

EMPOWERING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN EMERGING ECONOMIES: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

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Abstract. *Cyberfeminism is a woman-centered perspective that advocates women's use of new information and communications technologies for empowerment. This paper explores the role of information technologies, in particular the role of social media, in empowering women entrepreneurship in emerging economies via increased social capital and improved self-efficacy. A conceptual model is offered and propositions are explicated.*

Key words: *women entrepreneurs, social media, empowerment, social capital, self-efficacy*

*"The growing economic power and influence of women-owned businesses
are changing the shape of the global economy."*

-Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, 1998

1. Introduction

Women account for slightly less than 50 percent of the world's population at approximately 3.55 billion women (United Nations, 2010). Though women represent almost half of the world, they do not comprise half of the world's workforce. Worldwide, the percentage of women in the labor force varies widely, from a low of 12 percent in

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Qatar to a high of 53 percent in Mozambique (United Nations, 2010). Women also ‘bear a disproportionate burden of the world’s poverty,’ as they are more likely to be poor, suffer from hunger, deprived of healthcare, and denied basic rights in the workplace (UN Women, 2013; OECD, 2008). Not only are women more vulnerable, they are also less likely to have access to property and land (OECD, 2008).

Worldwide trends indicate that, in almost all cases, women are paid less than men, with the 2008 wage gap average holding at approximately 17 percent (UN Women, 2013). For example, the United Nations reports that, across 68 studied countries (with the exception of Qatar, the Isle of Man, and Paraguay), women in the manufacturing sector earned less on average when compared to men (United Nations, 2011). Additionally, women are relatively overrepresented in lower-paying and more intensive jobs, such as domestic service, agricultural production, and manufacturing of clothing and household goods, and are more likely to work part-time in comparison with men (OECD, 2008). Further, wage gaps are most disparate for management positions (OECD, 2008). Finally, women spend more hours working per day and carry the bulk of the workload in family life worldwide (United Nations, 2010). Nonetheless, there are indications that greater access to economic opportunities, such as increasing workforce participation, can have a positive impact on poverty reduction in emerging economies.

Crittenden and Crittenden (2010) describe emerging economies as low-income, rapid-growth countries that are using economic liberalization as the primary engine of growth and note that there is no common acceptance of which countries have emerging status. Regardless, whether referred to as BRIC, BRIICS, or the “Next Eleven” (McPhaul, Crooker, Knight, Cherian, & Manion, 2010), the GDP in these emerging economies is expected to account for around 20 percent of the world economy and close to 85 percent of the world population. Thus, these emerging economies present both economic opportunities and challenges.

One way to improve access to economic opportunities for women in emerging economies is to increase their entrepreneurial activities. With an estimated 224 million women globally starting or running their own businesses (Kelley, Singer, & Herrington, 2012), there is tremendous opportunity to improve worldwide economic conditions through a better understanding of the tools that empower these women entrepreneurs. One of these tools is information communication technology.

Technological developments have created a tempest in emerging economies (Crittenden & Crittenden, 2012). The rising middle class in emerging economies has led to an increase in consumption of technological products, and the consumption of those products is expected to outpace that of developed countries (Heimbuch, 2010). Emerging markets are embracing technology and increasingly leading the charge in the development of a boundaryless and connected world. Thinking creatively about technology linkages and the implications of such linkages both within and

across emerging economies is an imperative in today's ever-expanding marketplace (Crittenden, Peterson, & Albaum, 2010).

Extrapolating from the aforementioned assertions about the role of women in the future growth of emerging markets and the importance of technology to such growth, the main objective of this paper is to develop a conceptual model of the role technology can play in empowering women entrepreneurs in emerging economies. Following the protestations of cyberfeminism, the subsequent conceptual model advocates women's use of new information and communications technologies for empowerment. The conceptual model enables the exploration of the role of information technologies, in particular the role of social media, in empowering women entrepreneurship in emerging economies via increased social capital and improved self-efficacy.

