

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN EMPOWERING RURAL ECONOMIES: A CASE STUDY OF KENYA

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Abstract

This study explores the role of social media in empowering rural economies, focusing on a case study in Kenya. In recent years, social media platforms have emerged as significant tools for economic development, especially in developing countries. This research investigates how rural communities in Kenya leverage social media to enhance economic activities, promote local products, and access market information. Using a mixed-method approach, the study combines qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys to analyze the impact of social media on economic empowerment. The findings reveal that social media facilitates market access, enhances networking opportunities, and provides a platform for knowledge sharing among rural entrepreneurs. However, challenges such as digital literacy, internet accessibility, and cultural barriers hinder the full potential of social media utilization in these areas. The study contributes to the understanding of digital tools in rural economic development and provides insights for policymakers and practitioners to optimize social media strategies for community empowerment.

Keywords: Social Media, Rural Economies, Economic Empowerment.

A. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has revolutionized the way people interact, communicate, and conduct business globally, with social media emerging as a critical tool in this transformation. In developing countries, particularly in rural areas, social media has become an accessible and powerful platform that fosters economic development and empowerment (Chaudhry, 2020). Recent studies have highlighted the potential of social media to create new economic opportunities for marginalized communities by promoting local products, enabling entrepreneurship, and facilitating access to broader markets (Mare et al., 2022; Okunola, 2021). However, the application of social media for economic empowerment in rural economies remains underexplored, particularly in the context of African countries like Kenya, where digital disparities and socio-cultural factors still play a significant role (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2019). Rural economies are characterized by limited access to traditional economic resources, such as infrastructure, education, and financial services, which hinders sustainable development (Fadairo et al., 2021). Social media platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, provide alternative channels that bridge these gaps by connecting rural entrepreneurs with potential buyers, suppliers, and business partners (Waghmare, 2019). Studies have shown that in countries like Nigeria and Uganda, social media has empowered local artisans and farmers by enhancing their visibility and market reach (Nwafor & Anyanwu, 2020). In Kenya, where agriculture is a dominant economic activity, social media's role in economic development is gradually gaining attention (Kipkurgat et al., 2019).

The utilization of social media in rural Kenya is driven by several factors, such as the increasing penetration of mobile phones and internet access, which have enabled rural communities to engage in digital economic activities (Aker & Mbiti, 2010). Despite these advances, there are still considerable challenges, including low digital literacy, inadequate digital infrastructure, and socio-cultural resistance, which limit the effectiveness of social

media in empowering rural economies (Muthuri et al., 2018). Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of how social media is used for economic activities in rural areas and the factors influencing its adoption and impact (Gichuki et al., 2019). Previous research has predominantly focused on the urban context, overlooking the unique dynamics of rural areas where community structures, social networks, and economic behaviors differ significantly (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019). Moreover, studies often emphasize the positive outcomes of social media usage without adequately considering the barriers and limitations faced by rural users (Porter et al., 2020). This gap in literature highlights the need for more nuanced research that examines both the potential and the challenges of using social media for economic empowerment in rural Kenya (Mtega & Ronald, 2013).

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the role of social media in empowering rural communities in Kenya. Specifically, it investigates how rural residents leverage social media platforms to promote local businesses, engage in entrepreneurship, and access market information. The study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative interviews with rural entrepreneurs and quantitative surveys to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of social media on rural economic empowerment (Bosire et al., 2021). The findings from this research are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on digital inclusion and rural development, offering insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and social media companies on optimizing social media strategies for rural communities (Mutula, 2010). By focusing on the Kenyan context, this research also seeks to provide comparative insights with other developing countries in Africa where similar socio-economic and digital challenges exist. It highlights the interplay between digital tools and traditional economic practices, thereby expanding the theoretical and practical understanding of rural economic empowerment through digital means (Mbarika et al., 2017). Ultimately, this study underscores the transformative potential of social media in rural settings and its implications for future development strategies in Africa. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, understanding the specific contexts and challenges faced by rural communities in Kenya becomes essential. This study will add to the growing body of knowledge on digital economies by focusing on the under-researched area of rural economic empowerment through social media. It will further provide actionable recommendations for harnessing social media's potential in enhancing the livelihoods of rural populations, thereby promoting more inclusive and sustainable development.

