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The Influence of the Societal Context on e-Business Diffusion in the Small-to-Medium Enterprises Sector in Zimbabwe

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Abstract – This research is an extraction from the researcher's PhD thesis investigating the influence of societal context on e-business diffusion in the small-to-medium enterprises (SME) sector in Zimbabwe. The study was considered important in facilitating e-business diffusion in the Zimbabwean SMEs which are lagging behind in the uptake of this business model, given its pole position in global business transactions. The societal context is constituted by societal factors that relate to the cultural norms and beliefs that define the national identity of a country. The study focussed on the owners and managers of the sampled firms as the key personnel responsible for strategic decisions in their respective organisations. A survey design was engaged, using survey monkey online data collection platform to reach out to the Harare Metropolitan SMEs registered with the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA). ZIMRA-registered SMEs were selected because, by virtue of registration with the national tax authority, they were deemed to be more formally managed and appropriate for the current study. The study found that the societal context influences diffusion, although only one, out of the three dimensions investigated, registered a significant impact. The researcher recommended that SME owners and managers need to develop technology-oriented internal systems and employee up-skilling training programmes. This will enable them to adopt e-business as the operational business model to ensure survival during, and in the aftermath of, the COVID-19 era which has made e-business diffusion more critical than ever before. Government financial support is vital in making this a reality.

Keywords – Social Influence, Cultural Norms, Cultural Dimensions, Survey Monkey, Zimbabwe Revenue Authority.

I. Introduction

Small-to-medium enterprises are considered the engine of growth in global economies, with substantial contribution to the respective national economies' gross domestic product and employment requirements ([1], [2]). This means that firms operating in the SME sector need to be competitive, not only nationally, but also regionally and internationally. Several business models have been created over the decades in an attempt to increase the quality of service to customers and improve organisational performance. In line with this, e-business became the buzz business concept at the turn of the 21st century. It has since become the key business model the world over, for survival, development, competitive edge and customer satisfaction, in both big and small-to-medium business sectors [3]. Despite its popularity, extensive use and its touted benefits, literature has exposed its low level of adoption in SMEs in the developing economies, Zimbabwe included ([4], [5]).

Societal factors encompass the cultural idiosyncrasies that characterise a nation. The nation's culture encapsulates the norms, beliefs and customs influencing its day-to-day existence, social interactions and business etiquette. Culture has been shown by various researchers as one of the factors affecting the diffusion of new ideas, innovation and novel applications such as e-business ([6], [7], [8], [9], [10]). The cultural background of a nation is thus considered to be instrumental in the degree to which it embraces new technologies ([6], [10]). This study is, therefore, investigating the societal factors that characterise the Zimbabwean culture and their influence on e-business diffusion in the small-to-medium enterprise sector. The societal factors of this study are anchored on Hofstede's [11] primary cultural dimensions posited in his original studies of world cultures carried out between 1967 and 1973. In that study, he distinguishes cultures according to four primary dimensions, namely, power distance index (PDI), individualism/collectivism (IDV/COL), masculinity/femininity (MAS), uncertainty avoidance index (UAI). He adds a fifth dimension which he terms 'long-/short-term orientation' in his later studies [12]. These dimensions are purported to differentiate how people from different nations behave in both social and business settings. Out of Hofstede's four primary dimensions, the researcher selected two which resonated with the focus of the current study. These two are, 'uncertainty avoidance index' and 'individualism versus collectivism'. In addition to Hofstede's dimensions, the researcher also adopted Hall and Hall's [13] dimensions, 'high versus low context' cultural orientations. These are considered to have an effect on communication, in both the business and social sphere. The selected dimensions were renamed to make them more explicit in line with the thrust of the research. 'Uncertainty avoidance' was labelled 'perceived risk', indicating the risk tolerance of a cultural grouping. 'Individualism/collectivism' was renamed 'social influence' to show the level of dependence or non-dependence of the business management on other people's influence within their social or business circles. 'High/low context' was renamed 'personal interaction', depicting the SMEs' inclination towards face-to-face, rather than virtual, business interactions. Hofstede's and the Halls' dimensions are closely intertwined in how they explain the various behavioural patterns of different cultural groupings. Those behavioural patterns affect the reactions of the various cultural groups in terms of the level of acceptance and ultimate diffusion of new ideas. This research endeavoured to ascertain the significance of the chosen societal factors in influencing e-business diffusion in the Zimbabwean small-to-medium enterprise sector.

