Social Enterprise Improvisation of Services to the Community Using Mobile Technology

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Abstract: This study investigates the factors influencing the integration of mobile technology and services of Social Enterprise to communities in South Africa. Following the interpretive approach, we conducted a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews with SE employees and members of a community in South Africa. Our analysis revealed seven key factors: connectivity, network infrastructure, capabilities, affordability, accessibility, contextualisation, language translation, and knowledgeability. These factors interact in complex ways to shape the integration of mobile technology with SE services in the community. The study contributes to the literature by providing a nuanced understanding of how mobile technology can be integrated with SE services, highlighting the potential implications and consequences. Our findings have a significant impact on SEs, community members, and IT specialists including those involved in policymaking.

Keywords: Social Enterprise, Mobile devices, Case study

1. Introduction

Service delivery remains a pressing issue in communities worldwide (Masuku & Jili, 2019). Many communities are not receiving the much-needed services, while poverty and unemployment remain pressing issues. Governments in many countries have undertaken the responsibility to address the service delivery needs of communities (Kosec & Wantchekon, 2020) but have been constrained by resource challenges that have made it difficult to provide these critical services (Thusi et al., 2023). In particular, the South African Government has struggled to fulfil its service delivery mandate to communities (Mathenjwa, 2016). Considering these struggles by governments and social challenges within communities, individuals and groups have grown awareness and responsiveness to address these social challenges, such as unemployment and poverty (Fraizer, 2011), by employing Social Enterprise (SE), to drive social change.

Social Enterprise is described as having a social mission to provide services to local communities by combining its social mission with market-oriented business practice to be self-sustaining and support its social mission (Doherty et al., 2014). The emphasis in social entrepreneurship lies in the word "social" which focuses on the social issues in communities and not so much on "profit-making" as is the case with business entrepreneurship (Malunga et al., 2014). Increasingly, people residing in both urban and rural areas of many countries have access to mobile phones (Singh et al., 2016). Thus, SE seeks to employ Mobile phones to improve the services provided to communities, for sustainable development (Wronka-Pospiech & Fraczkiewicz-Wronka, 2014).

Despite Mobile phones' usefulness, many non-governmental organisations, including SEs struggle to integrate the ICT solution (mobile technology) as a tool to improve their service delivery to the public (Parthiban & Qureshi, 2020). The integration of ICT into SE in South Africa can especially help make available critical information to the public for participation and decision-making. Making information available through ICT channels is critical for the delivery of services (Kosec & Wantchekon, 2020). Since the most common way of communication is the use of a mobile phone, one needs to consider that many factors influence people's acceptance of mobile technology (Almarashdeh, 2018). The use of mobile devices in the improvisation of services is neither straightforward nor easy, in that many factors influence both providers and recipients of services. Common factors such as user attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs are regarded as determinants that affect technology acceptance (Alharbi & Drew, 2014).

The paper is organised into five main sections. The first section introduces the paper, followed by the literature review. In the third section, the research methodology is discussed. Next, the analysis and discussion are presented. The fourth section provides an integration mechanism for ease of technology use within SE service delivery. The chapter ends with a summary in the fifth section.

2. Literature Review

Within the current economic environment, where funding for socio-economic development is hard to come by, the need arises for organisations to be financially self-sustaining while also addressing social needs in local communities (Chell, 2007). SE drives the idea of self-sustainability and extends the traditional social purpose initiatives of non-profit entities such as NGOs and charitable trusts (Goval et al., 2017). Additionally, Social Enterprise (SE) stimulates economic growth through activities that lessen the reliance on government funding (Lyne, 2017).

In addition to the brief in the introduction section, SE refers to a business that brings about positive social change in an environment (community) (Littlewood & Holt, 2018). SE growth has been exceptional in many regions across the world over the last three decades (Kerlin, 2010). Some of the countries are Japan (Nakagawa, 2015), Germany (Birkhölzer et al., 2015), Italy (Defourny & Nyssens, 2014), and the United States of America (Defourny & Nyssens, 2012). SE's growing practices are fuelled by the quest for sustainability (Alter, 2007). Therefore, social enterprises are self-sustaining and entrepreneurial in their endeavours (Chell, 2015). The idea of SE is self-sustaining because it seeks to achieve social missions through business ventures (Gonin et al., 2012). In many parts of the world including South Africa, SE brings many vital innovations and crucial services to marginalised communities within the country (Chikadzi, 2014).

