

Swahili Consumerism. A Race against Time to Digital Transformation

¹Samuel Hudson Mrisha* and Sun Xixiang²

^(1, 2)*School of Management, Wuhan University of Technology, China*

Abstract

In a departure from biased conventional western narratives this study “benches the benchmarks” of western consumer behavior orientation, providing a novel outlook on emerging markets with a particular focus on the Swahili population. By employing a distinctive observation approach to scrutinize the interactions between telecommunication companies and their customers on social media platforms, this study bolstered credibility and alleviated the Hawthorne effect. In an innovative twist, the study employed the game theory to scrutinize the social media interaction scenarios, uncovering misunderstandings in how telecom companies perceive their interactions with customers in the realm of social media complaints management. Findings of the study exposes an unsuspected actor in the business ecosystem emerging as the likely culprit in hindering digitalization efforts. This study uniquely challenges the prevailing metanarratives of consumer behavior by uniquely categorizing the Swahili population as a medium context culture capable of embracing and reshaping consumerism in the digital era.

Keywords: Game theory, social media, customer complaints, marginalization, Africa and Tanzania

1. Introduction

A common misconception prevails, suggesting that the Swahili community is primarily characterized by language and geography (Mutonya 2008). However, proponents of research contend that it extends beyond these aspects, constituting an online community as well (Zwick and Bradshaw 2016). The prevailing misconception has led to the marginalization of this community in social media research. For example, there is still limited exploration of consumerism among the Swahili people in digital research landscape. In the constantly evolving digital landscape, the unexplored terrain of Swahili consumer behavior propels it into a race against time, striving for popularity and significance in the digital economy. Furthermore, gaining insight into the Swahili consumer behavior has recently been crucial and significant than ever before, as there is a pressing need to reassess how the world perceives Africa, particularly considering the significant changes the continent has undergone over the last six decades (Kuada and Bujac 2018; Mogaji 2021). Presently, Africa

showcases a landscape characterized by a rise in foreign direct investments, widespread penetration of mobile services, and the world's largest youth population, signaling a flourishing market in technology and telecommunications. Boasting the world's second-fastest-expanding middle class and the second-highest global population of millennials, with a population median age of 19.7 years, this region stands out for its demographic dynamics (Mogaji 2021; World Economic Forum 2021). Furthermore, Africa holds a vast potential for digital opportunities in the digital economy as the continent is projected to make up 25% of the world's population by 2050 (Eastman et al. 2021; Paice 2022). However, despite the presence of such an ideal environment, there is still hesitancy within the global academic and industrial communities to explore these prospects for digital economic transformation and enhanced consumerism opportunities (Kolk and Rivera-Santos 2018). This could possibly be a result of limited understanding of the continent's marketing dynamics (Viswanathan et al. 2021). Furthermore, African researchers, who are poised to offer valuable insights on the issue, frequently encounter rejections of their papers for non-scientific reasons (Tarkang and Bain 2019), thus exacerbating the situation by hindering the marketing decolonization efforts (Eckhardt et al. 2021). This situation sparks a troubling narrative of marginalization. Therefore, it is crucial to heighten research efforts to cultivate a more informed perspective on Africa's digital potential, unlocking avenues for strategic growth and collaboration in academia and practice.

The examination of Africa's marginalization has primarily focused on sociology and development studies, with the business marginalization perspective being relatively underexplored, despite its existence (Solomon and van Klyton 2020; Chikweche, Lappeman, and Egan 2023). Marginalized consumers in Africa are a significant part of the global segment known as the bottom of the pyramid (Chikweche, Lappeman, and Egan 2023; Eckhardt et al. 2021). Contrary to popular belief, there are lucrative opportunities in the bottom of the pyramid markets (Mathur, Mehta, and Swami 2020; Viswanathan et al. 2021). Celtel Company's success serves as a prime example, showcasing the ability to excel in the African bottom of the pyramid markets (Subrahmanyam and Tomas Gomez-Arias 2008). However, failing to recognize Africa's digital prowess is a widespread oversight that casts a shadow over both the existing \$170 billion economic value attributed to the mobile sector in Sub-Saharan Africa and the associated predicted consumer spending valued at \$2.1 trillion by 2025 (Mobile Economy 2023; Hattingh, Leke, and Russo 2017). Hence, optimizing the opportunities presented by the anticipated surge in consumer spending requires a profound comprehension of consumer behavior, achievable through the analysis of valuable insights, especially those derived from customer complaints. However, despite extensive research, the crucial role of social media in proficiently addressing complaints within the Swahili culture remains overlooked. This oversight is especially noteworthy, considering that 49% of customers unfollow companies due to inadequate customer service (López-López, Palazón, and Sánchez-Martínez 2021). Consequently, realizing Africa's digital potential is contingent on a nuanced understanding of the symbiotic relationship between culture and consumer behavior in social media complaints management.

