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DIGITALIZATION AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO COVID-19 IN POST-PANDEMIC IN AFRICA

Vincent Motau and Olusegun Obadire * 

ABSTRACT

The relevance of digital technology has increased globally, especially during and after the Covid-19 outbreak. However, digitalisation in Africa is still under the development process whereby the majority of African countries are adjusting and adapting to digitalization. The lack of technological advancement in Africa poses a serious delay to the adoption of digitalization. This study aims to assess the digitalisation and government response to COVID-19 during the post-pandemic era in Africa. This study was done qualitatively as a desktop study. Therefore, this study used a secondary research approach where books, journal articles, and newspapers were employed to collect data. A key finding of this paper is that the majority of African countries are still struggling to adapt to digital technologies because of the lack of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) materials but slowly but surely they are adopting digitalization. As digital transformation is essential for survival, businesses and institutions have increased their investments in technological breakthroughs. This study concludes that the introduction of digitalization in Africa was the best solution to curb the spread of COVID-19. Africa is still behind in digitalization, although it has a long history with technology. Africa has proven to be resilient, and its nations are catching up in embracing global digitization. The study recommends that digitalization in Africa in response to the pandemic must be adopted for future outbreaks. African countries must continue adopting digitalization because people now prefer to use the 4IR method.

Keywords: Digitalization, COVID-19, Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), Digital Economy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relevance of digital technology has increased globally, especially during and after the Covid-19 outbreak. The necessity for digitization has increased

in a major way as a result of the 2019 COVID-19 pandemic.¹ The emergence of the coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) has increased the demand for digitization more than before.² Digitalization is being claimed to be a key factor in economic progress in nations that are developing, increasing capital and labour productivity, lowering the cost of transactions, and allowing access to international markets.³ However, Digitalization in Africa is still under the development process whereby the majority of African countries are adjusting and adapting to digitalization. The lack of technological advancement and digital tools in Africa poses a serious delay to the adoption of digitalization in Africa. Due to the low adoption of Digital Financial Services (DFS) and the internecine disagreement, the epidemic has shown the profound already existing COVID-19 digital gap in many African countries. However, the majority of African states were forced to implement the digitalization strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic to carry on with their regular duties and daily businesses.

Numerous companies have either experienced a digital transformation or are in the process of undergoing one, but the outbreak of COVID-19 accelerated this transformation for businesses.⁴ Organizations were compelled to quickly adapt and start providing digital services to their customers as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. In the post-Covid-19 pandemic the majority of African countries did not stop using Digitalization, they continued to use Digitalization, because they realized that it was the available method that they could use.

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¹ L Nagel, 'The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the digital transformation of work. International' (2020) *Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 861-875 <DOI:10.1108/IJSSP-07-2020-0323>

² I.E Agbehadji et al, 'COVID-19 pandemic waves: 4IR technology utilisation in multi-sector economy' (2021) *13(18) Sustainability* 10168. <<https://doi.org/10.3390/su131810168>>

³ C Dahlman et al, 'Harnessing the Digital Economy for Developing Countries' (2016) <<http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/download/4adffb24-en.pdf>>

⁴ H Morgan, 'Best practices for implementing remote learning during a pandemic' (2020) *93(3) The clearing house: A journal of educational strategies, issues and ideas* 135-141 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2020.1751480>>

Numerous businesses have been compelled to quickly modify their business models as a result of a variety of actions, including government-led closures of international borders, social distancing measures, local as well as national lockdowns, and quarantine measures.⁵ Due to the pandemic, numerous businesses have had to quickly adapt to digitalization, and most people think these changes are going to remain around.⁶

2. BACKGROUND

Before COVID-19, digitalization was often overlooked as a viable working method for interaction in Africa, primarily due to the lack of access to digital tools. Many countries on the continent faced significant challenges in terms of infrastructure, connectivity, and affordability of technology. As a result, traditional methods of communication and collaboration were predominantly relied upon. In the pre-pandemic era, face-to-face interactions, physical meetings, and paper-based documentation were the norm across various sectors such as education, healthcare, business, and governance. The concept of remote working or online learning was not widely embraced or even feasible for many individuals and organizations.