II. Research Problem

Zimbabwe has been recorded as lagging behind in the 'race' of technology adoption ([4], [14]). While research on SMEs' ICT adoption in Zimbabwe has been carried out by several writers ([15], [5], [16]), there is no study done on the influence of societal factors on e-business diffusion, focusing on Hofstede's [11] and Hall and Hall's [13] cultural dimensions, in the combination adopted specifically for the current research. This is unique to this study and adds a new perspective to extant literature. From the fusion of these two models, the researcher derived the study's main objective: To establish and confirm the societal factors that influence e-business diffusion in the SME sector in Zimbabwe. This objective is operationalised by the following three sub-objectives.

1. To determine the significance of social influence on e-business diffusion in the SME sector in Zimbabwe.
2. To establish the influence of perceived risk on e-business diffusion in the SME sector in Zimbabwe.
3. To ascertain the influence of personal interactions on e-business diffusion in the SME sector in Zimbabwe.

III. Literature Review And Hypotheses Derivation

As stated earlier, this study is anchored on Hofstede's [11] cultural dimensions of 'uncertainty avoidance' and 'individualism versus collectivism', in combination with Hall and Hall's [13] 'low versus high context' cultural orientations. Pouloudi,

Ziouvelou and Vassilopoulou [6] made a major contribution in the study of societal factors and their contribution to e-business diffusion. They see societal factors as part of the general environment within which e-business takes place. These researchers posit that societal factors are determined by various elements within the social structure of the operational environment like, regional/geographical location of the business; the cultural, legal and regulatory environment and economic, ethical and professional underpinnings. Subsequent researchers on culture and diffusion corroborated the significant role played by societal factors in influencing the adoption of technology in its various forms ([17], [18], [19], [20]). The analysis of extant literature led to the formulation of the main hypothesis of the study which relates to the main objective.

H0: The societal context influences e-business diffusion in the SME sector in Zimbabwe.

The main hypothesis is investigated through three sub-hypotheses derived from the three dimensions constituting the societal context as presented in the preceding discussion. These sub-hypotheses are linked to the aforementioned sub-objectives of the study.

3.1 Social influence (SI)

'Social influence' is a term adopted in this study to describe the influence of the social structure imping on business, using Hofstede's 'individualism/collectivism' (**IDV/COL**) cultural dimension. According to Hofstede's categorisation, individualism describes those societies which are self-centred in orientation, considering their personal interests ahead of others. They are independent in their decision-making process, without much influence from other quarters. They consider new ideas with an open mind and quick to accept and adopt them without focussing too much on the risk element, if they consider them beneficial. A collectivist culture, on the other hand, is community-orientated, concentrating on social relationships in most of the decisions made. It relates to the impact that societal interactions and networks can have on the decision business entities take in embracing new technology. The degree to which ideas are accepted and modified is largely dependent on the interaction of the respective stakeholders along the formal and informal links in the social networks ([17], [18], [19], [20], [9], [21], [22], [23]). In the same vein, Rogers [24] postulates that the structure of a social system could either facilitate or slow down the diffusion of innovations. This is echoed by several other writers in literature ([8], [9], [20]). This study focuses more on the collectivist culture which characterises Zimbabwe. From the foregoing discussion, the researcher derived the first sub-hypothesis which is related to the first sub-objective of the study.

H1: Social influence has a significant impact on e-business diffusion in the SME sector in Zimbabwe.

