Information and Communication Technologies and Service Design in Cuba: a case study on the Weekly Package

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Abstract

In Cuba, due to the limitations of Internet access, the population created innovative solutions to obtain information available on the networks, called the Weekly Package (PS), a compendium of information that integrates different digital content, extracted from the Internet and marketed on hard drives and flash menories. The sale of the PS became a business and generated competition among sellers, configuring itself as service design organized spontaneously, arising from an emergency of the need for information consumption, assimilated by the black market. This work seeks to understand the flow of PS circulation by linking qualitative and quantitative analysis, to identify the main actors, as well as the informational preferences of the users, in the city of Santa Clara, in Cuba. Faced with the restriction of access to information in the country, the PS presents itself as a resource with great acceptance and usability among Cubans.

Keywords: Cuban. Qualitative and Quantitative Research. Digital Content Production. Information and Communication Technologies. Service design.

Introduction

In Cuba the access to the Internet is restricted due to limited connectivity, high prices and the fact that it is provided by the only existent telecommunication company, a state[1] owned company, Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba Sociedad Anónima, ETECSA (MINCOM, 2018). In general, the population has no connection at home, and much less, the mobility of access via smartphones. Nowadays the price of one hour access to the Internet is, approximately, 4,3 % of the average national salary, which is, $ 584.00 pesos cubanos (23 CUC), (ETECSA, [S.d.]; MINISTERIO DE JUSTICIA, 2005), the equivalent of 23.00 USD, according to the Banco Central de Cuba (2016) and the Banco Metropolitano de Cuba (2016), that means, approximately, 24 hours of Internet connection, if the whole average national salary received is spent in consuming it. Besides, there are specific areas in the towns around Cuba (the ones where it has been gradually improved) in which it is possible to connect through the local wi-fi signal, though the internet speed is slow.

Cuba has been facing political and socio-economic difficulties since 1959. With the implementation of socialism, the country has found itself in the middle of historical conflicts, especially with the United States, suffering from several embargoes. A situation which limits the technological development and the access to the means of communication, like the Internet, reducing the possibilities to exchange information with the world. Thus, it undermines the perception the world has about the island and all that is left to the population of Cuba is information mediated by the national newspapers and five educational television channels which include entertainment programs.

As a result of the difficulties in accessing the information available on the Internet, the people from Cuba have created alternatives to access it, such as the use of flash memories and hard disks as a way to obtain and share. The most used method in Cuba today is called "Weekly Package" (WP), a set of digital data, sold weekly to the people in flash memories and hard disks.

According to Concepción, (2016a – Our translation), the weekly package "comes up as an alternative to the unfavorable circumstances of two means of communication: television and Internet" and represents "a compendium of materials which encompasses all kinds of proposals, from a great variety of television and cinematic genres to computer applications" (CONCEPCIÓN, 2016b - Our translation).

The WP, as the name indicates, is distributed weekly. The content does not vary much from week to week. They try to continue with the audiovisual contents published in the previous week, as well as software and antivirus updates. The amount of information included in this set reaches up to the capacity of one terabyte.

The information offered in the package is the result of the work carried out by a team called Matriz del Paquete Semanal (Weekly Package Matrix), with access to the Internet

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1   In Cuba all the companies are public, that is, belong to the government (CONSTITUCIÓN DE LA REPÚBLICA DE CUBA, 1976).

and several technological equipment that allow them to download the information. They are also a result of the copies made from videos through the television[2] dish satellites, as well as independent productions that find a market in the weekly package. These weekly packages and their way of circulating are the object of the present article, developed from the perspective of the service design[3], based on the investigation conducted at the Consejo Popular "Condado Norte", located in the municipality of Santa Clara, capital city of the province of Villa Clara, Cuba, in the central part of the country. The Consejo Popular is the organ which is the most directly connected to the citizens and labor centers; it operates in a certain territory and supports the organs of the municipal, provincial and national Poder Popular (CONSEJO POPULAR, [S.d.]).

Based on the context presented, this article aims at analyzing the distribution channels and the preferences in digital contents of the consumers of the weekly packages in the city of Santa Clara, through an investigation of mixed methods, involving qualitative and quantitative analysis and the basic methodology of service design, in order to understand the functioning of this national phenomenon, in Cuba.

Methodological Procedures

To carry out this research, a study relating qualitative and quantitative research in different stages of the process was prepared, aiming at a case study that produces a compilation of data through participating observation, in-depth interviews and application of questionnaires. To apply these instruments, as well as to perform the analysis and discussion of the results, we followed the methodological way proposed by Maranhão (2017), presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Methodological steps followed in the research

QUALITATIVE QUANTITATIVE QUALITATIVE

Source: Modified from (MARANHÃO, 2017)

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2   Information obtained from an interview carried out with one of the creators of the weekly package.
3   According to Pinheiro (2015) the service design "mixes the humanistic perspective of design with the logic oriented to service, with the aim of providing an emotional pattern centered in the human being that leads them into creating new services or improving existing ones. Pinheiro (2015) states that applying service design should be neither a specialized practice nor an academic discipline, but it should be recognized as a skill, allied with competence and attitude, which can be learned and applied to different occupations, objectives and areas of knowledge".

