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Fears and Realities: Investigating Social Media Use for Sustainable Economic Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

The advent of social media technology initiated new approaches to economic development where stakeholders across business terrains are engaged in consensus building and implementation processes to survive in a highly competitive business environment. Today, everything has gone digital, and the traditional business approach is no longer enough to take the local product/services to a global level. The diffusion of social web globally has raised questions about whether these new technologies could be used more proactively to improve the economy of society for sustainability. Hinged on the Technological Acceptance Model and Technological Determinism, the study investigates how social media technology has impacted on the Nigerian business terrain for sustainable economic development and its militating factors. Personal in-depth interviews were conducted on some key business executives in Okota, Lagos and Emene, Enugu metropolis to investigate their perceptions of the extent, potentials and prospects of social media deployment for sustainable business development. Findings reveal that social media is making impacts in Nigerian businesses, though at a minimum rate due to issues of media literacy, phobia and access. The study recommends that private business owners and their employees be trained on the use of social media adoption for economic sustainability.

Keywords: Social Media, Economic Development, Sustainable Development, New Media Technology, Southern Nigeria

Introduction

Social media usage has been growing in popularity in Nigeria (Morah & Uzochukwu, 2019). Today, just about everyone depends on information and communication technology to keep their lives moving through daily activities like work, education, health care, leisure activities, entertainment, travelling, personal relationships, and the other life activities. This accounts for the use of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube in national movements for social change, such as in the variety of Occupy site and the Arab Spring. This development is consistent with the established position that the media helps to cause attitude change and, by so doing, ensures socioeconomic transformation (Schramm, 1964; Akinfeleye,

1995). Unlike the traditional media, social media can also be accessed on mobile phones, computers, tablets and laptops which facilities the spread of information on networks. Willard (2009) argues that mobile communications and social media have gained much attention and research since they can be used to raise awareness of issues, improve monitoring of environmental and social realities, and even be used as tools for political actions.

Nigeria has a mostly young and vibrant population. About 32.4 per cent of the total population is below the age of 18 years amidst a total population of more than 140 million people (NPC 2006). The Nigerian National Youth Policy in Morah & Uzochukwu (2019) defines the youth as young people between 18 and 35 years that are Nigerian citizens. The population of youths (15 – 35years) in Nigeria was estimated to be 64.1 million (Morah & Uzochukwu, 2019). This implies that most Nigerians are young people who are likely to use social media in their everyday life.

Uche (1989) described Nigeria as a developing country with a reasonably well-established media industry. It had a virile press before the colonial advent and has, subsequently, established an electronic media that has a reasonable reach. Considering the role of communication in society, scholars have conceptualised information as the lifeblood of democracy (Jenkins, 2006; Jensen, 2010). This supports that information is also the lifeblood of media organisations as it is the most valuable commodity traded on the floor of media organisations. In this connection, therefore, social media can be a tool to further media's role in the economy as it stimulates social change and empowers the audience by changing information to knowledge which produces well-informed consumers who can participate in sustainable economic and national development. This shows that social media can be useful for developmental purposes and even compliment the mass media in national development. Social media can, therefore, garner opportunities that are apt for sustainable economic development.

Statement of Problem and Objectives

Social media has attracted much popularity than traditional media as shown in the high number of Nigerians presently using the internet. There are more than 21 million smartphone users with about 17 million smartphone users active on social media via their mobile phones in Nigeria in 2017 according to the recent Jumia Report (Morah &Uzochukwu, 2019). According to a recent report at internetworldstats.com Internet users as of June 30, 2015, were found to be 92,699,924 which equals

51.1% of the country's 2015 population given as 181,562,056 (Ekwenchi, Morah &Adum, 2015, p.2). Today, everything has gone digital and the traditional business approach is no longer enough to take the local product/services to a global level. It, therefore, became imperative to examine the potentials of the new innovative, creative and two-way communication means of reaching the international market to register economic product/services in consumers' minds using social media technology.

The emergence of the social web has also raised questions about whether new media technologies could be used more proactively to improve the economic sector of society for sustainability. A vacuum therefore exists, noticeable in the inability of many business enterprises in Lagos and Enugu states to adequately utilise social media technologies in their business management. Specifically, the study set out to profoundly investigate the usage profile of social media and determine if social media technology influences sustainable economic development in the two selected states.

The following research questions help to signpost the study: Are social networking sites driving the transformation of the two states business landscape towards achieving economic development? To what extent has the use of social media in business attracted foreign investors to the state? And if they are useful tools for sustainable economic development, how can we ensure that they live up to their potentials?

