Power Dynamics in E-commerce Adoption in Least Developing Countries: The Case of Dar-es-Salaam SMEs, Tanzania

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Abstract. This paper examines power structures that make E-Commerce adoption amongst Small and Medium Enterprises in least developing countries a daunting task. The study adopts structuration theory as a lens, focusing specifically on structures of domination. The results indicate that at organizational level, lack of management support was the reason. However this was caused by government's reluctance to adopt E-Commerce. By not adopting E-Commerce, government creates structures of domination by drawing on both of its allocative and authoritative resources. Further results show education institutions possessing authoritative power - they design the curriculum by determining what to teach and how to teach it; and whilst doing it, fail to take into account the industries and specifically SMEs needs. However with the rapid adoption of mobile technologies, E-Commerce is becoming a reality through the development of mobile enabled trade websites, which gives SMEs numerous ways to diffuse and rejuvenate themselves in the global economy.

Keywords: E-Commerce, Structuration theory, least developing countries, Small and Medium Enterprises, Tanzania.

1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, E-Commerce has been widely believed to be an avenue for integrating communities and countries into the global market economy. E-Commerce in this study is seen as a technological innovation - a tool used by the adopting society to perform tasks more efficiently or to perform new tasks [1]. As a technological innovation, E-Commerce promises to reduce the costs of interbusiness transactions by automating many individual steps in the procurement process; alleviating transaction inefficiencies in the supply chain [2]; and most importantly bridge the existing development gaps between the haves and the have not through integration of information systems [3,4,5,6,7]. However these economic benefits can only be accrued to those who succeed in adopting the technological innovation [1]. Succeeding is usually a daunting task for developing countries, and more so for Least Developing Countries (LDC), who still find it difficult to compete in the global digital exchange as they lack a conducive operating environment in terms of technical, social, economic and political elements [8,9,10]. LDCs constitute a special category

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of the "poorest and weakest segment" of the international community that are characterized by extreme poverty, weak economies, inadequate institutional and human resources and often vulnerable to natural disasters [47]. As such, very few LDCs have adopted E-Commerce and even those that have adopted E-Commerce, most, remain at the initial adoption phase – a level of adoption ranging from being connected (e.g. basic email), having a static website (e.g., simple website) to interactive E-Commerce. A limited number have transcended to the second measure of adoption, institutionalization - the extent of E-Commerce utilization which range from having an interactive, transactive, or integrated E-Commerce status [11].

Tanzania is an example of an LDC that has shown little substantive progress with regard to E-Commerce – specifically at the institutionalization phase. Since E-Commerce adoption is highly affected by contextual factors of the adopting society [44,48], this study focuses on understanding power structures that make E-Commerce adoption amongst SMEs an uphill struggle. To do so, the study adopts structuration theory as a lens, to enrich "the picture of meaning construction—or construction of interpretive schemes—by interrelating the analyses of meaning, power and norms" [12]. The theory is inherently dynamic and grounded in ongoing human action, and therefore indeed has the potential to explain emergence and change in technologies and use [13]. Through this lens, E-Commerce is conceptualized as a structuration process that takes shape through the social construction of E-Commerce rules and resources.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: the next section provides background study of ICTs and E-Commerce in Tanzania. Section 3 presents theoretical work on structuration theory. Section 4 presents the methodological approach and Section 5 the data analysis. The results are discussed in Section 6. Section 7 concludes the paper.

2 ICTs and the State of E-commerce in Tanzania

Tanzania is located in the eastern coast of Africa with a population of just over 41 million people. Although the country is fairly stable politically with a fully functioning multi-party democracy, economically, the country is among the least developed countries. As in many other developing countries, Tanzania has many Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) which play a critical role in the economy especially with respect to employment. As a result, there have been numerous studies investigating internet related technologies and the digital divide as well as the role of ICT for the performance of SMEs. Matambalya and Wolf [14] investigated a sample of 300 SMEs in East Africa. Their result shows that the use of ICT by SMEs in Kenya as well as in Tanzania is increasing over time, with the usage of fixed phone lines nearly reaching the saturation point (although still lower in Tanzania than in Kenya). In Tanzania, Nielinger [4] and Pigato [15] found that computer usage, and the internet in particular still remains very low even in firms that own computers. As for those who have computers and ICTs, under-utilization is a common feature with "a widespread gap between availability and effective use". Nielinger [4] found that 36% of the enterprises had access to a fax-machine and one-third had access to email. However, both means account for only 10% or 9% of total business correspondence, leaving the outstanding 81% of business correspondence to traditional, non-electronic means". Although currently the countries'

number of Internet users is increasing steadily, the country still lacks cheap and high-capacity connections to the global Internet despite the large and increasing demand for Internet access [16]. The digital divide is also highly evident. For example, there are 16 times more people per Internet café in the rural regions of Iringa, Mbeya and Songea compared to urban Dar es Salaam, and in the semi-urban region, Morogoro, were there are 7 times more people per café [17].