The research was conceived in three phases, as shown in Figure 1, the first phase comprises the qualitative methodological approach and includes the definition of the case study, the arrangements and implementation of the instruments of the data compilation and the application of three of the several tools from service design as it will be presented further on. The second phase consisted of a quantitative methodological approach involving the distribution and statistical analysis of the questionnaires. The last phase consisted of the qualitative analysis of the results. These phases indicate the process of conception and execution of the research, which will be detailed in the following items.

Selecting the sample

In the first phase, through participating observation, the public was targeted and mapped, in order to select the population from the city of Santa Clara which would be studied. As the research focus, among the 19 Consejos Populares in Santa Clara, we chose the Consejo Popular "Condado Norte", because it is an area, popularly known as the most commercial in the city, involving both licit and illicit businesses. Also, through the observation and surveying the community, it was possible to detect five people that sold WPs. They were interviewed in a combination of in-depth and in context interviews, so that we could identify the actors who were involved in the production and sale of the weekly package. From the interviews of the sellers we could identify three *paqueteros*[4]. In addition, in this phase, we found out that the creators of the WP live in La Habana, capital of the country. The methods of compilating information and the service design tools were applied to a selected sample elected for convenience due to the difficulty in accessing the whole universe of costumers who consume the products offered in the WP.

The sample is composed of: two creators of the weekly package, three *paqueteros* and five sellers, adding to the context of the research 50 costumer-users of the weekly package. These costumer-users were selected considering ten consumer-users for each one of the sellers interviewed, as shown Figure 2.

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4   They are responsible for modifying and organizing the WP information in each town, to be later sent and sold to users.

Figure 2 – Sample of the case study
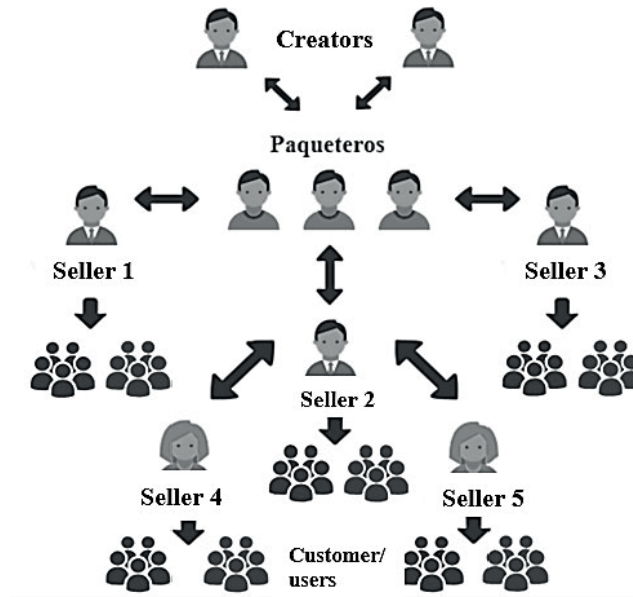
Source: Own formulation, jun. 2018

All the questions for the data compilation were formulated according to the methodology of basic process of service design exhibited in "*This is service design thinking*" (STICKDORN; SCHNEIDER, 2011).This methodology is composed of four stages: exploration, creation, reflection and implementation, which permeate many phases of the research, since each stage proposes aspects to be measured, starting from those where the questions for the instruments were conceived up to the data compilation.

Following Stickdorn y Schneider (2011), the methodology of basic process of service design presents itself as a toolbox. For the present research, three tools of the basic process of service design were used, corresponding to the stage of exploration, the tools used were the map of stakeholders and the contextual interviews, and to the stages of creation and reflection the co-creation.

The map of stakeholders is a visual representation of the public of a certain service. In order to create one you need to make a complete list of the needs of the stakeholders and also carry out interviews. It is important that the interests and motivations of each group are revealed in this process, and these should also be incorporated to the map.Once the list is complete you should focus on how these groups interrelate and interact among themselves (STICKDORN; SCHNEIDER, 2011).

An useful tool for creating a stakeholder map would be a contextual interview which, according to Stickdorn e Schneider (2014), is developed and conducted in the context where the service is produced. This is an ethnographic technique that permits the observation of

behaviors according to the interest of the interviewers, while the co-creation can be used in combination with other tools of the service design process. The co-creation session aims at exploring possible paths and collecting an ample variety of perspectives within the service design process.

So the map of stakeholders was used as a mean of identification of all the actors involved in the weekly package, and the contextual interviews, to help the interviewee remember specific details of what is being researched. At the same time the principles of the co-creation were used to interpret the composition of the CDs of the PS, and the processes of delivering the service of buying and selling.