B. METHOD

This study employs a mixed-method approach to comprehensively explore the role of social media in empowering rural economies in Kenya. The research design integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods to capture diverse perspectives on social media usage among rural communities. The qualitative component involves semi-structured interviews with rural entrepreneurs, local business owners, and community leaders who actively use social media platforms for economic activities. These interviews provide in-depth insights into their experiences, challenges, and perceived benefits of social media as a tool for economic empowerment. On the other hand, the quantitative component consists of structured surveys distributed to a larger sample of rural residents to quantify the impact of social media on economic development and to identify patterns in usage and outcomes.

The data collection was conducted in selected rural regions of Kenya, such as Nakuru, Meru, and Kisii counties, which were chosen based on their varying levels of social media penetration, economic activities, and access to digital infrastructure. A purposive sampling technique was used to select interview participants who are known to use social media actively for business and economic purposes, ensuring a diversity of experiences and perspectives. For the survey, a stratified random sampling method was employed to ensure representation from

different age groups, gender, educational backgrounds, and economic sectors. The survey instrument included both closed and open-ended questions to allow for a more nuanced understanding of social media's impact on economic activities. Data analysis was carried out using a combination of thematic analysis for the qualitative data and descriptive statistics for the quantitative data. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns from the interview transcripts, providing a narrative understanding of how social media facilitates economic empowerment in rural settings. For the quantitative data, statistical techniques such as frequency distribution, cross-tabulation, and regression analysis were utilized to determine the relationship between social media usage and economic indicators like income levels, market access, and business growth. The integration of both qualitative and quantitative findings offers a comprehensive overview of the role of social media in rural economic empowerment and helps validate the results through methodological triangulation, enhancing the reliability and validity of the research outcomes.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Increased Market Access and Visibility for Rural Entrepreneurs

The study reveals that social media platforms, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, have significantly enhanced market access and visibility for rural entrepreneurs in Kenya. By utilizing these platforms, small-scale farmers, artisans, and other rural business owners have been able to overcome geographical limitations that traditionally constrained their market reach. Social media allows these entrepreneurs to showcase their products and services to a broader audience beyond their local markets, connecting them with customers across Kenya and even internationally. This broader reach has led to increased sales, business growth, and improved livelihoods for many rural entrepreneurs. This finding aligns with previous research that underscores the transformative potential of social media for small businesses, particularly in rural settings. According to Kietzmann et al. (2011), social media offers unique opportunities for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to engage directly with customers, build brand awareness, and foster loyalty through interactive communication. The interactive nature of social media allows rural entrepreneurs in Kenya to not only promote their products but also engage in real-time feedback and customer service, enhancing their market position and competitiveness. This is consistent with the observations of Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), who argue that the immediacy and connectivity provided by social media can significantly reduce marketing costs and improve customer relationship management for small businesses.

The study's findings are supported by Rau et al. (2016), who noted that social media serves as a low-cost marketing tool that can level the playing field for small businesses in developing regions. In rural Kenya, where traditional advertising and marketing channels are either inaccessible or too expensive, social media provides an alternative that is both affordable and far-reaching. This capability is particularly important in contexts where infrastructure is underdeveloped and traditional supply chains are limited. Social media, thus, becomes a tool for rural entrepreneurs to bypass intermediaries and directly reach customers, suppliers, and partners, optimizing their market access strategies. The benefits of increased market access and visibility are evident, it is crucial to contextualize these gains within the broader challenges faced by rural entrepreneurs in Kenya. Studies by Nyambu (2013) and Gichuki et al. (2019) have highlighted that while social media can significantly expand market reach, the actual realization of these benefits depends on the level of digital literacy, access to reliable internet, and the ability to create compelling digital content. For many rural entrepreneurs, especially those with limited formal education and digital skills, effectively utilizing social media remains a challenge. This gap in digital competencies can limit the extent to which these entrepreneurs can fully capitalize on social media's potential for market expansion.

