainly the conflicts that involve the principle of neutrality of the network and the massive collection of information on users. They stress that 'these two themes are fundamental to keep or abolish the free and isonomic character of the Web when it was created' and question the future of these laws, bearing in mind the inherent conflicts they can generate.

Social media have also been used as a recruitment tool (COMPUTERWORLD, 2012). Other studies also relate the use of social media on the Internet with internal communication and its dimensions. Among them one could mention the studies of Lin et al. (2012), Fowler and Christakis (2010), Mattu (2012), Singh, Jain and Kankanhalli (2009), Smith e*t al.* (2009), Smith, Hansen e Gleave (2009) Waters, Burnett and Lamm (2009).

The phantasies produced and instilled into the human mind by mass media have contributed to the fact that we live in a standardised society from the behavioural point of view, where companies try to be in people's minds with loyalty relations.

Nevertheless, what seems to be sent and received mass information, is in fact, in our opinion a demassification of minorities that send and receive large quantities of their own images, which reflects and intensifies mass media and the quantity of information we will be sharing in the future.

2. METHODOLOGY

The method used tried to contribute to the research on internal communication and social media with new data. An online survey was created as an empirical method for data collection which can complement the existing information on the literature, the source which supported the definition of research hypothesis and constituted the base of the empirical study:

H1: Social media generate new ways of internal communication.
**H2:** Social media make communication more rapid and interactive.

After collecting the data, it was analysed and the results were discussed. The statistical analysis carried out with SPSS (*Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*), version 20.0 for Windows, involved measures of descriptive statistics (absolute and relative frequencies) and inferential statistics. To test the relationship between variables, a significance level of $(\alpha) \leq 0.05$ was used as reference to accept or reject the null hypothesis in a significance level. The Binomial Test was used, as we are testing the difference between the two proportions.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1 Sample characterisation

58 subjects took part in the study. The majority is male (53.0%), and the female percentage is 47.0% as it can be seen in Chart 1.

Chart 1 - Gender
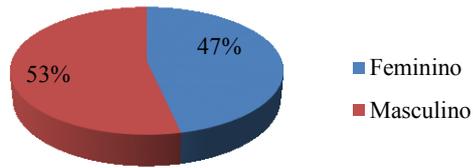
In Chart 2 we can see age distribution. The majority is found in the age group 36-40 (31.0%). The youngest represent 1.7% and the oldest 6.9%.

Chart 2 - Age

Chart 3 – Seniority in the organisation
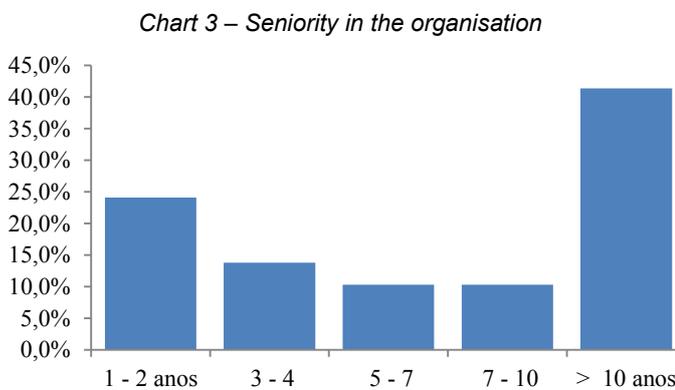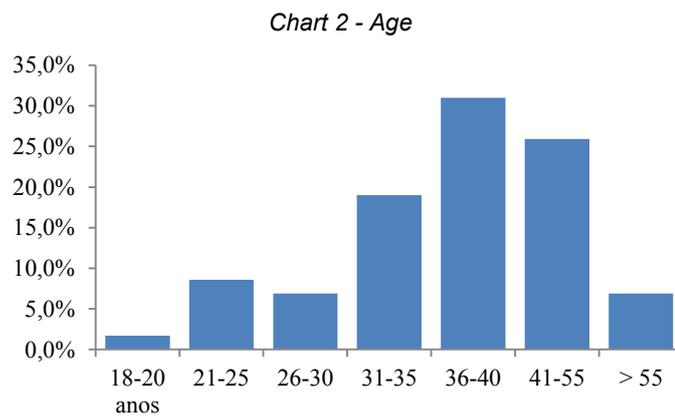
Most respondents work for companies in the services sector (62.1%), followed by those who work in the trade sector (20.7%), as is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 - Sector		
	Frequency	Percentage
Trade	12	20.7
Industry	4	6.9
Other	6	10.3
Services	36	62.1
Total	58	100.0