However, with the outbreak of the virus and the subsequent need for people to maintain social distancing measures and lockdowns, the limitations of traditional methods became apparent. Suddenly, there was an urgent demand for alternative ways to communicate, collaborate, conduct business transactions, and deliver services while minimizing physical contact. As an alternative to nationwide shutdowns, the pandemic compelled schools to provide remote teaching and learning. This unprecedented situation forced Africa to rapidly adapt to digitalization as a means of survival.

This sudden and unprecedented global crisis forced business sectors to reconsider their established business strategies and adjust to the new standard. The COVID-19 epidemic accelerated the digital transition that had previously taken place in several businesses. Before the pandemic, some

⁵ M Sostero et al, 'Teleworkability and the COVID-19 crisis: a new digital divide?' (2020) JRC working papers series on labour, education and technology.

⁶ McKinsey & Company, 'How COVID-19 has pushed companies over the technology tipping point—and transformed business forever' (2020) McKinsey & Company. [Online] October 5. <https://www.mckinsey.com/businessfunctions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/how-covid-19-has-pushed-companies-over-the-technology-tipping-point-and-transformed-business-forever>. [Retrieved 2021-02-15].

companies were hesitant to fully embrace digitalization due to various reasons such as cost concerns, lack of technological expertise, or resistance to change. However, when faced with the immediate need to ensure business continuity amidst lockdowns and social distancing measures, these barriers became secondary.

The adoption of digitalization became imperative for companies across sectors. Remote work became the norm, and businesses had to quickly find ways to enable their staff to operate effectively from their residence. This led to a surge in demand for collaboration tools, cloud-based services, and virtual communication platforms. Furthermore, with physical establishments shuttered or running with limitations, companies had to pivot towards e-commerce solutions rapidly. Online shopping experienced an unprecedented boom as consumers turned to digital channels for purchasing. Companies that had already invested in. According to Adegoke, 2020; and Gronbach, (2020), to reduce the risks associated with in-person interaction and crowding, Zimbabwe, Madagascar and Togo introduced government-to-person (G2P) electronic payment methods as an effort to improve social well-being.^{7, 8}

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, some companies were in the middle of adopting digitalization but when Covid-19 hit the world, many companies quickly adopted digitalization because that was the only solution to keep business operations from continuing.⁹ However, Digitalization has become an effective instrument for changing economies and cultures around the world in recent years. Africa has realized the need to utilize digital technologies to promote development and address socio-economic issues given its enormous potential and expanding population.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Communication theory and Adjustment theory. Underpinned this study. Communication theory is a hypothesis that explains communication

⁷ Y Adegoke, 'Digital platforms have been a boon for social assistance in African countries during the pandemic' Quartz Africa (2020)

⁸ L Gronbach, 'South Africa's social protection response to the COVID-19 pandemic' (2020) Internal policy centre for inclusive growth. University of Cape Town.

⁹ Ibid, pp.135-141.

phenomena, their relationships, the narrative that explains these correlations, and the rationale behind these three components. A framework for debating and assessing the significant agreements, practices, and occurrences that make up communication as a whole is provided by communication theory.

Theory can be viewed as a tool for mapping out and understanding the world; communication theory gives us the tools to solve empirical, philosophical, and practical communication-related challenges.¹⁰ The transmission perspective, which sees communication as the transfer of knowledge, and the ritual perspective, which sees communication as work done to link and promote that exchange, are two ways that communication theory emphasizes the symbolic and socially constructed that comprise communication.¹¹

3.2 Empirical Literature

3.2.1 Defining Digitalization

Distinct researchers and scholars have provided different definitions of "digitalization" based on their understanding, analysis and findings. In this regard, digitalization is the process of using technology and digital information to find new chances for value generation.¹² It is a method of applying digital expertise to bring about adjustments or take steps that could lead to a technological shift. Because of the improved effectiveness, reliability, performance, and more efficient ways to optimize, businesses can significantly raise the value they provide to customers.¹³

Digitalization is the process of converting the information inside of a document from the printed form into a machine-readable format.¹⁴ The act of converting hard copy information into electronic copy is known as

¹⁰ Flowerdew J. and Miller L, 'Second language listening: Theory and practice' (2005) Cambridge university press <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667244>>

¹¹ B Van Ruler, 2020. 'Communication theory: An underrated pillar on which strategic communication rests' (2020) 12(4) *In Future directions of strategic communication* 367,381 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1452240>>

