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Analyzing the Factors Behind the Closure of “JoinB2B”: A Case Study of a B2B Marketing Communications Platform

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Abstract: The startup sector of Azerbaijan has developed rapidly and dynamically since 2014 and 2015, which should be considered a great success for the development of the non-oil industrial and service sector. However, systematic and in-depth studies on the performance of individual case studies have been neglected. Although this is understandable due to data constraints, limited access to businesses, and a non-liberal business environment, successful and failed startups should shed light on the most important aspects of growth management in the business sector. For this reason, this paper uses the in-depth interview method to collect data and analyze a specific case, namely “JoinB2B,” a startup company based in Hungary and Azerbaijan that made a failed attempt to build a global business-to-business marketing communications platform. The findings show that former co-founders and former employees agree that there were communication problems, misrepresentation of management, and issues with full dedication to the startup. This hindered the organizational development and maturity of the company. In addition, the COVID-19 outbreak exacerbated persistent communication gaps and created a chaotic situation. Former employees stated that the platform was not sufficiently improved to have adequate technical capacity, that a professional team of employees was never formed, and that there were still persistent problems with timing and planning to establish a locally and globally recognized brand. Finally, business experts and economists cited lack of capital, internal management problems, overestimation of the startup’s ambitions, lack of a plan for business expansion and growth, and lack of state support and insufficient revenue raising as possible reasons for the closure. The study’s findings are aimed at government agencies, research institutions, academics, and business experts, as academic research in this field is rare in Azerbaijan and should be encouraged.

Keywords: Azerbaijani economy, business-to-business, case study, Hungary, marketing communications, startups

1. INTRODUCTION

Startup companies are important for a variety of reasons, including job creation, business development, and marketing development. Startup companies contribute to the economy in a number of ways. One of the most important contributions is job creation. According to Kane (2010), startups in the United States create an average of 3 million new jobs annually. In addition to job creation, startups also contribute to innovation and economic growth (Szarek and Piecuch, 2018). They introduce new products and services that can disrupt existing markets and create new ones. Startups also tend to be more agile and adaptable than larger companies, which allows them to respond quickly to changes in the market (Chesbrough and Tucci, 2020). This can lead to more competition and greater efficiency in various industries. In addition, startups can attract investment and generate revenue, which can have a positive impact on local and national economies (Nazari et al., 2022). Overall, startups play a crucial role in promoting economic growth and innovation.

Startups face several challenges and risks, including business model sustainability, funding, market competition, and talent attraction and retention. Business model sustainability can be a challenge for startups as they need to develop innovative, sustainable business models to survive in a competitive environment (Nunes et al., 2022). Funding is another challenge, as startups often have difficulty accessing funding and convincing investors to invest in their companies (Pallathadka, 2022). Market competition is also a risk, as it can be difficult for startups to achieve a good fit between product and market and to deal with business ideas that have already been tested (Nunes et al., 2022; Menon et al., 2020). Attracting and retaining talent is another aspect, as it can be difficult for startups to attract and retain qualified employees (Nunes et al., 2022). It is important that startups address these challenges and risks to increase their chances of success.

Not all startups are successful in the face of fierce entrepreneurial competition and limited financial and economic resources. The aim of this article is to find out why one of the startup initiatives, namely the Azerbaijan (the main initiator country) and Hungary-based former startup “JoinB2B”, failed in developing its business. The startup’s official mission statement and plan read as follows: “We match companies depending on their location, industry, business purpose, tenders and offers. Our all services are free at the moment, but

we plan to introduce ads, premium membership and organize offline paid events as well.” In other words, “JoinB2B” was a unique marketing communications platform focused on the business-to-business (B2B) segment on a global scale, founded in 2016. However, the startup failed to transform its business model into a full-fledged commercial company in the marketing communications platform space. Understanding this problem can provide insights into the marketing communications landscape and interest in B2B activities in the digital space in Hungary and Azerbaijan. These are two emerging markets with rapidly growing economies. Understanding the marketing communications landscape in these countries can be helpful for companies considering expansion into these markets. To this end, the main research method chosen was an in-depth interview with former co-founders, employees, business experts, and economists to find an answer to the following research question of this paper: What factors contributed to “JoinB2B’s” failure to establish itself as a competent and full-fledged business-to-business marketing communications company/platform?