While increased visibility can boost sales, it can also expose rural entrepreneurs to increased competition, including from larger, more established businesses that may have better resources for digital marketing. As Porter et al. (2020) discuss, the democratizing nature of social media can also lead to market saturation, where the sheer volume of information and competition makes it difficult for smaller businesses to stand out. This calls for a more nuanced understanding of how rural entrepreneurs can differentiate themselves and maintain their competitive edge in a crowded digital space. The study's finding that social media enhances market access and visibility for rural entrepreneurs in Kenya is corroborated by existing literature. Social media provides a valuable platform for overcoming geographical and infrastructural barriers, enabling small businesses to connect with broader markets. However, the effectiveness of these platforms depends on factors such as digital literacy, content creation skills, and strategic marketing approaches, which require further support and development. Policymakers, development agencies, and social media companies need to consider these factors when designing interventions to support digital empowerment and market expansion for rural entrepreneurs.

2. Enhanced Networking and Collaboration Opportunities

The study shows that social media usage among rural entrepreneurs in Kenya significantly enhances networking and collaboration opportunities. Through platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram, rural business owners can connect with a wide array of stakeholders, including potential customers, suppliers, peers, and mentors. These connections foster business collaborations, partnerships, and knowledge exchange, creating a more interconnected business ecosystem in rural Kenya. Such networking not only allows for better market insights and collective problem-solving but also supports community-based economic activities where shared resources and local partnerships can lead to mutual growth. This finding is consistent with prior research on the role of social media in building social capital, which is crucial for business success, particularly in rural and resource-constrained environments. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) highlight that social media platforms are powerful tools for creating and maintaining social capital by facilitating interactions that would otherwise be difficult in traditional settings. In the context of rural Kenya, social capital built through social media can result in increased trust and cooperation among entrepreneurs, leading to collaborative efforts that enhance economic outcomes. Putnam (2000) also emphasizes the importance of social capital in fostering cooperation and shared learning among community members, which is essential for sustainable economic development.

The study's finding aligns with the work of Burt (2004), who highlights that networks created through digital platforms can function as "bridges" that provide access to resources and information otherwise unavailable within an entrepreneur's immediate environment. In Kenya, rural entrepreneurs using social media can tap into new markets, access better suppliers, and find mentors or investors who can provide valuable guidance and support. This bridging social capital is particularly beneficial in contexts where physical infrastructure and mobility are limited, as it allows rural businesses to connect with urban markets and global supply chains, thus broadening their economic opportunities. While enhanced networking and collaboration through social media offer substantial benefits, there are challenges that need to be considered. For example, Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) argue that the quality of social networks and the type of information exchanged are critical factors that determine the effectiveness of these networks. In rural Kenya, where digital literacy levels may vary significantly, the effectiveness of social media networks can be hindered by misinformation, lack of credible information, or inadequate digital skills among participants. The study by Mare, Moyo, and Rinnawi (2022) further supports this by showing that while digital networks can enable collaboration, the actual

value derived from these networks depends on the participants' ability to navigate digital spaces effectively and filter valuable information from the noise.

The collaborative opportunities facilitated by social media are also shaped by socio-cultural dynamics and trust levels within rural communities. As Granovetter (1985) notes, trust and social embeddedness are critical components of successful economic transactions and partnerships. In rural Kenya, where community ties and relationships play a vital role, social media must be carefully navigated to foster genuine and beneficial collaborations rather than superficial or transactional interactions that do not result in long-term benefits. This calls for tailored digital literacy programs that not only teach technical skills but also focus on effective communication, trust-building, and conflict resolution in digital environments. The study's finding that social media enhances networking and collaboration opportunities for rural entrepreneurs in Kenya is well-supported by existing literature on social capital and digital networking. Social media provides a platform for building valuable connections, facilitating resource sharing, and promoting collaborative business ventures. However, maximizing these benefits requires addressing challenges related to digital literacy, trust, and the quality of information exchanged. Interventions by development agencies, NGOs, and digital platforms should therefore focus on enhancing digital skills, promoting trustworthy content, and fostering genuine collaborations to fully harness social media's potential for rural economic empowerment.