¹² M. M Gobble, 'Digitalization, digitization, and innovation' (2018) 61(4) *Research-Technology Management*, Pp.56-59. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/08956308.2018.1471280>>

¹³ *Ibid*, Pp 56-59

¹⁴ H.N Eke, 'Digitizing resources for University of Nigeria repository: Process and challenges' (2011) 8(1) *Webology* 1,19.

digitalization.¹⁵ Digitalization is the process of transforming print-on-paper materials into digital format, typically through scanning.¹⁶

Even though each of these terms essentially means the same thing, the researcher chose Gobble's definition to make his argument on Digitalization in Africa in post-COVID-19. Therefore, the researcher has focused on the economic aspect where Digitalization was needed the most during and immediately after the COVID-19 period in Africa. Numerous digital strategies have been put into place by African policymakers to combat the virus regionally, nationally, locally, and continentally. However, there are some major challenges that many African countries experienced in the adoption of Digitalization to continue the operation of their businesses.

3.2.2 Economic Digitalisation during the Covid-19

The concept of the "digital economy" refers to the economic activity that arises from connecting individuals, businesses, organizations, devices, data, and processes through digital technology. It encompasses all online exchanges and transactions spanning numerous industries and technological platforms, such as big data, mobile, internet, and communication/information technology. The digital economy is regarded as the main driver of economic growth in both developed and developing countries.^{17, 18}

However, for the digital economy to be fully implemented it requires enough advanced technology equipment. In contrast Sub-Saharan Africa to OECD countries, the influence of the digital economy is less because of the region's undeveloped Internet connectivity and technology equipment.¹⁹ Therefore, it can be argued that during the pandemic, most of the African countries have suffered from implementing a digital economy due to the lack of internet

¹⁵ B.A Fabunmi et al, 'Digitization of library resources: Challenges and implications for policy and planning'(2006)5(2)

¹⁶ B.A Amollo, 'Digitization for libraries in Kenya' (Presented at the 2nd International Conference on African Digital Libraries and Archives (ICADLA-2), University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, November, 2011)

¹⁷ R.P Pradhan et al, 'Short-term and long-term dynamics of venture capital and economic growth in a digital economy: A study of European countries' (2019) 57 *Technology in Society* 125,134. <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2018.11.002>>

¹⁸ C.Y Cheng, 'ICT diffusion, financial development, and economic growth: an international cross-country analysis' (2021) 94 *Econ Mode* 662,671 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econmod.2020.02.008>>

¹⁹ G Myovella et al, ' Digitalization and economic growth: A comparative analysis of Sub-Saharan Africa and OECD economies' (2019) 44(2) *Telecomm Policy* 101856 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2019.101856>>

connectivity and advanced technology to keep the business going without inconveniences.

3.2.3 Digitalisation in the Economic Sector in Uganda

In Uganda, the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) that produce for the economy are crucial for attaining sustainable development since they foster the growth of jobs and earnings.²⁰ Despite the same, they confront numerous obstacles, like irregular input supply, high capital costs, and limited technology adoption. The 2019 pandemic and national and international control measures have made these existing problems worse.²¹ Digitalization is more than just implementing digital solutions; it is the development of fresh approaches and commercial strategies to capitalize on digital possibilities. However, on the other hand, Digitalization also hampers job opportunities that require physical activities. It has been noted that although Uganda has made great progress in growing its digital economy, more work must still be done, before the country's population can fully profit from technological advancements after COVID-19.²² Contamination strategies for the COVID-19 pandemic, such as limiting the flow of commodities and services, have harmed the economy and caused significant disruptions to the lives of people.

3.2.4 Digitalisation in the Economic Sector in South Africa

The epidemic had two main effects on the South African economy: first, it caused a progressive relaxation of domestic output outside of necessities. Second, because most of the world's main economies entered complete lockdowns starting in March 2020, the epidemic had an impact on the world economy.²³

In South Africa, digital technology is thought to allow businesses to swiftly transition from conventional physical means to new business models. Businesses are operating with goals for the future, and the COVID-19 pandemic has sped up the transition from traditional to online models. The transition from in-person to online operations was difficult for small and

²⁰ Ibid, Pp. 101856.

