



VISIBILITY OF LEADERSHIP ON INSTAGRAM

Communication Strategies and Engagement in Women-Led Startup

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KEYWORDS

Digital
communication
Women
Instagram
Leadership
Organisational
communication

ABSTRACT

Digital communication is a key strategic resource for startups, particularly on social media platforms such as Instagram. This study analyses how Spanish startups led by women represent their leaders and teams on Instagram, identifying communication patterns and their relationship with audience engagement. Based on ten companies selected from the latest GEM report on female entrepreneurship, and through the analysis of 997 posts using ordinal coding (0–2), the study distinguishes between depersonalised communication, team visibility, and high leadership visibility. The results reveal significant differences in communication strategies and higher levels of engagement in certain types of posts.

Received: 17/ 03 / 2026

Accepted: 07/ 06 /2026

1. Introduction

Startups face significant limitations in their communication due to scarce resources, a lack of established routines, and a strong dependence on the figure of the entrepreneur or founder, all of which shape their communication practices. Communication in startups is rarely institutionalised; instead, it emerges organically and is adapted as effectively as possible to their limited resources, underdeveloped organisational structures, and reliance on key individuals such as the founder. Faced with these resource constraints, startups turn to their own direct, low-cost channels (Rasmussen, 2022). In this context, digital communication has become a key strategic resource for startups operating in an environment characterised by innovation, digital transformation, and structural uncertainty (Rudeloff et al., 2022).

Social media enable communication without intermediaries, facilitating rapid visibility where organisational and personal elements merge naturally (Rasmussen, 2022). In this scenario, social media have gained considerable importance, becoming one of the main communication platforms for both individuals and organisations. They allow the dissemination of large volumes of content and information at very low cost while providing direct relationships with their audiences (Nazila et al., 2025; Thomas, 2020). Therefore, social media are not used merely as a “trend” but genuinely align with the structural conditions of startups (Alhakimi & Albashiri, 2023; Rasmussen, 2022). Among these platforms, Instagram stands out due to its visual nature, its potential for brand building, and its capacity for storytelling and visibility (Fitrianti et al., 2020).

In the case of women-led startups, communication is particularly relevant for female entrepreneurship, which has been recognised as a driver of economic and social growth, even though significant barriers related to resources, networks, and visibility persist (Abdelwahid & Kaoud, 2022; Schulcz & Zsigmond, 2025). It cannot be denied that leadership itself performs communicative functions, through which organisational identity is personified and individuals come to embody the organisation, thereby constructing a communication style with visible voices (Rasmussen, 2022). Although there is notable academic interest in startup communication, the scientific literature still contains unexplored areas (Kaiser & Kuckertz, 2023; Rudeloff et al., 2021). In light of this knowledge gap, the present study aims to analyse the digital communication of women-led startups on Instagram, focusing on the visibility of the team and leadership as a differentiated communication strategy, and to explore the engagement levels generated by their posts.

2. Digital Communication and Strategic Communication in Startups

Digital communication is fundamental to the development and evolution of startups. In recent years, emerging companies have gained considerable importance in the economy, both in terms of the labour market and their capacity for innovation and the creation of new business models. Nevertheless, despite the predominant role played by the entrepreneur, most founders lack specific training in communication management (Rudeloff et al., 2022). This is largely due to the lack of resources and the flexible organisational structure that characterises these organisations, as well as the fact that communication is rarely a priority function in the initial stages of startup development (Ala-Kortesmaa et al., 2022).

Organisational strategic communication can be analysed according to the distinction between unidirectional and bidirectional approaches (Rudeloff et al., 2022). The former are primarily oriented towards the dissemination of information and the generation of visibility, favouring unidirectional communication models that allow greater narrative control without expecting a response from audiences. In contrast, bidirectional approaches prioritise interaction, dialogue, and relationship-building with audiences, which requires a constant allocation of resources. Furthermore, this latter approach exposes startups to public criticism and a certain sense of loss of control associated with reputational risk (Colliander et al., 2015; Rudeloff et al., 2022).

In this context, social media have enabled the dissemination of content in different formats (image, video, text, etc.) on a large scale and at a relatively low cost, facilitating the necessary interaction between the organisation and its audiences (Thomas, 2020). However, the ultimate effectiveness of these platforms depends on the organisations themselves and their ability to implement coherent communication practices aligned with their strategies (Alhakimi & Albashiri, 2023). In emerging

companies, communication usually falls to specific individuals rather than to specialised departments. This, in turn, combines with the possibility of developing various communication strategies on social media, including team visibility and leadership visibility, as well as other hybrid strategies. In these cases, interaction does not necessarily take the form of direct dialogue with the audience but can occur indirectly through the visibility given to the individuals who represent the organisation (Rasmussen, 2022).