In accomplishing the paper's objective, we first provide an overview of information communication technologies and the role that social media, as a part of the technological network, plays in the empowerment of women entrepreneurs. Within this context, the impact that social media can have on the critical construct of self-efficacy is discussed. Next, another critical construct, social capital, is derived from the literature and the linkage with the role of technologies is explicated. Empowerment as a process is described as related to each of these three major constructs and is then also presented as the outcome of the interrelations of social media, social capital, and self-efficacy. Since empowerment is both a process and an outcome, the propositions to support additional research with regards to the intertwining nature of the variables are suggested after the explication of each of the constructs. Finally, we offer suggestions for research and practice based on the newly-defined conceptual model.

2. Information Communication Technologies: A Means to Empowerment

Information Communication Technologies (ICT) refers to the integration of telecommunications networks, computers, and audiovisual systems used to create, access, store, transmit, and manipulate information (Ojokoh et al., 2013). It includes computer software and hardware, computer networks, the Internet, electronic mail, business, computer games, and the more recent digital social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Marcelle, 2000). When considering the role of ICT in regard to development, the challenge is "to transform these new forms of communication into real opportunities for growth and development" (Nath, 2006, pp. 191-192). Access to ICT allows societies and groups to transform their social, political, and economic lives by changing and reshaping processes. Among many benefits, ICT offers higher efficiency and productivity; faster accumulation, sharing, creation, and transfer of knowledge; better collaboration and communication; and faster transfer of financial and political information (Ojokoh et al., 2013).

ICT is viewed as one of the most promising developments in recent times as it has the potential to bridge many gaps in human socio-economic development. The

impact of these technologies is felt globally, as it affects both developing and developed nations. According to the 2013 ITU report, 33 percent of men in developing countries use the Internet as compared to 29 percent of women. This represents 154 million more men than women using the Internet in the first quarter of 2013 (ITU, 2013). In the developed world, 80 percent of men are online as compared to 74 percent of women, representing 483 million male users and 475 million female Internet users. Figure 1 portrays this gender gap.

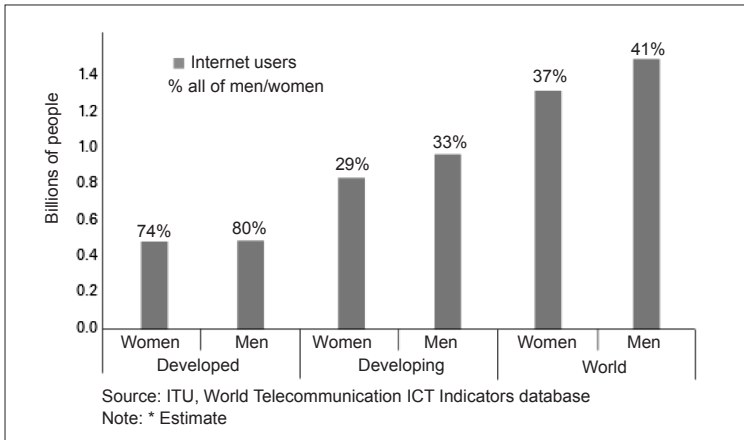


FIGURE 1. The Gender Gap: Men and Women Online

Source: ITU, 2013

Even with the gender gap, the adoption of ICT by women has resulted in considerable and notable benefits. ICT adoption has helped women create new employment and self-employment opportunities, while improving access to formal and non-formal education and access to information and services related to health services and gender issues (Huyer & Mitter, 2003). For example, Grameen Telecom in Bangladesh has created a “phone culture” among women in villages, which has facilitated greater access to information. This greater access to market information has helped small business owners grow their businesses (Ahmed, Islam, Hasan, & Rahman, 2006). Further, the 2007 study of women in Egypt found that access to the Internet in general (e.g., an Internet café) resulted in three contributors to female empowerment: (1) increased information access and professional development, (2) expansion and maintenance of social networks and social capital, and (3) transformations of social and political awareness (Wheeler, 2007). In yet another study on the use of computers in Bolivia, Wamala (2012) found that the use of computers by women considerably strengthened their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Additionally, researchers have evaluated the level of participation of women in ICT, focusing on access of women