3.2 Perceived risk (PR)

Perceived risk, termed 'uncertainty avoidance' in Hofstede's cultural dimensions, refers to the level of risk tolerance any particular cultural group can withstand. Hofstede considers this dimension from a dichotomous perspective where a cultural setting can be characterised by either high or low uncertainty avoidance index (**UAI**). A high **UAI** indicates minimal tolerance for risk in unfamiliar situations or new ideas. This mainly manifests in collectivist cultures which display resistance to new ideas because of fear of possible risks embedded in such novel innovations. Perceived risk raises security concerns which are a serious impediment to innovation diffusion [10]. This risk aversion is associated with fear for the safety of information transmitted through online transactions and possible electronic fraud and theft ([25], [26], [27], [28]). Businesses in such cultural settings tend to analyse every minute detail before they consider adopting any innovation. This slows down the pace of diffusion. The recent massive cyber-attacks targeted against major global firms, broadcasted on many national and global news channels during the prevailing COVID-19 era, seem to have validated the security concerns harboured by the risk-averse collectivist cultural communities. A low uncertainty avoidance index, on the other hand, indicates acceptance of risk as part of learning and adoption of new ideas. It is associated with the individualist culture which is mainly found in the western world. Overall, perceived risk/risk aversion is negatively correlated with the diffusion of new ideas. The foregoing literature review raises the second sub-hypothesis which links with the second sub-objective of the study.

H2: Perceived risk has a significant negative influence on e-business diffusion in the SME sector in Zimbabwe.

3.3 Personal interaction (PI) (high/ low context cultural orientation)

The need for **PI** is a characteristic of high contextual cultures. They depict a desire for face-to-face communication [13]. High and low context orientations are at the opposite ends of the continuum, with high context cultures displaying a need for business

transactions in identifiable mortar-and-brick premises. They thrive on the physical evidence of both the business premises and the transacting personnel as these present tangible evidence which reduces perceived business risk. High context cultures exhibit circuitous and verbose language in their communication, with body language playing a significant role in complementing the verbal communication. They favour face-to-face interactions because they enable them to read body language, see and touch the actual product or service and enable them to assess the quality. This characteristic is associated with Hofstede's collectivist communities and closely relates to **UAI**. High context cultures rely to a large extent on visual/physical communication [29]. They are termed 'connotative' cultures [30] from their use of facial expressions, expressive body movements and actions, to give full meaning to the message conveyed in the verbal articulations. Their reliance on personal interaction is ascribed to their intimate relationships within their socio-cultural networks. In other words, they find the physical elements of communication more reassuring. This is in contrast to the virtual communication used in e-business, an aspect that may be unsettling to community-oriented, high context societies which are risk averse. Low context cultural groups, mainly in the developed world, are less verbose, more action-orientated and linked to Hofstede's low 'uncertainty avoidance index' displayed by individualist cultural groups. The analysis of Hall and Hall's high/low context cultural orientation resulted in the third sub-hypothesis of the research which is associated with the third sub-objective.

H3: Personal interaction has a significant influence on e-business diffusion in the SME sector in Zimbabwe.

3.4 The Study Conceptual framework.

From the preceding literature review and the resultant hypotheses, the researcher derived the research conceptual framework presented in **Figure 1** below.