In the second phase, the research instruments were applied to the 50 customer-users of the selected sample. The forms used in the survey had 12 questions referring to the access and the use of the weekly package of digital content. Three of the questions in the questionnaire (questions 1, 11 and 12) offered the possibility of an open response. This research method was applied between January 16th and January 26th, 2017. Another interesting fact is that the surveys were anonymous, so that the respondents felt free to write openly.

The analyses of the questions were quantitative and univariate, from a data base that made it possible to visualize the answers given and through the production of graphics and tables, with the quantitative results of the variables from the questionnaire. After the quantitative analysis, descriptive analyses of the results were carried out. The data base and the descriptive analyses were done with Microsoft Excel 2013.

Finally, in the third and last phase of the research, the results obtained were evaluated in a descriptive manner. To do so, three steps were followed: reduction of the information, arranging and transformation of the information and interpreting the information (SAMPIERI; COLLADO; LUCIO, 2014). We tried to shorten the quantity of information resulting from the compilation of information to facilitate the comprehensive and relevant analysis, including the separation, classification and synthesis of all the information. Hence the data was organized so that the processing was viable.

Discussion and Result analysis

The participating observation permitted identifying who the sellers of the weekly package and of the digital contents were. It is possible to affirm that there is a seller in every three blocks, known popularly as memory-filler, in Spanish, *llenadores de memorias.* These sellers work for themselves, as a private business, and there is no geographic standard for their location. There is neither a defined profile since some of them, besides the business with the packages, also have a working connection with the government, while others dedicate themselves solely to selling the packages. We could also detect who the customer-users of each seller are, determining that the clients choose their providers for the quality of the service and not for the proximity. Not all the WP users are actual clients, that is, most WP

users buy the contents, but there is a minority that obtains the information through the interaction with friends and neighbors, generating a social network in their community. We could also detect, from the interviews, that the distributors of the WP move around using mostly public transportation only occasionally opting for private transport, that is, the distributor travels to the provinces by interprovincial buses.

It is possible to state that the main cultural characteristics of the selected sample show them as sociable people who consider their neighbors as family. Being part of the most commercial community in the city where a lot of business is carried out albeit less developed than other neighborhoods. The Condado is an ample area of popular culture, with a place for carnaval rehearsals and two dance groups that every year represent the community in contests during carnaval. The most practiced religion is the "*Santería*", originated in the African culture and maintained by tradition. The language spoken by the local population is Spanish, the national language, but the *condadenses* have a particular way of speaking which can be difficult to be understood by those who do not belong to the community.

Likewise, five WP sellers were chosen, also through observation. These sellers were interviewed with the use of the method of in-depth interview. As a result, it was possible to know other actors involved in the weekly package, as described bellow:

1. Creators of the Weekly Package: people who create the compilation of the information that are part of the weekly package, download the digital contents and distribute the packages throughout the provinces.
2. Distributors 1: are the members of the matrix who distribute the packages in Havana.
3. Distributors 2: distribute the WP to all the provinces of Cuba.
4. Recipient: receives the WP when it arrives in the province and take it to the *paqueteros*. In this research we considered three *paqueteros* in the city of Santa Clara.
5. *Paqueteros*: modify the weekly package according to the identitary elements of the community and sell to the vendors.
6. Sellers (*llenadores de memorias*): place themselves at the communities and sell to the customer/users either the whole package or separate digital contents.
7. Customer/users: people who consume the information from the WP.

Identifying the main actors of the weekly package allowed the understanding of the role of each actor involved in the process, as well as the flow rate for the case study in the city considered in this research. The flow rate helped understand the sales network of the WP and the digital contents, since, due to the fact that it is a commercial network the members of the chain act as clients and providers simultaneously. Thus, the creators, being the first in the commercial network, act solely as providers. On the other hand, the receivers, *paqueteros* and sellers act not only as providers but also as clients. In Figure 3, bellow, the flow rate of the weekly package can be seen.

Figure 3 – Flow rate of the Weekly Package
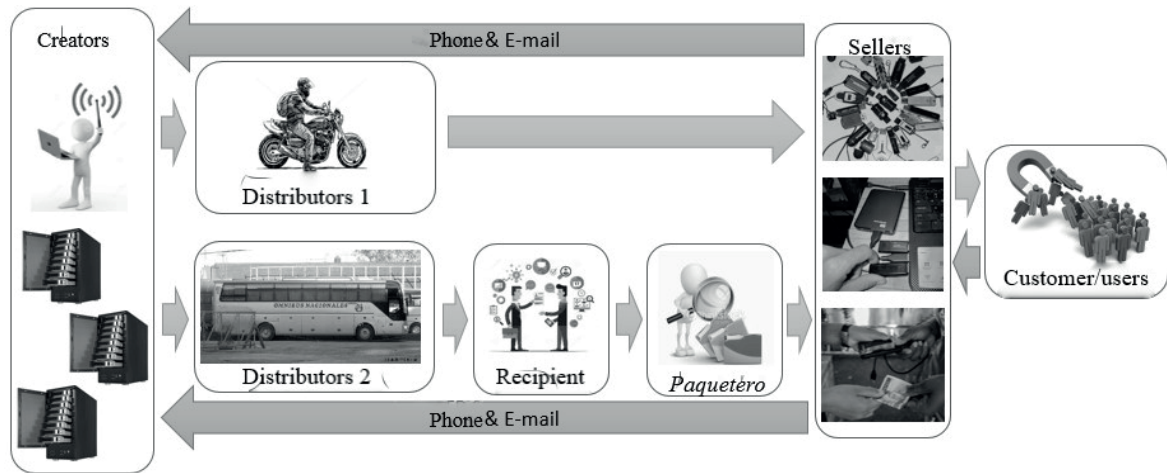
Source: Own formulation, jun. 2018.