to ICT and their empowerment (Huyer & Sikoska, 2003; Buskens & Webb, 2009). Buskens & Webb (2009) indicated that women's use of ICT allowed them to create spaces for refuge, expression, education, network, and trade. ICT can serve as a tool for women's active participation to improve their situations and provide them with access to information to promote better health and alleviate poverty (Huyer & Sikoska, 2003). Regardless of the positive relationships found, there is room for even greater ICT usage as the common theme throughout much of the research is that participation in ICT activities is usually lower for women than men.

In making the digital sphere more dynamic and interrelated, modern ICT is creating opportunities for women entrepreneurs in emerging markets. The resulting online communities, created by improved peer-to-peer communication and more visible individual participation, offer a vast network of customers and suppliers. Additionally, an array of online communities and communication options provide much needed learning opportunities and continual support for business development.

Historically, males have comprised the majority of new technology users. However, women have emerged as the dominant users of some social media sites (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012; Allen, 2013). Indeed, approximately 58 percent of Facebook users and 62 percent of Twitter users are women, with 40 million more women than men engaging on Twitter monthly (Allen, 2013). Regardless of the gender dominance of any one particular platform, social media can serve as a means to support women's empowerment by encouraging self-expression. The ability for the creator to share thoughts, concerns, and emotions with others, and attract attention, sharing, and participation in return, results in an improved psychological well-being and, through repetition, a sense of self-empowerment. There is emerging evidence that modern technology such as social media can provide a way for women to improve their incomes, gain awareness of their rights, improve their own and their families' well-being, advance their children's education, and improve their status in their homes and communities (Hafkin & Huyer, 2006).

Social Media

Social media, which refers to a group of interactive Internet-based applications, uses the Internet and mobile platforms to support the creation and exchange of user-generated content. There are literally hundreds of different social media platforms (e.g., blogging, micro-blogging, social networking, text messaging, shared photos), and companies such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram operate across these various platforms. The advent of social media has fundamentally changed the way individuals, communities, and organizations communicate and collaborate. Since social media provides a user-centric platform, it allows users to be empowered to express themselves and post their own content in the form of text, evaluation (e.g., like/dislike), video, and/or pictures to interact with their virtual network. The usage of these platforms and companies has grown exponentially among a wide audience base.

Ali (2011) identifies three major characteristics of social media platforms that have enabled rapid growth. First, social media platforms are available as a channel of communication to connect to others and to express oneself. Second, platforms are easy to use as they require little familiarity of technological process in order to publish content. Third, popular social media sites (e.g., Facebook, Orkut, Twitter) are available for free after a user establishes an internet connection. This final feature is critical as it enables access within the segment of impoverished individuals, a demographic that is well represented by women.

The number of social media users is growing rapidly, which opens a vast online market for new ventures. The new media has changed the way entrepreneurs can source and distribute information, while playing a major role in the value creation process (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000; Vargo, Maglio, & Akaka, 2008). For a business, the benefits of social media participation can be considerable, with the cost of non-participation potentially resulting in lost business by losing touch with current and potential customers and with focal trends in the industry (Ubeda, Gieure, de-la-Cruz, & Sastre, 2013). Social media can help existing businesses grow brand recognition, generate revenue, gain feedback and insight from customers, and improve the customer relationship experience (Jones, 2010). Social media can also help new ventures and small-medium enterprises build and maintain relationships with stakeholders (Doyle & Stern, 2006; Indrupati & Henari, 2012). By 2012, 50 percent of women business owners in the USA used social media to grow their businesses (Dennis, 2012).