SE employs information and communication technology (ICT) to enable and provide services to communities. Primarily, ICT is applied widely in fields such as healthcare (Zonneveld et al., 2020), agriculture (Spielman et al., 2021), and community development. Increasingly, ICT solutions such as mobile technology are employed for community development as it has become a more effective enabler for community engagement (Ingrams, 2015). Mobile technology solutions include mobile cellular phones, personal digital assistants (PDA), video game consoles (e.g. PlayStation Portable), smartphones and tablet computers (Free et al., 2013). Since its adoption in 1990, mobile phones have evolved, and we now have smartphones that have become part of everyday life (Kakihara, 2014).

3. Methodology

We employed a multiple case study approach, selecting an SE and a community in South Africa. A set of criteria was used for the selection. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of the phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2011). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 25 participants: 15 and 10 from the SE and community, respectively. The interviews were stopped at a point of saturation. The participants were assigned pseudonyms, and they included users, managers, project coordinators, IT specialists, fieldworkers, and members of the community. The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Subjective reasoning is employed in the interpretation of the findings. Primarily, the subject approach was selected for three reasons. First, it is a qualitative study allowing for an interpretive approach. Secondly, it enables the researcher to construct meanings socially (Maines, 2000). Thirdly, with the approach, new insights can emerge and be induced into the phenomenon being studied. Also, subjectivity leans toward interpretivism because people see things differently within their lived experiences (Iyamu, 2020).

4. Findings and Discussion

Thus, the findings were viewed from different consequential and implicative standpoints, and meanings were constructed. In constructing the meanings, technical and non-technical perspectives were the focus, on how services were improvised to the communities using mobile technologies. This was geared towards two: to gain a deeper understanding of the contribution of SE to communities, and for a better comprehension of using mobile devices, to facilitate and enable the ease of access to information and service distribution. Seven impact factors were highlighted in the analysis. The factors were categorised into technical and non-technical factors that influenced how SE and community members use technology to share important information related to service delivery. The technical factors are connectivity, network infrastructure, and capabilities. Non-technical factors include affordability (cost-effectiveness), accessibility, contextualisation, language translation, and knowledgeability. The technical and non-technical factors depend on each other and are inseparable in their use to improvise services to the community.

4.1 Connectivity

Connectivity has been used as a metaphor to study interactions enabled by digital technologies for many years (Aljabr, Petrakaki & Chamakiotis, 2024). In the context of this study, connectivity refers to the ability to connect entities, humans and services using technology solutions such as mobile devices to share and access information. This means that connectivity can be via mobile data or Wi-Fi. SE improvise service delivery by sharing important information using technology solutions, including WhatsApp, short message services (SMS) and electronic mail (email) applications. Connectivity thus means that SEs who provide a service to the community can connect via a service provider to distribute information to the community.

Connectivity happens using mobile technology, which plays an important role when it comes to information sharing. According to Sonnad et al. (2022), organisations employ electronic systems to connect and interact with other systems. Most community members have access to a mobile device, which allows them to benefit from the services provided by SE. Those who are connected to the services can share information with others in their community either through word of mouth or by passing on WhatsApp messages. The improvisation of service using mobile technology by SE and community members reaches many in the community. People who do not know about the services now also have access to information as it is being passed on by those who receive first-hand information (through attending training).

4.2 Network Infrastructure

Much emphasis is placed on the impact of telecommunication network infrastructure towards digital transformation and quality of services in developing countries. The cost and quality of services provided to mobile users by internet service providers (ISPs) are dependent on proper network infrastructure, which includes fibre optic cables, data centres, and mobile phone towers (Inusah et al., 2024). Within the context of this study, network infrastructure means the systems and physical components that enable connectivity between computers and mobile devices for communication and information-sharing purposes. Network infrastructure has an impact on the quality of communication and information distribution between SE and community members who rely on mobile connectivity to access the distributed information. Network downtime is often the result of network infrastructure components that are failing or being stolen, such as mobile phone tower batteries. Network downtime refers to the interruption of access to systems, services, or applications due to hardware failure or power outage (Dzedzy & Ayyub, 2024).