In the flow rate of the weekly package there are lines in two opposing directions, the blue channel is thedistribution route of the WP, from the creators to the customer/users. The green arrows indicate the information feedback, according to the requests of the customer/users. The feedback can occur through different communication channels, through person to person communication, by phone or e-mail. As the first element, we have the creators who deliver the weekly package to two kinds of distributors, distributor 1 (motorcyclist) who distributes the WP directly to the sellers in Havana (Cuba) who then offer it to their customers. While the distributor 2, takes the package to the provinces, where they meet with the receivers who deliver it to the *paqueteros*, (three in the case of Santa Clara) until it gets to its final destination: customers and users.

By mapping the actors of the business venture, all the interest groups and stakeholders involved in the process of conception and trading were identified as direct participants: i) creators, ii) distributors, iii) receivers and iv) the so-called *paquetero*s. As indirect actors in the production of the WP, we identified: i) ICTs, ii) community and society, iii) government agencies, iv) political institutions and v) public companies. In this research all information was analyzed in a qualitative way.Figure 4 illustrates the map of stakeholders.

Figure 4 – Map of Stakeholders

Source: Own formulation, jun. 2018.

The map of stakeholders visually represents the interest groups. It describes three levels: the weekly package, the direct agents and the indirect agents. Both parts, the direct and the indirect, interact between them throughout the production, flow and consumption system of this alternative media. So, with the identification of the interest groups and considering the cultural characteristics of the selected sample the results of the questionnaires were interpreted and the quantitative univaried analysis was carried out. The first question aimed at learning about the need of use of the weekly package by the population of Cuba. Graphic 1 shows the behavior of the variable need of use.

Graphic 1 – Is the weekly package necessary for the population of Cuba?
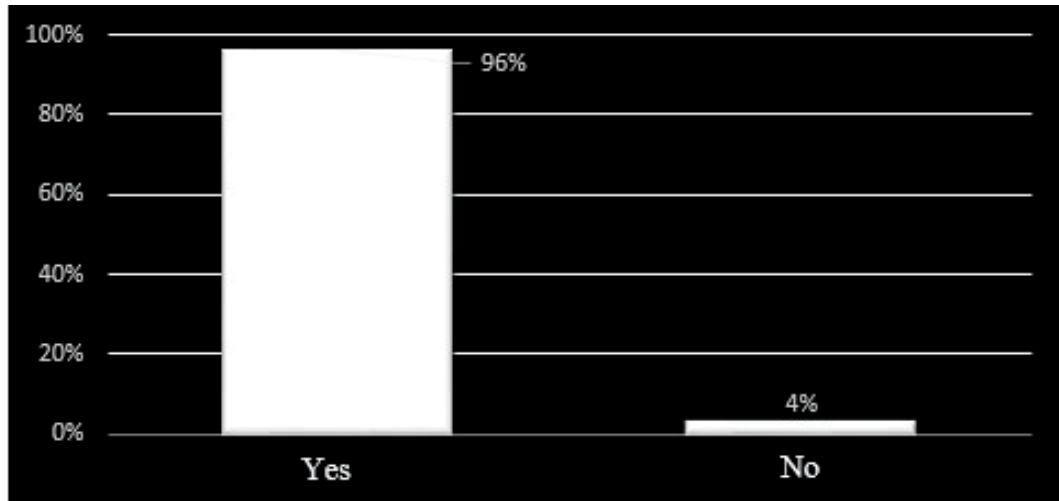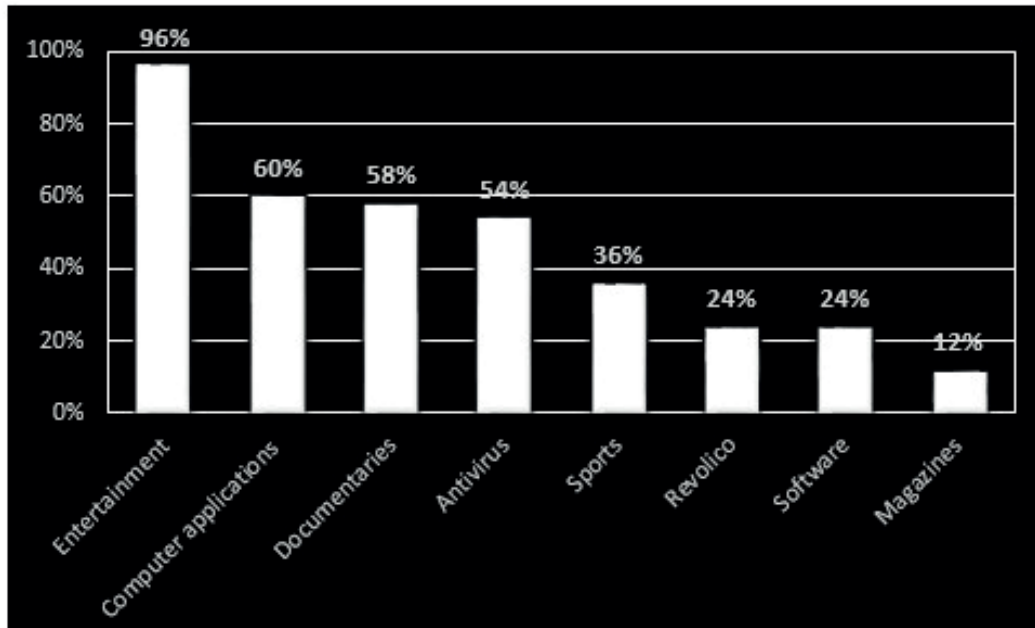