Literature suggests that consumer behavior is impacted by the cultural aspects of a

language (Kara, Gunasti, and Ross 2020; Kipnis et al. 2021; Mutonya 2008; Rosa, Sillani, and Vasciaveo 2017). Supporting this notion, the Whorfian hypothesis suggests that the structure and terminology of a language play a role in shaping the perspectives and thought processes of its speakers regarding the world (Chen, Benet-Martínez, and Ng 2014). Consequently, the alteration in perception brought about by a language directly influences consumer behavior (Eastman et al. 2021). Therefore, the Swahili culture's prolonged marginalization in consumer behavior research is surprising given its substantial business potential. With a sizable population of 200 million speakers, Swahili ranks as the 10th most spoken language globally and serves as the predominant native language in Africa. Unfortunately, this culture is frequently overlooked, leading to the imposition of western models and assumptions within its unique cultural context resulting to undesirable consequences (Eckhardt et al. 2021; Bonsu 2009; Elhoushy and Lanzini 2021; Kuada and Bujac 2018; Mathur, Mehta, and Swami 2020). The lack of alignment between theoretical insights and practical implementation in these instances could be attributed to the varied cultural orientation prevalent in the Swahili region, a factor often overlooked by western models as they seldom recognize cultural pluralism (Solomon and van Klyton 2020; Bonsu 2009; Eckhardt et al. 2021; Izogo, Mpinganjira, and Ogba 2020). In light of the International Telecommunications Union's (ITU) updated understanding of the digital divide, which now emphasizes quality over quantity, it becomes essential to highlight the significant role of Swahili language in shaping the quality of interactions (Mutula 2008; Solomon and van Klyton 2020). Thus, the examination of the African context becomes imperative.

The primary focus of research in Africa tends to be on North Africa as part of the MENA region or the country of South Africa, leaving the East African region relatively unexplored (Madinga and Lappeman 2023; Elhoushy and Lanzini 2021; Mathew and Soliman 2021). Our study specifically addresses this gap by focusing on the often-overlooked East African region, where a significant concentration of Swahili natives exists. Thus, the research is centered on the Tanzanian context, which is the epicenter of native Swahili community. Likewise, Tanzania has gained recognition as one of the three African countries placed in 'Group A' for exemplary government technological practices (World Bank 2022). Similarly, capitalizing on its stable democratic environment, which attracts private investment, Tanzania is set to become one of the leading African nations in population growth, with the expected projection of 185 million people by the year 2100 (World Economic Forum 2020). These favorable conditions provide the justification for conducting the study in this region due to its blossoming digital potential (Solomon and van Klyton 2020).

Investigating the state of digitalization specifically within the realm of Swahili consumerism, reveals a compelling array of research gaps that warrant thorough examination. The western mainstream perspectives associate limitations in digital progress in Tanzania and Africa with cultural and infrastructural challenges (Adu and Zondo 2024; Myovella, Karacuka, and Haucap 2021; Zhang et al. 2022). Conversely, alternative research contradicts this perspective, claiming it to be biased and conservative (Adam 2019; Eckhardt et al. 2021; Schuppan 2009). Hence, the lack of consensus of the debate underscores the significance of this study, which aims to

