

MARKETING IMPULSE TO PROMOTE E-LEARNING IN BASIC AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on e-learning and its specific evolution applied to Basic and Secondary Education, taking into account new technological approaches, as evidenced by the marketing of school publishers in Portugal. Marketing strategies depend on educational complexity, and this research explores the possible impulse to promote e-learning in such environment. The research methodology focuses on the needs and motivations for a conceptual framework, including the development of e-learning supply processes, demand formation, and the interaction between supply and demand, which can be enhanced with appropriate public policies. The results of qualitative interpretations confirmed that beliefs about e-learning are generally influenced by most previous implementation processes and are still generally considered an unsurpassed failure. However, the evidence is modified by the new data on the impact that COVID-19 has on the entire educational organization process, specifically on technological dissemination and innovation. Price or free access and training offers forms the basis for the "mise en valeur" while marketing emphasizes the values of generosity, empathy and sharing of emotions.

KEYWORDS

Marketing, e-Learning, Education, COVID-19, Portugal.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic could create enormous potential and opportunity for the e-learning market by changing the culture of using computers in families for education, improving technical conditions and boosting digital literacy (Saraiva & Silva, 2021). In this sense, an interruption of face-to-face education demonstrated the importance of "openness" in education. Open Educational Practices (OEP), Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), and many others in Educational Youtube Channels are valuable examples in a time of crisis and routine life. A better way to promote open education is to foster and support a culture of openness, in face of ambiguity and uncertainty of educational settings. However, the current literature seems to neglect a vital discussion: considering the impacts of COVID-19 and marketing on the "mise en valeur" of e-learning.

It is crucial to define realistic goals, present proposals that consider the current moment and implement e-learning with simplicity, commitment and empathy. Prioritizing issues of care, empathy and emotional support should not be limited to the e-learning environment directed at students but also embodied in educational policy and decision-making with an impact on teachers and parents.

Alves and Cabral (2021) suggest that it be reflected more in the learning of those far away than the simple and generous information about the "mise en valeur" of distance learning consummated in training offers, tips, and warnings shared in the community. Students can learn actively through their computers, tablet, or mobile phone. More evidence is the potential of using games and simulators, augmented reality, the Internet of things, didactic robotics, remote laboratories and artificial intelligence capable of helping the teacher chat, job correction, etc.

This study focuses on the development of e-learning in Basic and Secondary Education. The case of Portuguese education system is divided into pre-school education (from the age of 3), basic education (6 to 15 years old) and upper secondary education (15 to 18 years old) (Eurydice, 2022). Empirical evidence was analysed and evaluated in six aspects: the school and the impact that business marketing has on its options, the e-learning tools and their potentiation, and the ability to monitor results in the face of teachers' digital training and skills.

Based on school management and educational policies, the school enables the use of e-learning tools in the form of platforms and Internet access, with results that require monitoring by teachers and parents. Business marketing actions are based on the studies that suppliers make on the needs and motivations of both schools and teachers. While training forms the basis for the "mise en valeur", dissemination and use of e-learning instruments, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a context of resilience, generosity, empathy and sharing of emotions. So, the following question is required:

What business marketing actions did e-learning providers adopt in the context of COVID-19?

A qualitative case study methodology explored the needs and motivations based on a conceptual framework, including the development of e-learning supply processes, demand formation, and the interaction between supply and demand, which can be enhanced with appropriate public policies. To this end, suppliers, and teachers with different levels of responsibility in schools and groups of schools were interviewed. In addition, news and statistical documents from the public domain has been analysed. Thus, qualitative interpretations and classifications were, whenever possible, combined with quantitative confirmations.

To recognize "mise en valeur" of e-learning and disseminate from a right-based approach, marketing actions will go together as part of one big action plan.

2. E-LEARNING APPROACH

Implementing distance learning by e-learning in the context of Basic and Secondary Education is a complex task that begins with a strategy for developing basic technical infrastructure, as in any other implementation.

Clark and Mayer (2016) define e-learning as education delivered on a digital device (computer, laptop, tablet, or phone) intended to support learning. Ways of e-learning can include electronic storage of content on external drives, in the cloud, or in local memory.

E-learning certainly has a place in the curriculum for the future of Basic and Secondary Schools. However, it is necessary to know that younger and full-time compulsory school-age students need planned parental involvement to work from home (Hasebrink et al., 2009), along with tutorial support and collaborative work opportunities. For this research, the above definitions imply a formal scope of educational design. New learning environments challenge continuous thinking, from "technology" on one side to "social" on the other.

