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No longer at ease: How digital organizational followers in Kenya are challenging contemporary leadership

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Abstract

The high internet penetration as well as the increasing digital platforms in Kenya has led to the transformation of many organizations in Kenya. Further, organizational followers are adopting digital technologies, and leveraging on digital platforms while working within organizations. Due to digitization, organizational followers are now collaborating, working flexibly (i.e. from home and other contexts away from work) and sharing content with people in different geographical locations. Consequently, many followers are influencing their organizational leaders. The digital transformation in the country, and among workers, suggest that organizational leaders should develop effective workable strategies and ensure they have conducive cultures that are in tandem with the digital transformation in place. This paper, based on Social Impact Theory (SIT) focuses on digitized organizational followers and their effect on firm leaders within Kenya.

Keywords Digitization · Social impact theory · Followers · Leaders · Kenya

1 Introduction

Organizations globally are changing: no longer are its followers passive and deferent as traditional organizations have portrayed them; they instead play an active role in the attainment of set goals and objectives (Kelly 1988; Malakyan 2014). Traditional organizations in this case are those that largely operate within the classical model of bureaucracy, hierarchy (with distinct roles of leaders and followers) and with basic IT adoption (Loonam et al. 2018; Malakyan 2014). According to Carsten et al. (2014), owing to the innovative and competitive nature of today's organizations, it is prudent that organizational followers are proactive.

Digital technologies have greatly contributed to making organizational followers active. Leclercq-Vandelannoitte

(2015, p 18) observed that while traditional organizations and their IT departments decided which technologies to adopt in the workplace, today's workforce leads in deciding which technologies to use, why, how and when. Digital platforms now allow organizational followers to collaborate, for example through social media (Kane 2017; Köffer 2015), communicate across the set geographical boundaries (Joyce et al. 2018), among others. Technology today has generally re-shaped and re-organized organizations (Attaran et al. 2019).

In developing countries, and Kenya to be specific, with a higher internet penetration, organizations must adjust to accommodate the pervasive digitization. According to statistics from the Communication Authority of Kenya (CAK) (2019), active mobile subscription in the country stood at 46.6 million, while internet/data subscriptions stood at 42.2 million by 30th September 2018, against the current population of 47.6 million (KNBS 2019). This suggests that adoption of digital technologies and platforms in the country is quite high. Kenya is one of the countries in Africa with the highest internet penetration as well as in the adoption of technology (IHub Administrator 2019). These advancements in technology therefore suggest that organization leaders must be ready and proactive to not only handle the changes coming to their organizations, but more so to handle organizational followers who are tech-savvy and 'independent'.

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In light of the foregoing arguments, this paper seeks to answer these two research objectives:

1. How have organizational followers in Kenya embraced digitization in the workplace?
2. What is the effect of organizational followers adopting digitization in Kenya, on leadership?

The current study is a narrative literature review on digitization and organizational followers in Kenya, and the effect this has on organizational leaders. Narrative literature reviews critique, summarize and conclude on arguments in a given area of focus, and may have one or more research questions (Cronin et al. 2008; Ferrari 2015).

2 Social impact theory

Social impact theory (SIT), which was developed by Latané (1981), argues that individuals are influenced by the social environments they find themselves in. Specifically, this theory suggests that the strength, number and immediacy of people are significant factors contributing to influencing a person in a particular direction (Mir and Zaheer 2012). The foregoing authors suggest that strength may relate to a person's power and authority; immediacy has to do with proximity to a person either physically or positionally; while number relates to the size, for example the number of colleagues, or employees in an organization. Oc and Bashshur (2013) applied SIT in relation to followers and leaders, and concluded that followers do indeed influence leaders through the three tenets of SIT (i.e. strength, immediacy and number).

SIT is relevant to this study when examining the effects digital followers have on their organizations and by extension, their leaders. Similar to Oc and Bashshur's (2013) study, this paper suggests that proactive digital followership has the potential to influence organizational leadership.

