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DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AND SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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Abstract

In the world, digital revolution transforms the entire human activities field such as policies, businesses, humanities, educations. Similarly, in a disruptive context of COVID-19, the commitment and lockdown accelerated the digital appropriation in institutions, schools, collective and individual daily practices. In this challenging context, Social and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) strategies were disrupted from traditional approaches to digital in order to overcome this worldwide commitment. This paper aims at describing and interpreting the digital communication transformation in business strategies through the Industry 4.0 paradigm and TOE (Technology, Organization, and Environment) Model. In a multi-site ethnography qualitative case study, participants were workers involved in the digital communication strategy implementation in the business approach of twelve SMEs installed in Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania, two Africa countries. After observations, interviews, and focus groups, findings enabled the getting of SMEs digitalization challenges and outcomes according technological, organizational and environmental contexts influencing social representation of digital devices and platforms adoption in users experience for a web marketing to maintain business communication with stakeholders. As a recommendation, supporting SMEs digital communication sustainability in developing countries calls to rethink these enterprises' business strategies, take initiative for digital transition leadership, support conversation through community and social media management strategies.

Keywords: Digital transformation, SMEs, Sustainable development, Binding communication, Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

From age to age, the different revolutions disrupted human activities and civilization (Vrontis, Chaudhuri & Chatterjee, 2022; Van Tonder et al., 2021). Since the beginning of the 21st century, a fourth revolution based on Internet and its countless fields of application transforms all the domain of activities in the world

(Shahadat et al., 2023; Van Tonder et al., 2021). Indeed, the digital revolution generates a disruption in social habits through IoT (Internet of Things), Big Data, Socio digital technologies, mobile terminals and shift to virtual platforms. This situation is source of many innovations in strategies which concern individuals and

organizations in developed and global south countries for a sustainable development (Soedarsono et al., 2020; Gougou & Paschal, 2023; Urbach & Röglinger, 2019). For example, in rural communities and cities, the individual and collective habits have been influenced by this revolution in sort that the social organization is changing entirely due to increasing of mobile phones, social networking sites, weak links and similar things resulting in daily continue sharing and sociability online (Gougou, Paschal & Shamaieva, 2023). According to Berger et al. (2020), in both business and non-business institutions, this revolution produces a digital transition by the application of sociotechnical devices in daily activities. So, the appropriation of the mobiles and virtual platforms influences practices, values and people beliefs in this digital era offering new supports of communication (Gougou & Paschal, 2022; Vrontis, Chaudhuri & Chatterjee, 2022; Gougou, Paschal & Eichman, 2023).

Simultaneously, in the world, it is noticeable that entrepreneurship is a vital segment supporting the economic growth and, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are key contributors to economic development. As for the importance of SMEs, it is widely accepted that SMEs are one of the pillars of states/countries' economies. In most countries, SMEs are the dominant form of business organization, accounting for over 90% of registered enterprises, and they play a key role in driving sustainable economic growth and job creation (Diabate et al., 2019). Hence, they increasingly need to respond to the issues of sustainability according to economic, environmental, and social dimensions (Philbin, Viswanathan & Telukdarie, 2022). Therefore, face to the different challenges due to worldwide crisis and disruptions, the entrepreneurs are engaged in providing new offers and innovations in order to be the source of satisfaction thus the commitments (Diabate et al., 2019). Moreover, SMEs are a big lever in the modern worldwide economy to make business at local, national, and interactional areas (Mubarak et al., 2019; Van Tonder et al., 2021). In their domain of activities, the digital revolution is a transformative way to engage a sustainable development in a changing context. In fact, SMEs need to understand that the market environment and customer demands are changing rapidly (Vrontis, Chaudhuri & Chatterjee, 2022). It calls for new business strategies and practices related to organization marketing and management for the community's development.

In Africa, as in the world, many SMEs contribute to the economy and society development. Consequently, the growth of these organizations is very important for communities' wellbeing and sustainability (Diabate et al., 2019; Assefa, 2021; Van Tonder et al., 2021). Since the COVID 19 outbreak, there is a growth of digital usage in business marketing strategies and practices (smart-commerce, Webmarketing, online work, and similar things). This fact is a transforming process trend of global digitalization in developed and developing countries. However, the accelerating popularity and usage of Digital Media has paved way for business in different forms. While big corporates are reaping benefits of so many diverse digital opportunities, SMEs are still lagging far behind in adapting to these innovative technologies to increase their outcomes (Nuseir, 2018; Bican & Brem, 2020). Consequently, for Gougou, Paschal & Shamaieva, (2023), there are several critical gaps in our current knowledge of the digital revolution issues in many areas as in Cote d'Ivoire (West Africa) and Tanzania (East Africa). This context justifies our study about the transformation of communication strategies through a strategic appropriation of digital technology in order to sustain SMEs in a

competitive changing environment. This research took into consideration the binding factors of the digital communication to describe the transformation and disruption in SMEs in Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania. This context calls to study digital strategies and digital (Tools and platforms) integration in SMEs for a sustainable development of the business in a context of uncertainty, before, during and after the COVID 19 outbreak. In these circumstances, this adoption is a source of many questions on the SMEs sustainability development.