The use of social media tools and platforms has the potential to impact the lives of people in the developing world (Ali, 2011). Notably, there is tremendous potential for using social media platforms as a tool for the empowerment of women worldwide. For example, social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube played an important role in women engagement in the Arab Spring and in their political empowerment (Newsom & Lengel, 2012). A 2007 study of female bloggers in Africa suggested that writing about issues of interest to them was a first step in giving the women a sense of psychological empowerment (Somolu, 2007). Further, two other studies focused on the role and use of blogs by women in Iran. One study explored the role of blogs in helping women voice their concerns about discriminatory laws and to participate in public discourse (Shirazi, 2012), while the other study centered on women discussing societal taboo subjects such as sexual health (Hermida, 2002). On blogging and women empowerment, Stavrositu & Sundar conceptualized psychological empowerment around three themes: connectedness, mastery, and control over the aspects of one's life. The authors found that blogging about personal issues and experiences empowered women through enhancing their sense of community and augmenting their sense of self-efficacy. A sense of community is a woman's consciousness of feeling part of a larger community, while the sense of self-efficacy is a woman's control over her own voice, her ability to assert herself, and her feeling of having a distinct voice.

It is theorized that social media, with its networking capabilities, is an important route to empowerment due to the access to resources and opportunities. Researchers found that using the Internet for business learning enhanced women's independence and self-confidence, which in turn increased women self-efficacy (DeNoble, Jung, & Ehrlich, 1999; Thomas & Moisey, 2006).

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is one's belief in his/her capacity to employ the necessary resources as required in a particular situation (Bandura, 1997). Specifically, self-efficacy commonly refers to the process of inner transformation, in which women recognize their ability to define their own self-interests and entitlement to make their own choices (Sen, 1999; Kabeer, 2001; Nussbaum, 2001). At the micro-level, and embedded in the idea of self-efficacy, is the need for women to be involved as agents of change in their own lives and not merely as recipients of change. This micro-level has consequences for the broader community. At the aggregate level, this indicates the importance of social inclusion and participation of women in the society (Friedmann, 1992; Narayan, Patel, Schafft, Rademacher, & Koch-Schulte, 2000). In order to achieve these outcomes, women must have access to resources which are the enabling factors for attaining successful outcomes (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005).

Hafkin & Huyer (2006) identified five different types of empowerment routes as related to self-efficacy. These were:

Economic

- Control over income and family resources
- Increased income and access to employment
- Participation in the work force at a high level and with higher pay

Socio-Cultural

- Freedom of movement
- Lack of discrimination
- Visibility in public places
- Positive media image

Familial & Personal

- Status and autonomy in the household
- Right to make choices in one's personal life and in one's family
- Access to sufficient health care and nutrition
- Safety, security, and integrity

Psychological

- Self-esteem
- Sense of inclusion and entitlement by self and others

Educational

- Access to literacy and education at all levels

Related to these aspects of empowerment is self-confidence. Confidence is defined as a “feeling ... of one’s power or of reliance on one’s circumstances” (Merriam-Webster, 2013). Given the disparities that women face in comparison to men, it is not surprising that men have been found to be more confident than women (Croson & Gneezy, 2009). For example, women reportedly have less confidence in their investment decisions (Estes & Hosseini, 1988), while men are more overconfident than women in situations of uncertainty (Lichtenstein & Fischhoff, 1982; Deaux & Farris, 1977; Lundeberg, Fox, & Punčohař, 1994) and when solving mathematical problems (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007). Importantly, Croson and Gneezy (2009) found that men have a higher risk tolerance than women, which could have major implications for women’s entrepreneurial activities given that such activities tend to be fraught with risk.

Indeed, a disparity in confidence has been found in reference to women entrepreneurs. According to Kelley et al. (2012), women perceive themselves as less capable of starting a business than men and exhibit a higher fear of failure. Women not only doubt their own capabilities, they also perceive their environments as having fewer business opportunities across all regions of the world. At the 2002 World Summit on the Information Society, information communication technologies were described as a tool to empower women so as to improve their participation in the economy and in their quality of life and, thus, their self-efficacy (Obayelu & Ognlade, 2006; Ojokoh, Zhang, Oluwadare, & Akintola, 2013). As noted, at a macro-level self-efficacy and social inclusion, via the development of social relationships, go hand-in-hand.