3 Organizational followers

The focus on organizational followers has generally been lacking or dim in studies and programs on leadership (Bufalino 2018), which is baffling in an era where participatory processes are evident and advocated for (Frye et al. 2007). Further, the stereotypic view of organizational followers as being passive, deferent, and with terms such as 'sheep', 'non-leader' 'subordinate' even 'non-leader' being used to describe them, has contributed to the neglect of the organizational follower (Bufalino 2018; Crossman and Crossman 2011; Malakyan 2014).

Organizational followers however play an instrumental role in their organizations. Carsten et al. (2014, p 18) aptly observed that 'If leaders are to be credited with setting the vision for the department or organization and inspiring followers to action, then followers need to be credited with the work that is required to make the vision a reality', suggesting that the attainment of organizational goals and objectives mainly rests with the followers. Importantly, though, is an understanding of the place of digital technology and platforms in making organizational followers proactive, which is the concern of the current paper.

4 Digitization and organizational followers

According to Köffer (2015, p 2), the digital workplace is an important organizational asset for worker productivity, implying that organizations that realize this early are set to benefit as compared to those who come to this later. Parvainen et al. (2017, p 64) have defined digital transformation as the 'changes in ways of working, roles, and business offering caused by adoption of digital technologies in an organization, or in the operation environment of the organization.' This definition suggests that the entry of digital technologies brings with it a number of organizational changes, and these affect both leadership and followership.

As a result of digitization in the workplace, how work is done by organizational followers has changed. According to Attaran et al. (2019), digitization has meant that work can be implemented by employees from different locations, and not from the traditional locations of the businesses, meaning that workers are now much more flexible in their working. Colbert et al. (2016) observed that through increased use of technology in the workplace, employees now have a world of information on their fingertips, are able to collaborate and even deliver products with much ease across the globe. The study by Forsgren and Byström (2018) similarly found out that workers in organizations use social media to help maintain coherence in sharing work-related information, as well as in using the platforms to socialize.

But perhaps one of the critical effects of digitization in the workplace is the opportunities it has created for organizational followers. As organizational followers use their own devices rather than those given to them by the organizations, this has meant that employees are not only flexible, but also more effective in their work (Church and Burke 2017; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte 2015). Relatedly, Berland (2016) observed that employees today complain of slower and sometimes incompatible software in the organizations, and that many of them prefer to use the devices and other digital platforms they have at home. Today, therefore, organizational followers are much more proactive, less reliant on the organization (at least digitally) in seeking to do the best in

their organizations, suggesting that their expectations about work and how they work is also changing (Noe et al. 2014). Organizational followers who are digitally fluent are able to manipulate information and use it to attain set goals and objectives (Colbert et al. 2016).

A helpful perspective to our arguments is Hirschman (1970) seminal work on ‘Exit, voice and loyalty’. Hirschman argued that when there is deterioration in organizations, individuals can choose to exit (quit the organization), or voice out their concern to the leadership in place. Those who choose to remain are the loyal ones, hence the ‘loyalty’ aspect. In relation to this paper, proactive organizational followers through the utilization of digital platforms help their organizations attain their aims. In this case, digital platforms help such followers ‘voice’ issues relating to their organizations, which eventually help their firms improve.

5 Digitization in Kenya: selected cases

Our first research question focusses on how organizational followers in Kenya have embraced digitization in the workplace. To begin, Berman (2013) pointed out that Africa’s swelling workforce, and the explosion of mobile internet are two of the seven factors likely to propel the continent to an economic acceleration. This is an observation that has been true for Kenya. As already pointed out, the ubiquitous internet in Kenya has contributed to new job openings, new ways of doing business, and an improved quality of life (CAK 2019). The recently launched digital blueprint in Kenya (GOK 2019) has acknowledged the pivotal role of financial inclusion through digital platforms such as Mpesa, Mula, Pesalink and Pesapal in the country, further attesting to the benefits of digitization in the country.