Source: Own formulation, jun. 2018.

Almost all of the interviewees considered the weekly package necessary for the population of Cuba. Only two respondents dissented of such remark, which is the equivalent of 4% of the sample. On the other hand, the 48 people who considered it important argued that they needed the package because it is the easiest way to acquire information found on the Internet. This information permits defining that the WP occupies a very important spot in the daily life of Cubans.

In order to identify the consumers' choices of information, one question was asked about their preferences of consumption of the WP, which allowed the interviewees to select more than one option, considering some of the digital contents included in the package, the options were: 1) entertainment; 2) computer applications; 3) documentaries; 4) antivirus; 5) sports; 6) *revolico*[5]*;* 7) *software;* 8) magazines.

Graphic 2 shows the pattern of answers obtained. Demonstrating that, almost all the respondents (96%) stated that entertainment is one of the main information of the package and the highest in preference. The computer applications were chosen by 60%, the documentaries, 58% and the antivirus, 54% being the one of the highest in preference.

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5   It is an advertisement site used for sales, business promotions, house exchanging etc.

Graphic 2 – Preferences of digital contents

Source: Own formulation, jun. 2018.

Due to the high percentage of users who prefer entertainment, 48 out of 50 respondents prefer the audiovisual content such as soap operas, TV shows, movies and reality shows. A question to find outthe main way to obtain information about the digital content of the WP was included in the questionnaire and its result is shown bellow, according to Graphic 3.

Graphic 3 – How to obtain the digital contents
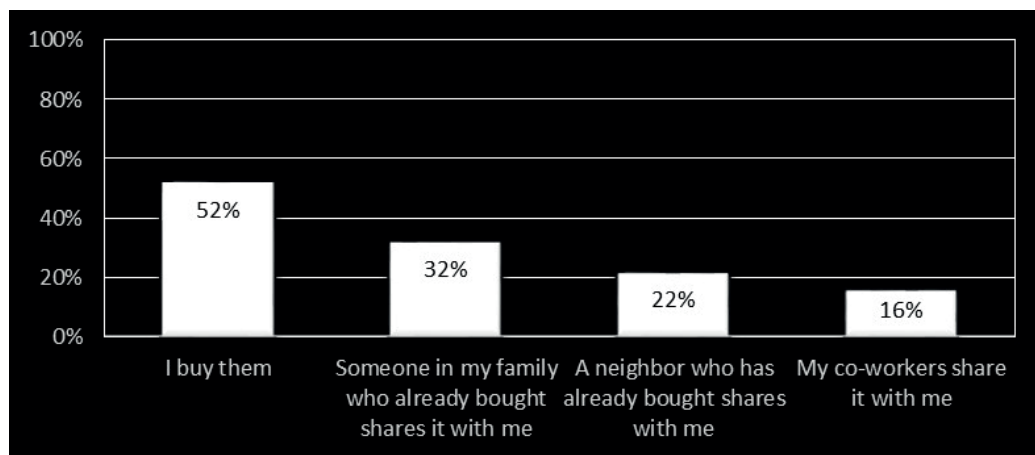
Source: Own formulation, jun. 2018.

It could be verified that 52% of the respondents acquire the information they need by means of purchase. However, 70% receive them through sharing, from this percentage, 32% obtain the information from some family member who bought it, 22% from a neighbor who bought it and 16% said they got it from coworkers.We could deduce that this sharing of digital contents between consumers of the WP generates interaction and establishes a social network. The users were also asked about the quantity of time they spend consuming the information from the WP, and Graphic 4 reflects their answers.