When adequate Network infrastructure is not in place, which is sometimes the case within low-income areas, people experience poor internet connectivity, as empirically revealed in this study. Poor internet or mobile connectivity negatively impacts the services provided by SE to the communities because they use mobile technology. Sometimes, cellular phone towers are affected by electricity interruption and internet, or mobile connectivity is interrupted. This has an impact on the availability of information as well as the inability of fieldworkers to share or store critical information online.

4.3 Capabilities

Regarding sharing information and providing learning opportunities through training events, mobile technology is regarded as a crucial tool in providing quality services (KR et al., 2024). The features and capabilities that mobile technology, such as smartphones, provides can potentially increase productivity in rural and urban farming communities (Tulinayo et al., 2022). Features and capabilities within messaging applications such as WhatsApp and text readers allow for quality communication between service providers and community members and between community members. The technical factor of capabilities is important in this study as it relates to what people (service providers and recipients) can do using their mobile devices, which enhances their communication and economic status.

The enabling capabilities and features within mobile technology can result in quality communication between SEs and the communities they are serving. Sharma et al. (2021) discuss the importance of mobile capabilities in providing higher data rates for improved communication. The point of higher data rates for improved communication is also emphasised by Agrawal et al. (2015) when discussing how wireless network technologies have evolved from first-generation (1G) to fifth-generation (5G) technologies. Service providers and recipients benefit when information can be accessed seamlessly using enabling capabilities. These benefits include greater participation in creating new content and information (Emeana et al., 2020). The community can use social

media platforms to share their experience and exchange best agricultural practices (e.g. how and where to grow crops and sell produce).

4.4 Accessibility

There is a strong relationship between access to the Internet and economic development. Accessibility within the context of this study refers to how information and activities are made available, reachable, and usable for those who need to benefit from the available information and services. Emeana et al. (2020) note the need for accessibility, which includes access to mobile devices and network coverage which supports the distribution of agricultural information. This means that the information distributed to farmers and community members needs to be accessible so that they can benefit from it. As noted by Al-Sakran and Alsudairi (2021), this accessibility also refers to the platforms where the information is distributed and the format in which it is shared.

Lack of access to advanced technologies such as smartphones, coupled with limited internet access, are factors that work against accessibility to important information. Mapiye et al. (2023) note these limitations while stressing the need for device capabilities to support information accessibility. Accessibility is also limited by the lack of digital literacy, which relates to the understanding and knowledge to use information presented in multiple formats on an electronic device (Pangrazio et al., 2020). Accessibility in the context of this study also refers to the ability of the community members to navigate to content using their mobile devices (e.g. smartphones). SE should thus ensure that the information and content they share are accessible by targeting different users of devices.

4.5 Contextualisation

The distribution and accessibility of information often need to be tailored to fit within the context or domain within which the users or recipients find themselves (Kaipia et al., 2017). To enhance the relevance of information, much must be understood about the users and the environment they find themselves in. For SE it thus becomes important to know the community they are servicing so that they can provide contextualised and relevant information.

Context is described as the connection of cultural, spatial, and political influences, amongst other factors (De Bruin et al., 2023). SE thus improvises its services by distributing information within the context of what the community needs. Many of the community members have a farming background. This is coupled with their need to be sustainable and use the available land to their advantage, such as growing crops. Information will make sense to them when contextualised around community members' lived experiences. Contextualised information implies that community members get value from the services that are provided to them. The information the community receives leads to productive farming and sustainable living while also addressing malnutrition. The community members become co-produces of knowledge and information because they, understanding the context, share the information with others in similar settings.

4.6 Language Translation

Research shows that many factors hinder communities from benefiting from technological interventions to improve livelihoods within developing countries (Alao et al., 2021). Low levels of literacy and language barriers are among the hindering factors impeding the use of technologies like the Internet and mobile devices for information sharing. Language translation is therefore important to gain maximum benefit from information distribution. The language used by people within a specific grouping or culture carries meaning that is particular to the cultural setting. Language translation in the context of this study is making sure that the terminology used aligns with people's conceptualised thoughts, feelings, and behaviour as noted by Cambell and Young (2016). In their improvisation of services, SE should thus ensure that the terminology they use is understood by their target audience. The process of translation, according to Corina (2021), ensures an accurate rendering of meaning from one language (the source) to another (the target).

