

# Breaching Location Silos: An Exploration of social media optimisation by SMMEs in Southern Africa

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*This study explores the significance of social media as e-marketplaces for advancing e-commerce for small scale, micro and medium enterprises (SMMEs) in the southern African sub-region – notably in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Evidence from the examination of extant literature and our personal observations reveal that when properly harnessed as e-marketplaces, social media platforms, especially those that are compatible with mobile devices (i.e. smart mobile phones, tablets and notebooks), have tremendous e-commerce potential to enhance brand awareness, market growth, and market share for firms, thereby augmenting and expediting the management of customer relationships and brand loyalty. These benefits have the potential to trigger innovative marketing, brand positioning and creativity for SMMEs in South Africa and Zimbabwe. The main theoretical contribution of this study is the development of a conceptual model of social media that promotes SMME growth especially considering the large percentage of youth with a large appetite for new technology. Therefore, active engagement on social media could breach (the current) location silos," by tapping into the diaspora market.*

**Keywords:** Southern Africa; e-marketplaces; ecommerce activities; small business management

## Introduction

The surging popularity of social media has enabled small scale, micro and medium enterprises (SMMEs) to develop electronic-marketplaces that enhance enterprise-customer interactions founded on content sharing of messages, conversations and mutually-reinforcing dialogues. The capacity of social media platforms to connect SMME brands to potential and existing customers, and enhance active engagement with stakeholders, is already well established in the literature, but little is known about the success of that experience in the context of Southern Africa – especially in Zimbabwe, and to a lesser extent, South Africa.

The emergence of advancement in technology inventions and the web use has brought up marketplaces (Madichie, Tinson and Gama, 2009; Oghis, Nienand and O'Keefe, 1999). Internet developments have bridged business potential gaps and created market opportunities since businesses can enter and compete on the global market from any geographical location (International Trade Centre (ICT), 2015). E-commerce developments have been growing fast because of internet technology and have brought new opportunities that transformed the entrepreneurial business environment, thereby creating more business opportunities (Mwanza, 2016). Although E-commerce is credited for its affordability to the customer, timeliness and becoming an integral part of the business environment in the developed world, its adoption in developing economies has been slow (Raiei *et al.*, 2011). Having a web presence has thus become an indispensable marketing necessity for SMMEs in the developed world such as France where 87percent of consumers use online platforms when making purchase decisions and options (Nakara, Benmoussa and Jaouen, 2012). Social media has transformed business conduct and enhances information and product exchange (Musungwini *et al.*, 2014) as an

increasing number of customers' search for, access and evaluate products through online social media tools and platforms (Nadeem *et al.*, 2015). Zimbabwe has witnessed the growth in the use of mobile phones and social media platforms and the most popular sites include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and Google (Karuri, 2016). The harsh operating economic environment prevailing in Zimbabwe has forced businesses to shift focus from the traditional promotional tools like advertising on the television and radio (Malaba, 2015) to social media platforms to increase their chances of survival. World Wide Worx and Fusewire's (2016) study on Media Landscape in South Africa revealed that 13 million of South Africans are on Facebook, 7,4 million are on Twitter, 8,28 million are on YouTube and 2,68 are on Instagram and the bulk of these users access these platforms on mobile phones (Snyman, 2016). Consistent with this trend bigger brands in South Africa were found to be using social media platforms and were projected to increase their social media budgets for 2015 (Incite group, 2014).

An interesting dynamic of the electronic revolution is enterprises' widespread reception, adoption and utilisation of the internet and electronic commerce, creating global markets and leveraging business prospects (Mwanza, 2016). It has also been argued (see He *et al.* 2015) that social networking sites and tools have changed information sharing mechanisms at the workplace, increased advertising and marketing opportunities as corporate business and logos are posted on these sites. Despite the dominance of small, micro and medium businesses in emerging economies and their contribution to economic growth, social development, employment creation and growth of the social media in advancing business opportunities, the capacity of social media platforms to create e-marketplaces for advancing e-commerce for SMMEs in emerging economies is yet to be fully investigated (Chuka, 2012; El-Gohary and Eid, 2013). The problem is that, despite the fragmented literature that explore the benefits of the internet and social media connectivity on improved business processes (Abed, Dwivedi and Williams, 2015; Ashley and Tute, 2015;), it is unclear whether social media platforms may serve as dependable e-marketplaces for conducting durable electronic transactions. While it is undeniable that internet connectivity has influenced businesses' information and communication processes and transformed their internal and external operations from the traditional business activities to the contemporary e-commerce and e-marketplaces marketing (Musungwini *et al.*, 2014), the persistence of such business processes remains under-explored due to the serendipitous, spasmodic and once-off orientation of such online transactions.

In their research on Zimbabwe, Zanamwe *et al.* (2012) revealed that e-commerce is an emerging phenomenon involving limited business transactions restricted largely to communications via company websites rather than social media platforms. This raises critical questions about the role and significance of social media in creating e-market places for enabling persistent transactions between businesses, potential and existing customers. Zhao *et al.* (2016) argue that apart from the procurement of internet services and accessing hardware devices, the uptake of e-marketplaces and e-commerce remains disappointingly low. In South Africa, only bigger brands such as Woolworths are using social media platforms and have increased their budget for social media marketing (Incite group, 2016). As such, while emerging technologies have taken centre stage in people's lives and social media platforms are considered to influence customer tastes and accessibility profoundly (Joseph, Letsholo and Hlomani, 2016), there is persistent ambivalence about the capacity of these platforms to serve as 'rendezvous' for credible, enduring online transactions between SMMEs and customers.