Graphic 4 – Time of use of the WP
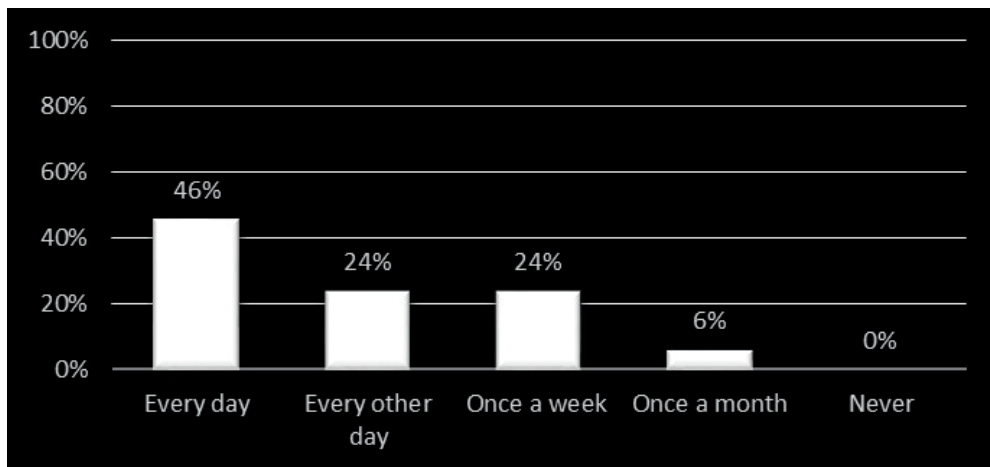
Source: Own formulation, jun. 2018.

As indicated in Graphic 4, all the respondents state that they use the digital contents at least once a month. From the total, 46% say they use the WP every day, 24% access every other day, another 24% only once a week and the remaining 6% only once a month. Therefore, most interviewees access at least once a week, representing 94% of the selected sample. The high percentage of access of the WP shows that the consumption of the digital content is done regularly. The analysis of the preferences between the audiovisuals offered by the national television and the WP is shown in Graphic 5.

Graphic 5 – Preferences of audiovisuals between television and WP
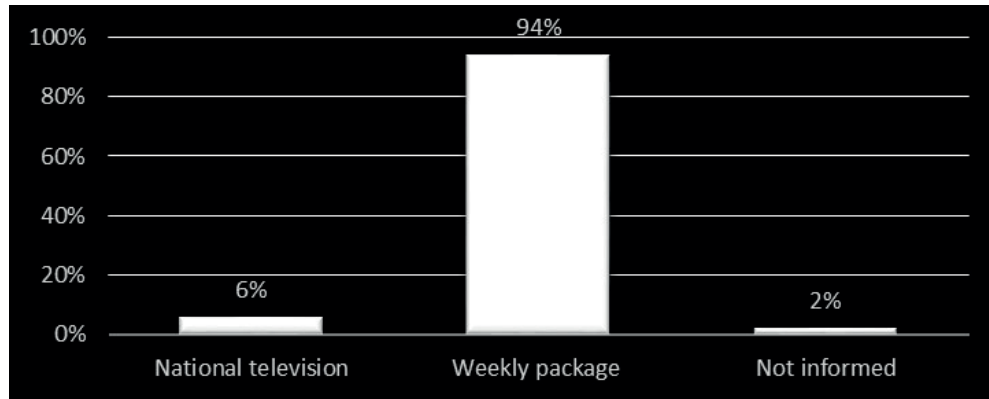
Source: Own formulation, jun. 2018.

In terms of preference, the programs offered in the weekly package have an ample advantage over the programs offered by the national television, since 94% of the interviewees said that they preferred the contents of the package and only 6% opted for the national television. The offering and the quality of the services of audiovisual programming of the national television do not meet the expectations of the population and therefore people seek in the package what they cannot obtain through official channels. Regarding the services provided, it was observed that only 2% of the respondents said they were not satisfied. In contrast, 80% state that they are satisfied with the attention from the sellers, as presented in Graphic 6.