²¹ R Kahunde et al, 'The effects of COVID-19 lockdowns on Ugandan businesses: A comparison of the 2020 and the 2021 lockdowns' (2021)

²² World Bank Economic Report, 'Digital Solutions Key in Boosting Uganda's COVID-19 Health Response, Aiding Faster Economic Recovery' (8 July 2020).

²³ E.K Avenyo et al, 'Determinants of the Adoption of Digital Technologies in South African Manufacturing: Evidence from a Firm-level Survey' 92(2) South African Journal of Economics 235,259 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/saje.12378>>

medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) because they didn't have enough technological resources that enable them to operate and keep their businesses operating.²⁴

In contrast, other business categories have been able to adapt imaginatively using digital technologies. Bigger businesses have an edge over smaller and medium-sized businesses since their increased resource availability makes the transition to a digital company model easier.²⁵ However, one significant breakthrough that defined the Fourth Industrial Revolution was using ICT. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has accelerated this change.

3.3 Covid-19's Effect on Businesses

The coronavirus pandemic, which started in mid-March 2020 in South Africa, has severely affected Africa, with much of the continent's economy being shut down in an attempt to stop the virus's spread. Disruptions have affected supply chains, sales activity, and business operations (to a lesser extent). A considerable number of businesses have closed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, disrupting trade in virtually every industry sector in an unprecedented way.²⁶

Most of the businesses had to close or scale back operations as a result of the pandemic, which also led to a sharp decrease in sales and major changes to the workforce.²⁷ However, the effects varied greatly throughout businesses. The trade closures and travel restrictions were the primary causes of the pandemic's considerable influence on the expansion of digital businesses.²⁸ In the study conducted in Europe, Riley asserted that over 60 million Europeans

²⁴ G Anakpo and S Mishi, 'Business response to COVID-19 impact: Effectiveness analysis in South Africa' (2021) 13(1) *The Southern African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management*, Pp.7 <DOI:10.4102/sajesbm.v13i1.397>

²⁵ D.T Matt and E Rauch, 'SME 4.0: The role of small-and medium-sized enterprises in the digital transformation: Challenges, opportunities and requirements'(2020) Pp.3,36 <DOI:10.1007/978-3-030-25425-4_1>

²⁶ A Donthu and A Gustafsson, ' Effects of COVID-19 on business and research. *Journal of Business Research*' (2020) 117 *Journal of Business Research* 284,289 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.06.008>>

²⁷ M.C Apedo-Amah et al, 2020. Unmasking the impact of COVID-19 on businesses: Firm-level evidence from across the world. *The World Bank*.

²⁸ F Almeida F et al, 'The challenges and opportunities in the digitalization of companies in a post-COVID-19 World' (2020) 48(3) *IEEE Engineering Management Review* 97,103 <10.1109/EMR.2020.3013206>

are at risk of losing their jobs or having their monthly salaries cut as a result of COVID-19.

3.3.1 Sales and Marketing

New economic opportunities have been created by the advent of technological advances and the adjustments it has brought about in businesses' daily operations. They changed entire sectors, created new markets for previously untapped product categories, and rendered previously sold goods less tangible.²⁹ The adoption of new digital goods and services is contingent upon adaptability. Giving them models or solutions that can be adjusted to their needs in this way helped them make decisions about purchases quickly.³⁰ When new technology is introduced into business processes, it not only increases customer satisfaction but also opens up new markets abroad.³¹

3.3.2 The Closure of International Borders

The closure of international borders severely affected the trade between African countries and the entire world. Numerous African countries have followed some global policy patterns to combat COVID-19, including border closures, stringent immigration laws, quarantines, and the implementation of orders to stay home.³² This means the closure of the borders which were imposed by the governments had put the trade on hold.

3.3.4 The Closure of Local Businesses

Due to the lockdown which was imposed during COVID-19, led to the closure of non-essential businesses. Businesses such as Pharmacies and supermarkets were allowed to operate under the restriction measures.

3.3.5 Shortage of Suppliers during the Covid-19

People who own businesses indicated that the input expenses for suppliers have increased because of the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating the negative

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ K Lyytinen et al, 'Digital product innovation within four classes of innovation networks' (2006) 26(1) Information systems journal, Pp. 47,75 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.12093>>

³¹ Ibid.