Social Capital

One’s relationships are an asset that can provide resources (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000), and an important construct in this regard is social capital. Social capital is defined as networks that enable collective action (Woolcok & Narayn, 2000). Indeed, beyond providing resources, there are other benefits to having a diverse social network including decreased vulnerability through protection and risk management (Moser, 1996; Narayan, 1995) and an increase in potential opportunities (Isham, 1999). For example, a study of impoverished African entrepreneurs running small-scale firms found that social networks were forged between entrepreneurs to reduce risk and uncertainty (Barr, 2000).

Social capital is comprised of bonding and bridging (Putnan, 2000). Bonding social capital refers to close intercommunity ties, while bridging social capital refers to relationships with extra-community networks, such as with non-closely related others (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). To illustrate, entrepreneurs in an impoverished context can utilize their bonding social capital to acquire necessary resources and skills, and these can then be used to join more diversified extra-community networks (Granovetter, 1995). Specifically, bridging social capital provides access to external assets and the ability to diffuse information (Putnam, 2000) by connecting diverse types of people (Williams, 2006).

The Internet has been thought to increase bridging social capital by supporting the creation and maintenance of larger social networks (Resnick, 2001; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001) in a relatively cheap and accessible way (Donath & Boyd, 2004). It was found that people join social media sites to maintain strong ties with close relations and strengthen ties with more distant others (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Boyd & Ellison, 2007). As such, social capital fostered through social media can be an important resource for entrepreneurs and is thought to be a mechanism to achieve empowerment.

Empowerment

Empowerment is “the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). Empowerment is both a process and an outcome for women and refers to the ability of women to make decisions and affect events around them, benefit from resources and opportunities, exercise control over their own lives and bodies, and have a voice in public life and decision-making which results in increased autonomy and improved well-being (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). Keller & Mbewe describe women empowerment as “a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination.” Kabeer (2001) cites the importance of empowering women through fostering their ability to challenge their contexts and make strategic choices in an environment where such choices were previously denied. Thus, increased access to information through social media can improve a woman’s capacity to envision alternative options to make meaningful choices (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005).

3. A Conceptual Model of Women Entrepreneurship

“Technology is a means by which women can create new worlds and realities...”
-Hawthorne & Klein, 1999, p. 4

The role of social media in the empowerment of women is a little explored phenomenon. Studies to date suggest that women are utilizing social media in a variety of ways and that entrepreneurs are using social media to grow their businesses. The goal here is to offer a conceptual framework for understanding key relationships that lead to the empowerment of women entrepreneurs in emerging economies.

The proposed conceptual model is comprised of four major constructs: social media, self-efficacy, social capital, and empowerment. All of these constructs have been defined previously, with the proposed relationships (Figure 2) being that social media impacts both a woman entrepreneur’s social efficacy and her social capital,

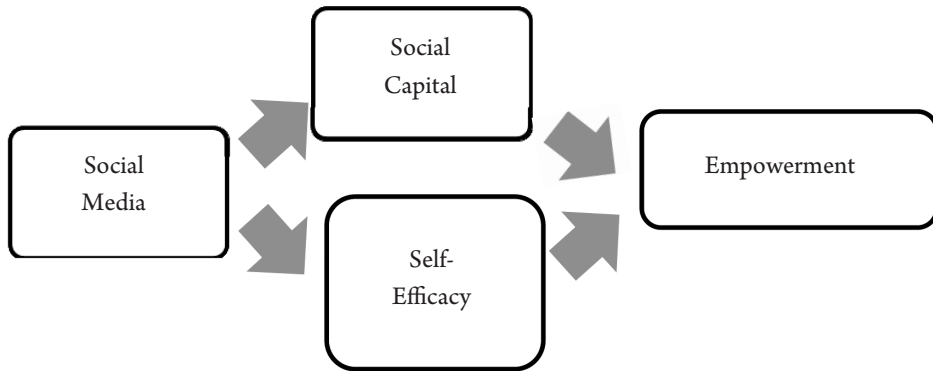


FIGURE 2. Conceptual Model: Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in Emerging Economies

ultimately resulting in feelings of empowerment that enable productive gains in the entrepreneurial world.