The findings of this study are of interest to various stakeholders, including business experts, economists, scholars, entrepreneurs, startups, and a broad readership. The research employs a non-technical and easily comprehensible methodology and writing style, making it accessible to a wide audience. There has been limited previous research focusing on single-case studies in the Azerbaijani economy within the business sphere, where both successful and failed startups are analyzed using a rigorous scientific approach. Consequently, the following section provides comprehensive information about the research’s data and methodology in Section 3, followed by the presentation of results. Finally, Section 4 presents the conclusions drawn from this study.

2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative methodology, specifically the case study approach and in-depth structured interviews, to gather data regarding the specific startup, “JoinB2B”—Azerbaijani and Hungarian joint venture. The case study approach has gained significant traction among researchers in recent years. It proves invaluable for investigations that require a profound understanding, a human-centered perspective, and nuanced interpretation. Case studies are particularly advantageous when researchers aim to address three pivotal components: the underlying process or practice, the interactions within this process, and the significance of these interactions (Njie and Asimiran, 2014). This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of intricate phenomena, permits the exploration of multiple viewpoints and contexts, stimulates the development of new hypotheses and theories, and is particularly suitable for the examination of rare or unique cases (Pasaribu et al., 2023; Rembulan and Kusumowidagdo, 2022). The advantages outlined align with the research requirements pertaining to “JoinB2B”, making it the primary research methodology for this study.

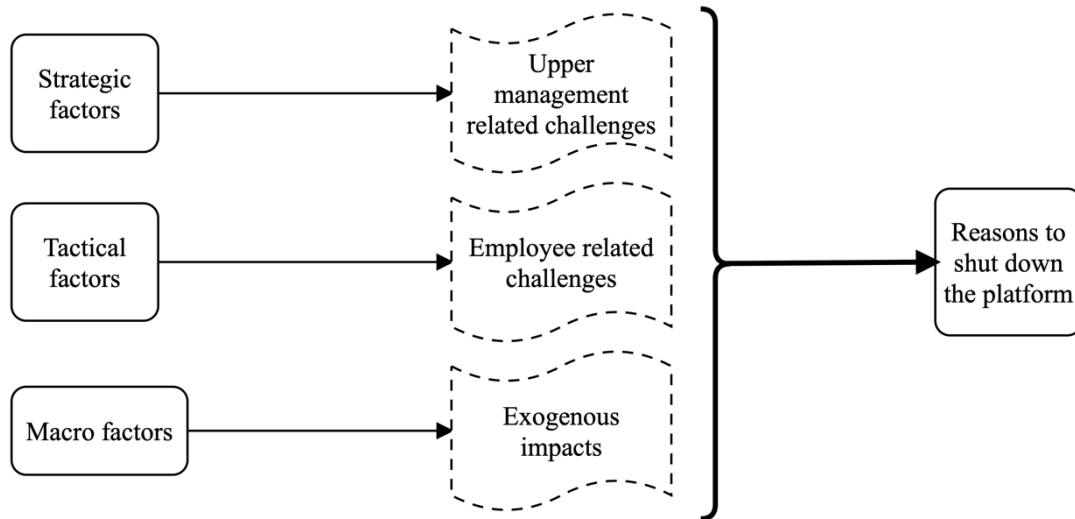
The data generation method employed for this study involved conducting in-depth interviews with the startup’s co-founders, employees, as well as independent business experts and economists who could provide insights into potential external and internal factors contributing to the shutdown. In-depth interviews are a qualitative data collection technique that entails comprehensive discussions with participants to gather detailed information regarding their experiences, perspectives, and viewpoints (Monday, 2019). Utilizing in-depth interviews as a research instrument offers several advantages, including the ability to capture narrative data, enabling a deeper exploration of individuals’ perspectives, and facilitating the acquisition of rich, nuanced data (Monday, 2019). This approach was deemed suitable because readily available secondary data from statistical databases or other sources were not accessible.