1.1. Research question

This study was guided by a question: how can digital communication strategies support the sustainability of SMEs in Africa thus the worldwide uncertainties?

This question is based on the context that in the world, transformation of business strategies through digital communication implementation is related to challenges and opportunities influencing the sustainable development of communities.

1.2. Problem statement

The digital revolution is transforming all sectors of activity within society by the omnipresence of digitals in daily at local and worldwide levels. In politic, economy, and sociocultural practices, the usage of digital tools (Internet, social media, mobile terminals and so on) to communicate is a common concern for decision makers, business actors and citizens for a sustainable society. Moreover, in a context of unpredictable uncertainties (as COVID 19 worldwide crisis), the digital communication represents an advantage in order to increase the resilience, overcome various contextual challenges like lockdown, geographical barriers, market competitiveness and similar things. In addition, both in Global South (developing countries) and developed countries, it is observed that digitals integration in SMEs can be a source of an effective growth in term of competitiveness, new assets and business opportunities. This digital transformation mostly helps small business to be efficient in production and marketing. Yet, in Africa, this shift to digitals encounters various situational challenges like Materials and Internet access, digital literacy, social representations, and similar things (Paschal, Gougou & Kagendo, 2024).

In Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania, particularly, the growth of entrepreneurship in the last decades led people to launch many SMEs covering these countries to get business opportunities and reduce poverty. These Small and Medium companies implemented in various fields of activities have an important role in employment, education, taxes support, communities' wellbeing, and the country ranking. Furthermore, related to the worldwide digital revolution and national policies, many SMEs in Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania are engaged in digitalization with the adoption of new communication tools (Smartphones, E-mails, social media, websites, clouds ...) for sustainable marketing management approaches resulting in profits and more business opportunities. This revealed a need to get high visibility to attract many clients from social media within the online market. Compared with traditional marketing (in person spaces), Web marketing offers the advantage to compete in a bigger market and find customers just without moving to physical spaces. This is the era of digital communication and web marketing usage to reach the organization goals. Once the company adopts a digital communication strategy, it needs to attract the large number of social media users in order to develop the visibility of its online

market.

However, in developed and developing countries, according to many Internet users experience and SMEs stakeholders (employees, managers, customers, partners), the common concern is that digital communication strategies integration is challenged by many factors like the availability and accessibility to the digital materials, digital literacy mastery and social representation of digital tools in business (Beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, stereotypes...). This resulted into many local SMEs marketing approach failures due to the target public low engagement in the organization strategy transformation and contribution for a balanced development through a sustainable economy supported by entrepreneurship. The subsequent problem essentially relates to the binding factors of this digital communication transformation as a way of supporting SMEs activities and innovation for the sustainable development in Africa as an example.

These facts drove researchers' reflection on the Technology, Organization, and Environment levers influencing the effective adoption of digital communication to support SMEs resilience and sustainable development in Africa. Still, in this changing society, the engagement of all citizens in business strategy digital transformation sustainability is necessary to build a sustainable model, resilient and perform for a robust flexible smart economy system.

1.3. Objective

The overall objective of this study was to assess and describe the transformation of digital communication strategies through the appropriation of social media as a tool for supporting the business organization resilience and stakeholders wellbeing in a world of uncertainties.

1.4. Theoretical lens

In the trend of digitalization, industry 4.0 can be defined as an umbrella term, denoting a variety of recent concepts, as well as multiple linked disciplines within the industry or society to transform the business operations. It means that digital transformation and the wider Industry 4.0 paradigm involve a range of different technologies, such as IoT (Internet of Things), Cyber-Physical systems (CPS), big data and AI/ML (Philbin, Viswanathan & Telukdarie, 2022; Javaid et al., 2023). Consequently, this study was guided by industry 4.0 paradigm and Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) Model. Akpan, Udoh & Adebisi (2020) asserted that the Internet is the bedrock of the industry 4.0 (I4.0) paradigm such that others, enabling technologies depend on this digital communication infrastructure. So, scholars need to investigate how technologies have the capacity to provide a greater impact on the SMEs performance and business sustainability in a challenging context. This includes an understanding of which technologies impact on sustainability as well as the level of maturity of the technology and the corresponding viability of adopting digital tools in certain frametimes (such as short-term, medium-term and long-term).