³² S Yaya et al, 2020. 'Globalisation in the time of COVID-19: repositioning Africa to meet the immediate and remote challenges' (2020) 16(51) Globalization and Health 1,7 <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-020-00581-4>>

effects on enterprises.³³ Larger SMME companies indicated that logistics affected 33% of their operations, and 21% noted shortages of supplies or merchandise. Numerous small company owners are having problems with cash flow as a result of all those outside influences.³⁴ This is mostly because of unplanned increases in the costs of personal protective equipment (PPE) and delays in customer payments (or clients just not paying their accounts). SMME business owners were failing to cover their employees' payments as a result of all the changes, the majority of the employers had to terminate their employees, which had a serious impact on their ability to make ends meet.³⁵

3.3.6 The Decrease in Tourism

Sucheran (2021) argued that the tourist industry is one of the main drivers of the universal economy, and it has been severely impacted by the unique COVID-19.³⁶ As a result of COVID-19, 156 governments locked their borders completely to foreign tourism as of June 1, 2020.³⁷ Because of the strict lockdown put in place during the pandemic, the industry of tourism has been particularly heavily impacted; as a result, the industry was gradually bleeding death as the shutdown continued.³⁸ Nearly every country has imposed travel bans, closed borders, or set quarantine times to avert the COVID-19 epidemic continue spreading. Travel has all but ceased worldwide as of April 2020. The pandemic has put thousands of tourists and employments at serious risk, leading to a crisis in the South African tourism sector similar to what is happening to the world economy. Travel restrictions have resulted in a notable decrease in online reservations for the airline and tourism industries. The demand from customers for food shopping online at

³³ Y Lu et al, 'The perceived impact of the Covid-19 epidemic: evidence from a sample of 4807 SMEs in Sichuan Province, China' (2020) 19(4) *Environmental Hazards* 323,340 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17477891.2020.1763902>>

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ K Jafta et al, 'Income and Poverty Implications of COVID-19 Pandemic and Coping Strategies: The Case of South Africa' (2020) 19(3) *Africagrowth Agenda* Pp. 1-5 <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-afgrow_v19_n3_a1>

³⁶ R Sucheran, 'Preliminary economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the hotel sector in South Africa' (2021) 10(1) *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure* 115,130 <<https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720-90>>

³⁷ UNWTO, 'Coronavirus: The world economy at risk' (OECD Interim Economic Assessment 2020) Available at <<https://www.unwto.org/unwto-statement-on-thenovelcoronavirus-outbreak>> [Retrieved July 22 2020].

³⁸ Charles M, 'SA tourism sector is slowly 'bleeding to death' as the lockdown drags on' (2020) Available at <<https://www.iol.co.za/capeargus/news/sa-tourism-sector-is-slowlybleeding-to-death-as-the-lockdown-drags-on-50995164>> [Retrieved July 19 2020].

websites like Pick n Pay has increased dramatically. The present state of the economy has forced some companies to close their physical locations and offices, and airlines to cut back on their flight schedules. Many companies, manufacturers, and production lines have been forced to close to safeguard their workers. Inadequate technology infrastructure has made it impossible to work from home, which has affected the supply chain and led to the liquidation of e-commerce businesses.³⁹

3.4 The Impact of Digitalization on the Business Sector

Digitalization has played an important role in advancing the sector of business during the pandemic and it has continued to play a crucial part in the business sector even after the COVID-19 era. It can be argued that without Digitalization in African countries and in other world continents, some businesses could have closed down because the majority of countries have embarked on lockdown as a strategy to impede the COVID-19 virus's propagation. The COVID-19 pandemic has made digitalisation more important than it has ever been. Millions of individuals utilize online services connected to the internet to obtain credit, process payments, and stay in touch with friends and family.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused challenges for many different industries. Many of these businesses have experienced tremendous pressure to offer their products digitally, and as a result, they have been forced to institute new internal operating processes.⁴⁰ However, it can also be argued that African countries are still struggling in terms of technological advancement. The COVID-19 outbreak has highlighted Africa's ICT infrastructure weakness, leading to severe consequences for numerous small and medium-sized enterprises (SMMEs).⁴¹

Many different industries' enterprises have faced difficulties as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these companies have been forced to introduce new internal working procedures and have felt pushed to offer their products through digital platforms. Companies have experienced