However, it's important to acknowledge that in-depth interviews can be time-intensive and resource-demanding, may not be suitable for studying large populations, and are susceptible to researcher bias (Kvalsvik and Øgaard, 2021; Sexton Topper and Bauermeister, 2021). To address these challenges, seven email interviews were conducted to establish the necessary qualitative dataset. Furthermore, it is essential to note that findings derived from in-depth interviews may have limited generalizability (Kvalsvik and Øgaard, 2021; Sexton Topper and Bauermeister, 2021). These considerations were taken into account both during the interview process and when interpreting the results.

The reasons behind the discontinuation of the marketing communications platform can be multifaceted, but it is imperative to narrow down these factors to facilitate the research process, data collection, and result interpretation. Figure 1 outlines the theoretical foundation of this qualitative study, categorizing potential reasons for the platform’s shutdown into three overarching categories: strategic, tactical, and macro factors. Each group of factors can be associated with specific data sources, such as those related to upper

management, employees, and external influences. Consequently, qualitative data collection adhered to the guiding principles outlined in the conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Systematic representation of the possible reasons for the discontinuation of marketing communication platforms.



Source: Author’s own construction.

Table 1 provides an overview of the data set’s sample size. To be precise, a total of seven interviews were conducted. Among these, four were conducted in Azerbaijani, and the remaining three were carried out in English. Within this group of interviewees, one individual was the former co-founder of the startup, three were former employees, and three were independent business and economics specialists.

Table 1: Description of the sample (data sources) of the interviewees.

N	Interviewee	Abbreviation	Language of the interview	Interview format
1	Former co-founder	CF1	Azerbaijani	Email interview + voice messages
2	Former employee	EMP1	English	Email interviews
3	Former employee	EMP2	Azerbaijani	
4	Former employee	EMP3	Azerbaijani	
5	Business and economics expert	BSE1	English	Online real-time interviews
6	Business and economics expert	BSE2		
7	Business and economics expert	BSE3		

In the case of the co-founder and former employees, only the interview questions were supplied to them to facilitate the generation of qualitative data. However, with the business and economics specialists, an initial briefing (i.e., the background of the startup launch, the history, the decisions made, etc.) about “JoinB2B” was provided before proceeding with the interview questions. The co-founder conveyed both written and oral responses through email interviews and voice messages on the WhatsApp platform. Meanwhile, all former employees were interviewed via email, and the business and economics specialists participated in real-time online interviews conducted on the Zoom platform.

It is worth noting that email interviews, a relatively novel research method, hold substantial promise for qualitative researchers (Amri et al., 2021). Given constraints in terms of time and resources, email interviews emerged as the most efficient and optimal approach for this research. The number of potential participants for the current study was initially limited, i.e., the number of co-founders and former employees was fixed, but the business experts and economists were selected based on their professional background and ability to provide insightful feedback on the possible reasons for the closure of “JoinB2B”. Each respondent was assigned an abbreviation to reference and anonymize them in the results section. These abbreviations can be found in Table 1. Also, the interview questions are listed and categorized below.