The SE that provides services to the farming community needs to ensure that when distributing information, it is understood and contextualised. If language translation does not take place, it can lead to a breakdown in communication based on cultural or educational grounds. Language translation is thus important to ensure that content is correctly presented and that it becomes useful to those for whom the information is intended. This leads to greater participation and richer content creation by both service providers and the community.

4.7 Knowledgeability

For many people and communities, knowledge and skill come through informal learning over many years. Knowledge, in turn, is defined as having an awareness or familiarity of something (or skills, descriptions, etc) which has been acquired through experience, discovery, or learning (Fidelugwuowo, 2021). This means that, apart from formal learning, people have some knowledge base developed through their daily activities. This provides them with a basis for being able to search for new knowledge. Knowledgeability within the context of this study refers to people's understanding of things and concepts within their living environment, enabling them to engage with content and processes.

For SE, the community members need to have some basic knowledge and understanding of their environment and the challenges they face. For example, community members are faced with challenges like food security and unemployment. They do things that supplement their income and provide nutrition. Knowing the challenges they face leads them to look for ways to improve their livelihood. The improvisation of services by SE thus targets community members wishing to learn more about farming, income generation and food security. When the community is knowledgeable, it makes it easy for SE to provide ongoing service to the community. The community becomes appreciative of what they learn through the training provided because they can put the things learned into practice. Enhanced communication based on knowledgeability between SE and the community leads to new knowledge and understanding.

5. Integration Mechanism for Ease of Technology Use

The findings discussed above focused on how the technical and non-technical factors could be employed by SE to improvise its services to communities using mobile devices. Figure 1 illustrates how the technical and non-technical factors are interconnected to influence the integration of mobile technology with SE services. arrows are used to show the relationships and interconnectedness. These findings provided us with the key elements that need to be addressed for SE to effectively deliver service to communities through mobile technology. These key elements form part of the framework as an integration mechanism for improvising services to communities through mobile technology. The framework also shows the relationship between the various factors and how they impact each other.

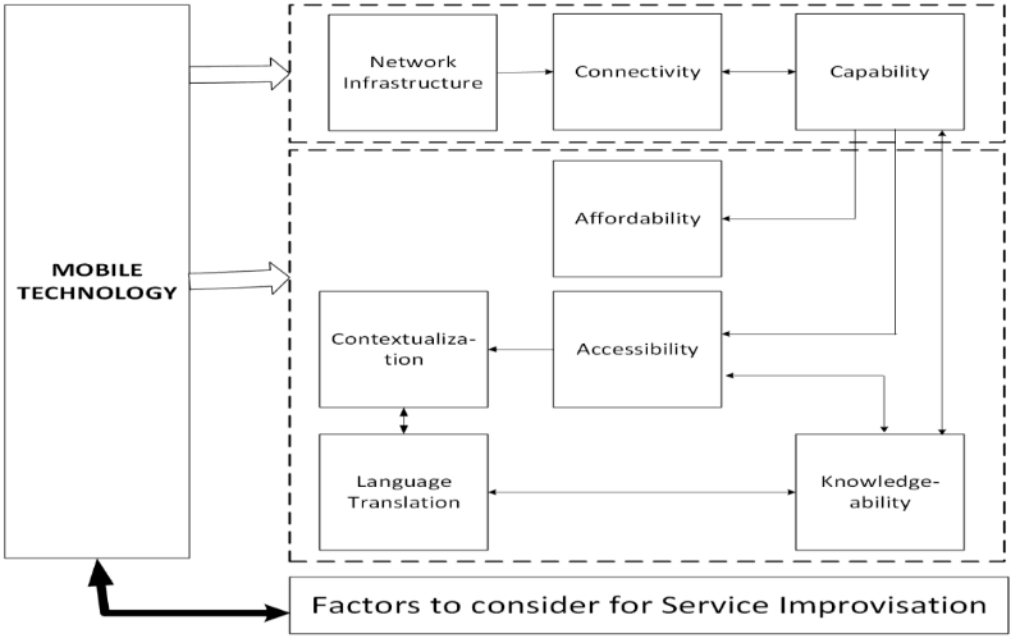


Figure 1: Integration mechanism for ease of technology use

5.1 Network Infrastructure and Connectivity

As noted above, network infrastructure is critical for providing internet connectivity to mobile technology users. Research shows that Internet service providers (ISPs) depend on network infrastructure to provide Internet access to many Internet subscribers. ICT has proven to be a key contributor to socioeconomic growth in developing countries and depends on installing proper network infrastructure. Without the infrastructure, ISPs

also struggle to provide connectivity to users and thus hinder proper communication, which needs to happen for socioeconomic growth. There is, thus, a relationship between the availability of network infrastructure and internet connectivity.

