

South African Women's Rural Development and E-Commerce

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INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, social, economic, and political progress is linked with the ability of countries to make informed, knowledge-based decisions with ICTs performing an increasingly crucial role in many societies in this regard. While the potentially transformative nature of ICTs suggests an unprecedented opportunity to overcome existing social divisions and inequalities, the role of ICTs in development is suffused with contradiction and paradox (Morales-Gomez & Melesse, 1998; Marcelle, 2002). The panoply of recent technological innovation along with the convergence of content, computing, and telecommunications has created new and pervasive applications, such as e-commerce and e-marketing, all of which can impact significantly on organizational processes. While it seems to be a common *a priori* assumption that ICTs can “empower” individuals and increase levels of social interaction and civic involvement (D’Allesandro & Dosa, 2001), little effort, so far, has been made to understand both the changes enabled by the new technologies, and how they can be meaningfully applied to an African rural trading context.

THE RESEARCH NEED

Numerous sources (World Development Report on Poverty, 2001; UNDP Human Development Report, 2001) highlight the absence of research relating to the socioeconomic impact of ICTs, generally, and more specifically, relating to African rural women. Furthermore, there is little research focusing on the economic impact of the integration of ICTs with women’s revenue-generating activities. Minimal empirical evidence exists to support the claims made for and against the use of ICTs, and much of the debate suffers from a lack of unambiguous evidence (Duncombe & Heeks, 2001; Heeks, 1999). In addition to this, as Montealegre (1999) noted, often the substantive issues relating ICTs to business processes are generally ignored and require better fieldwork to analyze the dynamic interplay between the social and the organizational settings in which the ICT is embedded.

The research model developed in this article aims to contribute to the attainment of ethical fieldwork procedures that appropriately and dynamically relate the use of ICTs in a particular socioeconomic context and for a particular organizational process, marketing. The case used in the research was the Rural Women’s Association of Sekhukhuneland (the RWA). The RWA is a gendered not-for-profit, community-based organization located in the village of Apel, 150 km southeast of Polokwane, in the province of Limpopo, South Africa. Within four years, it significantly contributed to the eradication of both child malnutrition-caused mortality and hunger, and, in addition, generated a small income for some of its members. Despite this achievement, and despite the presence of ICTs, in the form of a government-sponsored telecenter, substantial economic growth and prosperity has eluded these rural communities, and access to markets has remained static (Rhodes, 2000).

METHOD SELECTION

Research method is performative, that is, it has effects, it makes differences, it can enact realities, and it can help to bring into reality what it discovers (Law & Urry, 2002). Different research practices make multiple worlds; these may be very unlike each other but be equally true and equally valid. This is so because the “real” is made within relations—real is a relational fact. We are observing what is exposed to our method of questioning, and new realities are created as they interact. In this way, reality is produced in dense, extended sets of relations. The selection of an appropriate research methodology needs to reflect the nature of the domain and phenomenon being studied, and research methods need to encompass the search for connectivity between the development problem, within an understanding of the social and political conditions (Arce, 2001). A “best-fit” research methodology, for this case, is required to satisfy the following conditions discussed below.

BEST-FIT RESEARCH METHODOLOGY REQUIREMENTS

First, methodology must be appropriate and ethically acceptable to the participants and the community in which they operate. Where research is contextual, local historical and sociopolitical information, and the national context in which the research is situated, is an essential component in acquiring authentic understanding. This is particularly relevant in this research study, as development here continues to be blighted by gendered, generational conflict. The “local” is embedded in complex relationships with other actors and forces, and in this case, there is a long and complex history of unequal power relationships and economic marginalization in which community local development processes are embedded. The research is sited in an area where the notion of equal rights for women conflicts with traditional customary law that enshrines existing social hierarchies and male privilege. Decades of violent repression and armed struggle against apartheid and colonialism have led to a culture of violence and witchcraft accusations, with witch hunts being one manifestation of this violence. Witchcraft is pervasive, and accusations are often an inherently political and gender oppression strategy occurring within the ambit of traditional authority.

Second, the selected methodology and research design must achieve the aims of the investigation, which in this case requires direct intervention in exposing and sensitizing the participants to concepts they are not particularly familiar with or may not know at all, such as e-commerce models and marketing concepts. This area of enquiry is complex, and very little is known about the use of ICTs to develop local rural economies. Furthermore, e-commerce and ICTs are emergent, highly unstable, immature, and not yet fully diffused. This scenario suggested the need for an interpretivist exploratory, interventionist research approach to develop a new body of empirical knowledge from which theories might be postulated at a later stage.

Third, for the research to be considered ethical, its design must advance the search for appropriate development strategies. Where research is situated in an underdeveloped sociopolitical-economic space, it often involves deliberate external intervention. Such a situation ethically demands that care be taken not to damage anyone and that emancipation be an outcome of the intervention. Research methodology that understands the local contextual social and political conditions and integrates them with local needs increases the positive consequence of development strategies. Implicit in this assumption is the need for authentic local participation in the study.

SELECTING RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A starting point in selecting research methodology is to reflect on Meta theory. Meta theory (the philosophy of science or epistemology of science used to critically reflect on the nature of scientific enquiry) has particular notions of what the aims of social enquiry should be, and these notions lead to clear preferences for research methodologies and techniques. Three Meta theories (Positivism, Phenomenology/Interpretism, and Critical Social Science) have been clearly linked (Mouton, 2001) to the three major research methodological traditions (quantitative, qualitative, and participatory approaches) and are briefly reviewed below as an aid to guiding the decision of a best-fit methodology for this particular study.

Positivism considers that the social sciences and the natural sciences are similar enough to be able to use the same research methodology that is the use of quantitative methods to measure well-understood phenomena within a body of established knowledge. The lack of a stable body of knowledge discourages the choice of quantitative methods to structure prove/disprove research hypotheses. In this case, the research area requires openness, exploration, and discovery. This infers that the appropriate methodology to follow is qualitative.

With Phenomenology/Interpretivism, the aim of the enquiry is to understand (not to analyze or explain). The research participant is consciously and continually involved in social construction of his/her own reality that is contextual, personal, and subjective. Qualitative methods are used in this school of research to determine mental processes and perceptions in a variety of cultural settings and to understand how people meaningfully fit phenomena into their daily lives. Use of interpretivism is indicated as appropriate where there is no body of existing theory and where contextual meaning is required.

A further dimension of reflection includes the consideration of Critical Social Science theory, which aims to emancipate people from alienation through linking causal analysis with phenomenological investigation (that is, countering oppressive mental modes, for example, in this case, embedded superstition that uses witchcraft accusations as a causal explanation for trouble and misfortune in the community). The ultimate aim is to transform the relations of dependence and enlighten the social actors so they can view their social situation in a new and more beneficial way.

Participative action research (PAR) fits closely with the particular research requirements generated from the preceding analysis. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) defined PAR as “collective, self reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to

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