investigate and contribute to the resolution of this academic mystery. However, another significant research gap emerges in the understanding of market literacy in Tanzania and across Africa. This gap entails the lack of insight into the intricate connections between customer vulnerability, regulatory oversights, and their impact on consumer protection particularly during complaints management. Therefore, our inquiry explored these facets within the Tanzanian context, taking into account the scarcity of consumer behavior research in the region. Furthermore, the predominant emphasis on food consumption patterns in consumer behavior research within the context, while overlooking digital behavior, motivated us to expand our investigation for a more holistic understanding (Moyo, Amoah, and van Eyk 2023; Isanovic et al. 2023). From a practical standpoint, the dominance of conventional call centers over social media as a secondary choice for handling customer complaints underscores a divergence between industry practices and the growing digital landscape. This is especially notable when considering the rising impact of smartphones in shaping trends within both the digital economy and consumer behavior (Solomon and van Klyton 2020; Ameen, Madichie, and Anand 2023; Izogo and Mpinganjira 2020). Therefore, this study uncovered several research gaps encompassing outdated literature, limited scope, and a biased emphasis primarily focusing on rural communities (Isanovic et al. 2023; Mutonya 2008; Viswanathan et al. 2021; Moyo, Amoah, and van Eyk 2023). Our study aimed to fill the existing void by embracing a wider scope that intertwines previously unexamined elements. Moreover, it incorporates the suggestion put forth by Moyo et al. (2023), advocating for the integration of theories within the African context. As a result, our study uses the game theory to position itself as a fundamental building block in reshaping the dialogue on Swahili Consumerism. Therefore, this study paves a way for understanding the Swahili consumerism in a natural, unobtrusive and contextualized settings of the Swahili culture.

2. Theoretical Review

The utilization of game theory in scrutinizing consumer behavior is not a widely recognized path. Moreover, the current literature tends to apply the theory to single interactions (Abedian et al. 2021), overlooking the fact that the dynamics between customers and companies are usually repetitive and iterative processes. This study applies game theory to scrutinize the sustained interactions between customers and companies, with the iterative prisoner's dilemma scenario providing a foundational inspiration. In the dynamic digital landscape of the telecommunications industry, the intricate interactions between customers, telecom companies, and regulatory bodies unfold predominantly on social media platforms during complaints management. Customers strategically voice concerns, prompting telecom firms to respond and uphold a positive brand image, while regulatory authorities oversee adherence to standards. Achieving equilibrium involves aligning customer satisfaction with responsive actions, resembling a Nash equilibrium. Game theory's strategic implications are also evident in telecom company's decisions surrounding the choice between expensive call centers and the more economical option of social media platforms as primary avenues for handling complaints. Despite the potential risks

associated with shifting complaints management to social media, such as service inadequacy, there are benefits such as cost advantages and potential market leadership. Thus, game theory presents a multi-dimensional lens for examining this study.

3. Methodology

The selected research methodology, encompassing a constructivist ontology, interpretivism epistemology, and a qualitative approach with thematic analysis, was well-matched for this study. This approach not only acknowledges the cultural intricacies inherent in the Swahili context but also permits a comprehensive examination of the dynamic and multifaceted aspects of consumer behavior. The study employed social media observation concentrating on complaints management interactions of five telecom companies on their Twitter and Facebook platforms in 2023. Thus, facilitating a real-time and nuanced scrutiny of consumer-company interactions due to the rich context of data available. Furthermore, the interpretive framework empowered researchers to navigate and interpret the diverse realities within the Swahili culture, providing the flexibility necessary to uncover unique findings not readily captured by traditional quantitative methods. Moreover, the abundance of qualitative data, coupled with the researchers' cultural familiarity, fostered a holistic understanding of digital consumer behavior, rendering this methodology particularly well-suited for unraveling the intricacies of the study's central focus. Furthermore, thematic analysis was pivotal in dissecting qualitative data from social media interactions. The process involved coding, grouping, and refining themes collaboratively, leading to organized thematic charts that captured the essence of digital consumer behavior within Swahili culture (Braun and Clarke 2006). The analysis not only unveiled multifaceted aspects of consumer-company interactions but also provided a structured framework for understanding Swahili culture in the context of digital complaints management. An ethical concern regarding privacy and confidentiality emerged, leading to strict measures for anonymizing data, redacting personal information, and paraphrasing direct quotations to ensure participant confidentiality while still offering meaningful insights into Swahili consumer behavior. This deliberate methodological selection aligns seamlessly with the study's objectives, facilitating the collection and in-depth analysis of rich and contextually meaningful data. Consequently, bolstering the study's credibility.