Paradoxically, while SMMEs' potential to improve economic and social development is uncontested (Mudavanhu, Mubata and Mudavanhu, 2014), the contribution of social media platforms to develop e-market places that enhance their business practices remain speculative and under-explored in emerging economies such as South Africa and Zimbabwe. This is partly because SMME websites remain the more dominant platforms for online advertising compared to social media, where information security, computer viruses and questionable credibility invoke doubt on the credibility of social media platforms as e-market places for such businesses. Therefore, despite the phenomenal promises by technology enthusiasts on the capacity of social media platforms to promote low cost communication, trigger viral connectivity of customers through electronic-word-of-mouth, augment the visibility and marketability of brands, there is no guarantee that increased visibility of brands on these platforms increase purchases or creates sustainable e-marketplaces for such brands.

## Literature Review

Electronic marketplaces are open systems allowing organisations to perform business transactions with suppliers and customers in a virtual market (Ordanini, 2005). Although variations persist in the use of the term, there is convergence of opinion on the enabling role of emerging technologies (e.g. social media platforms, mobile technologies) in the conceptual design and implementation of e-market places. Consistent with this understanding, therefore, El-Gohary (2010) defines Electronic Marketing (E-Marketing) as a new philosophy and a modern business practice involved with the marketing of goods, services, information and ideas via the Internet and other electronic means. The central place of technologies is also acknowledged in Strauss and Frost's (2001: 454) definition of e-marketing as: "The use of electronic data and applications for planning and executing the conception, distribution and pricing of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organisational goals" (Strauss and Frost, 2001: 454).

E-commerce platforms allow traders to interact and do business online (Zhao, Chang, Wen and Lin, 2016). As a result, physical means of product promotion have decreased significantly because of the upsurge of online platforms as a marketing strategy (Montague, Gazal, Wiedenbeck and Shepherd, 2016). With the increasing ubiquity of phones that all increased access to online information, consumers are now capable of acting and reacting on what businesses offer without depending on traditional channels of information dissemination and media (Dijkmans, Kerkhof and Beukeboom, 2015). The rapid adoption of e-commerce has enhanced the development of online trading platforms, created more business opportunities and accentuated the growth of e-marketplaces as marketing channels in business (Jahanshahi, Zhang and Bren, 2013; International Trade Centre (ITC), 2015). Thus, e-marketplaces refer to a network of traders who conduct business on virtual markets facilitated by e-commerce (Zhang, Deng, Wei and Deng, 2012). Social media meant for personal online information exchange has been adopted by businesses to reach to a huge market (Duffett and Wakeham, 2016). As a result, social media has become an indispensable tool in business today (Ainin *et al.*, 2015). Since more social users are utilising Facebook and twitter accounts amongst other accounts to log in the e-commerce platforms, e-commerce has the potential to be conducted on these social networking sites (Zhao, Chang, Wen and Lin, 2016). To date, most studies have focused on the factors that influence SMMEs to use social media with approximately over twenty-eight studies conducted since 2008 (Abed, Dwivedi and Williams, 2015). Despite researchers' intriguing interest in conditions that facilitate SMMEs' appropriation of social media for business purposes, Burgess, Sellitto, Cox and Buultjens (2014) argue that most SMMEs have not established themselves on social media platforms for marketing their businesses. It is against this background that this study seeks to establish how SMMEs can use customers' presence on social media platforms to increase the sales, marketing, raise brand awareness and create loyalty to their brands and products.

### **Small scale, micro and medium enterprises (SMMEs)**

The characterisation of SMMEs is a contested subject. The various conceptions of SMMEs revolve around *inter alia*, the number of workers they employ, their capital investment, value of their assets and the income they generate (Buculescu, 2013). The South African government defines an SMME as any enterprise consisting of employees who do not exceed two hundred, a small business as any firm that employs not more than fifty employees while the medium sized enterprise employs between fifty to two hundred employees (see Dlodlo, 2013). The Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) defines SMMEs as formally registered businesses with between ten to forty employees, an annual turnover of \$500 000 and an asset turnover of between \$5 000 and \$1000 000 (ZIMRA Finance Act ss2b, Ch 23:04). The economic importance of SMMEs to South Africa and Zimbabwe and the globe at large cannot not be underestimated. These small businesses constitute the backbone of economic growth, employment creation, and social development of emerging economies (El-Gohary and Eid, 2013). SMMEs employ about 59.7 million people, generates 40-50percent of foreign currency earning through exports and contribute 40percent to the GDP of emerging economies (Prasad, Upadhyaya and Mohanan, 2012; Cant and Wiid, 2013; Prasad, Upadhyaya and Mohanan, 2013; Rumumba, 2014). On the one hand, a study of SMMEs in Zimbabwe revealed that they contribute to more than 50percent of the GDP, the eradication of poverty, improvements in the standards of living of the entrepreneurs and creation of employment (Zindiye, Chiliya and Masocha, 2012). On the other hand, SMMEs have been hailed for improving the economy, improving tax inflows and contributing 42percent to the nation's GDP in 2015 (Bureau for Economic Research [BER], 2016). The activities of

these businesses, therefore, cannot be ignored especially their uptake of emerging technologies to leverage their growth prospects.