Interview questions to the co-founders were as follows:

1. What factors, in your view, have contributed to “JoinB2B’s” discontinuation, and do you believe that with more effective strategies, it could have remained operational today?
2. Have you sought support from accelerators or institutions to bolster the startup's operations? Could you elaborate on the outcomes, whether successful or not?
3. Do you think state support could have altered the startup's trajectory significantly?
4. Were there considerations of merging with larger entities? If not, what advantages did “JoinB2B” see in operating independently in both local and global markets?
5. Were there notable managerial challenges or deficiencies during the startup's journey? Can you pinpoint specific instances?
6. What risks and challenges did you encounter in managing the startup's marketing communication? Additionally, were there any advantageous opportunities that arose?
7. Did “JoinB2B” achieve its target user numbers? If not, what do you believe hindered this achievement?
8. Were competitive pressures a significant influence on the startup's operations? Did it operate within a highly competitive landscape?
9. If similar startups were to emerge, what counsel would you offer them? Should the government support such ventures, and if so, what are the reasons? Is the country's business and economic environment conducive to successful startup ventures?

Interview questions to the former employees were as follows:

1. What was your primary motivation for becoming involved with “JoinB2B”?
2. Can you identify any specific management or team-related challenges or deficiencies during your time with “JoinB2B”?
3. Did you envision “JoinB2B” becoming a prominent platform within the local economy in the foreseeable future?
4. In terms of its mission or vision, what did “JoinB2B” lack or uniquely offer in comparison to other startups?
5. Do you believe there was a pivotal moment that led to “JoinB2B's” discontinuation?
6. Looking back, are there specific decisions or changes that, in your opinion, could have steered “JoinB2B” toward success?

Interview questions to the business specialists and economists were as follows:

1. What are the primary reasons for the closure of Azerbaijani startups in a broad context?
2. Is the level of state support sufficient for local startups?
3. Were the macroeconomic and institutional conditions favorable for startups during 2015 and 2016?
4. Can you provide insights into the potential growth and expansion plans of this startup?
5. Could managerial issues related to firm-level economic realities lead to closure?

The presentation of results in this study follows the stylistic approach of Montrone et al. (2021) and Richards et al. (2012). These approaches combine interpretive and reflective writing with in-text citations and references from the qualitative data set. Given the relatively limited number of interviewees, it was not necessary to employ additional qualitative methods such as coding, thematic analysis, or grounded theory. The findings section is organized into three distinct subsections: “Co-Founders,” “Former Employees,” and “Business Experts and Economists” In each of these sections, relevant findings are discussed in more detail.

In addressing potential privacy and ethical concerns, this study adhered to the principles outlined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. Participants were assured complete anonymity, which allowed for open and honest expression of their ideas and opinions on the questions posed. In addition, before conducting the interviews, all participants explicitly agreed that their responses could be used for the research and subsequent analysis. It is worth noting that the interviews with economists and business experts conducted in real time via the Zoom platform were not recorded, as no qualitative coding process was originally planned. All interviews took place in September 2023.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Co-founders

Due to limited opportunity to communicate with all co-founders, only one of them was interviewed. To elaborate, CF1 identified primarily three factors contributing to the closure of “JoinB2B:” the COVID-19 pandemic, technical incompleteness and errors within the platform, and management-related challenges. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional work patterns and communication among the co-founders due to a dispersed work environment (in other words, the co-founders did not share a common office space or workplace in the early stages of the startup). The platform remained incomplete from a technical standpoint, failing to achieve the dynamic and error-free end product desired, which, in turn, hindered user acquisition efforts. Lastly, the management of the team, including aspects such as strategic planning, goal setting, and overall startup growth, did not unfold in an optimal manner. The intricate interplay of these factors culminated in the shutdown of the startup and the discontinuation of its platform. Had these challenges been effectively addressed in a timely manner with the appropriate allocation of resources, “JoinB2B” could potentially have continued its operations, especially given the absence of a similar platform in Azerbaijan and the broader South Caucasus region, a gap that persists even today.

