Chapter 14

Exploring the Diffusion of Mobile Phone among Zimbabwean Migrants in Botswana

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ABSTRACT

From the early 2000s, the population mobility from Zimbabwe has drastically increased due to the collapse of the national economy and political instability. While the Zimbabwean migrants in Botswana have experienced horrific social, economic, and political difficulties, the mobile phone adoption rate among them has skyrocketed. Based on the theory of diffusion of innovations, this study investigates the influence of mobile phone diffusion among Zimbabwean migrants at the individual, community, and governmental levels.

EXPLORING THE DIFFUSION OF MOBILE PHONE AMONG ZIMBABWEAN MIGRANTS IN BOTSWANA

International population mobility is a common feature in the contemporary history of the southern African countries (International Organization for Migration, 2005). Some countries in the region even allow people from neighboring countries to stay legally for a few months without a VISA or a type of permission to enter and work in the host countries. The key factors driving people to

migrate vary, including job opportunity, poverty, disease, human rights abuse, as well as political instability. As a result, separation from family members and disconnection with previous communication networks are easily observable in most southern African countries (Peberdy, 2000).

Botswana is a southern African country, often called a sub-Saharan country. The population of Botswana was approximately two million people in 2009 (USA CIA, 2009). Although the country has a comparably small population, its economy is one of the strongest in the entire African continent: GDP per capita in 2008 was in excess of USD 13,900 and the unemployment rate was less than 7.5%. In contrast to the strong

economy, Botswana's HIV/AIDS infection rate reached 25% among its total population in 2009 (UNAIDS, 2009).

Botswana is now experiencing a new but notable social phenomenon related to international migration. From the early 2000s, the population mobility from Zimbabwe to Botswana has drastically increased due to the collapse of the national economy and political instability in Zimbabwe (Africa Monitor, 2007). Prior to the massive migration, the Botswana government allowed Zimbabweans to stay and work legally for three months per year without a government permit. This open border policy motivated Zimbabweans to move into the rich country of Botswana (Moroka, 2005). More recently, however, responding to the massive international migration, the Botswana government is now concerned about the existing and predictable consequences of the Zimbabwean migration into Botswana.

Although Zimbabweans are the major migrant group in Botswana, most of them experience severe hardships in their lives, which are unique as migrants and different from Batswana – people of Botswana nationality. Most of them live apart from their family members, who have stayed in Zimbabwe, have unstable income sources, and live in very poor housing conditions, often without indoor sanitizing facilities. For instance, many Zimbabwean households in Botswana share one water conduit together and use one toilet, which is located in a corner of the residential block and does not have a flushing device. If a migrant is single or lives apart from his/her family members, in most cases, the person shares a room with many other people, because the cost of housing in an urban area is very expensive in spite of the poor quality of the place.

Even in such dire circumstances, a large portion of Zimbabwean migrants have mobile phones. Although no statistical data is available for the rate of mobile phone adoption among Zimbabweans, a high rate of adoption can be surmised by the abundant possession and use of mobile

phones that was observed. It was easily noticed that many people on the street frequently checked their mobile phones to see if anyone had called.

Capturing these interesting scenes, this study explores why and how the diffusion of the mobile phone occurs among Zimbabwean migrants in unique situations as foreigners in Botswana and analyzes how the diffusion of the mobile phone affects Zimbabwean migrants' individual lives, their migrant community, and the governmental policies towards international migrants. The underpinning theoretical frame for this study is the diffusion of innovations (DOI). Thus, the literature review covers factors affecting the diffusion of innovations in general and mobile phones. For data collection, this study employed ethnography with other qualitative methods including interviews and observation.

DIFFUSION THEORY AND MOBILE PHONE DIFFUSION

Diffusion research in the field of communication studies investigates how an individual in a social system adopts an innovation introduced through certain communication channels (Rogers, 2003). In this definition, three elements of diffusion constitute the key to understanding how the diffusion of mobile phones occurs among the Zimbabwean migrants in Botswana: innovations, social systems, and communication channels. First, an innovation can be anything, such as an object, idea, information, practice, program, etc., if an individual perceives it as new, even though the perceived innovation is already prevalent among others. Second, a social system refers to any social variable that may affect a potential adopter's decision making process. It subsumes culture, history, tradition, politics, economic situation, and rules established by institutionalized human interaction. Third, a communication channel is any means that can deliver messages and actions, including individuals and mass media, such as television,

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