Theoretical Considerations

The Technological Determinism Theory formed a part of the theoretical basis for this study. Marshall Mcluhan's (1962) Technological Determinism theory states that media technology shapes how we as individuals in a society think, feel, act, and how our society operates as we move from one technological age to another. In essence, we learn and feel and think the way we do because of the messages we receive through the current technology (the social media) that is available to us now. Just as the radio required us only to listen and develop our sense of hearing and television engages both our hearing and visual senses; social media has arrived to introduce interactivity and participation in the communication process. We then transfer those developed senses into our everyday lives and use them again and again. The theory further suggests that when new systems of technology are developed, the culture or society will immediately change to reflect the senses needed to use the new

technology. It further predicts that with every new system of media technology, society will change and adapt to that technology. This implies that Nigerian entrepreneurs are bound to improve their marketing and communication thinking to reflect the technology of the time which is social media. The proper harnessing of the potentials of social media technology will definitely ensure sustainable economic development.

The Technological Acceptance Model (TAM) proposed initially by Fred Davis in 1986 which explains how users come to accept and use technology is also apt to the study. The model suggests that whenever users are presented with new technology, several factors tend to affect their decision about how and when they will use it. Davis (Chuttur 2009) indicates that users' motivation can be explained by three factors: perceived usefulness; perceived ease of use and attitude toward using the system. He argues that the attitude of a user towards a system is a significant determinant of whether the user will use or reject the system. In this context, TAM transposes to how business people in Lagos and Enugu states utilise social media in managing businesses as a result of the perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness of social media and as generally accepted the communication and media platforms.

Media for Sustainable Development

Wilson (2005) provided a different perspective of what constitutes development. Inayatullah (in Wilson, 2005) asserts that development is a change towards patterns of society that allow better realisation of human patterns of society greater control over its environment and over its political destiny, which enable its individuals to gain increased control over themselves (p.124). Rogers (Wilson, 2005) regarded development as an extensive participatory process of social change in a society, which has intended to bring about social and material advancement (including greater equality, freedom and other valued qualities) for the majority of the people as they gain greater control over their environment (p.125). Wilson also, corroborates Ekong to point out that development is for and about people and not about things. He believes the people for whom development is intended for the need to be made aware of their needs and as well participate in the process through a converted mass mobilisation. (p.126). The primary rationale of national development is human development, the purpose of which is to enlarge people's choices for: "…greater access to knowledge; better nutrition and health services; more

secure livelihoods; security against crime and physical violence; political and cultural freedoms; and a sense of participation in community activities…" (UNDP Human Development Reports, 2002),

National developments, on the other hand, are changes or advancement in a nation aimed at improving the political, health, economic and social lives of the people. Communication is one means of achieving national development as information is generally regarded as power. More specifically, the media has grown historically to perform important developmental roles as the fourth estate, agenda setter, watchdog, force multiplier, and gate-keeper, as they influence society. Media activities should, therefore, facilitate social change and national development as "what the media do or do not do has mattered to societies, and this has been reflected in complex systems of ideas about what they should or should not be doing" (McQuail, 2010,p.218). Along with this mindset, Pavlik &McIntosh (2013) appreciates the place of social media communication in development, arguing that the public or audience may finally have some say in the new digital media environment;

> Through communication tools that give the unprecedented public power to share information and to' talk back' to those in power, people can connect and organise on any number of issues that are important to them, affecting policy changes through online and offline means (McQuail, 2010, p.31).

The influence of the media in national development always depends on three factors: the media, the societies in which they operate, as well as the audience they reach. McQuail (2010) asserts that the activities of media institutions are inextricably both economic and political and somehow greatly dependent on changing technologies. The public character of the media does not derive "mainly from the political function of the media in a democracy, but also from the fact that information, culture and ideas are considered as the collective property of all" (p.218). Hence, considering the potentials of new media, social media should serve as a robust way to enable Nigerian entrepreneurs to accelerate economic developmental goals in society.

Golding (1974) regards prevailing development conceptions as ethnocentric and ahistorical. For Golding, ethnocentric is the pathways of Northern countries which has legitimate and viable ways to the development and implies that the South should imitate the North. His ahistorical critique can either pertain to the view that development can only come from the outside owing to the static isolation of

developing countries or to the act of conceiving the future as a bigger version of the present (p. 52). If this mindset is taken, social media, a new technology from western nations should be used to develop Nigeria, an African country. Golding, however, regarded such views as tantamount to seeing developing countries as "embryonic microcosms of western capitalism" (p. 52). The author rather reiterates communication scholars to focus on the role of international news and media organisation and the relationship between traditional news patterns and the new media if they are genuinely interested in investigating the role of media in national development. This equally demonstrates the importance of interactive communication in human development.