2.1. Organisational Identity and Digital Communication

Organisational identity has been conceptualised as a dynamic and relational construct, resulting from communicative and narrative processes through which organisations define themselves and are defined by their various audiences (Brown, 2006; Coupland & Brown, 2004).

Narrative has gained considerable importance in studies linked to organisational identity, as it allows analysis of how organisations convey meaning or coherence in situations of change and uncertainty. In digital environments, organisational identity both transforms and underpins the identity process, since digital platforms are not merely new channels for narration but expose the organisation publicly and continuously to an audience composed of multiple voices (Vaara, 2016; Winkler & Etter, 2018). In the case of startups, these narratives play a particularly relevant role, as they help stabilise organisational identity in the early stages of development and differentiate the organisation in a highly competitive environment (Ala-Kortesmaa et al., 2022). In this process, the individuals who form part of the organisation play a fundamental role, as employees and collaborators are key actors in the production and projection of organisational identity by actively participating in the communication strategies that shape the organisation's image (Gioia et al., 2013; Smith, 2013). Thus, organisational identity becomes visible, public, and mediated by digital platforms. This identity is manifested not only through dialogue but also through the exposure and visibility of the people who make up the organisation (Vaara, 2016; Winkler & Etter, 2018). In this sense, employees and leaders do not merely participate in the internal life of the company but embody its values, norms, and meanings — a dimension that is especially relevant in startups, which are characterised by the absence of consolidated structures, where identity is conveyed through specific individuals (Brown, 2006; Gioia et al., 2013; Smith, 2013).

In digital environments, this visibility is articulated through different communication strategies, among which team visibility stands out, with employees acting as ambassadors of the organisation. Research on employee advocacy highlights that this active and visible participation in corporate communication can generate positive effects in terms of trust (De Kerpel & Van Kerckhove, 2025). On the other hand, high leadership visibility constitutes another relevant communication strategy, particularly in the world of startups, since in these organisations the figure of the entrepreneur or founder exerts a significant influence on organisational identity, projecting their values, beliefs, and even the experience of their own professional trajectory (Rudeloff et al., 2022).

From the perspective of personal branding, leadership visibility in digital communication aligns with authenticity and coherence between personal values and those of the organisation itself, which is highly valuable in an environment directly connected with its audience (Putri & Sonni, 2025). Similarly, the literature on entrepreneurial communication emphasises that the visible presence of leadership contributes to the construction of legitimacy by providing a communicator or reference point capable of articulating the organisational narrative (Kaiser & Kuckertz, 2023), thus becoming a strategic communicative decision.

2.2. Female Leadership and Engagement on Social Media

Companies led by women play a fundamental role in job creation and within entrepreneurial ecosystems. However, they continue to face multiple barriers related to access to resources, support networks, and greater visibility. This study focuses on the latter, as the lack of visibility is directly linked to deficits in legitimacy, recognition, and credibility (Abdelwahid & Kaoud, 2022; Schulcz & Zsigmond, 2025). It is in this context that digital communication plays a crucial role as a relevant tool for female entrepreneurship. It offers opportunities to increase the visibility of their businesses and to position them not only as a positioning strategy but also to build support networks and highlight their leadership

in environments that have traditionally been dominated by men (Azab & Elsherif, 2025; Rando-Cueto et al., 2022).

On the other hand, the conceptual literature indicates that women tend to adopt more relational or transformational leadership styles, characterised by special attention to people, collaboration, and the building of trust (Angelakis et al., 2024). These relational styles fit particularly well in digital environments, where closeness, authenticity, and presence are highly valued. Social media have enabled these styles to gain visibility without the need for formal structures, where female leadership is not limited to mere representation but becomes a strategic communicative practice (Angelakis et al., 2024; Azab & Elsherif, 2025; Rando-Cueto et al., 2022).

Numerous studies have shown that tools such as visibility, authenticity, and coherence in organisational discourse have a direct influence on levels of engagement on social media (Alsharairi et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2025). These communication styles align with more contemporary models in which interaction and closeness are important personal and organisational values, aspects that are further reinforced in digital environments through greater exposure (Angelakis et al., 2024).