Propositionally, the relationships are:

- Proposition 1: The use of information technology, particularly social media, instills self-efficacy in newly-engaged women entrepreneurs in emerging economies.
- Proposition 2: The use of information technology, particularly social media, increases the social capital of the newly-engaged woman entrepreneur in emerging economies.
- Proposition 3: Improved self-efficacy in newly-engaged women entrepreneurs in emerging economies will result in greater feelings of empowerment.
- Proposition 4: Increased social capital in newly-engaged women entrepreneurs in emerging economies will result in greater feelings of empowerment.
- Proposition 5: There will be an increase in the number of women entrepreneurs in emerging economies as feelings of empowerment are improved.

4. Exploring the Constructs and Relationships

Testing this conceptual model and these propositional relationships is an obvious next step. Malhotra and Schuler (2005) reviewed 45 empirical studies that assessed some aspect or variable of women's empowerment and, while many studies were found to be quantitative in nature, a number of studies utilized a mixed-methods approach. Importantly and consistent with the model proposed here, a large number of studies considered empowerment as the dependent variable. The use of qualitative methods for studying empowerment has taken the form of in-depth interviews and case studies. Oxaal and Baden (1997) and Sen (1999) have asserted that empowerment is best captured by hearing women's individual interpretations of events. Given the benefits to

be honed from mixed methods, exploration into the current model would benefit from this approach.

Social media has been assessed in a variety of ways. From a measurement perspective, the construct can be measured through an additive scale with regards to frequency and duration of use (Correa, Bachmann, Hinsley, & de Zúñiga, 2013). However, simply measuring the frequency or duration of use does not account for the richer user experience made possible through interactive online sites. Thus, capturing intensity of use and engagement on a particular social media site might be warranted (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009).

With regard to self-efficacy, the “General Self-Efficacy Scale” which contains 17 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale is a widely used assessment tool (Sherer, Maddux, Mercandante, Prentice-dunn, Jacobs, & Rogers (1982). Social capital has been assessed in a variety of ways, across many dimensions (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). For example, instruments have been developed to measure social capital in different country contexts (Bullen & Onyx, 1998) and specific to a society (Narayan & Cassidy, 1999). However, research into the online or virtual social capital is a relatively new phenomenon and may require a customized instrument (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

The most common measure of empowerment is along economic dimensions. This includes both income and ownership of assets. However, identifying the levels at which the economic dimension is studied is key. For example, female control over income at the household level could be a measure; at the community level, female access to employment, access to the market, and membership in various trade associations might be important measures; at the national level, female representation in the job market, the inclusion of women’s economic interests in federal budgets, and laws guaranteeing equal pay are important (Narayan-Parker, 2005). However, more ideal methods to measure empowerment might be through direct measures related to decision-making control and choice (Hashemi, Schuler, & Riley, 1996; Malhotra & Mather, 1997).

Given the importance of women in the global economy and the rise of women entrepreneurs, it is critical that both academics and practitioners gain a better understanding of the determinants that can increase the empowerment (including both access to and command over resources) of women entrepreneurs in emerging economies. The observed role of social media use in the outcomes of women entrepreneurs creates a fruitful avenue of investigation. As a woman entrepreneur’s networks (bridging social capital) and feelings of ability to control resources (self-efficacy) grow through social media, it is anticipated that this will have a wider impact on society. For example, women play a critical role in decisions around children; as such, their empowerment can improve outcomes for future generations. Additionally, increased status in the community could have broader development implications, including fostering of public and private rights for women, which is both a valuable and an interesting area of research.

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