Generally, there are four fundamental principles which are crucial for development—accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion. Development is therefore perceived as a qualitative change, which entails changes in the structure of the economy, health, social environment, and political disposition. The targets of national development are mostly the people; as such efforts are focused on the human population. The media has always remained at the centre of every development plan as the fulcrum on which the society revolves and social media is no exception. Since social media has been widely accepted as a medium of interactive and participatory communication across the globe (Jenkins,2006; Duru &Morah, 2017), it can be regarded as the fulcrum on which the society now revolves. From this discourse, it is clear that social media with its unique potentials is deemed essential for sustainable economic development especially in Nigeria.

Social Media for Sustainable Economic Development in Nigeria

Research (Morah & Duru, 2017; Morah & Okenwa, 2013; Morah & Uzochukwu, 2019) has shown that social media has great potentials of helping various businesses to grow; penetrates every sphere of life and has proven to be an effective communication tool for sustainable development. Morah and Uzochukwu (2019) adopted the survey research method to investigate how young people in the rural communities of Anambra, Enugu and Ogun states were politically activated to participate in the April 2015 presidential elections on the instrumentality of social media connected via mobile devices. They found out that the most popular social media respondents' access with mobile devices was Facebook which ranked highest with a percentage of 63.6% and followed by Whatsapp with a percentage of

18.1%. "Other social media …indicate that 2.5% use 2go, 3.3% use Twitter, 4.2% use blogs, 2.9% use BBM while 5.4% use Instagram"(p.13).

In Oke (2013) study on the Effect of Social Network on women Entrepreneurs in Nigeria: A case study of Ado- Ekiti Small Scale Enterprise, it was discovered that there is a significant relationship between social networks and business growth of an entrepreneur (p.8). The author insists that social networks are essential factors influencing entrepreneurial behaviour (p.2). Likewise, in Morah & Omojola (2018), it was found that SMEs mostly use Whatsapp and Facebook in selected states in Southern, Nigeria to advertise the business and interact with customers. It is therefore imperative to find out how social media could be adequately deployed for sustainable economic development.

The Nigerian political sphere has even witnessed a significant transformation with the advent of mobile and social media (Morah&Uzochukwu, 2019). Political aspirants can reach prospective voters through phone calls, mobile text messages, social media texts and online post and updates. Research from Pew's Project for Excellence in Journalism suggests that people are increasingly accessing news through mobile social media (Mitchell, Rosenstiel &Christian, 2012) cited in (Humphreys 2013). The use of social media for political communication has economic implications as the cost of sharing this information via traditional media will be reduced. Even at that, Donner & Gitau (2009) in Humpherys (2013) surmise that in places like South Africa, it's cheaper to send a message via mobile social media, like MXit, than it is to send an SMS. Mobile social media is even more forceful according to Humphreys (2013) as the means of media production, distribution, and consumption is on the same device. With the help of social, mobile media, photos or video can also be taken with phones and circulated to so many people in the same mobile environment. Through mobile social media like Facebook, Whatsapp, LinkedIn, Twitter, or YouTube, it can spread faster than just texting a message to contacts. Social media can thus easily help in spreading economic and marketing communication messages due to its potentials and ubiquitous nature.

Social media also plays a vital role in the process of identifying the needs and preferences of consumers. It provides a series of tools through which producers can analyse market needs and

determine customer expectations; and even discover some products and services they offer which meet their client's expectations (Onete, Dina &Vlad,2013, p.660). The authors argue that social media and the internet allow the collection of complete information even before the purchase of a certain product or service. It is clear that consumer read up existing knowledge about the product or service he is about to purchase. The consumers can also compare prices of different sellers/distributors and evaluate the information obtained on social media with the information from traditional media or personal experience (Onete, Dina&Vlad, 2013, p.660).

Social media equally influences the consumers' behaviour; with regards to the rate of information flow which diffuses very fast which is usually generated by the consumer. In this case, the manufacturer will be unable to intervene too quickly in persuading the buyer, without identifying itself as such in the discussions regarding a particular product or service (Onete, Dina &Vlad, 2013, p.660). Therefore, social media platforms are apt for maintaining good relationships between consumers and manufacturer and include: social networks, specialised blogs, discussion forums, platforms that provide review and evaluation services or those that offer services to clients. The social media potentialities as discussed above justify the decision of the study to investigate the general state of the usefulness of social media in economic development in Southern Nigeria.