This visibility of individuals extends beyond leadership to include the organisation's team. In this case, the team represents collective identity, professionalism, and trust, while leadership is primarily associated with legitimacy, coherence, and personal narrative. Both are distinct strategies with different communicative implications and purposes (Ala-Kortesmaa et al., 2022; Gioia et al., 2013; Men et al., 2021). These strategies are not only symbolic but also relational; this visibility strengthens interaction and, consequently, favours likes, comments, and engagement, thereby reducing the distance between the organisation and its audience (Alsharairi et al., 2025; Angelakis et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis. The initial sample consisted of ten Spanish startups selected from the latest Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report on women and entrepreneurship (Bojica et al., 2025). However, following a preliminary analysis, the sample was ultimately reduced to eight emerging companies, as two of them did not have an active Instagram account and exhibited characteristics more closely aligned with small and medium-sized enterprises than with the conceptualisation of a startup.

The corpus of analysis comprised a total of 997 posts extracted from the official Instagram profiles. The data were collected using the Fanpage Karma tool over a two-year period, from 1 January 2024 to 1 January 2026.

In order to analyse this volume of publications, a categorisation was designed based on the linguistic presence of specific terms in the text of the posts (Table 1). This coding strategy allowed for systematic comparisons between the companies without losing the qualitative dimension of the analysis and is consistent with previous studies that have used varying degrees of presence in text analysis (Elliott et al., 1999; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). The coding was carried out manually using Excel, with the main objective of classifying these publications according to the degree of visibility of the founder or leader and the team. To this end, terms associated with the use of the first-person singular, the first-person plural, and the proper names of the founders were employed, following the principles of content analysis based on linguistic units (Krippendorff, 2019).

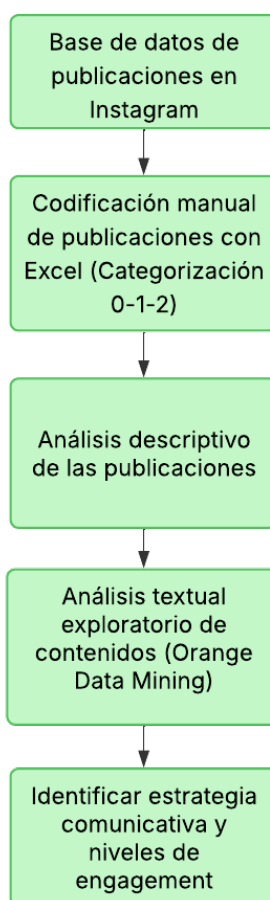
Table 1. Classification and categorisation of the publications

Classification		Linguistic terms
Category 2	Leadership	I, me, myself, am, have, decided, created, think, feel, CEO, founder, director, owner, entrepreneur, lead, mine, I am, Ángela, Berta, Ester, Mamen, Vanessa, Andy, Maibe, Almudena, Dolores, Paula, Biuse
Category 1	Team	we, us, our, team, family, girls, colleagues, staff, together, we unite, community, group.
Category 0	Uncategorised	All other posts will be automatically categorised here

Source: Own work, 2026.

Once the publications had been classified, data analysis was conducted using the Orange Data Mining tool. This final phase allowed the combination of quantitative variables, such as engagement, with the qualitative analysis of textual content (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Workflow



Source: Own work, 2026.

4. Results

4.1. Profile of the Startups Analysed

The eight startups analysed show considerable diversity in terms of sector, year of foundation, and geographical location. As shown in Table 2, the predominant sectors are primarily related to self-care, education, and mentoring — fields directly linked to individual and collective wellbeing. Regarding the year of foundation, most of the startups were established in the period following the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly during the years of uncertainty in 2020 and 2021. This coincides with the increase in entrepreneurial activity observed in Spain in the subsequent years (Fernández-Laviada et al., 2024). With respect to location, the companies are distributed heterogeneously across the national territory, with no clear concentration in any single autonomous community.

Table 2. Startups analysed

	Sector	Year of foundation	Location
IMAGERYST	Technology	2023	Asturias
ALTED MATERIALS	Sustainability	2023	Catalonia
FETÉN	Personal care	2021	Guadalajara
TRANQUIEMPRENDE	Mentoring	2012	Canary Islands
LEGIT.HEALTH	Health	2020	Basque Country
CONSCIOUS DIVING	Academy	2019	Andalusia
IPITEC	Consultancy	2018	Region of Murcia
DEDUCE DATA SOLUTIONS	Data analysis	2020	Cantabria