Approximately one third of these companies (32.8%) have more than 250 employees. Businesses with one to ten employees represent 27.6% of the total, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 - No. of employees				
	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
1-10	16	27.6	27.6	27.6
11-50	15	25.9	25.9	53.4
51-250	8	13.8	13.8	67.2
More than 250	19	32.8	32.8	100.0
Total	58	100,0	100,0	

More than half of these companies have existed for over ten years. The youngest (two years) represent 13.8%, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 – No. of years in the company				
	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
2 years	8	13.8	13.8	13.8
5 years	8	13.8	13.8	27.6
10 years	3	5.2	5.2	32.8
Over 10 years	39	67.2	67.2	100.0
Total	58	100.0	100.0	

3.2 Discussion

A very high percentage of respondents (88.0%) indicates that their companies use the Internet for their internal communication activities, as per Table 4.

Table 4 – Internet use

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage
Yes	44	75.9	88.0
No	6	10.3	12.0
Total	50	86.2	100.0
Omissions	8	13.8	
Total	58	100.0	

More than half (58.0%) consider the internal communication of their companies to be effective (42.0%) or highly effective (16.0%). The others consider it to be ineffective (4.0%) or not very effective (38.0%), as per Table 5.

Table 5 – Internal Communication

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Ineffective	2	3.4	4.0	4.0
Not very effective	19	32.8	38.0	42.0
Effective	21	36.2	42.0	84.0
Highly effective	8	13.8	16.0	16.0
Total	50	86.2	100.0	100.0
Omissions	8	13.8		
Total	58	100.0		

In Table 6, we can see the answers to questions related to internal communication in organisations. The most frequent answers (mode) are marked light grey. The questions that generated more agreement were *Employees should take part in the internal communication process* (64.0%), *The internal communication is adequate to the success of the organisation* (54.0%), and *Intranet is a means of communication, which aggregates useful information and news, becoming a work tool for employees* (54.0%). On the other hand the statement that generated most disagreement was *Communication inside the organisation is transparent* (26.0%).

Table 6 – Impact of internal communication

		Completely disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Completely agree
Internal communication is adequate to	Freq.	0	6	5	12	27

the success of the organization	%	0.0%	12.0%	10.0%	24.0%	54.0%
Employees should take part in internal communication process	Freq.	0	0	2	16	32
	%	0..0%	0,0%	4.0%	32,0%	64.0%
Intranet is a means of communication which aggregates useful information and news, becoming a work tool for employees	Freq.	0	0	3	20	27
	%	0.0%	0.0%	6.0%	40.0%	54.0%
The suggestion box promotes creativity and the participation of the employee in the organisation	Freq.	2	5	15	16	12
	%	4.0%	10.0%	30.0%	32.0%	24.0%
Internal communication humanises working relations	Freq.	0	3	3	26	18
	%	0.0%	6.0%	6.0%	52.0%	36.0%
Communication between management levels is adequate	Freq.	2	5	19	19	5
	%	4.0%	10.0%	38.0%	38.0%	10.0%
It is very important that the organisation invests on the intranet as a tool to improve internal communication	Freq.	0	2	8	15	25
	%	0.0%	4.0%	16.0%	30.0%	50.0%
An organisation which is part of a social network promotes a competitive advantage	Freq.	0	1	10	14	25
	%	0.0%	2.0%	20.0%	28.0%	50.0%
There are deficiencies in the process of internal communication	Freq.	2	6	12	20	10
	%	4.0%	12.0%	24.0%	40.0%	20.0%
Communication inside the organisation is transparent	Freq.	2	12	17	16	3
	%	4.0%	24.0%	34.0%	32.0%	6.0%
The internal communication tools used in organisations today optimise the relations at all levels and generate synergies between departments	Freq.	2	4	12	25	7
	%	4.0%	8.0%	24.0%	50.0%	14.0%
Internal communication can create links between the organisation and the employee	Freq.	0	1	4	25	20
	%	0.0%	2.0%	8.0%	50.0%	40.0%

The most used social media for internal communication in companies are Facebook (51.7%) and LinkedIn (17.2%), as shown in Table 7.

Table 7 – Which social media are used?