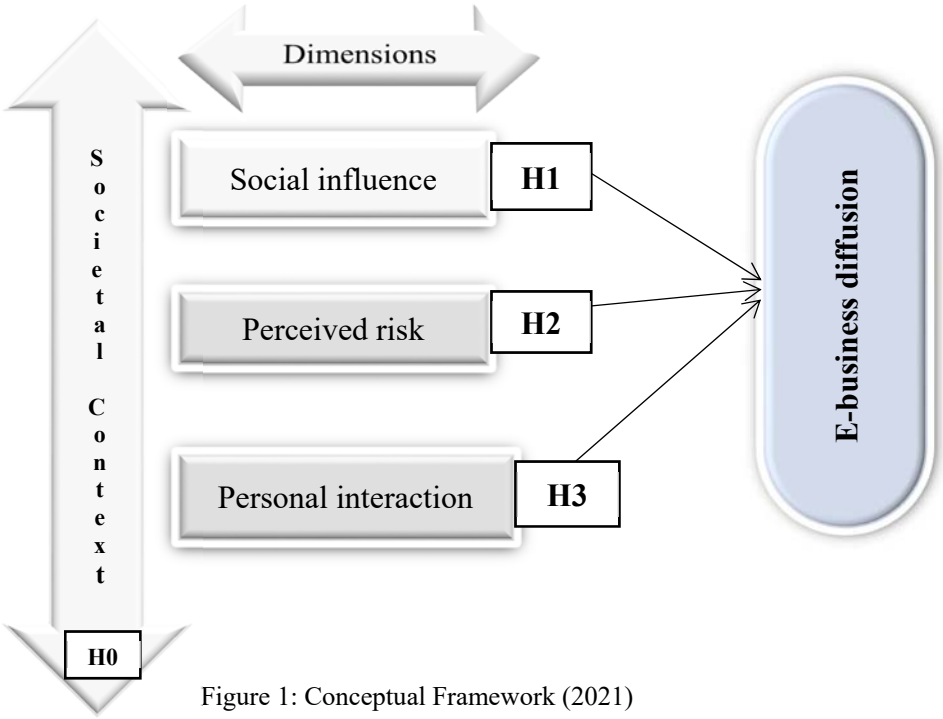

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework (2021)

IV. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design, Target Population and Sampling

The study adopted a positivist philosophy and a quantitative research design, using the survey research strategy. Survey monkey, an electronic online platform, was used to collect data. This had a wider reach and facilitated the data collection process [31]. Its use was found appropriate for the large sample that was required in order to aid in the generalisability of results. The study population was based on the SMEs registered with the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA). This was narrowed down

through simple random sampling of SMEs operating in the Harare Metropolitan area. Random sampling helped to give a fair chance of selection to the targeted SMEs and to ascertain the spread of internet users among them. Harare Metropolitan was chosen for being the hub of SME activities and hence representative of the larger SME population in Zimbabwe. The units of analysis were the SME owners and/or managers because they were considered as the strategic decision makers of the respective entities.

4.2 Data collection methods

A questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. It was structured on a Likert point scale of 1-5, with closed-ended questions to allow for statistical data analysis adopted in the study. A sample power analysis that was conducted gave 567 as an adequate sample size to ensure representativeness of the study [32]. To allow for attrition and non-response, 700 questionnaires were sent out and 603 were returned. Out of these, 590 were usable, after eliminating those that were incomplete or had errors. The return rate of 86.14% was sufficiently high to draw valid conclusions from the study findings, considering that it was higher than the recommended 60% [33], [34] and 50% [35]. Only 1.86% of the returned questionnaires were incomplete and unusable, compared to the acceptable threshold of 15% given by some researchers ([36], [37]). This was an indication of the appropriateness of the units of analysis selected for the study.

4.3 Study Findings and Analysis

The responses from the questionnaire items were coded to facilitate data capturing, using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) v26. After capturing, the data were cleaned for errors, as well as missing items and outliers. Subsequently, data analysis was done, firstly by conducting tests for the reliability of the research instrument [38]. The instrument was tested for evidence-based dimensionality to avoid a priori assumption of its suitability to the current study based on prior researches ([39], [40]). This was done through exploratory factor analysis (**EFA**) to evaluate the underlying structure of items and systematically grouping them according to the magnitude of cohesion between them. Two key assumptions were carried out before applying EFA. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (**KMO**) measure of sampling adequacy and the Bartlett's test of sphericity were both satisfied. KMO registered 0.808, compared to the set threshold of 0.700 (0.808>0.700) [41]. Bartlett's test was within the stipulated measurements, with $\chi^2 = 2467.515$, $Df = 91$, $p000<0.05$. The EFA was run using the principal component analysis (**PCA**) as the factor extraction method ([42], [43]). The rotated component matrix was subsequently applied to ascertain the suitability of exploratory factor analysis. The factor loadings derived from the rotated component matrix for all items measuring the three factors of the societal context were above the given threshold of 0.5 [35]. This showed that all the items used to measure the study variables were appropriate, except one under 'perceived risk' (**PR1**) (**Table 1**) and this was dropped. The cumulated total variance explained for the three components was above the stipulated 50% threshold of the variance explained, at 56.355%. The first component registered an *eigen* value of 3.788, explaining 21.183% of the variance. The second component had a value of 2.489 which explained 18.359% and the third component was 1.612, explaining 16.813%. The three variables were therefore found to be appropriately representative of the societal context.