³⁹ H Gqoboka et al, 'Challenges Facing ICT Use during COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises in South Africa (2020) 12(9) American Journal of Industrial and Business Management 1395,1401 <10.4236/ajibm.2022.129077>

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

notable changes, and they embraced digital technology-driven solutions with speed.⁴²

3.5 Strategy Used by Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises to Operate Businesses in the COVID-19

One of the biggest changes since the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic has been the move by small, medium, and large enterprises to go online, which opens up fresh possibilities for figuring out solutions.⁴³ In fact, the internet continues to be an essential resource for a lot of many enterprises, keeping them alive throughout the pandemic. SMMEs have addressed the COVID-19 outbreak while preserving a viable route to profitability to enhance their brand's perceived value in the eyes of customers. This has been made possible by advanced technology, remote working, shorter value chains, and social distance.⁴⁴

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A research technique is a methodical strategy that a researcher uses to address a research problem.⁴⁵ The qualitative desktop research approach was employed in this study since it helped the researcher obtain an understanding of the subject by gathering data from the available sources. Researchers generally employ non-numerical forms of data-gathering instruments, including document review or analysis, in qualitative desktop research studies.⁴⁶ When examining complex subjects and trying to get the points of view and experiences of other writers who have written books, journals, and articles on the same subject as your project, qualitative desktop research is essential. Articles, journals and books were among the qualitative desktop methods used in this context.

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ A.E Engidaw, 'Small businesses and their challenges during COVID-19 pandemic in developing countries: in the case of Ethiopia' (2022) 11(1) *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, Pp.1. <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s13731-021-00191-3>>

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ R Bougie and U Sekaran, *Research methods for business: A skill building approach* (7th edn, John Wiley and Sons 2019)

⁴⁶ J Creswell, 2013. *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* (4th edn, Pearson 2013)

This study used thematic content analysis. The researcher can determine the relationship between the material acquired and the project's themes by using thematic data analysis. By marking up potential themes and arranging them according to their connections, the researcher was able to expand the ideas. Subsequently, by paraphrasing concepts, the researcher was able to identify major themes. The diverse perspectives on parental engagement then gave rise to the sub-themes. Following that, they were thematically analysed.⁴⁷

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study has yielded two themes. These include the COVID-19 impacts on businesses and the impacts of Digitalisation on businesses.

5.1 The Covid-19 Impacts on the Businesses

The announcement of the lockdown was made by the head of state, who gave orders for citizens to leave crowded places and businesses and stay inside their homes. As a result, the shutdown forced the cancellation of any company events involving large crowds of people, underscoring the necessity for companies to coordinate digital advancements to maintain operations. Individuals had to get used to telecommuting and learn how to live in smaller quarters with their family members throughout the quarantine. Households transform into hybrid workspaces where workplace and household duties are combined. People's lives are significantly impacted by this circumstance since they run the possibility of losing their employment or having their earnings decreased.

In the study conducted by Kimuli, et al., (2021) titled "Digital technologies in micro and small enterprise: evidence from Uganda's informal sector during the COVID-19 pandemic" one of the respondents indicated that:

We have left our belongings in the "gamula" lockers because of the unexpected lockout. Water was able to enter these gamulas, mostly from the previous two months of rain. We have all of our belongings destroyed by the rain, and since the majority of things are damaged, I'm not sure whether we will even be able to sell what's left. We haven't even begun working yet, yet they are all losses. Using social media on her phone, my

⁴⁷ A Castleberry and A Nolen, "Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: Is it as easy as it sounds?" (2018) 10(6) *Currents in pharmacy teaching and learning* 807,815 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2018.03.019>>

daughter has attempted to sell a few things, but her buyer power is limited. She sells mostly to her previous customers—female dealers in toys and bags who are 50 years old.⁴⁸

For companies in a variety of industries in Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic has created difficulties. According to Almeida, Santos, and Monteiro (2020), there has been significant pressure on several business sectors to implement new operating procedures to provide their products via digital platforms. In response to the epidemic, businesses and industries have seen a sharp shift in customer behaviour toward online platforms. As a result, online trading has grown significantly because of COVID-19, primarily due to trade closures and restrictions on movement. The COVID-19 epidemic significantly changed consumer buying patterns worldwide. Their inclination for online companies stemmed from their desire for protection during the lockdown period enforced by numerous countries.⁴⁹ Furthermore, since the majority of young people are accustomed to using technology, they were the group that shifted the fastest toward online shopping during the lockdown.⁵⁰

Since the restrictions on the distribution of products and services were among the measures taken to control COVID-19 which has hurt the economy and disturbed people's livelihoods. Although Uganda has made great progress in growing its digital economy, according to the most recent World Bank economic report, more work must be done before the country's population can fully profit from technological advancements after COVID-19. Despite Ugandans' adoption of digital services, it has been observed that access to these services is still restricted for many who are unable to afford the high costs of digital services and gadgets.