	Yes		No	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Facebook	30	51.7%	28	48.3%
Yammer	1	1.7%	57	98.3%
Twitter	6	10.3%	52	89.7%
Ning	0	0.0%	58	100.0%
Google	9	15.5%	49	84.5%
Linkedin	10	17.2%	48	82.8%
Other	16	27.6%	42	72.4%

In Table 8, 10.0% indicates that companies use social media for recruiting and selecting employees fairly frequently and 6.0% indicate that they always use them. For 30.0% their companies never use social media in this context.

Table 8 – Does your organization use social media on the Internet as a tool for recruiting and selecting new employees?

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Never	15	25.9	30.0	30.0
Sometimes	10	17.2	20.0	20.0
Rarely	17	29.3	34.0	84.0
Frequently	5	8.6	10.0	94.0
Always	3	5.2	6.0	100.0
Total	50	86.2	100.0	
Omissions	8	13.8		
Total	58	100.0		

The main communication tools used by organisations for internal communication are the Internet (34.0%) email (32.0%) and meetings (26.0%), as per Table 9.

Table 9 – Which is the main tool used by the organization for internal communication?

	Frequency	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Paper newsletter	3	5.2	6.0
Email	16	27.6	32.0
Intranet	17	29.3	34.0
Other	1	1.7	2.0
Meetings	13	22.4	26.0
Total	50	86.2	100.0
Omissions	8	13.8	
Total	58	100.0	

The proportion of respondents that indicates there were no changes because of the use of social media as a social tool is significantly higher, be it in the *Interaction between team members* ($p = .000$), *Commitment and involvement in the daily activities of the company on their part* ($p = 0.000$) or *It improves the relationship between the organization and its members* ($p = 0.000$), as shown in Table 10. Thus, **H1** which advocated that there were changes in internal communication as a result of the use of social media is refuted.

Table 10 – If the organization uses social media on the Internet as a tool for internal communication, is there a perception of any change in the following points?

	Yes	No

	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Interaction among team members	15	25.9	43	74.1
Commitment and involvement in the daily activities of the company on their part	7	12.1	51	87.9
It improves the relationship between the organization and its members	17	29.3	41	70.7

When respondents were asked about the main advantages of using social media on the Internet as a tool for internal communication, the majority indicates speed (56.9%), the difference in proportion being statically significant ($p = 0.024$). As far as interactivity is concerned, opinions are divided. Half indicates that is an advantage and the other half considers it is not an advantage. As for the other characteristics, the majority considers that they do not constitute advantages, the difference in proportion is always statically significant, which is shown in Table 11. Thus, as for **H2** defined with the aim of validating speed and interactivity as advantages of social media, is only partly validated.

Table 11 – What are the main advantages to using social media on the Internet as a tool for internal communication?

	Yes		No		
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Sig.
Speed	33	56.9%	25	43.1%	.024*
Interactivity	29	50.0%	29	50.0%	1.000
User friendly	22	37.9%	36	62.1%	.000*
Sharing	24	41.4%	34	58.6%	.006*
Allows for instant response	19	32.8%	39	67.2%	.000*
Access by mobile phone	18	31.0%	40	69.0%	.000*
Security	3	5.2%	55	94.8%	.000*
Other	2	3.4%	56	96.6%	.000*

$* p \leq .01$

5. CONCLUSION

Following the literature review and the formulation of research hypotheses, this empirical study led to the following conclusions:

- **Conclusion 1:** Social media are not perceived as relevant to the efficiency of internal communication, thus not supporting **H1**.
- **Conclusion 2:** The main advantage of social media is the speed of communication, which only partly supports **H2.** This also suggested interactivity as an advantage of social media for internal communication.

Even though the results do not completely validate the relevance that the literature attributes to the use of social media internally, the main objective of this study, which sought to understand the strategic alignment in companies with the internal audiences through the use of new information and communication technologies is achieved, since there is more awareness of the practices of Portuguese companies about the use of social media to increase efficiency of corporate internal communication.

5.1 Research Limitations

Despite empirical evidence obtained through this research, it could be stated that the sample of companies that filled the online survey could be considered a result limitation.

Nevertheless, this study is relevant as it is a topical subject and it is constantly evolving. In this sense this study constitutes an important contribution to research in corporate communication.

5.2 Suggestions for future research

As the sample of this study is limited, the first suggestion would be to replicate the study in Portugal. The second suggestion concerns the interest in pursuing this research, not only in Portugal but also abroad.

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