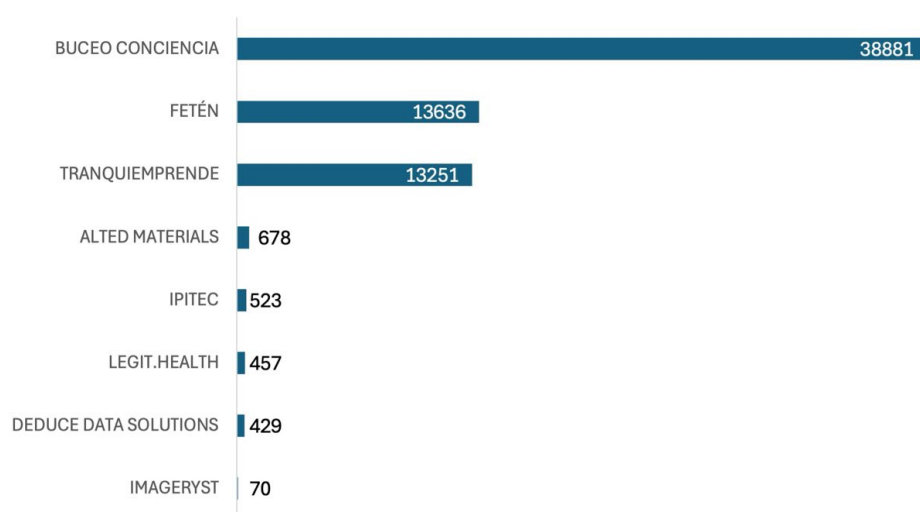
Source: GEM Women, 2024. Own compilation

4.2. Instagram

4.2.1. Overall Data

The number of followers of the startups analysed shows considerable variation across profiles (Figure 2). The startup with the largest number of followers is Buceo Conciencia, with 38,881 followers, followed by Fetén (13,636) and Tranquiemprende (13,251). These three emerging companies operate in sectors linked to education and self-care, suggesting a greater capacity to build communities compared with more technical or specialised sectors.

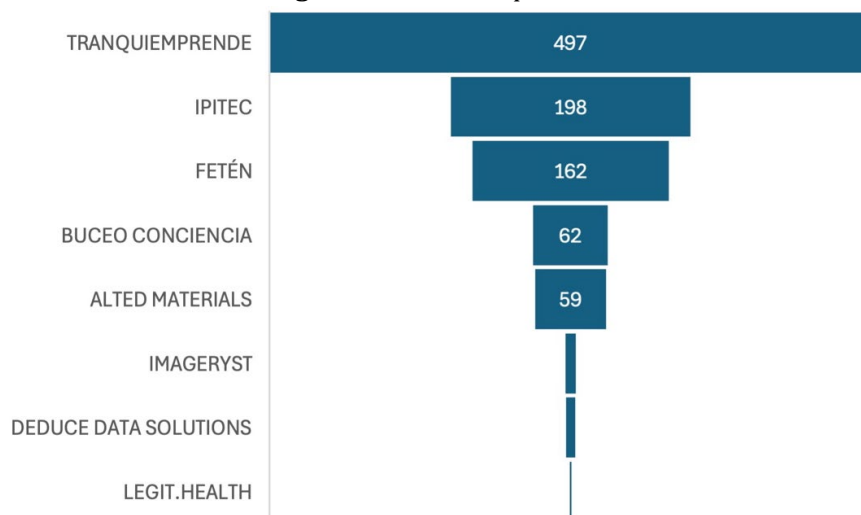
Figure 2. Number of followers



Source: Fanpage Karma, 2026. Own elaboration

Regarding the number of posts (Figure 3), Tranquiemprende leads with 497 publications analysed, followed by IPITEC (198) and Fetén (162). These data reflect different approaches to Instagram strategies, both in terms of posting frequency and content.

Figure 3. Number of posts



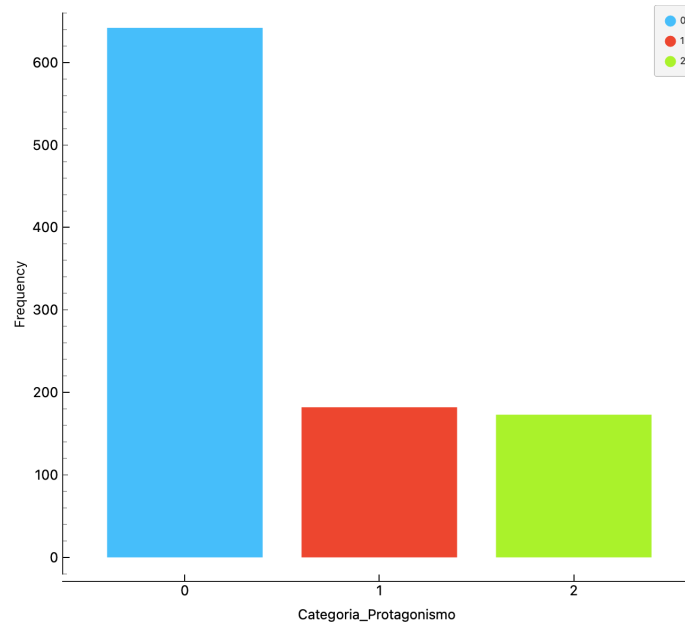
Source: Fanpage Karma, 2026. Own compilation

