

THE STARTUPPER PERSONA IN THE POLISH ECONOMIC PRACTICE – DEFINITION BASED ON OWN RESEARCH

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Purpose: Creating the persona of a startupper, a model that would most comprehensively describe the character of a person who decides to establish a business venture referred to as a startup in Polish economic reality.

Design/methodology/approach: The authors employed data from their own research to create the persona of a Polish startupper. In the research process, the authors adopted both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The primary quantitative tool was a survey questionnaire, and the qualitative tool was an interview. The research population consisted of three groups of subjects: Polish startups (N = 346), post-startup companies (N = 24), and startup investment experts (N = 19). The persona concept proposed by Alan Cooper was used to develop the persona of a startupper.

Findings: The persona of a Polish startupper was characterized using 11 categories divided into three areas: operational, aspirational, and experience-related. The operational area includes all the “hard” information defining a startupper. The aspirational area indicates the primary motivators that guide a Polish startupper in establishing and running a startup. The experience-related area characterizes the fundamental knowledge and skills regarding the creation, development, and management of a startup acquired in the process of founding and running a startup.

Research limitations/implications: Adequacy verification of the developed model of startupper persona based on researching other groups of respondents.

Practical implications: The study can provide a point of reference for those who intend to establish a startup business venture or want to verify the reasons for the success or failure of their existing startup ventures.

Originality/value: The article addresses the needs of “young” entrepreneurs who plan to build their businesses. It offers a holistic overview of success factors, competencies, and barriers to the creation and development of startups. The nature of startup ecosystems is different in each country. The developed startupper persona relates to Polish economic practice, which is undoubtedly an added value of the proposed model.

Keywords: innovativeness, startup, startup CEO, startupper persona, polish economic practice.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Startups in both science and the Polish economy are a relatively new phenomenon. Due to their growing market share and importance in social life, their role is becoming increasingly significant. Startups contribute to the dynamic growth of the economy and affect the structure of the market. Today, there is a growing dynamism in the economic sphere and numerous changes in the socio-economic reality. Consequently, market players are being forced to adapt to the changing environment by introducing innovations, both imitative and disruptive (Ousghir, Daoud, 2022). Innovation is nowadays a key determinant in the process of building a competitive advantage in the market (Guo et al., 2022). Startups, by their very definition, are entities characterized by a high degree of innovation and operating under conditions of extreme uncertainty (Jucá, Alves, 2022). Their activity is subjected to a high degree of risk, and their unique nature allows few of them to develop a stable business model and become mature enterprises (Haftor, Costa, 2022). This creates the basis for the assumption that startups are a response to changes in the environment – both in the economic and socio-cultural space.

According to modern research¹, intellectual capital is considered the foundation of startups. Intellectual capital consists of three elements: human capital, structural capital, and relational capital (Edvinsson, Malone, 1997). Intellectual capital served as the starting point for developing a startupper persona. The authors noted the need to characterize the individual who decides to establish, build, and manage a startup in Polish economic practice. The article attempts to answer the question of who is a contemporary Polish startupper. The characterization of the startupper included such elements as: the objectives and motives for founding and running a startup in Poland, the barriers a startupper has to face, the tools and techniques they use to build and manage a startup, and the industries they are most likely to choose as their area of activity.

The authors adopted a quantitative and qualitative approach to answer the posed research question. The study included three research populations: Polish startups, post-startup companies, and startup investment experts. The consequence of such formulated question and the adopted research methodology is a model of a persona, which represents the archetype of the startupper in Polish economic practice.

¹ Research conducted by the Startup Poland Foundation and research carried out within the framework of the doctoral dissertation of one of the authors, titled “Determinants of startups’ functioning in Polish economic practice”.

2. Method

The purpose of the research results presented in the article was to create the persona of a startupper, a model that would most comprehensively describe the character of a person who decides to establish a business venture referred to as a startup in Polish economic reality. The presented research is part of a broader study, the main objective of which was to identify and characterize the determinants of startups' functioning at each stage of their life cycle in Polish economic practice².

The authors employed data from their own research to create the persona of a Polish startupper. In the research process, the authors adopted both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The primary quantitative tool was a survey questionnaire, and the qualitative tool was an interview. The research population consisted of three groups of subjects: Polish startups (N = 346), post-startup companies (N = 24), and startup investment experts (N = 19). The persona concept proposed by Alan Cooper was used to develop the persona of a startupper.