4. Findings

Guided by three pivotal research questions, the investigation brings to light the landscape of consumer risk, cultural nuances, and telecom companies' decisions in managing complaints as part of the digitalization process in response to globalization pressures. Consequently, it reveals a dynamic narrative that highlights the race against time in the journey toward digital transformation and the strategic integration of social media platforms to revolutionize consumer service within the Swahili cultural landscape. The subsequent sections provide a detailed account

4.1 Consumer Risk Landscape

In examining the Swahili consumer risk landscape, our study has identified persistent concerns voiced by consumers, with a particular focus on theft-related issues, especially in the realm of data usage. The prevailing sentiment among consumers centers on discrepancies between the data allocations promised by telecom companies and the actual usage experienced by customers. A notable facet of this landscape is the prevalence of complaints alleging data theft by telecom providers. One illustrative case involved a dissatisfied customer whose complaint highlights the glaring misalignment between a 1 GB data purchased and a minor online task which depleted the data.

“You are completely full of nonsense, and today is the last day I buy internet from you. You are such thieves that it's even difficult to talk to your customer service. I've had your sim card since 2008. Can you believe that I used up a 2500 Tsh package just sending one email?”

The majority of theft-related complaints within the telecom industry exhibit a recurring pattern, where customer representatives advise cautiously checking for internet updates in the background. However, a closer examination reveals a subset of savvy customers who refute these updates to be the cause of data depletion, providing a detailed comparisons of their data package usage over time and how the situation is worsening with time. These grievances extend across the entire spectrum of industry, prompting the customers to engage the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA), the regulatory body overseeing the industry. However, despite the initiatives in social media no official statements or actions from the regulatory body have been released, exposing a regulatory oversight that leaves customers vulnerable. The absence of intervention creates an enticing environment for telecom companies to potentially exploit customers, raising pressing questions about consumer protection in this context. Similarly, another customer's concern underscores the possibility of exploitation happening under the radar of regulators, despite being emphasized in consumer complaints, as outlined in the excerpt.

“Why is it that every time I top up my number, I get deducted 200 to 400 shillings from my balance? Where is my balance going? Please explain this to me clearly. TCRA, can you also assist me? Every time I call customer service, they tell me to call back after an hour”

The presence of these challenges poses a dilemma for consumers. As indicated in the excerpts, some consumers express a willingness to switch from one service provider to another. However, a persistent question arises: "How can such a shift benefit the consumer if all telecom companies are exhibiting similar behavior? "Moreover, the situation becomes increasingly difficult when oversight challenges give rise to more severe privacy and security issues. The privacy and security concerns vary in nature, and one customer specifically voiced a significant complaint regarding mobile money transactions, as illustrated below.

“I have tried to monitor every time I receive money transfers, immediately after receiving the transaction, I get fraudulent SMS messages. I wonder how these scammers know that I have received money. I am very skeptical about the protection

of customer data by mobile networks.”

The social media complaint against the telecom companies raises a profoundly serious accusation, and the existence of similar grievances from other customers lends weight to the authenticity of these issues. Despite the gravity of these allegations, both telecom companies and regulators have failed to take substantial actions to address these challenges, underscoring a noticeable absence of regulatory oversight. This observation is particularly significant in the Swahili context, given that Western narratives have often downplayed the importance of bottom-of-the-pyramid and African markets, accusing them of obstructing digitalization efforts. A scrutiny of the consumer risk landscape of Swahili consumers from our study reveals that the telecom companies and the regulators are the major players in the less friendly consumer digital environment who are capable of instituting change but their passiveness makes the situation worse. However, beneath the surface of telecom discontent in the Swahili context lies a pervasive cultural undercurrent which also needs to be scrutinized