**Graphic 6** – Satisfaction with the service provided
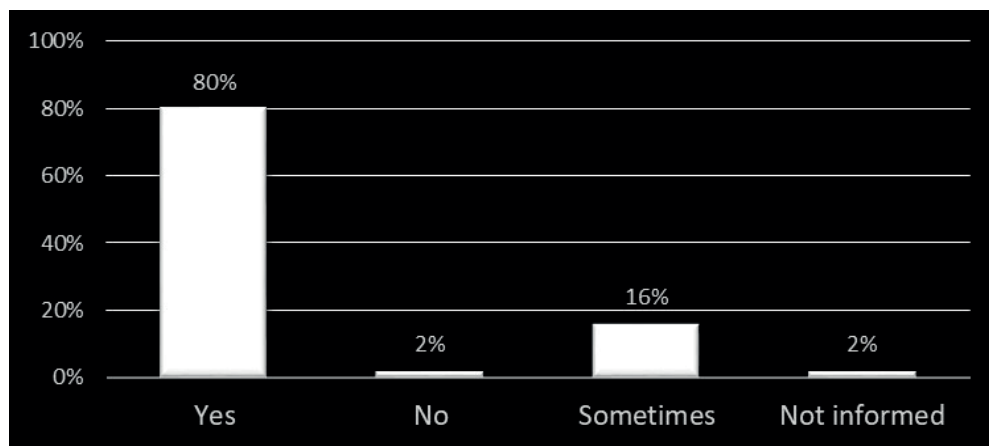
Source: Own formulation, jun. 2018.

According to the data collected, the sellers of the WP make use of service design strategies to gain and preserve clients. In relation to the understanding of how the selling process of the package works, an inquiry was made about the selection of providers of the WP and the choice of the users, concomitantly, we tried to observe the characteristics of the service rendered by the sellers. In this way, positive and negative elements were combined, specified in nine alternatives to be selected, they are: 1) Bad manners in greetings; 2) friendly attitude and attention; 3) Do not sell me the information I want; 4) Promptness of service; 5) Little knowledge about the information I am buying; 6) Suggesting the information that may interest me ; 7) Ill-treatment in interpersonal relation; 8) Mistake in returning the flash memory; 9) Delay when selling me the information.

In addition to these expressions of service, the interviewees had the possibility to suggest others that are not presented among them. Graphic 7 indicates de results of this question.

Graphic 7 – Characteristics of the service
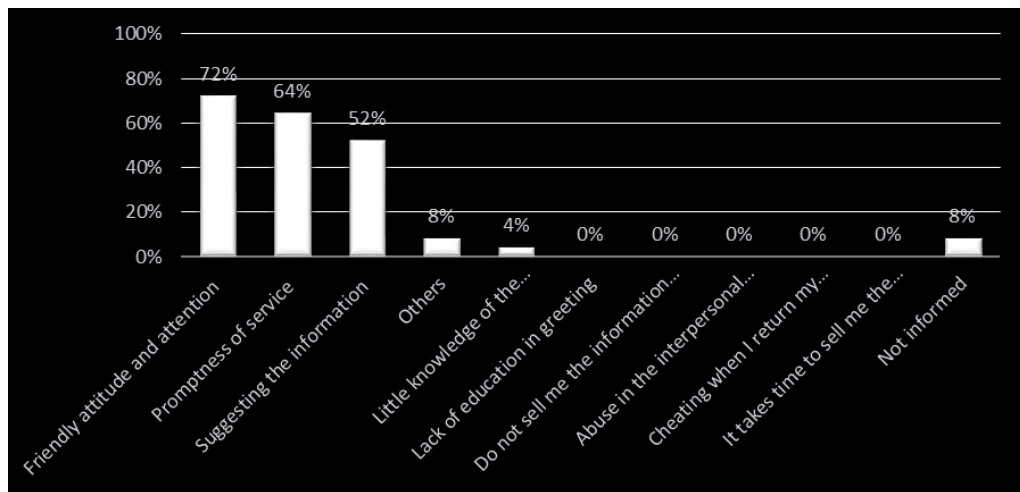
Source: Own formulation, jun. 2018.

Three options stood out among the characteristics of the weekly package service providing: friendly attitude and attention (72%), promptness of service (64%) and suggesting the information that may generate interest (52%). The numbers did not add up to 100% because it was possible for the interviewee to indicate more than one characteristic. We observe that of the nine variables given, three were positive and the others, negative. However, the highest percentages were found in the favorable aspects of the service. Therefore, and taking into account the answers to the previous questions, we can state that the sellers of the WP worry about ensuring that their clients have a pleasant and satisfactory experience when interacting with the service. In relation to the cost-benefit of the WP information, the respondents expressed the following opinions as presented in Graphic 8.