In order to define the model of the Polish startupper, it was necessary:

- To characterize Polish startups.
- To characterize the Polish startup ecosystem.
- To identify the determinants relevant to the functioning of startups in Polish economic practice from the point of view of startups, investing entities, and companies that have emerged from the startups.
- To identify barriers relevant to the functioning of startups in Polish economic practice.
- To identify the competencies desirable in people who are originators/owners (acting as CEOs) of startups and in people who are members of startups.
- To identify factors influencing the decision to provide financial support to startups by external investors.

The enumerated activities constituted the specific objectives of the broader study, which made the realization of the main objective possible.

The research was conducted between 2019 and 2021. The methodology adopted for the study included both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In the first approach, the authors used a survey questionnaire consisting of four parts: an introduction containing instructions, a core part, a metric, and a glossary. The core part consisted of 13 questions, including two open, seven semi-open (conjunctive and disjunctive), and four closed questions. The second approach complemented quantitative research. For this purpose, the authors used Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI). The study was carried out using structured online interview questionnaires, on which responses were annotated by the researcher. In addition,

²The research was conducted by a research team led by Waldemar Jędrzejczyk. The main research stream concerns the issue of competencies, both currently desired and prospective, and in relation to sectors and types of organizations, occupational groups, and key positions in organizations. In the area of startups – the determinants of their success and the competencies of startups – the head researcher was Agnieszka Kulej.

leading questions and in-depth main questions were asked. The interview questionnaire had a structure analogous to that of a survey questionnaire, i.e., it consisted of four parts: an introduction containing instructions, a core part, a metric, and a glossary.

3. Characteristics of startups in the Polish economic space

The term “startup” originated in English, and its original meaning referred to a fledgling business, regardless of its operating form (Breshi et al., 2018). Over time, the term gradually narrowed to refer to ambitious, creative, and technological ventures (Skala, 2018).

To date, on the ground of Polish science, the most popular definition was created by A. Skala. According to this author, the fundamental attribute of a startup is hyperscalability, that is, the potential for rapid growth in multiple segments in multiple markets. Other elements characteristic of startups include (Skala, 2018):

- limited internal resources,
- uncertain or non-existent demand,
- the chance of a disruptive market situation,
- the ability to obtain funding at an advanced stage of development,
- high operational capacity of the team for testing business models,
- strong leadership.

Other attributes distinguishing startups from standard market players include originality, higher risk of failure, and the ability to grow and return on investment above average. The distinguishing characteristics of startups are unique products, services, or solutions that either are not yet on the market or are innovative improvements to existing offerings (Kowalewski, 2020; Grant, 2022).

In Poland, the definition of a startup, which functions primarily in business practice, was developed by the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP). According to this definition, a startup is a young enterprise that (Wojas et al., 2015):

- was created with the aim of developing new and innovative products or services,
- seeks a stable business model that provides a guarantee of growth,
- has developed a stable of organizational structure,
- is in the phase of development-oriented experimentation,
- is actively seeking new markets.

The Startup Poland Foundation defined a startup as “a venture that has the potential for rapid growth due to a technological advantage or a market niche that has not yet been discovered and developed” (Beauchamp et al., 2017).

Today, the most popular definitions of a startup in Poland and worldwide are those created by S. Blank and B. Dorf, as well as E. Ries. The first defines a startup as a temporary organization searching for a scalable, replicable, and profitable business model (Blank, Dorf, 2013). The second determines a startup as "a human institution designed to create a new product or service under conditions of extreme uncertainty (...) A startup is greater than the sum of its parts; it is an acutely human enterprise" (Ries, 2012).

The cited definitions represent only a minor fraction of how a startup is understood in science and business practice. The term has penetrated everyday language and, as a result of the reflective reconstruction of individual and collective experience, has undergone numerous modifications and transformations. In social life, the frequent misuse of the term is noticeable. According to the authors, in order to better understand what a startup is, it is necessary to explore it from the subjective aspect and ask the question of who is the individual who decides to create and develop a startup under certain socio-economic conditions.