The impacts of COVID-19 on e-learning emerged in contextual situations characterized by ambiguity and uncertainties. Previous technologies and humans faced challenges never expected. Fast developments and adaptations (like in Zoom, or Teams tools) to educational environment, in parallel with massive fast training (like in Youtube) to resolve many problems of digital illiteracies, changed the values in context.

3. MARKETING ISSUES

The commercialization of education is a controversial issue. If there is no sales team, school publishers rely heavily on marketing! Ultimately, marketing makes selling unnecessary (Kotler & Keller, 2006). It is essential to distinguish which marketing responsibilities can be divided and which strategies have been considered successful (Eastman & Saulnier, 2019). This can be done while in frame definitions of marketing because they have been revised according to the evolution of technologies and the market. The American Marketing Association is an example, and in 2017 approved the latest definition as follows: "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions and processes of creation, communication, delivery and exchange of offers that have value to customers, partners and society in general." (AMA, 2017).

Business marketing is based on much more personal and direct relationships between organizations. Jobber and Fahy (2019) identify organizational or business-to-business (B2B) purchasing three main types of buyers: the industrial market, the dealer market, and the government market. In business marketing, schools should interactively develop educational services in cooperation with key stakeholders (e-learning system providers, teachers, pupils, parents, local authorities, etc.). Indeed, in Basic and Secondary Education, the market is influenced by government agencies that buy products and services, covering the needs of teaching instruments and thus helping schools carry out curricular activities.

Nie et al. (2020) suggest e-learning sustainability models based on a 4Es table, which correspond to the dimensions of effectiveness, efficiency, economy, and equity. Pine and Gilmore (1999) also discussed 4Es that are intended to add value and unique competitive advantages for the following domains of experience, which are educational, aesthetic, escapist, and entertainment experiences. Nevertheless, Graham (2018) proposed the 4Es model of mentoring (experience, exposure, enthusiasm and empathy) to ensure value-added teaching.

Any of these models have their validity for the “mise en valeur” of e-learning, pertinent to relating some tools and techniques to digital marketing actions. Given that e-learning is a service, teachers and students are the main focus of suppliers. Marketing models in this context use a set of "marketing mix" variables, such as Li and Hung's 5P's (2009): Product - distance education service; People - ability, skill, knowledge, experience, and teachers' care for students; Pricing - complex decision given independent price negotiation for each school, or grouping of schools, or households; Promotion - school media, or others (radio, television, newspapers, social networks, websites), or relational sale (teachers); and Place - the Internet.

Although, according to Mahajan and Golahit (2017), this set of variables can still be broader if we apply the 11P's: Program (Product); Price (I am going to price it); Place; Promotion; People; Process; Physical evidence (Physical Evidence / Infrastructure s and Technology); Performance; Positioning; Pleasure; and Meeting point.

All these variables may be relevant. Nevertheless, in the case of e-learning, while infrastructure and technology are essential, the price is the most important, given the sensitivity of online consumers (Pricebench, 2020). In general, e-learning providers offer free or minimum-priced courses associated with brand messages, such as "Online courses at the best price" (Traininghouse, 2021) or "Online courses for less" (Udemy, 2021). Jobber and Fahy (2019) state that addressing the needs of clarity, coherence, credibility and competitiveness in a positioning strategy is vital. More than products or services, positioning is the key to conveying the benefits of a supplier.

Competition between Basic and Secondary Schools occurs mainly in the private sector, while the public sector remains a prisoner of government decisions and national educational strategies. Thus, producers of e-learning platforms and content face several challenges. First, who should be the client: student, teacher, school, or parents and educators. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic creates a new environment and has opened new horizons. Marketing actions depend on this complexity, and this research explores the possible drive to promote e-learning in these environments.

For instance, Paiva, Morais and Moreira (2015) suggest marketing by course unit. In this specific case, they refer to partnerships with organizations that produce knowledge in teaching and sciences (ClicMat and Physical and Natural Sciences) and chemistry (Portuguese Society of Chemistry).

According to Bonilla Segura (2014), to make a promotional analysis, the following aspects should be considered:

- promotion is a tool or set of techniques that constitute one of the controllable variables of marketing;
- promotion is to disclose a product or service;
- communication in the promotion is made in the spirit of informing, influencing, persuading or convincing an audience or consumer;
- the promotion always applies to a specific location or time.

Moreover, in order to promote e-learning in Basic and Secondary Education, it is suggested to consider the following factors:

- market-driven (Social marketing);
- teacher training (People);
- price policies (Promotion);
- image issues (Pointing-Out as a Reference);
- infrastructure (Physical Evidence);
- availability class (Performance);
- resilience (Digital identity).