The distribution and sharing of information to the community for community development starts with properly installing network infrastructures, a function performed by telecommunication agencies, government, and regulatory bodies (Rey-Moreno & Pather, 2020). There must be a greater prioritisation of network infrastructure in areas that need internet connectivity for the distribution and sharing of information that is critical to community development. Prioritising network infrastructure can lead to greater participation in content development and the distribution of information, which means that community members are in a better position to grow socioeconomically.

5.2 Device Capability and Affordability

There is a link between connectivity and mobile device capability. Mobile devices are built with connectivity in mind because they have evolved into more than just a communication tool; they are tools with which people do many of their daily tasks (Hartanto et al., 2023). For many of these tasks, there is the capability to retrieve and store information online. The mobile device should thus be able to access the internet and other internet-enabled services. Mobile device capabilities, therefore, play an important role in SE's distribution and sharing of information to communities.

Another capability aspect that affects SE in their service delivery (such as the distribution of agricultural information) is the software that can be installed on mobile devices. Messaging and communication software like WhatsApp is a platform that is used by most for sharing information (Dahdal, 2020). Not all mobile devices have the latest capabilities to read content, nor are they compatible with the latest messaging services. For example, content is sometimes distributed in Portable Document Format (PDF), which allows users to read the content only (and not modify it). Thus, community members must have access to mobile devices that have the required capabilities of both distributing and accessing content on their phones.

The affordability of the latest mobile devices has become a challenge for many community members seeking to use the services and information made available by SE. In addition to sending out messages and content that is only readable by smartphones, SE must also concentrate on using bulk SMS services. In this way, anyone can have access to the shared information. Most phones also allow users to send and receive multimedia services (MMS), which allows images to be distributed in this way. Focusing on reaching the wider community is a priority in information sharing. SE will thus use multiple channels to distribute information, including WhatsApp messaging and SMS / MMS.

5.3 Accessibility and Knowledgeability

Much has been written on equal access to information and how that increases economic development (Chatterjee, 2020). Accessibility speaks about people's ability to access and retrieve shared information. Information being distributed should thus be accessible and in a format that can be read by those who access the information. There is thus a link between device capability and accessibility, and both are important in information sharing.

SE needs to ensure that community members have mobile devices that can access information and that the community knows how to access the information. A person might have mobile devices with the right capacity but not know how to access the information. Knowledgeability in this context means that the community knows the information they need is available and knows how to access it. Not knowing about the available information and not knowing how to access the information are both limiting factors for service improvisation. Training sessions should include the content and the means to access the information. When farmers know how to use their mobile devices to access important information, they participate more in information distribution. This can lead to the stimulation of socioeconomic growth through participation in knowledge sharing.

5.4 Contextualisation and Language Translation

Shared information requires relevance, specificity, and a detailed background. These are some of the characteristics of contextualised information (De Matos et al., 2020). Without relevance, for example, little value can be extracted from the information being shared. SE must make sure that the content is of value and that the

community can engage with the content that is being shared. When the community can relate to the information being shared, it leads to greater participation and engagement.

Language translation is required for effective communication of contextualised information. In sharing information, SE must make sure that they use familiar terms. Regional farmers might use specific terms relating to their farming practices. The language translation is thus not limited to the language but also includes the terms used. Proper translation of the information leads to greater comprehension, and the improvisation done has a greater impact on the community.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by identifying key factors influencing the integration of mobile technology with services of SE to the community, and by demonstrating an understanding of this complex phenomenon. Practically, our findings suggest that SEs need to focus on training and gaining insights from both technical and non-technical factors to integrate mobile technology with their services. Future research could explore these issues in other cultural contexts or investigate the long-term impacts of these technologies on SE services, including policy development.

Ethics Declaration

Ethics clearance was required for this study. The Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), which oversaw the study, granted permission for it.

AI Declaration

No artificial intelligence tools were used in this paper.

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