For the purposes of the conducted research, the authors considered a startup a temporary organization with an innovative nature and a high degree of risk, operating under conditions of extreme uncertainty. The adopted perspective was that a startup consists of people striving to build a scalable, replicable, and profitable business model. It is an entity that has been in existence for no more than five years and has a legal personality registered in Poland, uses the legal personality of another entity registered in Poland, or is a natural person with Polish citizenship.

4. Startup market in Poland

The startup market in Poland and worldwide is an essential element of the economy. It features dynamic growth and volatility. According to S. Blank, the intensive development of the startup market in recent times is, firstly, combined with a decrease in expenditures on new product development, followed by the low cost of building a startup. Secondly, it correlates with easier access to external funding. Thirdly, classic management methods applicable to large companies do not work well with managing entities or projects defined as a startup. Due to the high dynamics of changes in the environment and the high risk of startup activity, this type of entrepreneurship has developed methods, techniques, and tools tailored to its needs (e.g., Lean Startup, Business Model Canvas, Customer Development). Fourthly, the increase in the importance of the Internet as a distribution channel for products and services, as well as the speed of customer absorption of new technologies, enabled a startup to become an enterprise with international reach in a short period of time (Blank, 2013). It means that the conditions under which modern startups are built and developed have undergone a favorable transformation.

Since 2015, the most extensive research on the startup market in Poland has been carried out by the Startup Poland Foundation. The eighth edition of the survey on the functioning of startups in Poland was conducted in 2022 and covered 2171 startups ($N = 2171$)³. The survey results indicate that the modern startup market is saturated with young entities operating for no longer than four years (85% of respondents). Among the respondents, 22% declared that they have been running for less than a year. Data relating to the age of Polish startupper show that almost half of the respondents are between 30 and 40 years old (44% of respondents). Slightly fewer, namely 33% of respondents, are in the 20-30 age range. However, an increase in the number of startup owners in the 40-50 age bracket was noted (from 13% in 2021 to 17% in 2022). The legal form of a startup business is most often a limited liability company (77% of respondents). Next, the startup owners choose a simple joint-stock company (7%), a joint-stock company (5%), or a sole proprietorship (5%). Among the respondents, 6% declared a lack of legal personality. More than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the startups participating in the survey employed 4 to 10 people (33% of respondents). Among the respondents, 19% employed from 1 to 3 employees, and 16% employed from 25 to 50 people. Another matter referred to the most startup-dense areas in Poland. The results of the study show that in terms of the number of established startups, in the first place is the Lower Silesia region (Wroclaw), in second place is the Mazovia region (Warsaw), and in third place is the Lesser Poland region (Krakow). Currently, Polish startups are primarily active in such sectors as: AI and machine learning (21%), e-commerce (14%), and analytics-research tools and business intelligence (13%). Respondents declared that their business philosophy is mainly based on models: B2B enterprise (38%), B2B small business (26%), and Marketplace (13%) (Dziewit, 2022).

The startup market in Poland, despite being a relatively young market, shows great potential for developing an innovation-based economy. Startups primarily create new jobs, especially for specialists of narrow specialization. Attention is also drawn to the fact that startups attract foreign investment capital and shape new investors and executives.

5. The persona of a Polish startupper

The creator of the tool that uses persona in the design process (UX Design) is Alan Cooper (2004), who described the process of creating a persona in a book titled "The Inmates Are Running The Asylum. Why High Tech Products Drive Us Crazy and How to Restore the Sanity". A persona is a tool used in the design process. It has the construction of a declarative description of a person who represents the target group. Its purpose is to identify and understand the user and highlight their key characteristics as an audience for whom a product, service, or solution is created (Holzinger et al., 2022; Jansen et al., 2022).

³ The closing of the survey and download of the survey report was on August 31, 2022.

The persona of a Polish startupper was characterized using 11 categories divided into three areas: operational, aspirational, and experience-related. The operational area includes all the “hard” information defining a startupper. The aspirational area indicates the primary motivators that guide a Polish startupper in establishing and running a startup. The experience-related area characterizes the fundamental knowledge and skills regarding the creation, development, and management of a startup acquired in the process of founding and running a startup. The developed model of a Polish startupper is presented in Figure 1.