Of recent, the country is experiencing a rapid rate of mobile phones adoption. Matambalya and Wolf [14] indicate that the percentage of firms that uses mobile phones is increasing fast. Molony [18] explored how mobile phones are being used by informal construction workers in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. His study reveals that ownership of mobile phones is stratified along employment lines and if properly integrated, a form of mobile E-Commerce could take charge. The increase in mobile telephony has ensured a steady increase in the country's teledensity which went from one per cent in 2000 to 25 per cent in 2008 and has already overtaken that of main line access. Yet the increase in mobile telephony, with high priced tariffs, has not translated into an increase in the use of the Internet, making "telecommunications services only available to the elite rather than everyone" and consequently excluding the poor majority from taking part in the nation's drive to become an ICT-enabled, and a 'knowledge-based society' [19,20].

3 Structuration Theory

Structuration theory developed by Giddens [22] is used to study social phenomena with the purpose of understanding how institutions or behavioral practices are produced and re-produced over time. These practices when routinized over time tend to determine how social realities come about and how social system works [23]. To produce or reproduce these behavioral practices, individuals draw on an array of interconnected rules and resources that may stretch across potentially great spans of time and space [24]. Rules and resources mediate human action, while at the same time are reaffirmed by individuals whose actions simultaneously condition and are conditioned by them [25, 26,27].

To conceptualize the theory, Giddens identifies three dimensions of interaction as: (i) signification (rules of meaning, understandable communication, the ideas and values people hold), (ii) domination (the exercising of power via resources as channeled for example via the financial system and the interrelation of supply and demand), and (iii) legitimation (the sanctioning of each other). Specifically, structures of signification describe the shared understanding of a given phenomenon by a group of people and are communicated via interpretive schemes or stocks of knowledge that serve as cognitive guides for individual action and behavior [28, 29,30,31,32,33]. Structures of domination are provided by structures that enforce established institutional rules to regulate actions and behaviours of individuals using available resources at their disposable which become the basis for acquiring individual power [25,28,29,33]. They are created when actors use power in interaction by drawing on either or both allocative resources (control of material products or aspects of the natural world) and authoritative resources

(give the actor power over the actions of others) [22,34]. Structures of legitimization, communicated through norms, are established by organizational conventions that validate whether certain behaviors are desirable and congruent with the goals and values of the organization or not [28,35,36].

4 Research Approach and Method

The study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative methods are useful in generating "multiple interpretations and deep understanding of the often conflicting rationalities of the people involved in IS innovation" [37]; thereby allowing the researcher to gain better understanding of the problem and identify the phenomena, attitudes and influences [38, 39]. Research methods informed by qualitative stance tend to give explicit recognition to the world of consciousness and humanly created meanings within the specific cultural and contextual settings from the perspective of participants. This approach is more suitable for this study as it complements our goal of trying to understand underlying power structures from the participant's (SMEs) viewpoints.

The empirical work was conceived as a combination of a pilot study, followed by interviews that spanned for two months. Targeted participants included SME owners, managers and IT executives as they are most familiar with E-Commerce in their firms and environment. Subsequent interviews lasted between an hour or two. Audio recording and note taking during interviews served as data collecting tools through which we examined the situated production of social action and addressed the visual, material as well as spoken features of the interviewees. The study is limited to SMEs in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, especially to those with a significant ICT presence. Initially, the database of the Bureau of Statistics in Dar-es-Salaam was used as an initial sampling frame to obtain the names of all SMEs in the region. SMEs not registered were contacted through a snowballing technique.

36 different SMEs were interviewed in total from the following industries: Communication Electronics & Computer, Loans & Finance, Service providers (ISP), Safety & Protection, Tourism & Entertainment, Arts, Craft & Curios, Agriculture & Forestry, Fishing & Manufacturing, Transportation, and Insurance respectively. We therefore ensure we sampled per industry and per level of E-Commerce adoption (initial to institutionalization). Many of the SMEs fell under the Communication Electronics & Computer industry (15 SMEs); followed by the tourism sector (5 SMEs). 37% of the SMEs were only targeting the local customer. 25 SMEs had a website and email communication. 53% of SMEs targeted both international and local, and the remaining 47% specifically targeted the East African market (Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi). 56% of the SMEs had their websites hosted abroad. Although many were reluctant to indicate which country their website was hosted in, the common responses were India, Germany and Dubai. SMEs that had no website but had some form of ICT presence such as email communication indicated that despite having email, their most used mode of communication was the mobile. Email was used for personal communication such as checking on friends and occasionally for conducting international business. The industry that solely relied on the mobile was Insurance, followed by transportation services.