### ***SMMEs and Emerging technologies***

Emerging technologies (ETs) and communication systems are credited with improving the connectivity of SMMEs to their customer base, enhancing online interactivity and availing latest information about markets, allowing SMMEs to compete successfully (Broekemier, Chau and Seshandri, 2015). As such, ETs form the staple communication and deliberative platforms for SMMEs striving to extend their geographical reach of customers and breaching the unfamiliarity of their brands to the outside stakeholders (Giovanoli, Pulikal and Grivas, 2014). Despite the potential negative consequences associated with online marketing (e.g. cost overruns, negative feedback from customers, computer viruses and information security issues), the SMMEs' exploitation of ETs may augment their business opportunities through increased business exposure, networked conversations and reaching far-flung communities (Nakara, Benmoussa and Jaouen, 2012; Cesaroni and Consoli, 2015;).

The internet is hailed as a vital business tool that enhances communication, leverages product exchanges and generates global networking opportunities (Janita and Miranda, 2013, Alali, Wishah, Alali, Al-Sukkar and Abu-Hussein, 2016). In the same vein, emerging technologies have increased the capacity of SMMEs to break geographical barriers to trade and venture into virtual marketplaces that allow new ways of conducting business transactions (Effah, 2014; Jaag, Trinkner and Yusof, 2014). Collectively, the adoption of the Internet and connectivity via emerging technologies have transformed business systems and enabled e-commerce transactions that can also unfold on e-marketplace platforms, hence, e-marketplaces act as powerful marketing channels for SMMEs (Yan, 2014). Emerging technologies have improved customers' access to product information online, increased their opportunities to buy products and share information with others as much as businesses market their goods on e-marketplaces and use them distribution channels (Yadav and Pavlou, 2014; Mola and Russo, 2016; Stahl et al., 2016). Nonetheless, the focus should shift from the numbers of SMMEs that have adopted social media platforms in their business operations to how these firms have capitalised on opportunities that social media platforms created to gain competitive advantage (Cesaroni and Consoli, 2015). While the over 1 billion Facebook user bases and the protracted duration which potential customers spent on the social media platforms (e.g. on average, individual users spent five and half hours per day on social media globally) are commendable, business opportunities such as viral sharing of brands and products, regular information sharing and the monitoring of consumer reactions should be foregrounded (Nakara, Benmoussa and Jaouen, 2012). It is for these business reasons that we identify with Rahnema and Beiki's (2013) claims about the power of technological adoption and improvements to increase the volume of trade opportunities, the internationalisation of business networks, and customer base of SMMEs. Since more corporate firms are adopting ETs, SMMEs cannot afford not to compete with rivals on social platforms (Juru, 2015). Social media platforms have transformed the marketing and selling of products (Musungwini et al., 2014) allowing businesses to change the social networking information into characteristics, features and functions for product and information exchange (Zhao *et al.*, 2016). In South Africa, established popular brands have adopted social media as a way of engaging with customers (Incite group, 2016). The significance of social media platforms lies in the opportunities for customers sharing of online content (Joseph *et al.*, 2016).

While Broughton, Foley, Ledermaier and Cox (2013) describe social media as communication through a website or online channel usually meant for social purposes, this characterisation is rapidly changing as SMMEs sprawl the internet to augment their market size and business opportunities. Although research tends to focus on behaviour on social media customers, the capacity of social media to create economic value and social dividends for SMMEs should never be ignored (Yadar, Valck, Hennig, Hoffman and Spam, 2013). Social media employs public websites and networks to reach people, and allows for lower cost contact between business and clients than any other marketing channel (Leonardi, Huysman and Steinfield, 2013) even though there are many hidden costs such as information security issues and business credibility issues to be overcome. Social media networking thus encompasses the use of social networking sites and media sharing sites to communicate with stakeholders propelled by internet connectivity, development of efficient software tools, and the proliferation of smart computers and mobile devices. Social media helps in managing business reputation, developing client interest in business products, creating customer awareness of business operations and luring new customers (Broekemier *et al.*, 2015; Ashley and Tuten, 2015). On the other hand, more customers now use social media tools to search, evaluate, access and products through these platforms (Nadeem, *et al.*, 2015).

A study conducted on social media use by SMMEs in Nairobi, Kenya, revealed that of the 49percent of SMMEs that adopted social media platforms to attract clients, the geographical reach of these customers did not transcend international borders (Jagongo and Kinyua, 2013). In contrast, Ukpere *et al.* (2014) observed that in Cape Town (South Africa), social media like Twitter and Facebook had facilitated business's access to potential and current customers, enhanced advertising and increased sales of products/services, thereby eliminating walk-in purchases in shops.

Therefore, social media platforms such as blogs, feeds, wikis, Facebook and Twitter create opportunities for SMMEs to enhance interaction with customers, establish brand awareness and create brand loyalty (Nadeem *et al.*, 2015).

