WOULD STARTUPS ADOPT MARKETING SCIENCE? REVALIDATION OF TRA AND TAM

ANTONIO HYDER VALENTÍN ALEJANDRO MARTÍNEZ-FERNÁNDEZ CARLOS PÉREZ-VIDAL OTTO REGALADO-PEZÚA antonio.hyder@umh.es, valentin.martinez@udc.es, carlos.perez@umh.es, oregalado@esan.edu.pe Universidad Miguel Hernández & H/F Research, Universidad Miguel Hernández, Universidade da Coruña, Universidad ESAN

ABSTRACT

We investigate potential adoption of marketing science research on behalf of technology startups, focusing on the revalidation of the technology acceptance model (TAM) and the theory of reasoned action (TRA). Marketing science adoption is explored with a 33-item survey validated by sixteen startup CEO across sixteen different countries. Preliminary data shows awareness of scientific research on behalf of startups and the willingness to adopt marketing science research for the achievement of competitive advantage through science-informed decision making, also leading to the reduction of trial and error. Findings signal an opportunity for startups to increasingly adopt marketing science-informed decision making, versus managerial mental models based on intuition and experience, as well as for the academic field of marketing to serve practitioners, contributing to elevating the relevance of the marketing science discipline in the process.

Palabras clave: applied marketing science, startups, technology adoption, theory of reasoned action, theory of planned behaviour, satisfaction.

BACKGROUND

1.1. The relevance of marketing science in practice and decision making

The scientific field of marketing allows organisations to make well-informed marketing decisions in order to better serve their customers (Steenkamp, 2021). Marketing decisions refer to the choice of management actions across any part of a firm's marketing activity. For long, marketing science is perceived to have its greatest influence on areas such as brand management, pricing, or customer and market selection of new products. Marketing tools such as segmentation, survey-based choice models, marketing mix models, and pre-test market models typically have the largest impact on marketing practice decisions (Lilien, 2011).

The need for connecting marketing research and practice is increasingly pointed out by top academics (e.g. Babin et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2017; Lilien, 2011). In fact, the influence and practical relevance of marketing science is progressively becoming limited (Vargo, 2019). In the particular case of startups, many of which operate in technology, have specialised workforces which might welcome the benefits of using scientific research and find the adoption of contrasted theories and models advantageous (e.g. Dennis et al., 2010). In fact, there is an increasing trend within some technology corporations grown from startups to conduct their own in-house marketing science by hiring researchers (e.g. Amazon https://www.amazon.jobs; Meta Research https://research.facebook.com; The Walt Disney Company https://jobs.disneycareers.com).

1.2. Consumer-technology represents a substantial and growing part of the economy

Many of the recent trends in marketing practice focus on consumer-oriented technology (Marketing Science Institute, 2022) where many of the consolidated marketing theories in areas such in branding, pricing, new customer/market selection, advertising and promotion, can be applied in contexts such as digital analytics, artificial intelligence, big data, social media, consumer technology in general, or in international business development. For instance, in digital and mobile communications, marketing science value chains are deployed as organisational frameworks.

Some of the consolidated marketing theories are becoming the foundation of new interactive phenomena. For instance, constructs such as *involvement*, arising from the 70's and 80's have grounded digital interactive concepts such as *engagement*, although its definition and relevance

to business practice is still in debate for over a decade. This signals both research fragmentation (Rosado-Pinto & Correira-Loureiro, 2020) as well as an opportunity for conducting research in newer technological contexts, making use of consolidated bodies of research, with a focus of applying and extrapolating gained knowledge to both marketing theory and practice, especially where failure rates are usually high and having the best available knowledge represents an advantage (e.g. Slater et al., 2014).

1.3. Technology startup ecosystems

Technology startup ecosystems are flourishing and developing across the world (e.g. Still et al., 2014). Such trend is driven by the fact that startups are perceived to be key for job growth and future welfare due to their forceful nature (Laso, 2020). In fact, government programs are consistently seeking to strengthen the innovation capacity of startups, as well as the ecosystems they form, by utilising science-research, increasing fundamental and applied research efforts and technological know-how in the pursuit of impactful results (Paquet, 2022). For instance, in the European Union (EU) this is increasingly becoming part of policy (Gabriel, 2022).

1.4. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

In the EU, 80% of GDP is generated by SMEs. However, according to the European Commission (EC) 80% of SMEs do not utilise scientific research to their advantage. Because of this, the EC is aiming to strengthen the innovation capacity of small and medium-sized enterprises in Europe and their contribution to the development of new technology-based products and markets. Government programmes aimed at SMEs such as Horizon Europe are increasing their research efforts, even outsource research as applicable to startups, extend their networks, better exploit research results and acquire technological knowhow, bridging the gap between research and innovation.