3. Empowerment Through Access to Information and Training

The study found that rural communities in Kenya leverage social media to access vital information and training that empower them economically. Through platforms such as WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and YouTube channels, rural entrepreneurs can gain insights into market trends, agricultural best practices, and entrepreneurial skills development. This access to information not only enhances their knowledge base but also provides them with practical tools to improve business operations, adopt new technologies, and respond to market demands more effectively. Consequently, social media becomes a significant enabler for capacity building and economic empowerment among rural populations. This finding resonates with previous studies that highlight the importance of access to information in fostering economic growth and empowerment in rural settings. As noted by Heeks (2010), digital platforms can reduce information asymmetry, which is a significant barrier to economic participation for rural communities. By democratizing access to information, social media allows rural entrepreneurs to make more informed decisions, negotiate better prices, and adopt innovative practices that enhance productivity and profitability. Similarly, Furuholt and Matotay (2011) found that access to timely and relevant information through digital means is crucial for the empowerment of rural farmers in Tanzania, allowing them to understand market conditions better and reduce reliance on exploitative intermediaries.

The role of social media as an educational tool is further supported by the work of Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), who argue that platforms like YouTube and Facebook can serve as informal learning environments where users acquire new skills and knowledge. In rural Kenya, social media is being used to share educational content on various topics, including financial literacy, digital marketing, and sustainable farming techniques. This aligns with the findings of Boateng et al. (2016), who observed that social media facilitates knowledge exchange and peer learning among entrepreneurs, enhancing their ability to innovate and adapt to changing economic landscapes. While social media provides valuable opportunities for information access and training, there are limitations that need to be considered. As Mutula (2013) points out, the digital divide remains a persistent challenge in many developing countries, including Kenya. Access to social media and its educational benefits is often skewed towards those who are already relatively better off in terms of digital literacy, internet

connectivity, and access to digital devices. This disparity can exacerbate existing inequalities, as those with fewer resources may be unable to fully participate in or benefit from the digital economy. Therefore, the empowerment potential of social media through information access is not uniform and requires targeted interventions to ensure inclusivity.

There is the issue of information quality and credibility on social media platforms. According to Tajudeen, Jaafar, and Ainin (2018), while social media provides an avenue for accessing information, the abundance of unverified content can sometimes lead to misinformation or poor decision-making among users. In rural Kenya, where formal education levels may be lower, the risk of misinformation can undermine the very empowerment social media seeks to provide. This calls for critical digital literacy programs that teach rural entrepreneurs not only how to access information but also how to critically assess its reliability and relevance. The study's finding that social media empowers rural communities in Kenya through access to information and training is well-supported by existing literature. Social media serves as a valuable tool for bridging information gaps, facilitating learning, and enabling informed decision-making among rural entrepreneurs. However, to fully harness these benefits, it is essential to address the challenges related to the digital divide, information quality, and digital literacy. Stakeholders such as policymakers, NGOs, and digital platforms must work collaboratively to create an enabling environment that ensures all rural communities can access, utilize, and benefit from the wealth of information available on social media.