Some studies have shown that organizational followers are making use of digital platforms for various reasons in Kenya. In education, a qualitative study by Bett and Makewa (2018) on how teachers of English in Kenya use Facebook Groups realized that the social media platform was being used for professional development activities, besides the social interactions that teachers engaged in. The study concluded that such a platform is important in Kenya, where opportunities for continuing professional development of teachers are scarce. A related study by Dryden-Peterson et al. (2017) documented how teachers in the North Eastern part of Kenya (a hardship area that has witnessed numerous terrorist attacks) are using WhatsApp to discuss issues relevant to education. Both of the foregoing studies evidence how organizational followers are taking the lead in using digital platforms for their own professional growth, and in ways that enhance their organizational performance.

Digital technologies have also been used in the health sector in Kenya from the healthcare provider, with healthcare

workers and even among patients. For example, in 2015, three organizations (Safaricom, PharmAccess and Carepay) teamed up to create M-Tiba, a savings platform that would allow Kenyans in slums, rural and other disadvantaged areas access healthcare (PharmAccess Group 2015). In a recent study on factors associated with efficacy of healthcare and prevention of cervical cancer in Machakos, Kenya, Kaunda and Liu (2019, p 51) revealed that ‘the use of innovative telehealth data solution to link Health care workers, particularly in rural remote health care facilities, to tertiary healthcare facilities can improve cervical cancer prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and care in limited resource settings’. This suggests that digital technologies were being utilized by healthcare workers to enhance the management and control of cervical cancer. Generally, there are many health innovations in Kenya, similar to those found in the developed contexts (Iyawa et al. 2017).

Another case that has employed digitization among organizational followers is evident in the media industry in Kenya. Many journalists in Kenya today use personal social media handles to discuss news items, interact with audience, alongside, or sometimes away from the mainstream organizational platforms (Muindi 2018; Okoye et al. 2019). According to Kamenchu (2015), media houses in Kenya have come up with policies to guide the journalists use of their social media handles while working with them, for example, by not ‘breaking news’ on their personal handles. This case suggests that organizational followers in the media are proactive and while digital platforms are part of their trade, they can use them in much advanced ways than employers would want them to.

In the political scene in Kenya, citizens as followers of their governments have also utilized digital spaces to engage with their governments and leaders, hence ‘voicing’ their concerns (Hirschman 1970). According to Ogola (2019), Kenyans on Twitter (or ‘KOT’) have utilized Twitter as a social media platform to engage in deliberation of public discourse (in line with the Habermasian concept of ‘public sphere’). KOT’s lively and sometimes ‘fiery’ engagement has been seen to have the potential to ‘shift the conversation’ (Nitsche 2019, para. 1). Omanga (2019) focused on citizens’ engagement on WhatsApp by citizens in Nakuru County in Kenya. Omanga argued that the platform has given room to discussion of political agenda in the County, with some discussions translating to offline civic engagement activities.

6 Effect of digitized followers on leadership

Since organizational followers in Kenya have adopted digitization, does this have any effect on leadership? Social Impact Theory suggests that this is possible through the strength, immediacy and number of a person or a group (Latané 1981;

Latané and Wolf 1981). The aspect of strength specifically applies to this study as organizational followers who are able to deftly utilize technology and related platforms have the potential to influence their leaders. The strength of organizational powers comes from personal power and authority, which in this case come from mastery and expertise in digital platforms (Oc and Bashshur 2013). The foregoing cases support this premise.

Among teachers in Kenya, the ability to adopt and make use of digital platforms to enhance their professional development is not only a benefit to them; it also has the potential to make teachers influential in their schools and in relation to the education system in general (Bett and Makewa 2018; Dryden-Peterson et al. 2017). As teachers in Kenya use social media, they not only discuss education-related matters, they also engage in discussions that have the potential to influence their schools leaders. For example, as Bett and Makewa's (2018) study showed, teachers would seek advice on aspects of curriculum or pedagogy from their colleagues online. Consequently, the practical responses from colleagues can serve as the fodder for such teachers' influencing their school heads. It possible that such a 'powerful' teacher could influence their school principal to invest in resources beneficial to learning, which colleagues online had suggested.