### **Social media sites as e-marketplace platforms**

An e-marketplace is a virtual online platform where traders can transact from any part of the world (Mola and Russo, 2016). E-marketplace platforms facilitate online business transactions between sellers and buyers as they act as middlemen who allow traders to transact (Giovanoli *et al.*, 2014). In developed countries, e-marketplaces are fast replacing the traditional market spaces as they allow consumers to share experiences, products and information online (Li, Fang, Wang, Lim and Liang, 2015; Alali *et al.*, 2016). They also match buyers and seller's needs, enhance trade and information exchange while providing support infrastructure for online transactions (Alali *et al.*, 2016; Giovanoli *et al.*, 2014). Social media platforms allow customers to visit their sites and SMMEs employ them as e-marketplace platforms for posting advertisements, selling products and presenting business profiles, and building relationships with customers on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, Google and others (Malaba, 2015). Businesses can therefore, embrace online marketing via social networks and social networking (Kobali, 2015). Since many e-commerce and e-marketplace platforms allow users to enter their detail on websites, most users can utilise social media tools accounts to log in the e-marketplace platforms, hence, allow traders to interact with customers, suppliers and distributors online (Zhao *et al.*, 2016). Social media platforms enable fast communication and promotion of products thus facilitating mobile payment of transactions, e-marketing, internet banking and mobile money payment (Ukpere *et al.*, 2014). In view of this, Ogunnaike and Kehinde (2013) recommended SMMEs to actively take up ICT and social media platforms to enhance their business prospects. There is consensus that social media has attracted the attention of SMMEs due to its potential to influence online web transactions: selling, availing product information, establishing need recognition, influencing pre-and post-purchase behaviours and the possibility of creating online shopping malls and payment systems (Zegreanu, 2012; Yadar *et al.*, 2013). However, if brand image is not managed properly on social media platforms, the reputation of SMMEs is destroyed instantly through bad publicity shared via multiple platforms and news can also spread virally since the business has no control of social media activities (Nakara *et al.*, 2012; Musungwini *et al.*, 2014).

In China, forinstance, Alibaba uses social media Sina Weibb site for advertising (Zhao *et al.*, 2016). In another study Ogunnaike and Kehindu (2013) revealed that internet adoption has enhanced social networking of businesses and significantly impacted the rate of sales, efficiency, market share growth and development of SMMEs. Similarly, Yasin and Zahari (2011) argue that social media contribute to the creativity and innovation of SMMEs, empowering them to compete for market share successfully. Apart from social media, Internet networks have accentuated new marketing practices and transformed SMME approaches to business. For instance, in France in 2009, web sales increased by 26percent and generated 25 billion euros, one-euro investment in internet technology generated two euros and for every one euro expended on web presence, two and half euros were earned (Nakara *et al.*, 2012). Inconjunction with such investments, social media tools have been appropriated to heighteninteract with customers, track their product choices and buying preferences (He *et al.*, 2015) as much as it is fundamental to sharing content, tracking the reactions and feedback from customers (Joseph *et al.*, 2016). As such, social media platforms are instrumental in in customer relationship management, customer service, buyer research, sales promotions, managing business reputations, creating customer awareness and attract new customers (Broekemier *et al.*, 2015). It is no surprise that South Africa popular brands have increased social media budgets in response to the high level of engagement on the platforms (Incite group, 2014).

While the term e-marketplace is infrequently used with reference to online business transactions in both South Africa and Zimbabwe, e-commerce tends to be the popularised term in both countries. One of the studies that have resonance with e-marketing is Makgopa's (2016) research into car dealerships in Gauteng province which reports South Africa dealerships' use of online social media tools in their marketing communication strategies and campaigns. The qualitative study revealed some subtle variations in message content when these dealerships used social media platforms. Another study that approximates e-marketplaces is Snyman and Visser's (2014) survey

which examined the South African dentists' social media usage behaviour in general everyday life and marketing strategies. Their study revealed that a majority of dentists employed social media especially Facebook and Google plus to stay connected to family and friends and only 13.2 percent of these professionals used social media as a marketing tool. Musakwa (2014) appropriated an e-marketplace (i.e. social media platforms) concept to examine how commuters felt about the effectiveness of the Gautrain (a public transit systems) in Johannesburg South Africa, by analysing commuters' posts on social media before and after completion of construction of the Gautrain system. This e-platform served as an effective communication tool for commuters (Gautrain customers) as they shared their transformed perceptions of the public transit systems, notwithstanding its challenges.

Other forms of documented e-marketplaces include the recently developed internet based application for locating the nearest taxi or shuttle for potential travellers. Taxify, a smartphone-based application, which allows clients (commuters and travellers) to order and board a licensed taxi within their vicinity, free of charge (Taxify, 2015). This e-market place which operates in Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa, is a radical transformation from having to wait for a taxi from a dispatcher company to empowering customers to choose between the various options available by type of vehicles, fares, user feedback and the distance to the pick-up point (Taxify, 2015). From a marketing perspective, this business website assists taxi companies to adapt to changes in the technological landscape of their industry – namely competition from new app-based systems (Taxify, 2015). Reference to the appropriation of e-marketplaces seems to be embedded in the broad family of electronic commerce transactions. As such, notwithstanding the difference between e-marketplace and e-commerce transactions, the deployment of terms e-commerce and e-marketplaces tend to be used interchangeably in context such as Zimbabwe, where online transactions are an emerging phenomenon. For this reason, studies that examined e-market and e-commerce will be collectively considered.

Dube, Chitura and Runyowa (2010) examined the electronic commerce benefits and adoption barriers in retail, transport, tourism and leisure SMMEs in Gweru, Zimbabwe. Their findings revealed the infancy of internet-based transactions in the country as SMMEs adopted e-commerce applications predominantly for communication/informative purposes. The most significant benefits derived from e-commerce adoption and usage were improved quality of information and communication with suppliers and customers, even though this technology was deemed to be too expensive and incompatible with the way SMMEs/customers conduct their business. Chivasa and Hurasha (2016) investigated the adoption and usage of e-commerce by SMMEs in the Matebele land region in Zimbabwe. Their study revealed that internet cost, ICT infrastructure, management attitude, ICT skills availability and hardware had a direct effect on the adoption and usage of e-commerce while government policy was found to be insignificant. The insignificance of the policy environment can be attributed to the harsh economic climate in the country that impedes the government's efforts to render ICT infrastructure required by SMMEs and internet services providers. Gumbo *et al.* (2014) examined the availability of electronic business tools and the extent to which they are used by SMMEs in Gweru, Zimbabwe. The evidence from their study revealed that most SMMEs in Zimbabwe were in their formative stages of e-business adoption even though there were signs of awareness of the benefits of electronic business tools in SMMEs' current use of these services