In this paper, researchers considered the industry 4.0 *social dimension* by questioning the binding factors of sustainable digital communication transformation in SMEs. Similarly, Effendi et al., (2020) stated that thinking on the digital communication adoption calls to use Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) Model as a theoretical lens in SMEs by observing transformation factors like perceptions, information technology capabilities, risk perceptions, and barriers to adoption. Indeed, TOE framework was

deemed useful in investigating various contexts of innovation because it has proven to be the chosen framework in understanding new technology adoption as a source of support to sustain the value creation in business.

In brief, in this paper related to the industry 4.0 paradigm, researchers used the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) Model in order to analyze the Digital Communication adoption and SMEs Sustainable Development in Africa. That calls to explore the binding factors as levers of behavioral transformation in organization and social areas for a more effective web marketing strategy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mubarak et al., (2019) study stated that in a modern hyper-competitive era, Business ecosystem evolves and disrupts continuously in sort that organizations like SMEs must transform their strategy constantly. So, the context of digital revolution leads a transformation in the SMEs management and marketing approaches to take into consideration the digital trends in business operation for a resilient performance. Moreover, for the author's empiric study, digital transformation influences the structure, policy and the business stakeholders growth strategies as decision/policy makers, consumers, managers and so on. For a successful digital transformation in SMEs, managers have to justify the allocation of resources toward technological infrastructure development in the operations of their firms through a flexible sustainable approach for developing human capital and to enhance their absorptive capacity. This paper is very important in understanding how the digitalization of business operation requires changing strategies for the success of SMEs in a hypercompetitive area. This transformation concerns the communication aspect also. Our current study tries to contribute to the continuity of the research about digital transformation strategies for SMEs sustainability in a changing environment influenced by the industry 4.0 revolution.

Akpan et al., (2020) article was a Special Issue to examine how simple technologies, such as FinTech (Social Media, and other technical innovations) help in improving small business operations and performance. The scholars' evaluated the awareness and adoption of advanced technology and identify the apparent challenges against technology implementation and deployment in SMEs that operate in the informal sector during the COVID 19 lockdown. Indeed, many SMEs in global South (Africa, Asia, and South America) economies are gradually adopting the Internet and Web-related technologies to create social businesses and develop new business models. Therefore, the revolution in Internet technologies and telecommunications provides new and affordable ways for SMEs in these economies to conquer market and promote brands due to rapid technological advancement in the globalized world. However, according to these scholars, many challenges continue to hinder digital technologies' adoption by small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in developing economies: availability, accessibility, affordability, adoption, digital literacy, and similar things. In a synthesis of articles, this study discusses recent developments in the global economy and the fiercely competitive business environments to provide evidence that state-of-the-art technologies are essential to enhancing competitive advantage and ensuring survival. As recommendation, they stated that the strategies to survive include a successful adoption of advanced technologies face to the new norm imposed by COVID 19 and the fierce global competition. This article related to our

research objective was focused on advanced technology adoption in SMEs. While our current study will just describe the digital communication disruption as another lever of business resilience in SMEs regarding the changing world commitments for a sustainable development in the Global south SMEs.

Van Tonder et al., (2021) study purpose was to present a systematic literature review of studies to describe how Business Model Innovation (BMI) Success in the Fourth Industrial Revolution influences BMI or SMEs growth and sustainable strategies in a digital era. For these scholars, an innovative business model is very important to support entrepreneurship initiatives as a transformation and renewal opportunity in order to overcome many contextual challenges related to the global trends like lockdown, hyperactive- competitive market, business commitments, digitalization of operations and so on. As a method, this paper used a synthesis analysis of articles related to BMI and SMEs in the 4.0 industrial revolution trends published in the period 2011-2021. The findings identified many literature gaps related to the integration of digitals and SMEs business model transformation to provide a better offer and service to their stakeholders (Customers, partners, employees and so on) for a sustainable strategy model. This paper contributes to the body of knowledge on Business Model Innovation processes and outlined how SMEs can successfully achieve BMI in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Nevertheless, as it was a literature review while our current paper was an empirical case study in West and East Africa countries to describe the digital communication framework, challenges, and opportunities in the Global South.