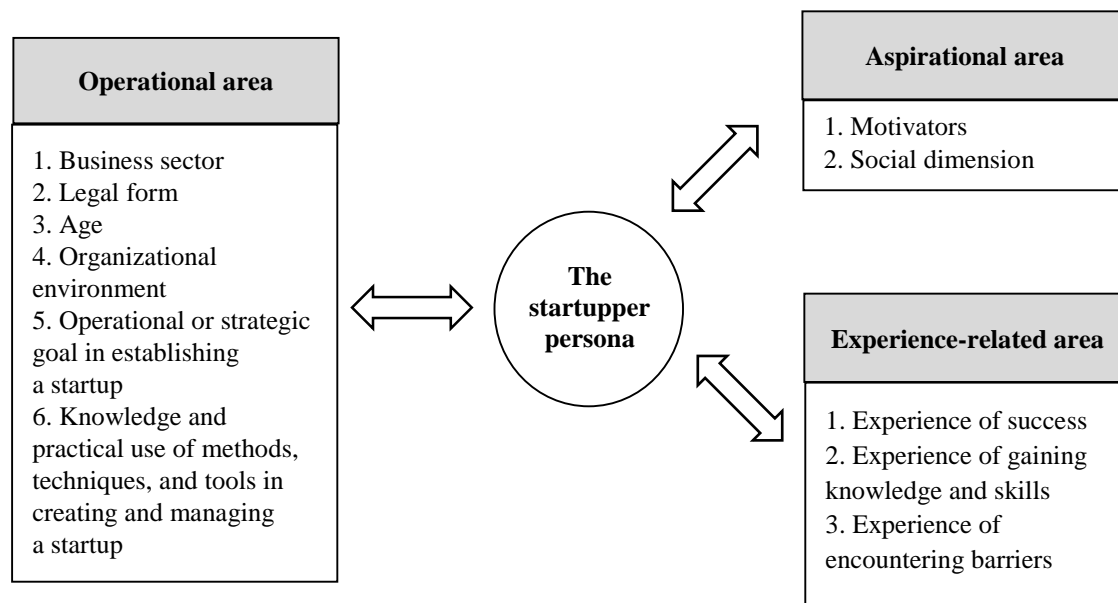


Figure 1. The model of a Polish startupper.

Source: own elaboration.

In the operational area, there are six categories of a startupper persona:

1. Business sector – a person running a startup in Polish economic practice most often chooses a sector related to the latest technologies/IT/ITC, i.e., Internet Business, Medical and Health, Data, Information and Learning, and Business Processes and Finances.
2. Legal form – the most popular legal form adopted by a Polish startupper is a limited liability company.
3. Age – a Polish startupper is a person operating in the field of innovation and high-risk projects for approximately five years. Then they transform into a mature entrepreneur or fail.
4. Organizational environment – such an individual functions in an uncomplicated, flexible, flattened, and informal organizational structure, the main feature of which is interdisciplinarity and informal management of human resources. The emphasis in the area of tasks and processes is based on the individual’s qualities, talents, and competencies, providing opportunities for their development and maximum use in various fields. The individual gives themselves and others permission to experiment, make mistakes, and learn from the conclusions drawn from them.

5. Operational or strategic goal in establishing a startup – among the primary objectives of a Polish startupper deciding to create a startup are building a thriving business, a recognizable brand, and a stable and profitable business model. These objectives are combined with financial goals, which are accompanied by cooperation with an external entity, and targets related to the individual's ambitions, i.e., the introduction of new and innovative solutions or technologies.
6. Knowledge and practical use of methods, techniques, and tools in creating and managing a startup – a Polish startupper is familiar with and most often uses in building a startup such approaches and methods as: Business Model Canvas, Lean Startup, Design Thinking, Customer Development, and Lean Canvas. In order to effectively manage a startup, such an individual most often uses project management methodologies (mainly Agile and Scrum project management) or the concept of management by objectives and Six Sigma.

In the aspirational area, there are two categories of a startupper persona:

1. Motivators – the primary motivators that characterize the Polish startupper are: the desire to realize their business idea, the need to solve a problem perceived in the market, and the desire for independence in financial and nonfinancial aspects, and thus taking responsibility for their own decisions, as well as the need to be the creator of their own life. In addition, such a person is motivated by having a goal in life and realizing their ambitions and dreams related to achieving professional success. Such an individual has passions, shows a desire to develop, and is ambitious.
2. Social dimension – a startupper persona is characterized by multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity. Such a person is highly committed, intrinsically motivated, and possesses a high degree of self-discipline. They are consistent and professional in their actions. They are characterized by perseverance in pursuit of their goal, which allows them to survive difficult moments in business practice in case of such high-risk ventures. They have highly developed competencies in sales techniques, creating attractive visions, and setting priorities.