## Conceptual Framework

First, the impetus for investigating SMME adoption of mobile social media as e-marketplaces is underpinned by the perceived advantages of e-marketing. These include opportunities for eliminating the barriers to distance between business and its clients; opportunities for extending trade worldwide without expanding physical network of offices and shops (Formunyuy and Neneh, 2011) and possibilities for diversifying product and services offerings and improved decision-making (European Commission, 2008; Lah, 2005). The use of e-markets is also credited with increasing transaction cost savings for organisations in six main areas: information costs, searching costs, bargaining costs, decision costs, policy costs and enforcement costs (Berthon, Ewing, Leyland and Naude, 2003, Cloete and Tanner, 2009). Therefore, e-markets are deemed to render efficiency in information dissemination by reducing the information asymmetry for various stakeholders and diversifying the range of customers and suppliers. It allows businesses to compete globally through upstream and downstream linkages in the value chain (Paré, 2002), thereby increasing the market size of SMMEs.

Although e-market places are often hailed for their capacity to reduce the cost of business transactions, expand the scale of business networks and improve service levels (Moodley, Morris and

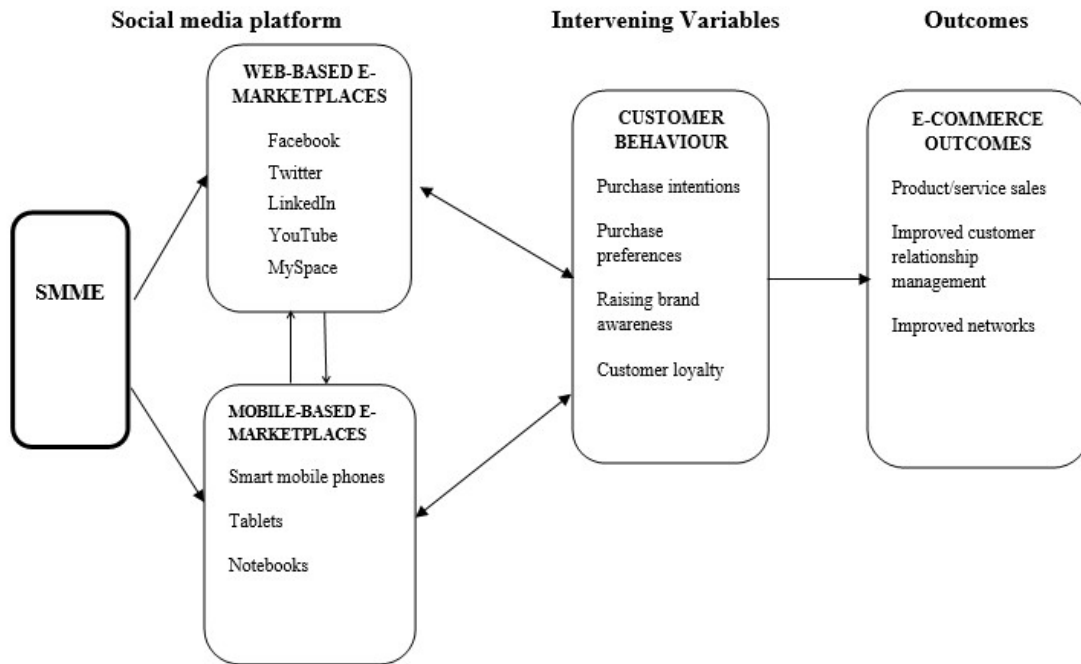
Barnes, 2001; Cloete and Tanner, 2009), these platforms have been underutilised by small, micro and medium enterprises (SMMEs) in South Africa. Dlodlo and Dhurup (2010)'s study on barriers to e-marketing adoption among SMMEs in the Vaal Triangle, South Africa, revealed technology incompatibility with target markets, SMME manager/owners' lack of knowledge, lack of stakeholder technology readiness, technology disorientation and perceptions towards technology as South African SMMEs' major impediments to the adoption of e-marketing. The lack of e-marketing models that are compatible with the size, scale and scope of business of SMMEs is a further barrier to the enthusiastic embrace of e-marketing by South Africa and Cameroon SMMEs (Formunyuy and Neneh, 2011; Cloete and Tanner, 2009).

Despite some selected South African online retail stores' huge investments in developing an online presence to sell or promote their products and services, many firms especially SMMEs are still battling to effectively use e-marketplaces due their limited knowledge of business models for e-commerce adoption to deepen their successful e-marketplace participation (Blanken, 2015). For instance, SMMEs especially those rooted in a survivalist orientation, tend to underestimate the value of e-marketplaces due to their small clientele base, a limited number of stakeholders and their discomfort in investing in resources (e.g. technology) whose direct economic gains are unquantifiable and illusive. While most SMMEs which venture into e-market places such as mobile social media envisage a substantial return on investment, attraction of new customers and more revenue generation with increased social media use, this rarely occurs and the benefits are not as obvious as expected (Chandler, 2013, Khan and Karodia, 2013). A study conducted by Jagongo and Kinyua (2010) on the relationship between Kenyan SMME's use of e-market places in particular social media platforms to promote entrepreneurship growth revealed that social media's offerings on product pricing and innovativeness had very little impact on SMMEs' overall growth.