4.2 Swahili Cultural Nuances in Social-media Complaints

Research efforts focusing on communication within cultural contexts often grapple with the Hawthorne effect, where participants modify their behavior under the awareness of being observed in a research setting. This study successfully addressed this challenge by collecting data from social media interactions between telecom companies and Swahili customers, allowing for a natural expression of behavior without the influence of research awareness. Consequently, the research provided a firsthand observation of the communication dynamics between telecom companies and their Swahili clientele. The interconnection between language and culture was pivotal in understanding how individuals perceive the world. In the context of social media complaints, our study surpasses surface-level analysis by examining communication styles, the influence of cultural hierarchy, and tolerance levels within Swahili culture, thereby enriching the discourse surrounding social media complaints in the Swahili cultural context.

4.2.1 Communication Style

The digital communication style of the Swahili population lacks clear categorization, posing uncertainty about its alignment with Western directness or Asian passive styles. While communication styles are often dichotomized into high-context and low-context cultures, the Swahili culture, shaped by Western colonialism and rooted in Arabic and Bantu languages, defies such simple classification. The unique Swahili cultural blend have portrayed 'balanced interactions' between telecom companies and customers in the digital landscape which is neither 'high nor low context' but rather known as a medium context culture. However, with regard to 'directness or indirectness' of the Swahili culture, this study finds that Swahili culture tends to be somewhat confrontational, leaning towards a direct approach. This inclination may be attributed to the dominant younger population, which has predominantly absorbed Western philosophies through various digital channels. An example of directness is portrayed by customer response when the customer expresses a direct desire to quit

using the company's product

"...I think I'll just switch to another provider. You are not my father or my mother..."

The Swahili customer's direct and confrontational approach in the interaction reflects cultural straightforwardness. This situation also mirrors the game theory's phenomenon of 'tit for tat strategy.' In essence, the tit for tat strategy is discernable here, where quick and meaningful responses foster a positive feedback loop, while delays and insufficient responses lead to negative cycles. As a result, the customer's quoted response signifies a retaliatory stance to a service failure, underscoring an ongoing failure to adequately address the issue when the initial complaint was lodged. Additionally, the customer explicitly expresses the intention to sever ties with the company, highlighting that the connection with the company does not hold the same cultural importance as a family bond in this situation. Therefore, upon examining the details of this confrontational interaction and the subtle tit for tat strategy beneath it, it becomes evident that the impact of cultural hierarchy plays a crucial role in shaping customer responses.

4.2.2 Cultural Hierarchy

In Swahili culture, respect and compliance are strongly tied to hierarchy, and due to the transparent, long-lasting, and frequent nature of societal interactions, adherence to this tradition is guaranteed. However, in the digital space, the situation is different. Consumers are conscious that they cannot be held accountable to the societal norms, and might opt for uncooperative strategies, as predicted by the principles of game theory. In the case of our study, the uncooperative behavior entails the disrespecting behavior, where one consumer disrespects the hierarchy of the customer service representative without fear of reprisal as indicated below.

"...Work procedures guide you as an employee. I have no reason to follow your procedures..."

The Swahili culture's intricate web of hierarchy and authority faces a critical examination due to the language's dependence on variables like the age, gender, and social status of the person being addressed. This contextual nuance, essential in traditional interactions, is notably absent in social media platforms, resulting in occasional cultural clashes. The disruption is further underscored by the contrast with the principles of game theory, where cooperation hinges on the anticipation of prolonged and frequent interactions, contrasting sharply with the brief and infrequent nature of many online encounters. These fundamental dynamics, which have historically determined the feasibility of cooperation in relationships, find themselves challenged by the rapid pace and different dynamics of social media. This collision between traditional Swahili cultural norms and the evolving world of digital communication poses a crucial test for the culture's adaptability and tolerance. Thus, playing a pivotal role in shaping contemporary interaction strategies.