In their research, Vrontis, Chaudhuri & Chatterjee (2022) aimed at investigating the contributions of digital technologies toward SMEs performance. It pointed that Digital business transformation is a very significant fact according to the worldwide trends including digital communication strategies implementation in all the daily activities. Moreover, it is stated that Web marketing technologies aims at facilitating communication, resources and information sharing, interoperability, and collaboration. Therefore, the usage of digital technologies could reduce the influence of external crises and introduce massive changes in business operations by providing better business models. So, SMEs adopt digital in their innovative business strategies to grow and overcome many challenges. Researchers used a partial case study survey to collect data from respondents who possessed at least a basic concept of digital technologies and their contributions to SMEs. Findings showed that adopting digital technologies has a significant impact on the creation of economic sustainability and social value for SMEs. Their study also found a significant moderating impact of entrepreneurial orientation on the relationship between social, economic value creation and SMEs performance. Nevertheless, there was still a knowledge gap related to SMEs digitalization process and specifically in the field of digital communication strategies. Consequently, our research tried to solve this gap by providing empirical data from SMEs in the context of Africa.

Shahadat et al., (2023) reflected on *Digital Technology Adoption in SMEs: What Technological, Environmental and Organizational Factors Influence in Emerging Countries*. Their research aimed at exploring the technological, environmental, and organizational factors that influence digital technology adoption in the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) sector in developing countries. In other words, it consisted in identifying the determinants that

contribute to decision-making in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) adoption in SMEs field. Through a quantitative case study in Bangladesh, the authors used a structured questionnaire to collect data from 535 samples from higher- and middle-level SMEs managers to understand the socio-environmental influence factors on digital transformation in the selected business strategies. Findings indicate that *relative advantage, complexity, observability, perceived cost, top management support, innovativeness of top management, competitive pressure and government support* are significant determinants of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) adoption in SMEs. This article is an interesting contribution to our current reflection as it provides analysis related to the binding and challenges factors able to support the digital transformation sustainability in SMEs. Yet it is a case study in Bangladesh that is not mainly focused on the digital communication approach and this limitation justifies our current paper taking place in Africa research context.

All the articles used in the literature review give a depth background of our research context and reveal a critical gap to understand the dynamism of digital transformation for a sustainable business in developing and developed countries (Shahadat et al., 2023; Mubarak et al., 2019; Van Tonder et al., 2021; Effendi et al., 2020). However, our current study explores the social dimension of the digital transformation in the SMEs business strategy through the adoption of Social Media, websites, and mobile terminals. Therefore, there is a need for further investigation of the cost/benefit analysis associated with the digital transformation by SMEs (Philbin, Viswanathan & Telukdarie, 2022). The next section allows designing our investigation and giving details about the research process.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

In this paper, researchers used a multisite ethnography case study (Falzon, 2016; Hine, 2015) to describe and interpret the digital communication binding factors according to SMEs stakeholders daily experience as Employees, clients, managers and so on. Research procedures were based on the topic's scope to select three inclusion/exclusion criteria: *SMEs location, digital communication strategies appropriation context* (Technology - Organization - Environment), and *outcomes*. So, the investigation took place online and offline to observe practices in the field of the digital communication implementation for a sustainable business strategy.

Indeed, many SMEs in Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania are mainly in the business for sale, construction, education, IT, transport, materials making and cosmetics, agriculture, industry, and services (Administrations). Hence, researchers used their connection with friends and relatives' network as mean to get access and collect reliable data in various SMEs. In addition, the TOE model (Technological context, Organizational context, and Environmental context) is also applied to select the participants because this study calls to take into consideration SMEs engaged in digital transformation. Thus, the other SMEs using only the traditional communication tools were not selected as research field in order to get insights from the focus target audience. All the selected SMEs considered dimensions of digital communication strategies like management and marketing approaches. Consequently, in this study, researchers used a descriptive and qualitative case study through a multi-site ethnographic approach applied to describe the participant's social representation (Beliefs, values, and attitudes)

and challenges related to digital transformation and communication implementation in their business activities.

3.2. Sample and sampling techniques

In this case study, researchers used a convenience sampling method to recruit the participants and collect the data. This method was appropriate in a situation where it was difficult to select the participants in a probabilistic approach due to the lack of statistics and the COVID-19 outbreak during the beginning of the investigation. Then, the adoption of digital communication tools in the SMEs strategies and business allowed to identify their Technological, Organizational and Environment contexts related to the TOE model as a criterion. Researchers chose SMEs using social media in their daily business and management activities.