The heavy concentration of e-market places in large established corporations such as online retail stores and their under-representation in SMMEs can be attributed to lack of technological infrastructure (Vatanasakdakul *et al.*, 2004), ambivalence about the expected benefits of using e-markets, lack of technical expertise in South African retail sector (Cloete and Tanner, 2009). This is in addition to a drop in confidence in technology following the bursting of the dot.com companies bubble leading to most South African business entities adopting a "wait and see" to technology adoption in order to learn from the successful strategies implemented by first world countries (Cloete and Fourie, 2004; Cloete and Tanner, 2009). One obvious evidence of weak technology infrastructure in the South African context is that while many South Africans have access to mobile technology in the form of smart phones, not many households have actual internet access in the form of broad band subscriptions (Khan and Karodia, 2013). Blanken's (2015) study into the creating of business value through Kalahari e-marketplace participation in South Africa revealed that the high cost of Internet and low Internet usage penetration were among the chief constraints for participating in an e-marketplace for both consumers and other small businesses. The limited investment in ICT adoption is also evident in Cameroon where SMMEs have invested less than 7percent of their total investments on ICT infrastructure (Nancy, 2003; Formunyuy and Neneh, 2011).

SMMEs are able to track customers' opinions, tastes, preferences and choices on the e-marketplace platform while allowing customers to carry out product evaluation and search before making a purchase decision (He *et al.*, 2015). Since social media platforms comprise internet based tool and applications that allows users to interact with the web via smartphones (Malaba, 2015; Musungwini *et al.*, 2014) customers can use their web-connected phones to access product information without relying on the traditional channels and media as illustrated in Figure 1 (Dijkmans *et al.*, 2015). Businesses can establish plans to exploit e-marketplace platforms by using social media sites accessed on mobile phones and or websites (Burgess *et al.*, 2014). However, social media sites were found to be more effective when accessed from mobile devices (Duffett and Wakeham, 2016). The conceptual framework is guided by the social network theory that assumes that relationship between players in the network can enhance information exchange. The model suggests that SMMEs as players in business network can create mutually beneficial relationship with customers (another player in the network) through the web-based and mobile-based e-marketplaces thereby influencing customer behaviour and e-commerce outcomes. Figure 1 supports our hypothesis that social media platforms act as web-based and mobile-based e-marketplaces to advance e-commerce for SMMEs. The adoption of e-market places and its continued use has implications for the augmentation of the market for SMMEs and allows for the effective management of multiple stakeholders comprising suppliers, customers and financiers. Regarding increasing the market size, changes to ancillary services such as logistics have been potential levers of businesses' competitive advantage in the contemporary aggressive competitive world of business where changes in price, promotion, and product are often quickly imitated by rivals (Mentzer and Williams, 2001; Madichie, 2015).

**Figure 1: Social media platforms serving as e-marketplaces for SMMEs**



Source: Authors' conceptualisation

E-market places become the competitive selling point for SMMEs to deliver efficiently on their value chain expectations and to “leverage excellent and superior logistics services, intricately linked with marketing strategy” (Madichie, 2015). Blanken’s (2015) study examined South African Kalahari e-marketplace which is founded on a B2C platform that enables third-party retailers to sell directly to Kalahari.com’s books and media customers in various categories. The study reported that this platform presented sellers with an additional channel to sell to unimagined customers while customers benefited from having access to a wide product range and competitive pricing. From a relations perspective, Jagongo and Kinyua (2013) argue that the appropriation of e-market places such as social media platforms is considered to cultivate strategic partnerships and increase their contact with customers and suppliers. They elaborate that apart from the breaching of geographical barriers between the business and its stakeholders, e-marketing platforms enhance speedy and low-cost communication between the SMMEs and its customer base by allowing SMMEs to construct databases for generating business that increase sales for these firms (Jagongo and Kinyua, 2013). Khan and Karodia (2013) present the benefit of e-market places as developing a community around the business’ offering to ensure increased access to the business by stakeholders and provide problem solving strategies around its product or service offerings. It also allows the business to position itself in the market through the building of company brands and values.

## Methodology

In attempt to add another dimension to the scholarly discourse on the potential of social media platforms to serve as e-marketplaces, a theoretical approach was adopted in this study. According to Wacker (1998) a theoretical paper is built on conceptual definitions, domain limitations and predictions to provide a framework for analysis and facilitation of the efficient development of the field. This study seeks to draw on marketing and social networking concepts drawn from literature, the researchers’ own reflections to develop a conceptual framework for a deeper understanding of the capacity of social media platforms to create durable and persistent e-market places for SMMEs and their customers. There is a general tendency in mainstream literature to describe theoretical study from the perspective of theory. Campbell defined theory as “a collection of assertions, both verbal and



symbolic, that identifies what variables are important and for what reasons, specifies how they are interrelated and why, and identifies the conditions under which they should be related or not related" (1990: 65). At the core of theoretical studies, therefore, is a clear attempt to establish some apparent or subtle relations of association or causality or to predict the nature of relationships between several independent variables and in most cases, one or more dependent variable. In the current study, the various mobile social media platforms (e.g. those run on smart mobile phones, tablets and notebooks) which serve as e-marketplaces, are the independent variable. The mediating variables may come in the form of increased interactivity between SMMEs and the customers and suppliers, expanded networked presence (see Ou, Davison and Pavlou, 2014), and the creation of a networked community (Khan and Karodia, 2013). The dependent variable can manifest in successful e-market outcomes and enhancements such as increased online sales through repurchases of online products, expanded market share for products/services, improved relationship marketing, internationalisation of brands and the building of global reputation of brands.