4.2.3 Tolerance and Conflict

Tolerance and conflict are among the unstudied aspects of the Swahili culture and consumer behavior. Our research indicates that the anchoring effect greatly influences the customer's tolerance and conflict attitude. Anchoring effect in this case entails

cognitive bias that describes the tendency of people to rely heavily on the first piece of information they receive. Therefore, in instances when customers are anchored with a positive perception their tolerance increases and the desire for conflict reduces and vice versa. In the context of 'tolerance and conflict' the sensitivity of 'tit-for-tat' dynamics were more pronounced. The provided customer inquiry below exemplifies a positively anchored customer with a more tolerant orientation.

"...I have been a long-time customer of your Mobile money Business app. However, for the past few days, it has not been working. Is there a problem with the app?"

The 'tit for tat' dynamics of game theory, which were explained in confrontations earlier, typically exhibit short-term impact. However, the synergy of anchoring and the 'tit for tat' dynamics play a much bigger, pronounced and long-term role in influencing the tolerance and conflict attitude of the Swahili people in interactions with the telecom companies. Therefore, customers drawing on their past experiences, anchor their perceptions and responses to telecom companies based on prior encounters. The strategy entails reciprocation; if a customer receives satisfactory resolutions, they are more inclined to respond with understanding in subsequent interactions. Conversely, negative experiences prompt a more critical response. This adaptive behavior forms a feedback loop, influencing the overall relationship dynamics. Telecom companies, cognizant of this strategy, can strategically manage customer interactions

4.3 Strategic Decision making in Digital Transition

Effective strategic decision-making is crucial, particularly when engaging with bottom-of-the-pyramid markets. Telecom companies in Tanzania are currently reliant on call centers for complaints management, but a pivotal choice lies in leveraging social media to reduce dependence on these centers. This shift is expected to address accessibility issues posed by globalization and narrow the gap in customer complaint management between Africa and developed countries. However, our study reveals obstacles hindering the transition from call centers to social media, with Swahili customers preferring immediate feedback through call centers. The Swahili consumer preference of call centers is motivated by the instant, interactive communication they offer, a quality which is not successfully replicated by telecom companies in their social media complaint channels. Therefore, telecom companies have the potential to influence Swahili consumers' preferences if they can ensure fast and reliable management of social media complaints. On the other hand, our investigation has revealed that the systems in place for adequately handling customer complaints within telecom companies are not robust. In some instances, all avenues for managing complaints were suboptimal, as illustrated by the details outlined in this specific complaint.

"...your customer service is very poor. Customer service agents do not answer calls, your Twitter feed is not useful, and your WhatsApp line is congested. No one is responding to customer queries except for automated SMS, which are also frustrating..."

The credibility of majority of the complaints are quite high as we noticed in our study

a spectrum of complaints facing prolonged response times, ranging from several hours to days. Furthermore, some instances of complaint resolution extended for weeks, and, surprisingly, even years without apparent closure. The findings indicate that significant challenges expressed by Swahili customers were more attributable to insufficient customer service than infrastructure issues. It seems that telecom companies lack a dedicated effort to address complaints, exemplified by a specific case where a customer's grievance has persisted unresolved for over six years.

“I lost my father and on his phone he left a sum of 1.5 million shillings in his mobile money account. I have tried to follow up on this matter but have received no response since 2017. To make matters worse, his phone number was sold to someone else. I need to know where that money is and why no one is listening to my inquiries. What legal procedures are available in this situation?”

Customer dissatisfaction with the customer service offered by telecom companies' platforms is prevalent on various social media channels. Some customers have highlighted the lack of coordination in handling complaints across platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. This fragmented approach results in customers being redirected from one social media site to another, escalating their frustration, especially since not all customers are active on every platform. As a result, the evidence points to inefficiencies in telecom companies' complaints management systems, underscoring the necessity to reassess the decision-making of these companies in keeping up with the digital evolution of complaints management.