Typically, one of the key determinants of successful outcomes in the startup ecosystem is state support and active engagement with business incubation or acceleration centers. Modern startups often possess a knowledge-intensive nature, requiring highly skilled personnel who demand commensurate salaries. CF1 expressed optimism regarding the outcomes of “JoinB2B’s” participation in local business incubation or acceleration centers, as these platforms facilitated the attraction of a broader user base. Additionally, CF1 highlighted the opportunities leveraged to make presentations aimed at attracting potential investments for the startup. Nevertheless, the co-founder conveyed the impression that with proper state support, “JoinB2B” could have achieved even better results, given its distinctive capabilities to operate independently in the global markets, free from the necessity of merging with or being acquired by larger corporations or holdings. Although the startup never reached the threshold for tax payments, the co-founder suggested that a reduction in income tax and social security contributions by the state for newly established startups and companies could serve as an incentive for these startups to transition into officially recognized and sustainable enterprises, rather than remaining heavily reliant on volunteer labor. CF1 recommended the introduction of subsidy mechanisms tailored for more advanced stages of startups. For example, the state could subsidize specific portions of salaries, with the startup itself responsible for financing the remainder once it attains profitability.

One of the primary factors contributing to the closure of “JoinB2B” was the presence of management problems, challenges, and gaps. Specifically, one of the co-founders was physically located in Hungary, while the other two co-founders maintained other full-time employment commitments, leaving them with limited availability to devote to the strategic development of the startup. Nevertheless, CF1 emphasized that they were successful in garnering the interest of over 2,000 users from approximately 70 countries. It is important to note that attracting B2B users, in contrast to non-business users, is notably challenging. Nevertheless, this accomplishment was realized with nearly zero budget allocation for marketing communication, primarily due to the absence of adequate financial resources. While it would be inaccurate to assert that the startup reached its intended user count, it consistently met its weekly and monthly targets during the phases focused on active user acquisition within the platform.

3.2. Former Employees

Former employees of the startup were the second best source of qualitative data to gain the necessary insights into the potential closure of “JoinB2B.” The main reason for the former employees to join “JoinB2B” team was related to the rising interest in digital marketing and marketing communication platforms in Azerbaijan (EMP2). The former employees of the startup were mainly young university students who saw a career opportunity in an innovative local startup which had a solid roadmap to deliver clearly determined product (EMP2, EMP3). For some former employees “JoinB2B” was a place to fulfill a new career possibility.

Former employees identified several issues and challenges related to management and team building that potentially impacted the functionality of the platform: The idea and product were offered to users for free for a long time, which significantly limited the platform’s potential for growth and profitability (EMP3). The platform

did not receive additional investment, which led to delays in product development (EMP3). Most importantly, the management and co-founders worked full-time in completely different locations, creating a distance between the team and the visionary prospects (EMP1, EMP2). This led to a lack of real-time communication, which is critical for a marketing communications platform. Instead, distant tasks, slow responses to the team's questions, and the weak absence of management in the office robbed the team's potential (EMP1).

Former employees also conveyed their perceptions regarding the platform's potential to establish a solid presence in the local economy during that period. The consensus among the former employees was that "JoinB2B" possessed significant potential but was hindered by slow advancements, limited financial resources (due to a lack of gradual investments), and timing concerns, which are typical red flags for short-lived startups (EMP1, EMP2, EMP3).

"In my opinion, the startup idea was very innovative and powerful. Having a ready-made site and real users were already a big achievement. I think that if more investments were made or investors were found and perhaps professional employees were involved, it would accelerate the recognition and development of this platform. I think the only problem was that everything was moving very slowly. This is not accepted in the startup ecosystem." (EMP3)

The startup's mission and vision did not resonate with some former employees, as indicated by EMP1. Conversely, others expressed that the startup's vision was overly broad and global, making it seem unattainable, which consequently led to reduced motivation among team members, as pointed out by EMP2. In contrast, EMP3 highlighted that the mission and vision of the platform were indeed beneficial.