Finally, Wang et al. (2021) found that electronic-word-of-mouth significantly influences consumer decision-making for products of high personal involvement. Learning by observation or social will reinforce the extrinsic motivations of consumers associated with the surrounding context, situations and external factors. In the period of closure of schools in the face of COVID-19, communication through social networks may have generated the benefits of word-of-mouth or viral. However, on a larger scale, online free videos in the form of training for teachers may have reached a high number of potential customers or influenced school management.

Meanwhile, generosity, empathy, and sharing of emotions are essential factors for any marketing activity to be effective (Godin, 2019).

According to Maughan (2019), school publishers need to appeal to the gatekeepers (teachers, librarians, parents, and booksellers), and marketing teams have kept pace with technological advances to connect with educators through such digital tools as social media platforms, videos, and podcasts. From one side, the design elements of marketing campaigns must grab kids' attention even if they do not purchase their course materials. On the other side, the free competition and the free choice of schoolbooks should not be eliminated (Barna & Zentai, n.d.).

Following Eurydice (2022), the digital transition of schools is a holistic integration of three contexts:

- Organisational - leadership, teamwork, professional development of school human resources;
- Pedagogical - curriculum development and assessment, pedagogical practices, use of digital educational resources;
- Technological and digital - infrastructure, equipment and Internet access; digital platforms.

Any marketing model should follow digital ambassadors with technical-pedagogical advisory roles and responsibilities for organizing training allocated to training centres. In addition, the nature of the educational environment requires specific marketing and strategic communications, advertising, and public relations. That influences the variables for each contractual context (specific supplier to a specific type or form of Government), and different alternatives can emerge to attribute weights for the multicriteria decision-making model influenced by marketing actions.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research highlights the qualitative case study of e-learning, in which participants enriched the description and increased the perspective of a similar context (transferability), which implies a complete explanation of all the actual circumstances.

Berg and Lune (2012) claim that the case study can reflect nuances, patterns and other underlying parts that previous research may neglect. Yin (2017, p. 18) defines it as "an empirical survey that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real context, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not evident". There are numerous previous investigations on e-learning, but few specifically address Basic and Secondary Education and the context of the state of emergency caused by COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the case study is the most appropriate option for this investigation.

The choice of participants, or people to be interviewed, followed Amado's recommendation (2014) so that "because of their experience of daily life, their responsibilities, status, etc., they are involved or in very close contact with the problem one wants to study". For the recruitment of participants in this investigation, a purposive sampling technique was adopted, and proportionality was not the primary concern, but rather the understanding of the categories of participants of a small representative group. Contacts were developed with Basic and Secondary Education teachers and with School Publishers marketers.

Silva (2022) performed semi-structured interviews enabling a long period of recording and transcription time. The case study selection also echoes the work of Creswell and Poth (2018), namely the "purposeful maximum sampling" approach. Twelve participants were interviewed "online" and contributed their observations and testimony, providing a rich volume of data and a pluralistic view. Collaboration and participation were the assumptions of the networks of contacts that allowed the selection of participants in this research. By deliberate choice, participants sought to bring more meaningful information in a diversified way. All participants were previously informed about possible data collection procedures. In this sense, informed consent was discussed individually, ensuring anonymous and voluntary participation.

The authors believe it is vital to differentiate the perceptions of the problem by the participants, process or event of the case study. The use of qualitative tools promotes teachers to sharing of sensitivity and ability to distinguish the details of phenomena in particular circumstances. The selection of participants in Portugal also denotes ordinariness, unusual circumstances, or accessibility. However, it is vital to understand a case study as a method of investigation through a comparative analysis of each participant, not of particular organizations (or even the Portuguese Government). In addition, for quantitative confirmatory data, several public information and documents were collected longitudinally from the media or government entities. So, this research represents a different contribution because other studies are usually only quantitative, with data

collection based on online questionnaires and samples of low representativeness (CNE, 2021). Quantitative analysis shows an increase that already reflects the use of e-learning.

The free access to platforms that school publishers gave as a result of COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the use of e-learning. Even more than the previous offer of the Government for all students from 1st to 12th grade who attend public schools (according to the certified statistics database of Portugal, Pordata website <https://www.pordata.pt>), and access to digital resources developed in conjunction with manuals, designated as a Digital License. Moreover, public procurement of e-learning is observed in contracts made by regional and local Governments (register of Portugal, BASE website <https://www.base.gov.pt/>).