It could be considered that a startup is initially a *micro SME*. Such early technology businesses learn by trial and error when adapting to the market and catering to consumers, not always count on the outcomes of science research (e.g. Lee & Kozar, 2008) and typically do not have the technological development capabilities of larger or specialised firms which might apply the results of science research to their advantage. It is a well-known fact that online and digital companies struggle to achieve their financial targets. For instance, not all startups have the necessary knowledge to develop their own marketing metrics or analytics, and adopt those suggested by major platforms. It could even be argued that many startups and SMEs are

adopting "success metrics" *enforced* by large online companies or by the Internet industry in general, which might arguably benefit the organisation that originally developed them, suited to their needs (Financial Times, 2020).

1.5. Application and diffusion of existing marketing research knowledge

New knowledge is made available through, for instance, marketing science articles. But not all marketing knowledge is developed by marketing academics. Figure 1 illustrates that marketing knowledge may be (1) generated in scientific research documents, such as journal or conference articles; (2) converted into practical tools by marketing intermediaries (e.g. Nielsen); the marketing science division of a marketing organization (e.g. Meta); marketing and strategy consultancies (e.g., McKinsey); or specialist niche marketing consulting firms (e.g. Social Status); (3) applied when marketing managers implement marketing science knowledge via practical tools in order to make marketing decisions. Figure 1 also illustrates that marketing intermediaries play a role in the diffusion process, but allows for a direct, disintermediated path as well. Marketing academics may work directly with marketing managers to have their tools adopted, or SME and startup marketing managers may actively seek solutions to address specific marketing problems. Finally, marketing diffusion may occur through routes such as general texts, specialist books or education.

1.6. Marketing is both a managerial profession and a scientific profession

Marketing, as a professional discipline (Steenkamp, 2021) is taught at business schools. In fact, startup ideas also take place in business schools thus becoming a source of new firms (e.g. Bengoa et al., 2021). A number of academic scholars have recently called for more emphasis to be placed on the application of marketing science to industry problems, rather than on rigor per se (e.g., Lilien, 2011). In fact, focusing on problem-solving, when startups pitch for fundraising, their first statement usually refers to what problem in the market does their product solve (e.g. TechCrunch).

Despite there are many successful marketing decision model developments, Lilien (2011) points out their minimal practical use, in terms of both trial and adoption, and questions why that is the case. In fact, such detachment from application as well as literature fractionisation, has led to the relevance of marketing academic research becoming widely questioned (Aguinis et al., 2021; Babin et al., 2022) even leading to the detriment of the discipline (Key et al., 2020). Vargo (2019) points out this limit on practical relevance might be a consequence of focusing

on the development of robust theory. In fact, managers, more than theories, concepts and models from marketing literature, use their mental models, intuition and experience. However, even backed with market-oriented tools such as market research data, their subjective mental models are prone to a range of systematic errors and biases (Lilien, 2011). In this regard when aiming to solve a managerial problem, models can help inform judgements so that a science-informed decision can help avoid subjectivity.

By tackling the complexities of the real world, marketing can be ahead of other disciplines, in fact, such work is often highly impactful (Steenkamp, 2021). Application of marketing science has shown positive returns to firms. Germann et al. (2013) found that increasing analytics deployment in firms leads to an improvement in their return on assets.



Figure 1. Marketing Science Diffusion and Application to Marketing Practice

Adapted from Lilien (2011)

1.7. Informing marketing science with marketing practice. Towards the development of joint working processes based on marketing capabilities and capacities from both science and practice perspectives.

Steps are being made towards incrementally informing marketing practice with marketing science. For instance, some researchers focus on enhancing the impact of scholarly research (e.g. Aguinis et al., 2021). Others emphasise that managers can obtain tested theories from one context and apply them to another one, improving decision making and avoiding trial and error (e.g. Lee & Kozar, 2008; Kaplan, 1987). There are also bodies of research which focus on dejargonising scientific wording in order to avoid miscomprehension and ensure readability and accessibility of science papers for diverse audiences, including practitioners (e.g. Baram-Tsabari et al., 2020). Likewise, recently, researchers have questioned if open access to academic research would in fact help startups, particularly science-based companies (ElSabry and Sumikura, 2020). Although Lilien (2011) had previously noted that relatively few quantitative behavioural researchers regularly attend both quantitative and behavioural conferences, new efforts such as Quant UX integrate both fields (Chapman et al., 2022). Despite typically practitioners do not read marketing science journals because they find little value in them, the Academy of Marketing Science (AMS) also held its first special session where startups and marketing scientists presented joint research to an academic and practitioner audience, with the participation of a panel of policy makers and investors, with the sole objective of efficiently bridging marketing research and practice (Babin et al., 2022).