Although the former employees reckon that there were not any specific moments which identified the success or failure of the platform since the problems already existed from the very beginning of the process and never were systematically addressed (EMP1, EMP3). However, one former employee indicated that: "At some point the management's hope was broken. We sent emails via Mailchimp. We were waiting for a response, but we could not prevent the emails from falling into spam. After the last-chance strategy failed, they also lost their motivation (EMP2)." From this perspective it seems that the co-founders lacked multidimensional, strategic and comprehensive solutions to overcome brand awareness challenges. As a future B2B marketing communications platform, "JoinB2B" had to successfully overcome these challenges first, establish itself as a grounded firm, and only then hope for long-lasting value generation.

Lastly, former employees were asked to identify what could have been done to prevent the complete shutdown of "JoinB2B." Most of the former employees participated in the startup for a long time and that had a clear observations from a bottom-up perspective. Several ideas were suggested that also shed light on the possible reasons why a B2B marketing communications platform might fail. They include lack of active participation of startup acceleration program, low global visibility, lack of professional team members, ignorance of the suggestions of the team members to solve the errors of the platform (EMP3). According to EMP1 and EMP2, timing, planning, low research and development, and lack of full-time salesman did not allow to achieve more innovative product placement and brand positioning. It seems that the former employees can see how the gap between the startup's potential and infrastructure to realize it was deep.

3.3. Business Specialists and Economists

Business specialists and economists also provided deep insights about the possible reasons for failure of the startup. In fact, the startup's failure can be attributed to a convergence of financial constraints, internal management issues, challenges associated with its geographic location, and the complexities of operating a B2B platform in the social media domain (BSE1). In more details, the limited opportunities to scale and adapt to market conditions, having sufficient capital to invest in product development, marketing, and talent acquisition are crucial factors to determine the outcome (BSE1). Not offering any paid services to users from the beginning can lead to a lack of revenue generation (BSE3). Many successful platforms adopt a "freemium" model, where basic services are free, but premium features are offered for a fee. This approach can help generate income and support ongoing development (BSE3).

State support or the absence of the startup-oriented industrial policies around 2016 and 2017 in Azerbaijan were also linked to the possible failure of the startup. Success in the startup world often demands a holistic approach, addressing both internal and external factors effectively. Therefore, BSE2 indicated that

“...aiming for global expansion without proper state support can be a significant hurdle. Expanding internationally demands substantial resources, including marketing, localization, legal compliance, and understanding diverse markets. The absence of state support, such as trade promotion initiatives or diplomatic assistance, can make it even more challenging to navigate the complexities of global expansion.”

Moreover, the startup being based in a developing but high middle-income country may have posed specific challenges. While such regions offer potential for growth and lower operational costs, they can also present regulatory, infrastructure, and talent-related challenges that the founders may not have adequately navigated (BSE1). Finally, the nature of the startup as a B2B platform in the social media realm is a complex space. Success in this arena requires not only a unique value proposition but also a deep understanding of the target market, effective user acquisition and retention strategies, and constant adaptation to user preferences (BSE1).

Even without the state support, it seems that “JoinB2B” could not integrate and mobilize its resources to have an applicable expansion plan. This is why the startup’s failure can be attributed to a lack of clear user acquisition and monetization strategies, a failure to offer paid services, inadequate marketing efforts, a lack of strategic expansion planning, and the absence of performance evaluation criteria. Put differently, the lack of a strategic approach to business expansion suggests that the startup may not have had a clear roadmap for growth, both in terms of user base and geographical reach (BSE3). Expanding without a well-defined strategy can lead to inefficiencies and increased costs (BSE3). It also seems that not exceeding expectations in the number of total users was linked to this fact because the absence of critical performance evaluation criteria made it challenging to assess the platform’s success and identify areas for improvement. Metrics and key performance indicators (KPIs) are essential for tracking progress and making data-driven decisions (BSE3). A successful startup typically requires a well-defined business model, effective marketing, and a clear path to growth and profitability.