5 Data Analysis and Results

At organizational level, SME employees felt there was a lack of top management support for desktop ICTs, specifically the usage of the computer. They indicated that if the support was present, it was purely not for transactive or fully integrated web-based E-Commerce. There was a consensus viewpoint across all industries that management's support with regard to desktops was relatively low and almost insignificant compared with mobile technology. As one SME employee from the Insurance industry indicated, "*our managers are more interested in mobile phones because it is the quickest method to communicate here and most of our clients have phones but few have computers. So phones work for us*. Management showed their support for mobile technology in their businesses by providing employees with *Blackberries loaded with Internet airtime* or airtime credits for their personal phones to enable marketing of the businesses.

At environmental level, SMEs perceived the government to possess the power to initiate E-Commerce and ensure it thrives because they are the biggest single buyer and employer in the country of ICT services; and ideally should be more engaged in the procurement, and delivering services. Despite having these resources, SMEs indicated that the government was reluctant to partake in online related transactions, accept credit payment, and were simply *lazy in checking their emails*. There was consensus that the government was more resistant to technological changes than individual consumers or private companies. As such, SMEs feel that E-Commerce adoption and institutionalization would not result in many returns if the biggest single buyer and employer in the country of ICT services was not adopting E-Commerce.

SMEs also queried the policies set out with regard to ICTs. It was established that they lacked clarity and were incomprehensive to cater for E-Commerce concerns, specifically on security issues. For example, an SME in the Communication Electronics & Computer industry indicated that *there needs to be a clear definition of what the terms computers and peripherals meant to the public and specifically to those in government who will tax you if you come with the CPU - they think that a computer is the monitor! Even if you complain, it depends on whom you find that day because the person responsible to take matters forward will not. So the winner will always be on the other side and you end up having to pay something*. These sentiments were echoed by other SMEs in the same industry and hinted of the existence of power structures which unfortunately lends itself to corruption.

Apart from the government, there was a unanimity complaint amongst SMEs, of a lack of competency and expertise in the ICT sector. They noted that software specific skills were difficult to acquire and even if acquired, difficult to retain and as such, most SMEs did not have software skills experts in their organizations but relied on external support or foreign partners, to develop and host their website, to train employees and for system maintenance. An SME in the tourism and entertainment industry lamented indicating that *the problem is we can't trust the market to provide us with the right person to do the job and who has the right technological skills. We need a great website for our tourism site. So what we do is outsource from outside the country*. It was evident that all SMEs felt powerless with the current available skills

and specifically the graduates they receive because according to them, there was a definite mismatch between the industries needs and what the educational institutes were offering. SMEs lamented on the lack of *grooming, experience and exposure to software development* and the potential of having a career in this field. The mismatch between educational curriculum and industrial needs according to SMEs specifically those specializing in software development, resulted in *graduates being very inexperienced, unskilled with practical issues and needing a lot of help. We normally fund them to attend certification courses.* However, few SMEs could provide graduates with the necessary help because ICT training was perceived to be more expensive compared to other professional courses. This is partly because some ICT courses require the usage of the internet which is unfortunately expensive. According to one of the service providers, Internet access is still expensive because of SEACOM monopoly – a privately owned and operated pan-African ICT enabler that is driving the development of the African internet. He indicated that although there are other cables that have arrived, they are still not effective in terms of operation and as such Internet price changes are not yet felt.