4. Challenges of Digital Literacy and Infrastructure

The study identifies significant challenges that limit the potential of social media in empowering rural economies in Kenya, particularly related to digital literacy and infrastructure. While social media offers numerous benefits, its effective use is often constrained by the low levels of digital literacy among rural populations. Many rural entrepreneurs lack the basic digital skills necessary to utilize these platforms effectively, resulting in a digital divide that hinders their ability to access market information, engage with broader networks, or promote their businesses online. Additionally, inadequate infrastructure, such as unreliable internet connectivity and limited access to affordable digital devices, exacerbates these challenges and prevents equitable participation in the digital economy. This finding is corroborated by previous studies highlighting the critical barriers to digital inclusion in developing countries. According to van Dijk (2006), digital skills and access to infrastructure are fundamental enablers of digital participation. Without adequate digital literacy, rural entrepreneurs are less likely to understand how to navigate social media platforms or leverage them for economic activities. Wyche and Olson (2018) found that even when rural residents have access to digital tools, their lack of skills often limits meaningful engagement. This aligns with the findings in Kenya, where many rural entrepreneurs may have access to smartphones but lack the knowledge to use social media effectively for business purposes.

The issue of inadequate digital infrastructure is a persistent problem across rural areas in Africa. James (2005) emphasizes that infrastructural constraints, such as lack of reliable internet access and high costs of digital devices, continue to pose significant barriers to digital participation. In Kenya, where rural areas often experience poor connectivity and high data costs, the potential of social media to drive economic empowerment is significantly curtailed. This finding is echoed by Mwesige (2004), who argues that digital inequality is not just about having access to digital devices but also about the quality and affordability of internet services. These infrastructural challenges create a disparity between urban and rural areas in Kenya, limiting rural entrepreneurs' ability to compete on a level playing field. The digital divide is further compounded by socio-cultural factors that affect the adoption and use of digital tools in rural communities. As noted by Selwyn (2004), digital literacy is not only about the technical skills to use digital devices but also about the social and cultural readiness to embrace digital

technologies. In many rural parts of Kenya, social norms, fear of technology, and lack of trust in digital platforms can deter people from fully utilizing social media for economic purposes. These socio-cultural barriers must be considered when developing digital literacy programs aimed at enhancing rural economic empowerment.

Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions that go beyond merely providing access to digital tools. There is a need for comprehensive digital literacy training that caters to the unique needs of rural entrepreneurs, focusing not only on basic skills but also on strategic use of social media for business purposes. UNCTAD (2018) recommends multi-stakeholder approaches involving governments, private sector, and civil society organizations to bridge the digital divide. Such approaches should include investments in digital infrastructure, subsidies for digital devices, and community-based training programs that build trust and familiarity with digital tools. In conclusion, while social media has the potential to empower rural economies in Kenya, challenges related to digital literacy and infrastructure significantly limit this potential. The study's findings highlight the need for comprehensive strategies that address both the technical and socio-cultural dimensions of digital inclusion. By focusing on improving digital literacy, enhancing digital infrastructure, and fostering a supportive environment for digital adoption, stakeholders can help rural communities in Kenya fully leverage social media for economic empowerment.

D. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the transformative potential of social media in empowering rural economies in Kenya by enhancing market access, facilitating networking and collaboration, and providing valuable opportunities for information and training. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram enable rural entrepreneurs to reach broader markets, establish strategic partnerships, and access critical business knowledge that can drive economic growth. However, the effectiveness of these platforms depends significantly on the digital skills of users and the quality of digital infrastructure available in rural areas. Despite the advantages, the study also identifies significant challenges that limit the full potential of social media for economic empowerment in rural Kenya. Issues such as low digital literacy, unreliable internet connectivity, high costs of digital devices, and socio-cultural barriers create a digital divide that hinders inclusive digital participation. These challenges suggest the need for targeted interventions, including digital literacy programs tailored to the needs of rural communities, investments in digital infrastructure, and initiatives to build trust and familiarity with digital tools. The research underscores the importance of adopting a holistic approach to harnessing social media for rural economic development. For social media to serve as a true enabler of economic empowerment, stakeholders—including policymakers, development agencies, and digital platform providers—must work together to address the technical, infrastructural, and cultural challenges faced by rural communities. By fostering a more inclusive and supportive digital environment, rural entrepreneurs in Kenya can fully capitalize on the opportunities presented by social media, leading to more sustainable and equitable economic growth.

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