4.2.1. Data by Category

Once the categorisation was applied to the full database of 997 publications, it was observed that the majority of posts fall into Category 0 (depersonalised), with 613 publications, followed by Category 2 (leadership) with 214 posts, and finally Category 1 (team) with 170 publications (Figure 4). These results indicate that, although communication focused on information and the promotion of products or

services remains predominant, communication strategies employing a personal narrative are gaining increasing relevance, particularly in those publications in which the founder herself is made visible.

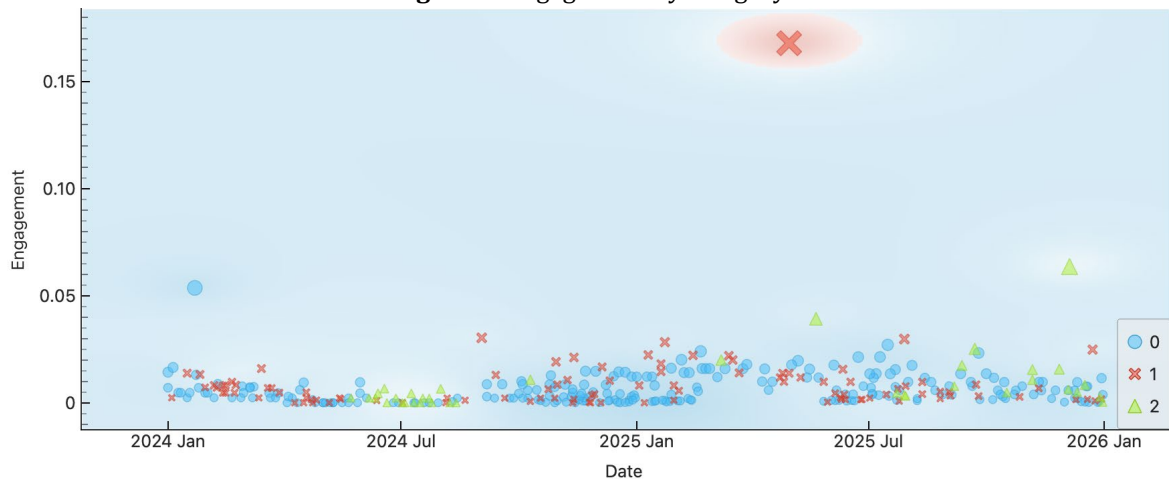
Figure 4. Classification of posts by category



Source: Fanpage Karma, 2026. Prepared by: Orange Data Mining

The analysis of engagement by category (Figure 5) shows that Category 0 exhibits more stable behaviour throughout the period analysed. However, the highest engagement peaks are concentrated predominantly in posts classified in Categories 1 and 2, indicating a stronger response from the audience to content that makes the team visible or, in this case, the founder of the startup.

Figure 5. Engagement by category



Source: Fanpage Karma, 2026. Prepared by: Orange Data Mining

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the discourse in Categories 1 and 2 and thereby reinforce the validity of the categorisation, word clouds were generated from the textual analysis of the posts. In the case of Category 2 (leadership), the word cloud (Figure 6) reveals a narrative centred on professional identity and the entrepreneurial project. Terms such as “entrepreneurship”, “entrepreneur”, and “brand” stand out, along with explicit references to the projects (“buceoconciencia”, “IPITEC”). This indicates that the founders use their personal voice as a channel to communicate and reinforce the visibility of their companies.