The intent of the study was to develop an e-marketing model founded on new identified relationships between mobile social media platforms and expected e-marketing outcomes. One level of theory building involves introducing a new substantive mediator or moderator of an existing relationship or process (Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan, 2007). The process involves adding a new "what" (i.e., a construct or variable) to describe "how" a relationship or process unfolds or "where," "when," or "for whom" that relationship or process is likely to be manifested (Whetten, 1989). While the relationship between mobile social media and e-marketing outcomes is often conceived as automatic and unmediated, the study introduced increased interactivity, expanded networked presence, and the creation of a networked community, as potential mediating variables. The theoretical study was informed by a review of concepts such as "e-marketing," "e-market adoption", "e-marketplaces", "e-commerce," "e-business" enabled by social media and mobile social platforms and applications. While the focus of this study was on e-marketplaces, El-Gohary (2010) considers e-marketing as an unclear concept as many researchers and practitioners tend to identify and confuse it with Internet Marketing, E-Commerce and E-Business, notwithstanding their differences.

In South Africa and Zimbabwe, where e-market places are an emerging phenomenon, both marketing literature and SMMEs and consumers still consider any transactions (e.g. online marketing, online sales and purchases including value addition in the distribution chain) conducted and facilitated by the use of the Internet, World Wide Web, intranet and via web based applications as e-marketing activities. For this reason, our literature search considered all online activities that were facilitated by the social media and mobile social media applications as e-marketing activities. Since the e-marketing is a new concept in emerging economies, the study concentrated on most recent studies for both countries stretching for a decade – between 2006 and 2016.

## Discussion

Digital technology has brought up individualised discovery, product customisation and customer interaction. A study conducted by Rahnama and Beiki (2013) revealed that 88percent of grown-ups use the mobile phones, 50percent of them have unlimited access to the internet and 19percent have tablets that render convenient personalised access to products at any time and from anywhere. Zegreanu (2012) further revealed that most people would respond to commercial messages obtained through mobile phones and hence SMMEs may increase the reach of customers if they were to develop communication that induces desire to respond to customised messages. Social media enhances communication speed, and supports the interaction and discussion in communities that is not existent in traditional marketing channel (Dijkmans *et al.*, 2015). In their study of an Arab country with a huge youth population, Makki and Chang (2015) argue that consumer purchase decision-making process is influenced, to a larger extent, by their interaction with family and friends on social media and this has enhanced viral marketing.

### *Social Media Platforms/ Adoption in South Africa*

A study of the South African social media landscape conducted in 2015 by Goldstuck (2015) revealed that Facebook had taken the largest space of social media in South Africa, followed by YouTube and Twitter. The study further revealed that 8.8 million South Africans used their mobile phones to access social media platforms and by August 2015 Facebook had 13 million mobile users, YouTube had 8.28 million, Twitter 7.4 million, LinkedIn 3.8 million, and Mxit 4.9 million users. Different stakeholders in South Africa, therefore, should be conscious of the value of these popular social media platforms to SMMEs (Lekhanya, 2013) since these platforms already have a comparatively high internet

penetration rate compared to other African countries such as Zimbabwe. Although there is a high uptake of social media platforms for social networking, they have not been sufficiently exploited for marketing and business purposes. A study conducted in KwaZulu Natal showed a slow uptake of social media with only 18percent of businesses using it to penetrate the market and 7percent using it for marketing purposes (Lekhanya, 2013) casting doubt on the extent to which social media platforms can transform the e-marketing agenda.

A website, *Bidorbuy.co.za*, number nine in South African rankings, is one of the biggest successful online marketplaces in Africa. Established in 2009, it offers a wide range of modern products; and the site displays catalogues of products accompanied by their prices. The site offers buyers and sellers the opportunity to transact on the site and receives over 300 million page visits per month facilitated by the high mobile uptake which creates opportunities for online business transactions (Dar, 2016; Tredgers, 2013). The site also offers flexible payment terms to those who would have concluded deals on the site and most of the payments can be made online, thereby offering convenience to clients (Dar, 2016; Tredgers, 2013) and SMMEs can benefit from targeting such sites. Another platform that has specifically targeted SMMEs in South Africa is *MzansiStore.com*. The site established in 2012, specifically targets SMMEs that sell South African handcrafted products like jewellery, display and sell such products and allow for online payments. MzansiStore has a wide range of products on display, customers order and buy online, and sellers use the platform to market their products to any network platform of their choice (Shezi, 2014).

### **Social Media Platforms/ Adoption in Zimbabwe**

In terms of internet usage and adoption, Zimbabwe is not part of the top ten African countries, hence the low uptake of e-marketplaces as marketing channel for small businesses (Edwin and Peter, 2014). Mupemhi, Mupemhi and Duve, (2011) observed that internet in Zimbabwe has been largely confined to emails and product displays with very limited e-payments. Although SMMEs in the country have an online presence that creates brand awareness, new business opportunities, and provides a platform for improving business competitive environments, social media uptake in Zimbabwe is still a new phenomenon. However, there is a general view that increased visits on the internet sites may reduce operational expenses drastically and influencing the procurement behaviour of customers (Musungwini et al., 2014). Econet Wireless Limited successfully launched EcoShopper in 2015, which is an online retailing service supported by the Ecocash service (a mobile money transfer system) capitalising on many Zimbabweans who have access to mobile phones, thereby creating an opportunity for mobile business transactions (see Madichie, Mpofu, and Kolo, 2017). EcoShopper has a variety of online shopping options for customers and allows them to select options from its six baskets and pay with Ecocash, or using the Econet MasterCard. The organisation successfully went into partnership with Nat foods, where customers can buy Nat foods products online from various depots in different parts of the country by simply selecting the basket of choice, choice of pick up location and pay with Ecocash. However, accessing the EcoShopper website is costly to customers in terms of data consumption and there is limited delivery of purchased goods (Gamba, 2015; Nyangari, 2012). Another successful story of e-marketplace in Zimbabwe is that of *10nga.com* that is an online shopping website launched in 2013, where entrepreneurs use their online presence on *10nga.com* to sell a variety of products ranging from clothing to electrical equipment and make payments using bank transfers, cash on delivery, and Vpayment. *10nga* is a marketing website that offers 24/7 toll free customer support, safe shopping and convenience, can also be accessed using smartphones and is available on Twitter and Facebook (Kabweza, 2013).<sup>5</sup>