Typically, operating under poor institutional conditions, such as weak legal frameworks, corruption, or bureaucratic inefficiencies, can hinder a startup’s growth and sustainability. These conditions can lead to regulatory uncertainties, contract disputes, and difficulties in protecting intellectual property rights, all of which can undermine a startup’s ability to operate effectively. However, business specialists and economists unanimously did not think that these exogenous reasons were rootcause of unsuccessful outcomes of “JoinB2B” (BSE1, BSE2, BSE3). Mainly, the startup’s internal management problems, including optimization issues and limited finances, were critical in its market outcomes (BSE1). Optimization issues suggest inefficiencies in resource allocation and decision-making processes, which can drain limited financial resources (BSE2). Limited finances can constrain product development, marketing efforts, and overall competitiveness (BSE2). These challenges can exacerbate other issues and make it difficult for the startup to adapt and grow in a highly dynamic market. These ideas somehow overlap with the observations of the employees.

Entering the highly competitive arena of social media-like B2B platforms is inherently challenging. Success in this sector requires not only a unique value proposition but also the ability to attract and retain a critical mass of users or businesses. Without a clear differentiator or a well-defined niche within this broad market, startups can struggle to gain traction. Unpreparedness of the startup to these harsh competitive conditions seems to be one of the crucial reasons behind the shutdown (BSE1). The absence of sponsored marketing communication strategies limited the startup’s visibility and user acquisition efforts among its competitors (BSE3). Effective marketing is crucial for attracting users and building brand recognition, especially in a competitive space like social media.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Azerbaijani economy faces significant challenges stemming from its heavy reliance on oil, an imbalanced industrial structure, and a constrained business environment (Ahmadov, 2022a; Seyfullali, 2019). Comparative analyses of structural shifts in the South Caucasus and Visegrad regions emphasize the urgency for countries like Azerbaijan to nurture their service sectors, creating income streams and employment opportunities for their populations (Ahmadov, 2023). Startups, particularly those focusing on digital platforms and software development, represent promising candidates to address this imperative. Consequently, there has been a growing number of collaborative efforts and scholarly economic comparisons between Azerbaijan and Hungary (Ahmadov, 2022b). This study seeks to uncover the underlying factors preventing “JoinB2B: from evolving into a fully-fledged business enterprise as a B2B marketing communications platform. It does so by conducting in-

depth interviews with co-founders, former employees, and independent business and economic experts (n=7), contributing new insights to this endeavor.

The closure of “JoinB2B” can be attributed to several factors, shedding light on the challenges and prospects in developing B2B marketing communication platforms within emerging economies like Azerbaijan. As per the co-founder’s perspective, the discontinuation of the platform resulted from issues stemming from COVID-19-related miscommunications, management challenges, and persistent technical errors. The co-founder believed that the startup’s engagement with local incubation and acceleration centers was productive and that the platform possessed sufficient uniqueness to potentially outperform emerging competitors. However, in contrast to the co-founder’s optimism regarding the acquisition of approximately 2,000 users from 70 countries with zero budget, business experts and economists held a different viewpoint. They argued that such a strategy was not viable, emphasizing that startups require adequate financial resources and capital to transition into fully-fledged commercial entities. These experts also underscored the absence of effective industrial policies and state support for startups like “JoinB2B”, which hindered their global expansion and value creation. Furthermore, the experts contended that the management of “JoinB2B” may have been overly ambitious in this regard, dedicating insufficient resources to support the startup’s scaling activities in a more realistic manner. They also highlighted that internal factors such as optimization, resource allocation, and a clear monetization strategy played a more significant role in the platform’s closure compared to external factors like poor institutional quality, corruption, and macroeconomic stability. These insights aligned with the perspectives provided by the former employees.