Figure 8. Post with the highest engagement in category 2



Source: Fanpage Karma, 2026

In Category 1, the post with the highest engagement (16.7%) stands out for its explicit mention of several team members and the celebration of a business milestone. This demonstrates the capacity of this type of content to mobilise the community around the people who form part of the organisation (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Post with the highest engagement in category 2



Source: Fanpage Karma, 2026

5. Discussion

This study confirms the relevance of these types of strategies on social media and their impact on organisational communication. The results show that most publications fall into Category 0, indicating the predominance of informative or commercial communication linked to more unidirectional approaches (Rudeloff et al., 2022). This pattern is observed even in women-led startups, where the founders themselves prioritise the direct visibility of their products or services. However, this tendency can be explained by various factors, such as resource limitations, the absence of consolidated communication strategies, or the instrumental use of Instagram itself (Ala-Kortesmaa et al., 2022; Kaiser & Kuckertz, 2023; Rudeloff et al., 2022). In this sense, the predominance of this type of communication

should not be interpreted as poor practice, but rather as a common functional strategy in contexts of uncertainty or pressure (Kaiser & Kuckertz, 2023).

In the case of Categories 1 and 2, it is observed that they generate higher engagement peaks, although less frequently, and are capable of producing greater commitment and closeness with their audience. Nevertheless, despite being the content that generates the most engagement, it is not the most frequently used. These data reinforce the idea that the visibility of individuals — both the team and the founder herself — strengthens interaction, even though it does not constitute the dominant strategy in the communication of the startups analysed. Furthermore, the results confirm that engagement does not depend solely on the volume of publications, but also on other variables related to the type of content and the communication strategy adopted (Alsharairi et al., 2025; Rudeloff et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2025).

On the other hand, these strategies also serve to examine the type of narrative being constructed. Thus, leadership functions as a personal narrative or symbolic legitimacy, while the team serves as a guarantee of solvency and professionalisation of the project (Brown, 2006; Gioia et al., 2013).

Overall, the results point to a tension between the most frequently used strategy and the one that generates the greatest interaction. Although Category 0 (informative and promotional content) predominates, the highest levels of engagement are concentrated in Categories 1 and 2, which are associated with greater visibility of leadership and the team and, therefore, with a more relational approach. This divergence suggests that on Instagram, the most common communication practices do not necessarily correspond to the most effective ones in terms of interaction. This reinforces the importance of aligning strategy and content with the specific dynamics of each platform (Fernández-Torres et al., 2025).

The findings of the study suggest that female leadership aligns with the styles described in the literature and that social media play a fundamental role in facilitating the activation and implementation of these narrative styles without the need for substantial resources. Social media reduce structural barriers, enabling significant strategic visibility with limited investment. In this way, more visible female leadership is consolidated not only as a matter of collective representation, but also as a strategic communicative practice (Angelakis et al., 2024; Azab & Elsherif, 2025; Rando-Cueto et al., 2022).

6. Conclusions

This study provides empirical evidence on how women-led startups communicate on Instagram, the importance attached to the visibility of the team and the founder, and how these elements are perceived and corroborated through KPIs such as engagement.

The proposed categorisation makes it possible to identify clear communication strategies and proves to be a useful tool for analysing engagement and discourse in startups on Instagram. Nevertheless, the results indicate that the predominant strategy remains informative and promotional, focused on services and products, with a prevalence of depersonalised communication and less frequent visibility of the team and leadership. Even so, the categories associated with leadership and team visibility (Categories 1 and 2) concentrate the highest levels of engagement, fulfilling communicative functions different from those of Category 0. Overall, these findings suggest that the categorisation not only has descriptive value but also facilitates the connection between identity, visibility, and engagement. They also reinforce the idea that interaction does not depend exclusively on posting frequency, but also on variables related to the communicative approach and the type of content shared.

Social media facilitate faster and more continuous communication with audiences, enabling the activation of the leadership styles described in this study without the need for substantial resources. Instagram's capacity for visibility serves as a communicative resource that strengthens the presence of female leadership by reducing barriers to public exposure and favouring relational strategies. In this way, visible female leadership is consolidated not only as a matter of representation but also as a strategic communicative practice.

Regarding the limitations of the study, although 997 publications were analysed, the sample size of startups can be considered limited. In addition, the analysis focused on a single platform (Instagram). In future lines of research, it would be appropriate to expand the number of companies included or to adopt a comparative design that examines differences in communication strategies between women-led and men-led startups.

7. Acknowledgements

This text has been produced as part of the MCIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/FEDER, EU project (Knowledge Generation Projects 2022). Project number: PID2022-139037OB-I00 (Communication management in women-led start-ups. Competitive strategies for differentiation and innovation). It has also been developed within the SEJ-628/FEDER Research Group (Open communication in women-led start-ups. Competitive strategies for differentiation and innovation) at the University of Málaga.

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