However, as research is growing exponentially it is also increasingly harder to assimilate and relate research, or to elucidate the role of a piece of knowledge. This overload represents a bottleneck for marketing scientific progress as well as its application in practice. As an example, in the field of education, the time between a finding, then publishing and referencing it in a literature review ranges between 2.5 and 6.5 years (Crues, 2017). Startups may require fast speeds in the adoption of new marketing science developments. In this regard, artificial intelligence for the assistance of marketing knowledge transfer is currently in working progress (e.g. Hyder & Nag, 2011).

To wrap up this section, in this research we argue that startup CEOs, entrepreneurs and decision makers would benefit from adopting marketing science models to help them make evidence-based decisions. Concurrently, marketing researchers would profit from understanding market needs and trends (e.g. MSI bi annual report, 2020), even obtain market data for analyses, or

simply maintain focused conversations with the aim of solving a marketing problem embracing both science and practitioner perspectives.

In order to attain this process, a next step would be to understand if startups would actually have the willingness to embrace marketing research. Accordingly, the specific focus of this study is to test whether startups would in fact adopt marketing science.

2. Foundational consumer-technology adoption models based on marketing science: Theory of reasoned action and technology acceptance model.

There are several highly-accepted technology adoption models. In particular, technology acceptance model and theory of reasoned action are well known, influential and commonly employed theories for describing consumer acceptance of technology. They are the foundation of many subsequent technology adoption models (e.g. Dennis et al., 2010).

Theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) is one of the most influential theories of human behaviour. Drawn from social psychology, it establishes that people's behaviour is driven by their behavioural intentions, which is a function both of a person's attitude towards behaviour and the subjective norms that surround that behaviour. Attitude towards a behaviour refers to the person's positive and/or negative feelings about performing the behaviour. Subjective norms are defined as the subject's perceptions of how others feel about the action to be performed (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Figure 2 illustrates the TRA.

FIGURE 2.



Source: Adapted from Fishbein & Ajzen (1975)

Technology acceptance model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) is considered one of the most influential and commonly employed theories for describing a person's acceptance of information systems.

Adapted from the theory of reasoned action, and based upon the beliefs-attitudes-behaviour paradigm of human behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), TAM is a static model, specific to information systems, that considers actual technology usage behaviour as a function of the behavioural intention to use a technology. User intention and behaviour are based on forward-looking expectations of the information systems' acceptance and usage, and are determined by two variables: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. The model is illustrated in figure 3. Numerous empirical investigations have established strong empirical support for TAM. Although TAM is technically a model of IT acceptance, it has also been used to examine post-adoptive usage (e.g. Dennis et al., 2010).

FIGURE 3.

Marketing science acceptance model.



Source: Adapted from Davis (1989)

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The aim of this work in progress is to explore the awareness of marketing science research on behalf of startup CEOs, and their willingness to use marketing science by specifically revalidating the technology adoption model and the theory of reasoned action with marketing science adoption. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the two foundational models suggested in this research.

METHODOLOGY

In this section, we describe the survey designed for this research, the data collection process as well as advances made in the data analysis.

4.1. Survey design

The aim of the survey proposed for this study, as detailed in the appendix, is to evaluate the value of marketing science for startups. In order to assess adoption attitudes and potential application of behalf of startup decision makers, we elaborated a tailored survey instrument with questions aimed at (1) the profile of the respondents; (2) variables relevant to marketing science adoption in startups related to awareness, attitude, perceived usefulness, and usage of marketing science research in business practice.

The research variables assessed are attitude, behaviour, disconfirmation, error, expectations, intention to use, perceived behavioural control, perceived ease of use, perceived performance, perceived usefulness, satisfaction and subjective norm. Also, socio-demographics and additional questions are made regarding their experience with using scholarly research including their awareness, frequency of use and experience with the application of science to business. In total the survey comprises 33 questions from which 24 items were assessed with 7-point Likert scales as well as one open ended question, six demographic items, one rating scale, plus one field offering to send to the respondents a copy of the study's results when published.

4.2. Data collection

Data is to be obtained from the Hackers and Founders (H/F) global technology ecosystems operating in 60 countries. H/F amasses early-stage technology startups as well as projects in conception aimed at early adopter technology consumers. The 33-item online survey has been audited and tested with two sequential groups of eight auditors each, in total sixteen entrepreneurs and startup CEOs local members of the H/F technology ecosystems. They revised and tested the survey to ensure other members of their local communities will comprehend the objectives of the study, the questions and wording pertaining to the models, that the online survey works correctly, and the data set is correctly transmitted and stored on an Internet server. The first group are from Australia, Germany, Mexico, Peru, Sweden, Turkey, Venezuela and Zimbabwe. The second group is from France, Holland, Honduras, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and United States.