In Tanzania, researchers started by getting data from the ten (10) nearest SMEs like Philpo, Rorya, Pamoja Hub, Ossai, Scaleinbiz, Nichesus Godwini, Kamwene shop, Kijiji Yeetu, Tandala. These SMEs are shops, retailers, financial services, Management Consultant, M-pesa (money transaction via mobile phones), Internet Service and digital tech inclusion and similar field of activities. In Cote d'Ivoire, the researchers took information in two (2) SMEs for the investigation in person and online. These companies are located in Abidjan, the economic capital of the country, and in Koumassi commune. ET GUELAMON is a furniture maker, constructor and import/ export SME using a hybrid Web marketing communication through in person and online operation. SECAMCI SME sells electric and sea company materials is a shop.

In brief, the research included 32 participants working in 12 selected SMEs (10 in Tanzania and 2 in Cote d'Ivoire). They were part of the human resources of these twelve SMEs as CEO, community managers, web marketer and employees for our convenience sample. Taking into consideration I 4.0 paradigm, the investigation took place onsite and online in Cote d'Ivoire (Case of ET GUELAMON and SECAMCI), while the online form was used in Tanzania. The workforce range is 1-37 in each SME and participants selected were these Small and Medium Enterprises digital communication managers, employees, and partners without distinction of age or gender. The inclusion/exclusion criteria allowed to validate the process by an investigation scope for participants views about the digital appropriation process, challenges and outcomes on the marketing and communication strategy of the SMEs to get more understanding of the participant practices and opinions.

3.3. Data collection

To collect the data, researchers followed three steps including different tools of research to build the corpus and data sets from February 2022 to February 2023.

Firstly, a non-participative on-site observation in three-selected SMEs allowed to identify their marketing and management practices, technological shift accessibility and availability, and usage of the digital communication tools in their business strategies growth. Simultaneously, a virtual observation took place on ET GUELAMON Website and, SECAMCI, ET GUELAMON and KIJJIYEETU Facebook pages. In addition, researchers could get extract of WhatsApp conversation later from the digital communication managers to document the virtual observations about the practices in the selected SMEs.

Secondly, an opened interview guide was used to get more information from the participants. To avoid biases, researchers

started with a pretest guide administered to three participants at ET GUELAMON in order to test the appropriateness and understandability of the questions related to the storytelling shared by the managers, employees and collaborators available at the workplace for the circumstance. Then, the full guide was administered in person to 8 participants at ET GUELAMON, 4 others at SECAMCI and 20 participants (online through google form) in Tanzania. The respondents were digital communication managers, digital specialists, employees, and partners. This procedure allowed to increase the interview guide validity according to participative approaches accepted by research community (Galvan & Galvan, 2017).

Thirdly, a focus group with four participants as digital managers of the SMEs helped in improving the understanding of the replies provided during the individual interviews. This last approach allowed understanding the views and social representation of participants related to digital communication opportunities and challenges in the SMEs marketing strategies transformation according to the context of Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania, two countries in Africa.

3.4. Data analysis areas

In this study, researchers focused on digital communication transformation in SMEs growth strategies, and we considered observation, interviews and focus group data. Discourses and conversations or textual data were proceeded by using content analysis (Sacks, 1992: 339; Bloor, 2006) and NVIVO software according to the three set factors of the TOE model: Technological context, Organizational context and Environmental context. This model applied in African SMEs sustainability shall allow in underlining views, perceptions and challenges of participants related to the digital transformation in their companies and the business operation in a highly competitive market. This approach is appropriate in clearly identifying the views of participants according to their experience and appropriation of digital tools in their daily business activities as managers, employees, or digital specialists in the investigated SMEs in Africa.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to the TOE model, the findings are organized in three items about technological, organizational, and environmental contexts related to the digital communication transformation in the selected SMEs in Africa.

4.1. Technological context

An action carried out in a context of freedom is more binding than when carried out in a context of constraint. The digital communication transformation in SMEs grew during the COVID 19 context and *accessibility/ availability* of socio-digital technologies in the daily life of business stakeholders. The respondents provided some views related to technological context of digital communication strategies adoption in Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania according to *relative advantage, complexity, and compatibility*.

Around us, people use many mobile phones, internet, and social media to communicate daily. In our business, before the COVID 19, we chose these online tools freely in order to diversify our communication strategy because of many new opportunities with our customers and partners. In our company, the availability of computers and Internet is a benefit. However, for the smartphones or laptops, it is the responsibility of the digital

communication workers to use their own materials often to maintain the business dynamic of our company. Most of our customers are contacted through the digital communication supports and that is good in our business strategy.

Similarly, a manager in Tanzania stated that:

In our marketing approach, the customers have freedom to use traditional or online means to interact and get access to our offers. On the website, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Emails, we are free to share the information, proceed the orders and control the tasks completed for a good marketing and organizational management. It provides a great visibility and steady stream of organic referrals from people who find us via our website and Google.