⁴⁸ S.N.L. Kimuli et al, ' Digital technologies in micro and small enterprise: evidence from Uganda's informal sector during the COVID-19 pandemic' (2021) 18(2) *World Journal of Science, Technology and Sustainable Development* 93,108 <<https://doi.org/10.1108/WJSTSD-02-2021-0017>>

⁴⁹ F Pinzaru et al, 2020. 'The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Business. A preliminary overview. *Strategica. Preparing for Tomorrow, Today*, Pp.721-730.

⁵⁰ MKOR (2020). *Impactul epidemiei de CoronaVirus asupra vietii romanilor*. Available at <https://mkor.ro/studii/studiu-coronavirus-romania-2020>.

5.2 The Impact of Digitalization on the Business Sector

Micro and small enterprises (MSEs) are subject to harsher COVID-19 constraints than larger, international companies.⁵¹ The economic impact of MSE was seriously threatened by the COVID-19 regulations. Most SMEs lack the means to transform into digital enterprises instantly; instead, they need guidance and instruction on how to deploy and apply specific digital technologies to maintain their operations. Even though the government has now loosened restrictions on the activities of most enterprises, SMEs are still negatively impacted by the lockdown. Businesses that swiftly digitized their operations to leverage the benefits of digital technology platforms attest that their operations took on a completely new face, opening up a new consumer base.

Digital technology is essential in light of the current economic catastrophe brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic since it can draw in more customers and gradually provide things without requiring them to visit physical venues. Comparatively speaking, larger collaborations have gotten enough government money to deal with the effects of COVID-19 on sustainability and profitability.

It is harder to meet growth requirements when owners lack the business and ICT skills necessary for SMME survival and sustainability.⁵² Therefore, since small businesses require the greatest amount of funding, financing huge enterprises in comparison to small businesses has had a detrimental effect on both categories. Large corporations that have embraced ICT as they go from physical to digital technology—Checkers, for example—permit consumers to make transactions online, protecting the physical store from losing money from being unable to sell merchandise to consumers, which might lead to overstock. The evidence shows that in Uganda and South Africa, Digital networks like Facebook and WhatsApp, together with e-commerce, helped low-income women-owned companies increase their online sales amid the shutdown to make sure that their businesses kept going. In this case, it can be argued that social media platforms were the only alternatives to be used by

⁵¹ M Shafi et al. 'Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on micro, small, and medium-sized Enterprises operating in Pakistan' (2020) 2 Res. Glob 100018 <doi:10.1016/j.resglo.2020.100018>

⁵² C Wendt et al., 'Let's connect to keep the distance: How SMEs leverage information and communication technologies to address the COVID-19 crisis' (2022) *Information Systems Frontiers* 1061,1079.

small enterprises to continue operating businesses during the lockdown because of the lockdown restrictions.

The rapid growth of the internet-based economy and the interdependence of economic systems mean that the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly upset the balance of the intricate world economy and will probably bring about major disruptions to every sector in South Africa shortly. However, the pandemic has brought to light the reality that a large number of South Africans do not only lack access to the internet but also to digital gadgets that would allow them to conduct business remotely and go on with other areas of their lives through online means.

The economic impact of COVID-19 has benefited online shopping significantly, as "well-off" individuals use these sites instead of crowded public places for their purchasing needs. The outbreak's impacts draw attention to the e-commerce sector's enormous localized innovation prospects, which may have more stable systemic implications that support local economic drivers.