Method, Population, Sampling and Instrumentation

To identify the ways in which social media contribute to the development of sustainable business and to the way it is seen in southern Nigeria business environment, we conducted an explorative pilot research which included a personal in-depth interview with four key business executives in Okota, Lagos state and Emene, Enugu state who indulge in different businesses. The researchers decided to start with a pilot study to explore the objectives of the study in Emene and Okota areas before extending to the whole of southern Nigerian states. The selected sample consists of two male and two female business executives purposively selected from Lagos and Enugu states. The choices for the two areas were purposively made due to the high level of economic small scale entrepreneurial activities in those areas. Since the objective was on sustainability and use of social media, those interviewed were young entrepreneurs, who are familiar with the application of social media platforms and new media

technologies. The interview was guided with the use of an interview guide which principally centred on the three research objectives, and the findings are presented in an executive summary format.

Findings and Discussions

The study sought to investigate the extent of the use of social media in contributing to the economic development of Nigerian small scale businesses. Four respondents were interviewed in two purposively selected states in southern Nigeria, and the findings are presented in executive summaries against each research question.

RQ1- Are social networking sites driving the transformation of the Lagos and Enugu states business landscape towards achieving economic development?

The four business owners reacted differently to this first question: the first (R1) indicated that social media had helped his business to grow especially Facebook. She observes that "the traditional media is too expensive in terms of advertising, so, we are seriously using Facebook to reach and communicate with our customers". This shows that social media may thrive in Nigeria if properly harnessed and adopted in businesses.

The second (R2) business executive interviewed agreed with the first person but noted that it is more convenient chatting with social media than doing a transaction. For him "effective and real business has to do with physical contact, not online considering the nature of this country, you get what I mean…." This implies that some business enterprises lack trust in social media as an online marketing and business tool.

The third (R3) respondent agrees with R1 although she believes that there might be some fake identities online. She calls for caution in depending solely on social networks: “you can call for a physical meeting with a customer if in doubt. Above all, don’t make any supply without payment confirmed first, don’t!” This implies that some entrepreneurs might be afraid to use social media technology due to fear or lack of business trust.

R4, the four business executive interviewed believed that social media is the in -thing now. He disclosed that most people in business are shying away from using social media because they could not manipulate the new media environment. "Some are yet to understand common android phones usage or even how to use Whatsapp. I think they need enlightenment on the benefits of social media, and how to network in business" he emphasised. This clearly shows that media literacy is essential to social media use for sustainability.

RQ2- To what extent has the use of social media in business attracted foreign investors in Nigeria?

The four respondents agreed that social media could attract foreign investors if harnessed adequately for economic development. R1 and R4 maintained that Nigerian producers should do extensive advertisement of their local product using Facebook. R4 maintained Facebook has a broader scope and potential than other social networks even though, "one can use Whatsapp, Linkedin and Instagram to make business contacts". The other entrepreneurs R2 and R3 agree that family/friends groups and religious groups on Facebook have tremendously helped their businesses to grow. The entrepreneurs reported that family/friends increased their business as there is a wider connection which enhances business demands and scope. This result affirms previous research on social network such as ArentGreve and Salaff (2003) research on "social network and entrepreneurship" which found that a high proportion of family members are present in female networks.

QR3- As useful tools for sustainable economic development, how can we ensure that social media potentials are effectively utilised?

The four respondents reported that finance, social media literacy, infrastructural facilities (for example, electricity and road), media access, family issues, government policy serve as the hindrances to the use of social media for their business growth. R2 and R4 called for a reduction in data tariff to enable small scale traders to purchase data for online business connections. They strongly agreed that if there is proper sensitisation on the usefulness of social media as a business development tool, especially among youths in Nigeria, there will be sustainable economic growth. The respondents strongly believe social media help to reduce the cost of media advertising; that was not previously affordable to small

business owners. This shows that it is apparent, that perceived usefulness of and eases of use of social media make Nigerian business people strive to use it the more.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Social media were demonstrated to be a veritable tool for economic growth in the selected states. This confirms with existing literature (Morah &Omojola, 2018) and upholds the technological determinism theory. In this study, social media technology was found to be significant in determining the business models of entrepreneurs in Southern Nigeria. Social networks were also found to be sources of business assets; information; getting customers and suppliers which can ensure sustainable economic growth.

This study contributes to an evolving body of literature on the effect of the social network to business growth and success of entrepreneurship in Lagos and Enugu. The study, therefore, concludes that there is a strong positive relationship between the social network and business growth/success of an entrepreneur, especially business in the two selected states in southern Nigeria. The study further indicates that effective use of social media contributes to economic growth on social media when adequately harnessed.

The study recommends that private business owners and their employees be trained on the use of social adoption for economic sustainability. The cost of internet data should also be reduced, and WiFi made free in public places so that ordinary people in Nigeria can have access to the internet for their business expansions and connections. More research should be conducted using the survey method to find out empirically the extent of social media usage in businesses in southern and other regions of the country.

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