Therefore, our research has shed light on the risk landscape faced by Swahili consumers, along with its connected cultural intricacies. It has also highlighted the suboptimal choices made by telecom companies in handling complaints, hindering both the resolution of complaints and the overall digitization initiatives in the Swahili context. This shortcoming prevents customers from fully leveraging social media-based complaint resolution, thereby creating a vicious cycle of dissatisfied customers from digital complaint channels, while the primary culprits—the telecom companies—escape consequences despite impeding industry-wide digital transformation efforts.

Discussion

This study has pioneered a novel approach which acknowledges the influence of Swahili culture on consumer behavior in the context of Africa's linguistic diversity, encompassing over 2000 native languages which are recognized by UNESCO. The findings of the study suggest that obstacles to digital transformation in handling customer complaints in the telecom sector primarily result from decision-making processes within telecom companies, rather than cultural factors or insufficient infrastructure, as popularized by Western narratives. As a result, this study contributes to initiatives promoting the decolonization of marketing by shedding light on the disparities introduced by biased Western narratives (Eckhardt et al. 2021; Srinivasan, Diepeveen, and Karekwaivanane 2019). However, challenging the existing skewed narratives necessitates the use of prevalent theoretical lens for a more nuanced analysis.

This study used the game theory lens to explore the digital transition in telecom

industry. Our investigation observed that telecom companies often conceive social media interactions with customers as 'isolated zero-sum events'. However, these scenarios bear a resemblance to 'iterated prisoner's dilemma' scenarios, presenting opportunities for non-zero-sum games and mutual benefits for both companies and customers. The misconception may result from a company strategy or inadequate training of social media representatives, who may not prioritize the iterative handling of interactions in social media complaints management. Nevertheless, the undeniable reality persists, telecom companies are not significantly committed to leveraging social media platforms for resolving customer complaints. Therefore, this study asserts that the Swahili culture is not resistant to digital changes. Rather, the primary reluctance stems from the telecom companies, resembling the 'hesitant players' described as 'chickens' in the game theory's snowdrift game. Therefore, findings of this study support and contextualize previous research which cautioned about the significant role of decision makers in shaping digital policies and environment (Solomon and van Klyton 2020). Whereas, in the case of this study, the telecom decision makers reluctance seem to be holding back the digitalization efforts in customer complaints management. Hence, the study contributes to the game theory decision making literature whilst positioning the findings to align with the leapfrogging theory (Abedian et al. 2021). This overall interaction creates immense value to research and practice.

The reciprocal link between the study findings and the leapfrogging theory provides valuable insights for both telecom company management and practitioners with interest in the Africa's burgeoning digital market, offering avenues for further academic research. The leapfrogging theory posits that developing economies can bypass certain developmental stages by embracing advanced technologies (Deqiang, Zhijun, and Rafique 2023). In the context of this research, it means that significant investments by telecom companies in social media technologies for customer complaints management could potentially narrow the service delivery gap between Africa and developed countries. However, this desired outcome is not achieved in the case of our study, as telecom companies surprisingly appear satisfied with the dominant use of call center, despite limitations it pauses particularly in addressing international customer needs. This observation places our study in line with literature that stresses the aversion to embracing transitions rooted in a fear of the unknown (Kipnis et al. 2021; The VOICE Group 2010). Conversely, the study challenges literature influenced by the theory of the firm, which anticipates rational corporate behavior driven by motives of profit maximization and cost minimization (Solomon and van Klyton 2020). The challenge is quite warranted, as the concerns about publicizing complaints on social media seem take precedence over the motive of profit maximization and cost minimization (Golmohammadi et al., 2021). Consequently, there is an opportunity for future research to examine how companies can strike a balance in decision-making when faced with choices involving profit, cost, and publicity.

The conventional Western viewpoint often depicts the African context as primitive and unchanging, frequently attributing digitalization challenges to the region itself. In contrast, this study introduces an alternative perspective, attributing the lack of

success in digitization efforts to the conservative mindset of telecom companies operating in Africa— a perspective supported by existing literature (Mueller 2023). Despite the dynamic potential in consumer behavior within Swahili culture and its adaptability to technological advancements, there is noticeable resistance from telecom companies to embrace this transformative shift. The industry's reluctance to invest in technology and personnel training is evident in the inadequate service provided through a social media complaints management channel. Telecom companies seem to overlook the essential issue of insufficient service in social media resolution and the absence of market segmentation. They fail to distinguish the customer base between those seeking assistance from call centers and those in need of prompt complaint resolution through social media. Consequently, a marketing segmentation opportunity exists in the telecom industry, yet none of the companies seem willing to capitalize on it. Thus, the study presents some practical and theoretical implications.

