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### **A Conceptual and Semantic Framework of the Startup: A Systematic Review of the Literature and a Qualitative Synthesis**

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#### **Abstract**

This this article aims to analyze the conceptual and semantic framework of the notion of a startup. The results of our study come from a lexical and thematic processing of more than 274 definitions from scientific articles. It appears that English-speaking authors share the definition by which the startup is an embryonic phase aiming to research and validate the business model. In contrast, in French-speaking research, the startup is a young innovative and technological company. Moreover, based on the plurality of semantic names attributed to the notion of a startup, this article aims to categorize startups according to several typologies. At the end of this work, we propose three major criteria to define the startup: The use of Lean Startup approaches (ALS) or agile methods, the research and validation of Innovation Business Model (IBM) and

finally, the provisional character of the organization.

**Keywords: Startup; innovative business model; lean startup; agility; minimum viable product**

## **Introduction**

The heterogeneity and scarcity of academic studies on startups is partly explained by the lack of consensus on its conceptual framework. Within the startup literature, many authors have described the concept of the startup in different ways. The objective of the conceptual and semantic clarification of the notion of the startup is to allow the identification of samples during empirical studies in order not to confuse startups and traditional SMEs, especially technological or innovative ones. In the scientific works examined, we are currently in the presence of a conceptual framework of the startup where the English and French definitions cohabit. It is not always possible to confirm that the Anglophone definition is necessarily the preeminent. Thus, the conceptual and semantic framework must be unified and clarified.

Among English-speaking authors, the notion of the startup is subject to fairly significant change depending on the context of the study. But in general, this notion is linked to the process of research and validation of a business model (Ries, 2011). Moreover, these same authors do not consider a company that executes a valid business model to be a startup, regardless of the sector of activity.

In the francophone literature, the concept of a startup has been confused with traditional small technological or innovative companies. Francophone authors describe startups through certain descriptive criteria that have not been unanimously agreed upon among authors, such as: innovation, use of technology, size and age.

Contrary to French studies, many English studies tend to show that the startup is not exclusively linked to entrepreneurship nor can it be considered as a reduced model of a large company (Blank, 2015). The startup can be launched by a young entrepreneur, a state, a public administration or an association.

Another element that characterizes the scientific debates is the interest in the plurality of semantic names that have been attributed to the startup and that have complicated the unification of the conceptual framework. Among the semantic names that we have identified among English-speaking authors, we can cite: New ventures; new company; emerging organization; high-technology ventures; spin-off; academic spin-offs. While in French-speaking works we find: The young innovative company, the young company in technological innovation, the young high-tech company, the ICT entrepreneurship or the young shoot (Song, and Al., 2008).

The plurality of semantic frameworks has caused conceptual ambiguity, so it seems useful to analyze the perception of the startup concept by the authors of English and French works. Our analysis attempts to answer the following

research questions: How has the startup been defined in the literature? What are the different semantic names that have been given to the startup? And to what extent is this terminological diversity at the root of conceptual ambiguity?

To understand and analyze the significance of such research questions, a qualitative study was conducted to address the conceptual framework and the semantic framework of the startup. These two themes are related in that the diversification of semantic names has led to conceptual ambiguities. To examine these themes, we used lexical and thematic study assisted by Nvivo11 software.

### **Methodological Approach**

In our approach, we carried out a systematic documentary research, which consists of searching in electronic databases the published scientific articles dealing with the startup. The choice of our databases is justified by the validity and reliability of the information contained in these articles. To search for these scientific articles, the following keywords were used: New ventures; new company; emerging organization; high-technology ventures; spin-off; academic spin-off; university spin-offs; research-based spin-offs; high-tech firm; spin-off venturing; spin-off ventures; startup; software startups; startup company; startup stage; hardware startups; startup corporation; internal startup; external startup; pre-startup; the embryonic firm; the startup firm; the growth firm; the mature multiline firm; technology venture startup; high-tech startup; new technology-based firms; technology spin-offs.

Of the 400 sources found, the literature review revealed 247 definitions that were compiled into a single corpus. Then, using Nvivo 11 software, we performed a 4-step analysis:

- **Step 1:** Decontextualize our corpus to define the content by coding each definition by authors and year according to the first group of nodes;
- **Step 2:** recontextualize this corpus by performing a query on the most frequent words which are then grouped by Elementary Context Unit (ECU). This work was carried out on the basis of an analysis grid;
- **Step 3:** Analyze the concepts according to our research themes by using the contextual analysis method to situate these words in a literary movement in order to understand how authors studied and used these words;
- **Step 4:** Categorize the words generated according to the conceptual framework and the semantic framework

### **The notion of the startup according to French-speaking perspective**

The conceptual framework of the notion of a startup according to the French-speaking journals operates at two complementary levels: The first is that of the organizational form for which the startup is a young company. The second level concerns the characteristics that distinguish these startups from other traditional forms of business (descriptive approach).