5.2.1 Businesses with Advanced Technology

Many businesses found that adopting digital solutions quickly was the best way to combat the epidemic. This strategy worked out, as businesses could quickly transition from in-person to remote working while operating as efficiently as possible under the conditions. The conclusion drawn by international digital decision-makers which was researched by Statista (2020) shows that the majority of businesses are undergoing a faster-than-usual digital transition. It is thought that the COVID-19 impact on digitalization adoption will result in a rise in digital platforms for collaboration as well as a revival of outmoded online commerce methods. Some of the digital concepts brought forward by the pandemic are anticipated to become reality shortly.⁵³

5.2.3 Lack of Technology Infrastructures

Even though digitization can greatly contribute to economic growth, a nation's degree of development may determine how much of an influence it has because some countries may lack technology resources. Sub-Saharan

⁵³ BDO, 'Digital Transformation in the Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Era' (2020) <<https://www.bdo.com/insights/business-financial-advisory/strategy,-technology-transformation/COVID-19-is-accelerating-the-rise-of-the-digital>>

African countries struggle compared to the OECD in terms of network connectivity.⁵⁴

Despite the strong backing from governments and other groups, small businesses in underdeveloped countries still struggle with expanding due mostly to their limited technological capabilities. Even though significant technology improvements worldwide, small businesses are hindered by the absence of modern technology adoption (due to the nature of their trade and business strategy). These small companies struggle to compete and expand without this technology. Not every company or person is equipped to deal with the challenges brought on by the move to digital technologies. For example, data suggests that over half of the world's population lacks internet connectivity, which is obvious proof of a dearth of online services and infrastructure.

Based on their past experiences and perspectives on technological advancement, some businesses were only encouraged to use digital solutions during the pandemic because they were not able to operate digitally due to the shortage of technology resources.⁵⁵ It may be argued that COVID-19 has impacted many businesses that were hesitant to adopt digital in the past and were caught off guard in the new era due to their lack of preparation.

Meanwhile, some companies, having already accelerated their digital transformation, demonstrated that they were ready to deal with the new, special COVID-19 model of business. Yet, many small companies have achieved success in COVID-19 by coming up with innovative ways to survive, such as branching out into new areas or developing fresh strategies for delivering their goods and services. Simultaneously, some major internet firms, including Google and Facebook, are developing new channels of communication for small companies to reach their consumers.

5.3 Underdevelopment and Inequalities in Africa

Considering the population dynamics, lack of development, and inequality in Africa, the pandemic's effects are more significant than they are elsewhere. This is especially true considering the potential of new variations and pandemics if the issue is not addressed thoroughly and globally at this time. It

⁵⁴ Myovella G, Karacuka M and Haucap J, 'Digitalization and economic growth: A comparative analysis of Sub-Saharan Africa and OECD economic' (2019) 44(2) *Telecomm Policy* 101856 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2019.101856>>

⁵⁵ Ibid

is evident that the majority of African nations lacked enough preparation for either the pandemic or any other kind of emergency. Before the epidemic, growth was impeded by weak institutions, a lack of growth-friendly laws, a lack of social safety nets, and inadequate public health and educational resources. During the pandemic, these same factors made crisis management more difficult. These elements will also have an impact on the type and duration of recovery, which differs between the two nations this study examines.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that digitalization in Africa in response to the pandemic must be adopted for future outbreaks. African countries must continue adopting digitalization because people now prefer to use the 4IR method. The study also recommends that African countries must prioritise developing and improving network connectivity because the majority of African countries are still suffering from connection. African people must be trained to use the 4IR technologies since people lack the knowledge to use 4IR types of equipment. African governments must encourage people to adopt economic digitalization because we are living in the 4IR era.

7. CONCLUSION

The significance of digital platforms in ensuring the adaptability of individuals, residences and organizations has certainly been highlighted during COVID-19. Social distancing and lockdown tactics which were imposed by the government have reduced the availability of physical engagement services, which made the demand for effective and easily available digital alternatives even greater. Evidence from various studies supports the notion that fast digitalization is essential for financial inclusion initiatives in Africa and has a big impact on hastening the continent's economic recovery after COVID-19. Platforms for digital financials offer numerous advantages, such as increased accessibility, reduced transaction costs, improved efficiency, and enhanced security. These benefits are particularly relevant for individuals and businesses in Africa, where access to traditional banking services can be limited or expensive. Digitization is unquestionably crucial to the healing process both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, it must be implemented methodically and deliberately, while preserving the rights and interests and privacy of customers, staff members, and residents.