4.3. Data analysis

Preliminary analysis of the sixteen test surveys reveals a positive attitude on behalf of respondents towards using marketing science. As an example, replies to survey items such as *improving the quality of my work, increase effectiveness and productivity performance, make better decisions, use of marketing science is favourable, advantageous, and intention to use,* consistently obtained responses of 6 or greater on 1-7 Likert scales, also signalling the potential absorptive capacity of marketing science on behalf of startup entrepreneurs due to the expected benefits (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). The survey is currently taking place with startup CEOs and entrepreneurs in Mexico and India. The subsequent step is to conduct regional research, aiming to obtain 300 observations in each of these areas: USA, EU, Africa, India and Latin America. Successive country or region-specific research will be assessed. Data will be analysed with Partial Least Squares Path Modelling (PLSPM). This choice is grounded on the fact that startup adoption of marketing science is relatively new in research and theoretical models are not yet grounded.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

Marketing is a professional discipline taught in business schools (Steenkamp, 2021) where many startup ideas take place (e.g. Bengoa et al., 2021). Although the proportion of management decisions informed by marketing science is low (Lilien, 2011; Vargo, 2019) marketing can be ahead of other disciplines if it helps to tackle the complexities of the real world (Steenkamp, 2021) especially where startups are an increasing key for job creation and economic development. In this research in progress our preliminary survey tests have signalled positive attitudes towards using marketing science models and theories in startups. The CEOs of these newly-formed innovative companies who persevere for survivability and scalability by seeking to make the right decisions, have expressed a willingness to use knowledge developed by scientists in our field. This represents an opportunity to empower the discipline of marketing science (Key et al., 2020) hopefully tying it together with marketing practice into a meaningful narrative with generalisable, normative implications, in order to achieve impactful scientific and practical relevance (Vargo, 2019) which will then allow to suggest unified marketing research directions in this regard (e.g. Pomirleanu et al., 2013).

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APPENDIX. SURVEY ITEMS

ATTITUDE (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1991)

1 ATT1: Using scholarly research is favourable

2 ATT2: Using scholarly research is a good idea

3 ATT3: Using scholarly research is advantageous

SUBJECTIVE NORM (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1991)

4 SN1: My colleagues would think I could make use of scholarly research5 SN2: People who are important to me would think I could use scholarly research6 SN3: Other people in my field would think I could use scholarly research

INTENTION TO USE (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1991)

7 IU1: I might use scholarly research in the future 8 IU2: I might use scholarly research regularly in the future

PERCEIVED EASE OF USE (Davis, 1989)

9 PEU1: It would easy for me to read scholarly research 10 PEU2: It would easy for me to understand scholarly research 11 PEU3 & PBC1: It would be easy for me to use S.R.

PERCEIVED USEFULNESS (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000)

12 PU1: Using scholarly research would improve my work13 PU2: Using scholarly research would enhance my effectiveness.14 PU3: Using scholarly research would increase my productivity.16 PU4: Using scholarly research would be useful.

PERCEIVED PERFORMANCE (Oliver, 1980)

15 PPF: Using scholarly research would improve my performance.

EXPECTATIONS (Oliver, 1980)

17 EXP: Using scholarly research would help me make better decisions

ERROR (Niebel, 1972; Lee & Kozar, 2008)

18 ERR: Using scholarly research I would make less mistakes in my decisions

SATISFACTION (Oliver, 1980)

19 SAT: I would be satisfied by using scholarly research

PERCEIVED BEHAVIOURAL CONTROL (Ajzen, 1991)

20 PBC2: I could easily use scholarly research if I wanted to

21 PBC3: I would have control over using scholarly research

DISCONFIRMATION (adapted from Bhattacherjee, 2001)

22 CNF1: I would be delighted if using scholarly research exceeds my expectations

23 CNF2: I might achieve the quality I expect using scholarly research

24 CNF3: I would be happy if scholarly research works better than I expect

BEHAVIOUR (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975)

25 BHV: How often do you usage scholarly research ? Every 0-3 months | Every 4 -6 months | Every year | Every 1-5 years | Never

USE OF SCHOLARLY RESEARCH. OPEN QUESTION (suggested in this research) 26. How useful is scholarly research to you when building a startup?

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHICS (AIMC, 2022)

27 SX Gender: Male | Female

28 AG Age : -18 | 18-25 | 26-35 | 36-45 | 46-55 | 55-65 | +65 years of age 29 ED Level Education: No studies | Primary studies | Secondary studies | University studies 30 WK1 Type Employment: Self-employed |Employed by a company | Retired |Unemployed 31 Your Profession: (open ended reply)

32 City and Country: (open ended reply)

33 To receive a copy this study when finished, please enter a means of contact (open ended reply. suggested in this research)