Graphic 8 – Cost-benefit ratio
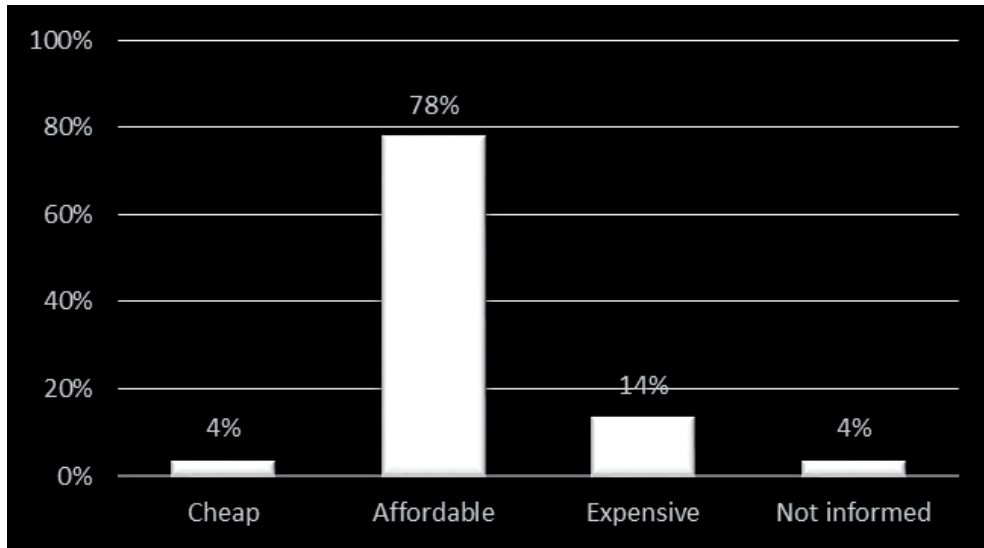
Source: Own formulation, jun. 2018.

We can observe that 78% of the respondents consider the selling prices affordable, taking into account the cost-benefit, 14% consider it expensive, 4% consider it cheap and 4%, that is, two people, preferred not to answer the question.The answers received allow us to define that the customer/users of the WP consider the price they pay for the information they need fair, which explains the fact that they seek such contents in the package and not accessing the Internet. Lastly, considering the holistic character of the service established between WP sellers as providers and the customer-users, we looked into the question of the users demanding information from their providers. Graphic 9 presents the results of such question.

Graphic 9 – Demand of information
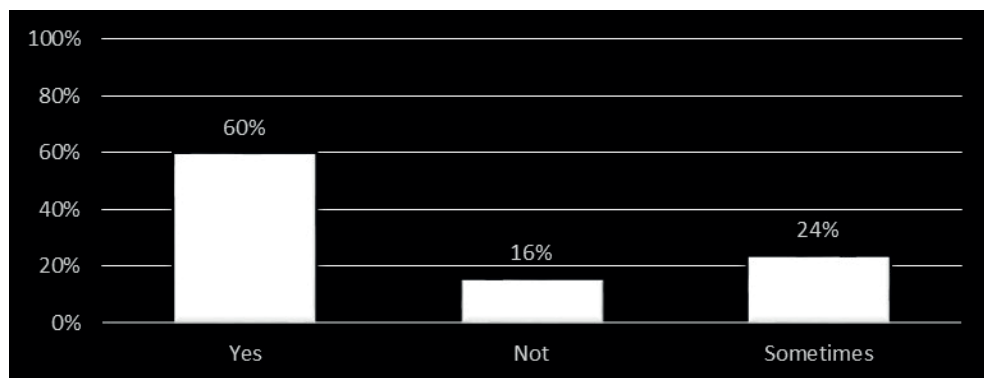
Source: Own formulation, jun. 2018.

We can infer that 84% of the respondents say that they ask their providers for information when they cannot find it in the weekly package. This data reveal that 60% of the users ask for the information they want, 24 % say they only do that eventually and 16% affirm they ask for no information. Thus, the service generated by the selling of the WP has a holistic way, composed by the informational needs and preferences of the customers.

Conclusion

The use of the ICTs represents a considerable change in the society, a change in education, in the interpersonal relationships and the way of disseminating and generating knowledge. Technological development is priority in communication nowadays and the limitation of access represents an important difference between developed and developing countries.

The limitation of Internet access in Cuba drove the Cuban society to seek ways and solutions for their information and communication needs, leading to the emergence of alternative technological ways and with them, new businesses. Besides having pushed entrepreneurship, the startups and people with no background in design apply intuitively tools attributed to service design in the creation, trading and selling of this digital product, the WP. The distribution and circulation of this weekly package in Cuba has created space for the interaction and exchange of information between people, besides providing the local society a new way to make a living. This situation allowed the occurrence of a change in culture, confronting tradition and altering lifestyles, customs, likes, interests, language among others.

It is possible to state that the existing gaps in the official programming of the Cuban television impose the emergence of other forms of acquiring information. The lack of Internet access also causes gaps in various ways for the people in this study, converting the WP into a strong competitor of the telecommunication company, which is responsible for the functioning of the Internet in the country. The WP as a business and service generator employs the tools of service design, since it is a product focused on the user and that takes into consideration the way how they are going to consume or interact with the information, besides seeking the satisfaction of their needs and their wishes, solving the informational need in an efficient and effective way.

The WP permits the user to access and pass on the information in a relatively easy way, establishing exchanges between neighbors, friends and coworkers or schoolmates, or even employing one of the ways here presented to obtain it. To determine the digital contents of the weekly package, the creators use the co-creation and the service design as tools, in the conversion of a popular business, as a way to think about the best offer of service and the guarantee of a good quality product, which by itself denotes a reflection of the social construction of this social phenomenon.

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