Implications of the Study

The promotion of decolonizing literature in marketing has spurred a critical examination of theoretical assumptions, prioritizing practical application over mere theory testing in research (Srinivasan, Diepeveen, and Karekwaivanane 2019; Eckhardt et al. 2021). In our study, we observed that telecom companies' reluctance to shift from call centers to social media platforms challenges traditional assumptions of the theory of the firm related to profit maximization and cost minimization. Through the lens of game theory, our research provided theoretical insights, suggesting that this resistance may stem from a desire to retain control over customer interactions in a more regulated setting of a call center. This highlights telecom companies' inclination towards prioritizing publicity over embracing digital transformation. Hence, the theoretical implications of our study become evident, showcasing the convergence of game theory and the theory of the firm. Our research reveals that company decision-making, akin to the prisoner's dilemma, can result in a suboptimal Nash equilibrium. This is evident in our study, as telecom companies, fearing negative publicity, opt for the costly call center instead of a more economical social media strategy. This theoretical insight contextualizes puzzling findings from previous studies, indicating that in clashes between theories, one theory usually emerges as dominant, depending on the specific cultural context.

The study underscores the practical implications of advocating for a collaborative approach among telecom companies in embracing digital transformation, mirroring the strategic dynamics observed in the prisoner's dilemma scenario within game theory, ultimately leading to mutual benefits. Conversely, if one company takes the initiative in digital adoption while others lag, it establishes a first-mover advantage, compelling competitors to catch up, akin to the cooperative/non-cooperative outcomes in the prisoner's dilemma. However, if both companies resist digital transformation, they might encounter adverse consequences such as escalating call center costs. This hesitance could create opportunities for new entrants employing digital strategies, potentially reshaping the industry.

Limitations and Areas for Further Studies

The scope of this study is confined by both time and geography. Future studies ought to extend their reach to encompass a variety of African cultures, undertake longitudinal analyses, explore intersections across diverse disciplines and theories, such as game theory and leapfrogging theory, and involve a broader spectrum of stakeholders to derive more comprehensive findings and relevant policy recommendations. An additional constraint arises from the utilization of game theory in this study, where the assumptions of the theory presuppose the rationality of the players involved in the game (Abedian et al. 2021). But this may not always hold true, introducing a limitation to the research. The players exhibit bias, as evident in the telecom company's prioritization of call center privacy over the publicity of social media platforms despite the cost ramifications. Therefore, an intriguing direction for future studies lies in incorporating behavioral economics principles into game theory models. By doing so, researchers can overcome limitations associated with assuming player rationality and gain a more nuanced understanding of decision-making complexities, such as biases observed in strategic choices. Exploring the consequences of these behavioral factors on strategic interactions offering potential insights across diverse disciplines.

Conclusion

In the race against digital transformation, Swahili consumer behavior stands as a latecomer in priority in both academic and practice. As a result, the East Africa region takes a back seat in optimizing digital advancements. However, the Swahili population holds substantial potential for the future of the digital economy, owing to its unique population demographic and the adaptability of its medium-context culture, challenging Western stereotypes which currently appears to be in the research fast-lane and making the most noise. This study shift gears in the narrative by underscoring the potential in Swahili consumerism. Through observation it reveals that telecom companies in the Swahili region maintain a Nash equilibrium, relying on traditional call centers for complaint resolution, while social media platforms play secondary roles. Despite the perceived optimality of this strategy, the volatile business environment indicates that a company embracing digital transformation within the Swahili youth demographic could secure a coveted first-mover advantage in the telecom industry. As a call to action, the study urges telecom companies to reevaluate their strategies using game theory, emphasizing the importance of long-term success.

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