Another manager in Cote d'Ivoire described this technological context of digital transformation in the statement below:

We have many customers preferring digital communication tools. For example, a day, we encountered issues with Internet accessibility because of a cut of electricity. The marketing Director called a client and said: "We cannot send the files to you online; can we bring it in hard copy at your office?" Yet the client replied, "Madam, in the 21st century, it is time of digitalization, so, take your disposition to send the files online, I am not interested in getting a hard copy due to my time management and our business digitalization model".

The presence, availability, accessibility of social media and digital technologies (Smartphones, tablets, computers, Internet ...) in Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania population daily environment is an important factor of the digital communication appropriation in businesses. Likewise, during the investigation, researchers observed the presence of technological tools like computers, mobiles and social media platforms used by the SMEs to manage the Human Resources and relationships with partners in daily tasks. So, it is a behavioral and social transformation influencing the SMEs sustainability strategies to build a closer relationship with others in the marketing management process. The feeling of freedom is an internal factor leading the entrepreneurs to use social media, mailing, digital platforms, and technologies to achieve the business tasks transversally. Moreover, these contextual technological binding factors increase shifting to web marketing as mean to get new business opportunities and revenues. In the selected SMEs business approaches, this choice allowed to complete personal and professional goals in various management environment following the international trends to overcome lockdown and geographical barriers. Consequently, participants revealed that the adoption of digital communication strategies to support SMEs resilience in low-income countries is compulsory to sustain their development due to the external pressure of partners. This is similar with Gomez-Trujillo et al., (2021) view asserting that the process of digital transformation can be viewed as a driver as well as a predecessor of sustainability, where companies need to develop supporting digital capabilities to achieve a balanced set of impacts across economic, environmental, and social dimensions.

However, this transformation needed to make technological investment to get a good performance in a competitive business environment where SMEs can make the difference by the technology shift. The relative advantage, low complexity and good

compatibility with some stakeholder's (partners) in B2B2C activities is an important level of this technology adoption in SMEs. So, according to Vrontis et al., (2022), Shahadat et al., (2023) and many scholars, Technological context in Global South is a relative Advantage to implement new strategies like inbound marketing. It allows to develop the social capital, visibility and return on investment benefits resulting to the integration of web marketing in SMEs operation process. In low-income countries, it means that digital communication supported by socio-digital technology accessibility is an opportunity to contribute to SMEs resilience and outcomes for a Sustainable Development in Africa.

This fact shows that the *Complexity and Compatibility* of digital communication approach support the traditional process of the SMEs in Africa. It calls for a digital transition for a sustainable transformation able to overcome local and worldwide challenges. This observation is similar with Effendi et al., (2020) and Shahadat et al., (2023) findings stated that the main drivers of information technology adoption are a competitive advantage on reducing costs, time and increasing productivity while social media is considered as an application that has great advantages compared to offline marketing to increase the audience and business revenues. These examples of the impact of digitalization show that information technology can no longer be viewed as a subordinate support function, but rather that digital communication tools need to be perceived as an integral part of the business and organization. Thus, all digital transformation stakeholders (Policy makers, employees, managers, partners, customers and so on) can learn from one other, make connections, gain new skills, and be encouraged to take their business to the next level in the digital area. In order to survive, traditional companies have to question their organizational models, learn from digital disruptors to shift their organizational models, culture and mindset. It calls to take profit from the further deployment of digital infrastructures, the proliferation of smartphones that allows ubiquitous computing, and the generation of huge volumes of all kinds of data.

To overcome this technological context, managers must *rethink* the SMEs business Innovative strategies to actualize firm performance with government support and improve ICT infrastructure. That required a transition for promoting technological externalities within the digital marketing approach and establishing socio-digital technologies platform adoption to support SMEs performance and sustainability face to the changing world (Akpan et al., 2020). Indeed, in developing countries like in Africa, SMEs encounter many contextual challenges including poverty, low digital literacy and internet, dominion of traditional marketing and so on. This reality calls to develop a new business model or adjust the existing one according to market demands and the innovativeness associated with the change according to the trends in this digital era. But the analysis of the organizational context factors is another level of sustainable digital transformation in SMEs.

4.2. Organizational Context

In this study, Employee Skills, Cost Perception, Top Management Support, and Resources allocated to support the digital transition are important factors in the organizational transformation. A participant, as SME manager, shared the experience below:

The challenge was digital literacy. Most of the employees were not familiar with the digital tools. Even if they had a standard mobile phone, they were not experienced in community management or digital integration in our business process. It took time and required a digital

marketing and communication specialist recruitment. Moreover, the cost of the materials was another challenge due to the low financial resources and the fact that our manager could not invest too much money for digital transformation. We are a small business and only the CEO, Webmarketing manager and Community manager are the three Managers of our digital communication strategies due to their digital skills mastery. This digital transformation in our organization management was well perceived employees and partners thus the difficulties.