In the health sector, digitized workers in Kenya are an asset to their leaders and health facilities. As Kenya has made a commitment to attain Universal Health Coverage by 2022 (Barasa et al. 2018), the role that healthcare workers play is instrumental. Health workers using digital platforms are able to enhance the fight against chronic conditions such as cervical cancer (Kaunda and Liu 2019). More than that, however, these organizational followers in the health sector can influence their leaders when their use of digital technologies enhances the attainment of health-related goals. The training of nurses and nurse leaders has been documented as a strategy to influence health policies in Kenya and other African nations (Ousman et al. 2017). Followership literature suggests that one can be a leader and a follower at the same time (Malakyan 2014). Hence, nurse leaders are also followers as they have leaders they report to (i.e. at the policy level). The influence of such followers can be more meaningful with adoption of digital technologies.

Ubiquitous technology in the media industry in Kenya has led to progress among journalists and other media practitioners. In 2018, after the contested presidential elections in Kenya, the opposition team organized a mock swearing in of their candidate Raila Odinga. Mainstream media stations were banned from covering this live event, and a number stations were shut off during this period (Madowo 2018). However, as Okoye et al. (2019) have reported in their study, many journalists used their personal social media accounts (i.e. Facebook, Twitter and You Tube) to access

and disseminate news on this prohibited event. By doing this, such journalists were being influential to their leaders on the media stations. This is especially the case as some journalists are influential on social media, and have large following (Einashe 2016). To many journalists, a large following on social media is their 'strength' according to SIT, a weapon they can use to influence their leaders.

Politically, digital platforms in Kenya, especially social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, You Tube and WhatsApp have given political followers power to bring about influence to their contexts in the country. The KOT case discussed by Ogola (2019) has given Kenyans a chance to not only interact, but also bring about meaningful influence to the leaders in the country and beyond. In 2015, as President Barrack Obama prepared to visit Kenya, CNN at one point referred to the country as a 'hotbed of terrorism', a phrase that incensed many Kenyans. An outrage by many Kenyans especially KOT compelled CNN to send one of its senior executive to the country to apologize (Mutiga 2015). Similarly, according to Omanga (2019), citizens' engagement on WhatsApp in Nakuru County led to a draft legislative bill presented in the County Assembly. These cases show how digital followers bring influence to their leaders, who in turn take meaningful actions for their contexts.

7 Conclusion

Although organizational leaders play a pivotal role in steering their firms towards the attainment of set objectives and goals, literature suggests that followers through their unique mix of strengths and skills are on the forefront in the attainment of these goals and objectives (Bufalino 2018; Carsten et al. 2014; Kelly 1988). Further, with organizations getting more and more digitized, its followers are becoming much more independent and flexible in how they carry out their duties (Church and Burke 2017). This is important for Kenyan leaders as they seek to progress their organizations.

As the Kenyan cases discussed in this paper show, digitization has not only been widely adopted by organizational followers, it has also helped these followers to directly or indirectly influence their leaders and organizations. As Social Impact Theory suggests, followers can influence through their strength, which can be demonstrated in many ways. In this paper, followers who demonstrate mastery of digital platforms, or who are able to regularly utilize such avenues, have the needed 'strength' to influence their leaders.

The foregoing arguments offer a number of implications for leaders and leadership in Kenyan organizations. First, leaders need to create an organizational culture where digital followers thrive. As Kuada (2010) observed, organizational leaders in Africa can create cultures where followers are

proactive and excellent, or those that produce passive and servile ones. Organizational leaders in Kenya should also have workable digital strategies, for example one which prioritizes growing their digital talents from within (Doonan 2018). This helps to motivate followers within an organization. Lastly, but importantly, leaders in firms in Kenya should be flexible in their leadership style. As discussed in this paper, followers can and do influence their leaders through their different ‘strengths’ as SIT posits. Flexible leaders should not only be cognizant of this influence, but also make room for influential followers.

In conclusion, as our arguments in this paper are mainly theoretical, further empirical studies on the effect of digitized followers on their leaders in Kenyan organizations and related African contexts can help test the arguments by social impact theory.

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