The school publishers' market is not exactly the sale of e-learning courses, but it works as a complement to school books in digital form to support and impulse the e-learning in Basic and Secondary Schools. Conclusions from the excerpt:

... when you talk about e-learning, it's distance learning services... for a value of 100€, a course on X... we don't have this market, we have a tool that supports our school projects, from the first cycle to the secondary... that in a free version allows them to use many services, in the paid version can access more services.

On the one hand, the main clients are the Government and private colleges (B2B):

... actually it is a platform of things and takes on a characteristic a little modelling in the sales process, come on, first of all, there is the model with the Government... there is an institutional client here; on the other hand, another is the ok college, the private college.

However, on the other hand, the first customers are parents, which always have in the business model teachers as mediators:

... I present this solution to teachers, and they choose our books. In addition to using my books, they have access to a digital platform... business model always has teachers to mediate... parents so that students can use them autonomously. (E1_M_I)

Finally, in market analysis, the quantified analysis of potential customers should also be considered. For this investigation, the public data from the Pordata website (see above) was relevant concerning the number of students and teachers in Basic and Secondary Education. This universe is essential to make a relationship or ratio with the public information about the use of the e-learning platforms of each school publisher and their potential. In addition, this could be released with a training offer. For instance, the CFAE (School Association Training Centre) websites are also not uniform, and there is no general list of all courses available at the national level. Following what is quantifiable, it is concluded that only a tiny percentage of the available courses are focused on content relevant to e-learning. Still, there is no uniformity in the designations nor the reference number of courses.

5. INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Business marketing actions come from a direct relationship between school publishers and the Government. A teacher has not been considered as "the school" but rather an intermediary for school publishers to reach the market of "students". The buyer teacher represents a market that is insignificant or null. Nevertheless, business marketing related to generosity paved the way for the communication process, empathy, and the sharing of emotions, as verified by the involvement of providers of e-learning systems and communication systems, and educational technologies. A supplier/school relationship was found, safeguarding cases in which teachers worked outside the professional sphere, for example, as parents. In this relationship, ethical aspects such as security, reliability, equity and transparency of platforms were evidenced.

In response to the above research question, school publishers' first clients are teachers and parents, but always having different marketing models to mediate. However, the main clients are the Government and private colleges. The public procurement and different type of contracts made by regional and local Governments are generally observed, but e-procurement or digital marketing actions could not be quantified (at least in above mentioned BASE website). Anyway, the medium price by digital license is different between public contracts. This way, an ethical analysis may be necessary if equity of access is put in evidence.

For parents, the marketing actions of publishers appear in the form of online gradual discounts throughout the school year and focus mainly on the Internet, email, and social networks, which are considered the influence of teachers and the concern of parents. The teacher, not usually a potential client, emerges in the market as an intermediary potential or influencer.

Price differentiation by e-learning tools and tools that maximize usage success is also relevant. On the one hand, specific and differentiated negotiation between e-learning providers, schools, school groups, or municipalities is relevant. The incidence of business marketing for these prices, so to speak, is often the discount. On the other hand, and as an example, Zoom was only free until 40 minutes... the schools had to buy! Everything indicates that it is promotional marketing or the attempt to generate the need in the consumer that leads to the subsequent purchase.

With COVID-19, opportunities arose for differentiated, directed marketing or level of segmentation by course unit. The new marketing actions should consider what teachers already intend to use and have already mobilized students and families. Any reason for disappointment can lead to a setback, for example, if the pricing policy is abusive, as it will be more natural for more users to lower prices. One supplier stated that he did not want to make a profit at this time (COVID-19 pandemic), just wanted them to be widely used. He said, therefore, "it was the moment to add the usefulness and pleasant... you need, and we have here for you to use, for us it was significant from a communication point".

How did teachers feel about this business marketing, or how did the product of these publishers come to them? One participant replied, "It is like this; they showed it by opening for free to everyone, made many people know some materials they did not even know these publishers had, didn't they!"

With the teacher specifically as a focus, the offer of formal and informal training was widely used mainly through digital communication. On Youtube, it is also possible to see and review testimonies and recorded sessions, webinars, seminars, digital dating cycles, tutorials, etc. It is usually possible to see the impact of these short videos, given the number of views being recorded and added over time. For example, the analysis of the ratio between the total potential users (Basic and secondary school students, Pordata data) and the number of views can reveal the levels of general interest and adherence to these technologies.

The improvement of marketing strategies should focus on the person in charge of education as a client and not only use the teacher as a direct or indirectly influencer. Thus, marketing aimed at each family will be more efficient because it enables empathy and paves the way for generosity and sharing of emotions. The big question is if the investment of human resources would be necessary or whether this will be possible with virtual agents and artificial intelligence. At the moment, much more fruitful collaboration between the Government's social action mechanisms, e-learning providers, and families will be one of the most viable hypotheses.