The respondent confirm that the top management support helps to improve the employee's digital skills mastery and build a better digital transition in the SMEs. Similarly, another manager testified that experience in the statement below:

In terms of time, the transition from conventional to digital tools took a bit of time because of the adaptation time necessary. The digital platforms and tools implementation in the business strategy called to be able to adapt them to the company and customer's needs to match with our SMEs market realities (...). Patience to understand the system and transformation is required with digitals. But I think that this allowed us to learn more.

Employee skills, cost perception and top management are lever of SMEs growth as mentioned by the participants in our research. Yet, the digital literacy gap, lack of finance, much energy and efforts required are some organizational contexts preventing the digital communication implementation in many SMEs in Africa like in many countries in the world. Thus, employees' digital skills gap, cost perception and management support challenges, the digital communication transformation in this context is overcome by many factors as trainings for a resilient organization. According to the respondents, digital transition was required because the adoption of the technology in the SMEs is source of opportunities to grow in a competitive context thanks to the management measures implemented to support the transformation. This fact is similar in Tamisier et al., (2019) and Akpan, Udoh & Adebisi (2020) studies stating that this implementation results from an internal and external analysis to provide digital professional skills growth to employees for a successful business outbound marketing outcome. It is an opportunity to increase the SMEs visibility, social capital and profit based on social media, digital platforms, and technologies for a good competitiveness in a collaborative environment including employees, managers, customers, and partners.

In other words, *organizational context* plays an important role in the digital communication strategies implementation success in SMEs according to the participants views. This mutation of the managerial perception and digital transition offers the advantage to build a more resilient innovative business model using digital as lever of development in a competitive disruptive environment in both developing and enveloped countries. So, according to the findings, this situation required strategies of continuous learning (Gougou & Paschal, 2022) to up to date the managers skills for an effective adoption of socio-digital technologies (Web, social media, mobile terminals) in the SMEs operational process for a sustainable business growth in Africa and in a world of uncertainty.

As recommendation, SMEs managers must take initiatives to reform the management structure through a digital leadership transition to increase the competitiveness and flexibility in a challenging business context. It means that SMEs need to be competitive in the market by using the social media opportunities to communicate, sell, build a sustainable relation and grow in collaborating with the customers and other stakeholders (Akpan et al., 2020). It requires a transversal online and offline dialog that calls Human Resources to take into consideration the stakeholder's digital literacy gap and engaging the entire workforce in the adoption of the social media, website, and mobile terminals in the daily operations of the SMEs. For example, the usage of inbound marketing, big data exploration, benchmarking in SMEs business strategies can be useful for business prospection and a predictive management of the trends in a disruptive market. Moreover, this digital transformation calls policy makers and managers to reorient policies, strengthen key complementary factors, and reform business growth strategies in their organization management (Shahadat et al., 2023). It consists in implementing intelligent marketing approaches and transformational digital leadership in terms of adopting new technologies to sustain SMEs digital capacities, employee skills, and business outcomes (Vrontis et al., 2022). However, this digital communication transformation calls to question the environmental context too in order to get a clear understanding of the SMEs experience in Africa.

4.3. Environmental Context

The environmental context is a very important lever of digital communication adoption in SMEs investigated in Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania. Our findings show the social representation of the participants in their business digitalization process.

Indeed, a manager shared this statement:

In our company business environment, the digitalization is promoted by the government policy and both large companies and SMEs must include digital communication strategies for more opportunities. Our company needs more visibility and during the COVID 19 outbreak, our partners, customers, and employees agreed with us to implement digital communication strategies in order to maintain our partnership, reach the business goals and avoid too many risks related to the health crisis.

The business environment and the COVID 19 outbreak influenced the adoption of the digital marketing and communication in the companies. Similarly, another participant mentions that facts in the statement below:

In my business, digital communication is the spine bone of our sales. We cannot reach our business goal without our presence on social media, because all our partners buy online and take the goods in the shop. Both our partner practices and the government policy support our initiatives to maintain the digital marketing in our Small and Medium Enterprise. Honestly, it improved our business management in order to avoid misunderstanding, as we are available instantly online to discuss clearly with our employees, customers, managers and partners. It allows avoiding many uncertainties in our business and maintain a good social capital.