In the perception of the former employees, a series of factors contributed to the unfavorable outcomes of the startup. These included the absence of a professionally experienced team members, managerial unavailability during office hours due to concurrent full-time job commitments of the co-founders, and the absence of incremental and gradual technical enhancements on the platform. It is noteworthy that the former employees were primarily recent university graduates who exhibited high motivation and commitment to the startup, aligning themselves closely with its mission and vision. Nevertheless, they pointed out that the co-founders appeared to lack multidimensional, strategic, and comprehensive solutions for addressing challenges related to brand awareness. Additionally, the former employees’ perspective from the grassroots level unveiled a few key issues. These encompassed a deficit in research and development efforts, the absence of a full-time sales team, and a dearth of technical advancements, all of which collectively hampered the global visibility of the platform. It is crucial to note that during its operational phase, the platform was recognized as innovative and cutting-edge. Moreover, the former employees expressed concerns regarding the absence of in-house representation by top management or co-founders, which hindered real-time communication. This, in turn, gave a rise to various challenges in effectively managing day-to-day tasks and operations.

The current study yields several policy implications that could catalyze further actions, guide policy decisions, or foster collaboration between startups and governmental entities. Notably, the case of “JoinB2B” underscores the significant impact of the COVID-19 outbreak. Undoubtedly, this global crisis disrupted numerous business opportunities and inflicted economic harm on affected countries. Consequently, a key policy implication is the necessity to address unforeseen external and global shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As argued by Bagirzadeh (2023), the Azerbaijani economy is presently in a phase of recovery from the pandemic, offering substantial prospects for the development of its non-oil sectors. To seize these opportunities, it is imperative that the higher education system and startup environments are supportive and adaptive in the face of such challenges (Bagirzadeh and Suleymanov, 2023). Secondly, a recent study by Seyfullali (2023) has highlighted the absence of a causal relationship between capital, productivity, and non-oil processing sectors. This observation is pertinent to the issue of domestic financial markets failing to adequately support new firms and startups. Consequently, there is a welcoming stance toward proper state support for new market entrants, emphasizing the crucial role of venture capital and unconditional credit in further bolstering the local startup capacity in Azerbaijan. Thirdly, according to Hampel-Milagrosa et al. (2022) in their country report about Azerbaijan, there is an imperative need for facilitating government coordination, addressing legal and regulatory gaps, investing in human capital, and enhancing support in regions outside the capital. These measures can create a more conducive environment for startups and bolster their growth prospects.

This study employs a single-case approach, examining a discontinued marketing communications platform originating from Azerbaijan and Hungary. Consequently, the scope of this study is limited in its ability to offer generalized knowledge concerning the potential reasons for startup failures within these countries’

ecosystems. The research assumes a static approach, as “JoinB2B” operated exclusively between 2016 and 2020. However, such analyses ideally should be dynamic, encompassing multiple cases, and take an evolutionary perspective. While the number of interviews conducted may not be as extensive as typical in-depth studies, it is essential to recognize that single startup case studies inherently present natural limitations that are not easily overcome. Thus, future research can center on the developments within Azerbaijan’s startup ecosystem, given the country’s pressing need to foster and fortify this sector by drawing lessons from past experiences. In this context, “JoinB2B” represents an intriguing case study to draw insights from.

In summary, the case of “JoinB2B”, despite being a failed startup from a small country, does not imply that small nations are incapable of making substantial strides in high-tech services. For instance, the YouTube channel "D Billions" based in the Kyrgyz Republic exemplifies how small countries can leverage contemporary technological advancements by accurately gauging the demands of social media users (Bloomberg Originals, 2023). In the case of “JoinB2B”, a marketing communications platform or technological endeavor, the limitations in resource availability hindered its growth potential during a window of opportunity. Similar instances are prevalent in Azerbaijan, although they remain relatively unexplored within academic research. While this paper represents an initial step towards addressing this gap, it is hoped that future research within the field of business administration will delve deeper into both successful and unsuccessful cases within the startup and business landscape.

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