As for teachers, business marketing related to training offers should focus more on rewards, for example, with the allocation of micro-credentials that are certified by educational institutions (Kato, Galán-Muros & Weko, 2020; French & Berry, 2017). In this case, and in an indirect way, not counting for career progression if there is no government reconsideration may elevate the feeling of self-esteem and strengthen leadership capacity.

Since business marketing is focused only on suppliers with profit as its goal, product improvement requires constant analysis. For this, it is necessary to contact by sampling key users. For example, in the evaluation of teachers who already used the platforms of school publishers before COVID-19, it was mentioned that they often did work with links that later students did not have access to open. That was one of the reasons they quit. On the other hand, bonus or premium systems that are awarded to students are referred to as sources of motivation in the early stages but lose influence over time of use.

Finally, the power of innovation is one of the characteristics of the human being, which in nature, in general, is manifested by the changes, changes, etc., which we call evolution. Business marketing does not escape this rule, and all the experiences originated by COVID-19 should be leveraged. Teaching has undergone changes that may not return, especially through the forms of synchronous digital communication. The use of mobile phones is one of the most promising areas. The strict collaboration between telecommunications providers and publishers gives rise to joint enterprise marketing products and actions of great added value.

The e-learning market has expanded with COVID-19. The widespread supply of e-learning services was the main change in existing marketing actions and focused primarily on promotional discounts sent by email to subscribers of limited free access who were registered. With this offer, there was a significant increase in registered users and consequent access to personal data. This consent allows stratification and segmentation of the target audience, especially if used techniques such as data mining. Thus, digital marketing done within the platform itself, both internal and external, was also benefited.

Finally, open or free access to platforms due to COVID-19 has allowed fundamental competitive analyses for e-learning suppliers. The work of cooperation between suppliers to offer unique solutions designed together that solve equity problems can bear fruit based on business marketing, but for now, it is non-existent. That fails

to enhance e-learning by communicating and giving knowledge about new tools, creating increasingly accessible resources, and being attentive to the needs of teachers and pupils (i.e. schools), taking into account all socio-economic contexts.

6. CONCLUSION

Research work should never be considered a finished product but rather an opening of new possibilities. In the emerging context of COVID-19, even more relevant is to consider that much is to be done. Moreover, this remarks the originality of this paper on a school publishers' terrain, where marketing issues are not usually under contest of school leadership or families as customers.

From a methodological point of view, the theoretical contribution responds to the gap in qualitative studies in this research that has based data collection on semi-structured interviews.

From these results, it was possible to infer recommendations about the initiatives that are considered most relevant to enhance better e-learning in favour of Basic and Secondary Education in Portugal. It should also be said that this theme is essential in all countries. However, in Portugal, it gains additional priority since the weaknesses of the educational system are well known, greatly aggravated by the pandemic context and the growing asymmetry of the socio-economic conditions of many students. It is therefore understood that this problem deserves special attention in the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027).

COVID-19 forced the use of e-learning as a response to the personal and collective protection that humanity needs. All the actors in Basic and Secondary Education were confronted with new instruments, uncertainty, and fear. As a rule, human being tends to be more generous in sharing means, resources, and knowledge—especially given whether or not basic needs are met. A spirit of survival has led to teachers, students, families and suppliers being more empathetic to each other. Educational culture, ethics and equity will have to be reconsidered in the context of the digital transformation of schools.

Business marketing actions are mainly focused on the teacher as an influencer and increasing discounts on prices throughout the school year for families. There is no clear boundary between the school environment as a final or intermediate consumer.

On the one hand, the training was offered, particularly for the platforms of the publishers, and took place mainly online and with recording for later review. On the other hand, suppliers opened their platforms for free access, which was just a marketing opportunity for many of the participants. Promotional marketing in the form of training offered by publishers, plus the usual product discounts, was the biggest revelation. The registration process enabled the possibility to contact further around 100% of the universe of potential users.

In any case, competition in the publishers/producers of content and e-learning platforms market is limited to a small number of brands. Moreover, competition between private Basic and Secondary Education institutions is almost non-existent, and the public sector remains a prisoner of government decisions. Conversely, public procurement of e-learning is observed in contracts made by regional and local Governments, and even marketing actions are missing or not quantifiable.

Finally, because of the diversity of tools and instruments in use revealed, it is suggested that the focus of future work is the specific contribution each of these tools has in the face of the potentiation of e-learning. Thus, the marketing impulse of a specific product from a specific supplier to a specific type or form of Government can be considered a potential contribution to the “mise en valeur” of e-learning.

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