Digital transformation is seen as a benefit for the top management and business market growth through online opportunities. That is mentioned by another respondent in the corpus below:

Beyond conventional marketing, the digital tools allowed us to be in touch with other companies CEO. In past years, we needed to go to prospect offices to identify their needs and proceed their offers. Yet, with digital technologies, they send us the list of their needs directly by email with supporting images to share their needs, and we respond quickly to complete them. It means that with conventional marketing there was a big waste of time. Today with digital, we proceed requests instantly.

Findings on *environmental context* revealed that SMEs shifted to digital communication to adopt the target population practices and overcome threats. Indeed, due to the digital revolution, most of their target prospects are in the generations Y, Z, or digital natives. It means that the identity and habits of this population required an appropriate approach to adapt the communication strategy in their hyper connective daily habits. Moreover, these prospects are more accessible online to network, for sale, to buy and build social ties/ social capital on social media in a web marketing strategy. Then, participants perceived the technology appropriation as a source of *Competitive Advantage* to drive the market and maintain a good business resilience in a changing world environment. So, in Africa, like in the world, this socio environmental context and COVID 19 outbreak accelerated the Business digitalization strategies in big companies and SMEs to sustain business activities. Trischler & Li-Ying (2023) mentioned the same findings in their research stating that this transformation offered competitive advantages to build a more flexible and customizable relation with partners, customers, employees, competitors, and the whole population available online.

In addition, observations showed that the global and local *Environmental Uncertainties* accelerated the modern business strategy adoption based on digital communication in both Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania. This transformation allowed to include population behaviors, challenges, and trends in the choice of innovative e-business strategies approaches to overcome misunderstandings due to people habits and low digital literacy perception. It is due to intern and extern factors related to the organization policy and resources, stakeholders' awareness and involvement in the digital transformation, social representations (attitudes, beliefs, behaviors) from the SMEs context. Consequently, this situation results in improving SMEs ability to achieve sustainable competitive advantages in this changing business environment (Trischler & Li-Ying, 2023; Hanelt et al., 2021). As Bican & Brem (2020) study, it is also noticeable that *Government support* is very important for an effective adoption of a managerial transformation according to socio economy trends. This support allowed SMEs in Africa to increase their resilience, market flexibility, revenues and contribute to the reduction of youth unemployment. However, according to Nuseir, (2018) and Shahadat et al., (2023) statements, thus the various benefit of digital communication tools like social media, the SMEs are still lagging far behind in adaptation of this innovative technology of the present century.

As recommendation, it is useful to shift to Community and social media management for a sustainable environmental context. The core of digital communication is to interact and maintain a good relationship with the partners, customers, employees, and users of

the web in a sustainable community perspective (Stich, Zeller, & Hicking, 2020; Shahadat et al., 2023; Philbin, Viswanathan & Telukdarie, 2022). So, in this changing world influenced by many uncertainties' factors, the choice of a community management approach is a sustainable lever of social capital building benefits on new market and growth in SMEs face to the hypercompetitive market requirement. Moreover, it calls to adopt a social media management approach to promote inclusion, diversity and equality in the decision taking. The first step, companies must analyze the corporate strategy, objectives, and environment to reduce the stakeholder's issues related to the digital transition implementation costs and increase the sustainability supports of the digital platforms' adoption. Secondly, companies must determine which industry 4.0-maturity level they want to achieve through a self-digital competence and capacities assessment based on the environment social representation trend analytics according to the population behaviors. Thirdly, SMEs must select and implement the maturity-specific digitization tools and transitioning measures for an effective digital strategy adoption in a chronological process maintaining conversation and inclusion of the stakeholders in the transformation. This provides SMEs a roadmap for digital transformation.

5. CONCLUSION

The overall objective of this study was to assess and describe the transformation of digital communication strategies through the appropriation of social media as a tool for supporting the business organization resilience and stakeholders' wellbeing in a world of uncertainties. Through a multisite ethnography case study applying the industry 4.0 paradigm and TOE model, findings revealed a great digital transformation offering opportunities of business growth to SMEs in Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania. In developing and developed countries, this requires a digital transition to improve the benefits of digital platforms (social media, mails, web sites) and mobile terminals (smartphones, computers, tablets) to support the management and business model innovation through digitals. As recommendation, supporting SMEs digital communication sustainability in developing countries calls Government, managers and these Compagnies Stakeholders to rethink the SMEs business strategy: take initiative for digital transition leadership, support conversation through community and social media management strategies. As limitation, it is a qualitative study using a convenience short sample in two African countries. So, the findings cannot be generalized and quantitative research in more SMEs is required for new studies related to the digital transformation and sustainable development of SMEs in developing and developing countries.

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