## **Conclusion and Implications**

Social media platforms have been found to be key drivers of online transactions that have potential to improve SMME growth, improve their market share, enhance customer satisfaction and manage customer relationships. This study presented emerging technologies such as social media and mobile social networks as potential e-marketplaces for the meeting and transacting of SMMEs and customers. The study acknowledges that despite the increasing prominence of social media platforms in Southern Africa, and the social networking enabled by such platforms, their application for

<sup>5</sup> According to Kabweza (2013), "Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ), has released the December 2012 (4th quarter) mobile phone and fixed telephone subscribers' statistics. According to statistics that we received from the regulator, Zimbabwe's mobile penetration is now 97%, up from 85% in June 2012. Econet Wireless, the largest telecoms company had 8,014,055 subscribers for the 3rd quarter of 2012. Telecel, the second largest mobile operator had 2,582,154 subscribers while NetOne, the smallest of the three, had a total 2,017,726 subscribers."

advancing online marketing remain an emerging phenomenon. Observably, there has been no profound involvement of SMMEs that under-utilised and under-explored these social media technological developments as business techniques even though they have been extensively appropriated in that space. This remains the case despite the contention that social networking sites and mobile social networks can serve as platforms for establishing customer tastes, tracking preferences and distributing products, monitoring online business transactions, receiving customer feedback, promoting pre-purchase and post-purchase behaviours, and allowing the customization of product offering (Nadeem *et al.*, 2015). South African and Zimbabwean SMMEs, therefore, must capitalise on any opportunity to increase their visibility via social media platforms since only 6percent are using social media for e-commerce (Cesaroni and Consoli, 2015; Madichie, Mpofu and Kolo, 2017). Whilst some SMMEs have adopted social media as a marketing strategy, they have not realised much value from it since they have not fully exploited the potential opportunities created by its availability (Zegreanu, 2012; Cesaroni and Consoli, 2015). There is thus a gap between availability and relishing of social media platforms for social purposes, and its use as e-commerce platforms. However, due to the business exposure they bring to the outside world, social media platforms engender social interactions, brand awareness and referrals, increase conversations about brands, potentially increase online business transactions and enable quick payments (Neti, 2011; Stelzner, 2012; Ukpere *et al.*, 2014).

Our main argument in this study is that when SMMEs have the option to engage with their customers, they can choose social networking sites and mobile social networking via handheld gadgets-both of which constitute instances of electronic market places or web based platforms. These e-marketplaces shape and influence the customers' behavioural preferences for brands, purchase intentions and increase general brand awareness. All these intervening variables influence the actual purchase of brands, improve sales which shape the e-market outcomes such as increased product/service sales, improved customer relationship management and improved networks. This paper, therefore, argues that social media platforms (be they social networking sites or mobile social networking via mobile devices) can serve as e-marketplaces for advancing e-commerce for SMMES. Indeed, having an online presence and constant online interaction among SMMEs may positively impact on customer satisfaction in unimaginable ways. Since the satisfaction is a direct result of customer appreciation of the transaction process, from the easy availability of information to the performance of the product, the fulfillment of expectations results in customer satisfaction and loyalty (Ainin *et al.*, 2015). SMMEs must be available on social platforms (Juru, 2015) and should embrace online promotions and selling via social network platforms (Kobali, 2015). Social media platforms have the potential to improve customer relationship management, create opportunities which are undeterred by geography such as penetration of new markets, sale of products to distant customers, conduct of market research and collection of customer profiles (Jagongo and Kinyua, 2013). India developed and utilised social media marketing to heighten interaction with customers and facilitate exchange of content, opinions and views by bringing together stakeholders in the community, thereby enhancing product accessibility (Neti, 2011; Musungwini *et al.*, 2014).

Management must, therefore, integrate social media with other marketing strategies to interact and connect with customers to monitor and track customer tastes, improve brand image and create customer loyalty that also promotes viral marketing of products (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Reyneke, Pitt and Berthon, 2011). It is also important for management to appoint online marketing managers to run online business activities and ensure website presence is improved. While such appointments can constrain SMMEs' budgets given their survivalist orientation, the long-term benefits on clientele and sale growth may offset the immediate financial cost of appointments. Management must also create a social media marketing strategy that facilitates wide networking and creates relationships with customers by identifying and satisfying the customer needs which also enhances profit making. This implies that management must choose the most appropriate social media strategy applicable to their own organisation, one that promotes interaction and grips customers' interest and enables effective use of feedback obtained on the platforms for strategic decision making (see for example, Grewal, Roggeveen & Nordfält, 2017). The study provides valuable insight on how social media platforms affect market share and customer relationship management in SMMEs with implications for South African and Zimbabwean SMMEs' adoption and use of social media technologies in the management of these businesses.

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