In the experience-related area, there are three categories of a startupper persona:

1. Experience of success – an individual who has been successful in running a startup in Polish economic practice has built a stable business model and is profiting from it. That person owns patents, their business is profitable, and they maintain a steady, high level of sales. That person has introduced an innovation to the market, attracted an investor, and obtained a return on investment. They are a leader in the industry in which they operate. Such an individual possesses a certain number of research and development projects, has met set targets, and entered new markets. They have successfully expanded into foreign markets.

2. Experience of gaining knowledge and skills – a startupper persona is a person who, while running a startup, acquires such skills as: presenting an idea, building a business model, raising financial and nonfinancial funds, improving sales techniques, establishing cooperation (cooperation with an investor, cooperation with a client), partnership approach to business, managing a company, managing projects, learning methods and techniques of managing and motivating people, managing finances, managing time, working under pressure, bearing the consequences of their own decisions, setting priorities, setting goals and achieving them, and rejecting taking for granted the primarily adopted assumptions. Such an individual acquires such qualities as: perseverance, patience, self-discipline, treating failure as an experience, entrepreneurship, creativity, creative problem solving, relationality, curiosity about the world and other people, distance to themselves and the business world, distance to the environment, active listening to the customer, empathy, humility, openness to change, resistance to stress, responsibility, and experimenting.
3. Experience of encountering barriers – a startupper operating in Polish economic practice is a person who faces financial and tax obstacles and barriers in their everyday activities. It requires them to possess enough financial capital to run their business (especially in the initial phases), as well as knowledge of tax regulations and the ability to obtain external funding. Other barriers faced by a Polish startupper are legal regulations and extensive bureaucracy. Such a person is heavily obliged to know the laws and procedures, without which they are unable to develop their business. Socio-cultural barriers relate primarily to Polish society's high level of distrust in innovation, low awareness of startup culture and who a startupper is, and what a startup is. As a result, such an individual often has to build their role as a startupper on their own, which is associated with a sense of loneliness and misunderstanding in the business or scientific community.

By analyzing the constructed persona of a startupper operating in Polish economic practice, it can be concluded that this is a person whose business is located predominantly in the technology sector. Such a person has clearly defined objectives, which were set by them when deciding to establish and run a startup. They are highly motivated, know their motivations, and can formulate them clearly. They are familiar with the most popular methods, techniques, and tools used in the startup environment for building, developing, and managing a startup. Such a person is multidisciplinary, quick to adapt to change, committed, and intrinsically motivated. However, such an individual, due to the nature of their business, operating mode, and the risks associated with their decisions, is often misunderstood by those around them and lonely in their actions.

6. Conclusions

The article presents the original model of a startupper persona operating in Polish economic practice. According to the authors, the essence of any startup is an individual who attempts to bring innovation to the market. It is evident both from the numerous definitions of a startup that have been developed so far and from the research conducted by the authors of this article which concerned the determinants of startups' functioning in Polish economic practice.

The startupper persona enables a better understanding of what a startup is and can serve as an introduction to a discourse on changes in various areas of socioeconomic and political reality in terms of startup activity. A startupper is not an ordinary entrepreneur. It is an individual who tries to change the status quo by improving it, which involves a high risk of failure. Such a person must possess specific, properly developed competencies and find a balance in each of the three mentioned areas, i.e., operational, aspirational, and experience-related. Understanding who a startupper is and what they need to successfully develop a startup provides opportunities in terms of creating new educational programs, new methods and techniques of management and making changes in terms of pro-innovation policies, and, above all, minimizing the barriers that such an individual faces in day-to-day operations.

The proposed model can provide a point of reference for those who intend to establish a startup business venture or want to verify the reasons for the success or failure of their existing startup ventures.

The considerations presented in the article do not exhaust the issue. It is recommended to verify the adequacy of the developed model of the startupper persona based on researching other groups of respondents, which can be regarded as a limitation of the presented study.

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