6 Discussion

The data analysis reveals that SMEs felt incapable of adopting and ultimately institutionalizing E-Commerce without government's involvement – specifically government's use of E-Commerce. Government's involvement in E-Commerce was seen as necessity because it is projected that if governments begin using E-Commerce for example e-procurement, they can provide an important incentive for SMEs to begin using E-Commerce as well [40]. The government therefore is seen to possess allocative power, in that it has infrastructural resources necessary to implement E-Commerce and has authoritative power in that it has the influence to adopt E-Commerce if it chose to, and the influence to prioritize E-Commerce by ensuring that there is physical infrastructure (road, electricity and traceable physical address), readily available expertise, provision of ICT policies that are clear and comprehensive, and other E-Commerce prerequisites. By not adopting E-Commerce, and any form of electronic transactions, the government creates structures of domination by drawing on both of its allocative and authoritative resources causing SMEs to feel inadequate as they are unable to influence the government in adopting E-Commerce. The inability to influence does not give SMEs the power to make a difference on how to propagate E-Commerce but clearly demonstrates how the state is an instrument of domination as it has the power to implement desirable changes [41] – such as adopt E-Commerce. Further results show education institutions, possessing authoritative power – they determine what to teach and how to teach it; they design the curriculum and whilst doing it fail to take into account the industry's needs. SMEs feel powerless because they are at the receiving end and have no say in what students should be competent in prior to graduating. As a result, SMEs receive graduates who are short of various important and sometimes basic ICT skills. This is a concern because, factors such as presence of an IT labor force and general IT literacy are enabling conditions for E-Commerce, although these are influenced by demographic factors [43].

These results echo those of Hambrick [42] who indicates that institutions that have access and control over scarce resources tend to be more dominant in the business industry than those that do not, even though the forms of domination may differ. This study however indicates that such institutions do not necessary have to use their power to exploit the means of production (resources) at their disposal, but can choose to remain silent, and reluctant in exploiting those means of production, such as the government in this instance. In so doing, the government consciously or unconsciously retains its power by not changing the status quo, of which if changed, could jeopardize their authority.

Despite these power structures, SMEs have not remained stagnant in the usage of ICTs but have moved on to mobile technology – a technology they find capable of meeting most of their business needs quite efficiently and effectively by allowing them to top-up mobile phone credits for themselves and their employees, airtime transfers between mobile phones, corporate bill payments and access to new markets, specifically rural poor people who have no traditional bank accounts. In order to tap further into these benefits, mobile phone companies are now facilitating E-Commerce by allowing SMEs to interact and conclude business transactions online, sending money to each other through mobile financial services already available in the local market. Mobile financial services have gained enormous popularity and SME owners see no other means of transacting economically. They have now articulated and reinforced their firm belief in the technology by ensuring that employees abide by the businesses' unwritten regulation of utilizing their personal mobiles for business venture. SME managers find mobile financial services a safe technology for business transactions despite there being no proper law to guide and regulate the mobile banking industry since its introduction in Tanzania in 2008 [44]. This is a clear indication that businesses would rather take the risk of mobile banking than wait for the government to amend the physical and telecommunication infrastructure and other traditional E-Commerce prerequisite. Through mobile technology, SMEs have gained the power to transform existing structures using resources (mobile phone) that have recently become available to them. They have shown that despite their political, culture and business contextual constraints, they can still craft their own destiny. To them, mobile telephony has been the most significant contributor to regional market expansion [21] and the path towards E-Commerce. As agents, SMEs have shown the ability to "make causal contribution to their own motivation and action within a system of triadic reciprocal causation" [22,45]. They have the capacity of forethought or consciousness which allows them to "monitor their own actions and their consequences, the actions of others [46], set goals for themselves, and plan courses of action likely to produce desired outcomes [45].

7 Conclusion

E-Commerce in least developing countries is still at a developing stage. This study specifically investigated structures that make propagations of E-Commerce an impossible task. The empirical analysis indicates that LDCs governments still have the largest ICT infrastructure and the prerequisite resources necessary for E-Commerce

adoption as compared to SMEs. However, SMEs are faced by an ongoing resistance from government in the adoption of E-Commerce – even at the basic level of email communication. This study shows that institutions in power do not necessary have to use their power to exploit the means of production (resources) at their disposal, but can choose to remain silent, and reluctant in exploiting those means of production, such as the government in this instance. By doing so, they strengthen their position and reaffirm their authority. In addition, SMEs are faced by further challenges from the educational institutions which tend to reaffirm their authoritative power by designing their ICT curriculum without taking into account the industries and specifically the SMEs needs. By not being included in the curriculum design, SMEs feel powerless because they are at the receiving end and have no say in what students should be competent in prior to graduating. That is, students finish their studies with degrees that are not context specific.

SME however have found an alternative solution that befits their business context – the mobile phone. Mobile technology has attempted to mitigate the adverse effects of government's political domination on SMEs. With the rapid adoption of mobile technologies in Tanzania and other LDCs by both consumers and businesses, E-Commerce can now become a reality through the development of mobile enabled trade websites, thereby giving SMEs numerous ways to diffuse and rejuvenate themselves in the global economy.

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