Table 1: Measurement Items for Societal Variables – Rotated Component Matrix

Societal Factors	**Item**	**Components**			**Cr α**
	Loading	1	2	3	
Social influence (SI) (Influence from Others)					**0.796**
I use e-business because suppliers use it. (**SI1**)	.732	**0.855**			
I use e-business because competitors use it. (**SI2**)	.710	**0.843**			
I use e-business because my friends encourage me to use it (**SI3**)	.562	**0.744**			

I use e-business because it is commonly used in my line of business. (**SI4**)	.459	**0.673**			
Perceived Risk (PR) (Risk avoidance/uncertainty avoidance)					**0.748**
I prefer to do business with firms operating from identifiable premises**. (PR1)**	.201		**0.296**		
There is a high risk of financial loss due to e-business transactions. (**PR2**)	.647		**0.799**		
Businesses and customers do not trust the safety of using e-business. (**PR3**)	.600		**0.769**		
There is a high risk of unauthorized access to confidential information. (**PR4**)	.619		**0.768**		
There is a high risk of loss of business if system fails (**PR5**)	.467		**0.614**		
Personal Interaction (PI) (Need for Face-to-face Transactions					**0.804**
Face-to-face business transactions build good customer relationship. (**PI1**)	.702			**0.828**	
Face-to-face business transactions have a personal touch. (**PI2**)	.689			**0.822**	
Customers prefer to see and touch the product to assess quality. (**PI3**)	.579			**0.751**	
Face-to-face business transactions show customer reactions. (**PI4**)	.481			**0.674**	
Customers prefer face-to-face business transactions. (**PI5**)	.442			**0.581**	

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.808		
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity $x^2 = 2467.515$, $Df = 91$, p0.000<*0.05*			
Eigen value	3.788	2.489	1.612
Variance explained	21.183%	18.359%	6.183%
Accumulated variance explained	21.183%	39.542%	6.355%

To ascertain the internal consistency and reliability of the measurement scales, the researcher further examined and confirmed the reliability of items in each factor using Cronbach's Alpha of above 0.7 ([44], [45]) (**Table 1**). All three dimensions loaded above 0.7, with 'social influence' at 0.796, 'perceived risk' at 0.748 and 'personal interaction' at 0.804. This confirmed the suitability of the instrument for the current study.

Subsequent to the validation of the instrument, confirmatory factor analysis (**CFA**) was carried out using IBM SPSS AMOS v26 to confirm convergent and discriminant validity of the construct prior to engaging structural equation modelling ([46], [41], [47]). The results confirmed both convergent and discriminant validity of the construct ([48], [49]). All the items confirmed convergent validity, with standardised regression coefficients greater than the threshold of 0.4, ranging between 0.521 and 0.843 and *p*0.000<0.05 ([41], [47]). For discriminant validity, all the covariances registered below the maximum threshold of 0.85 ([41], [47]), with the highest correlation coefficient of 0.472 between perceived risk (PR) and personal interaction (PI), thus confirming discriminant validity. Therefore, all the dimensions were confirmed to be independent and structurally valid ([47], [50]).

To confirm the results of the confirmatory factor analysis, model fit tests were carried out, namely, CMIN/DF for the absolute fit index [47]; the comparative fit index (**CFI**) for the relative fit indices; the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (**RMSEA**) for the model parsimony [41]. All fell within the stipulated ranges – CMIN/DF less than 0.3, CFI greater than 0.90 [48] and RMSEA less than 0.7 [47] and 0.08 [51] (**Table 2**). This qualified the adoption of the structural equation modelling (**SEM**) for data analysis.

Table 2: Model Fit Results for SEM

Goodness of Fit Index	Threshold(s) an Author (s) Supporting	Findings
CMIN/DF	<0.3 [47] [35]	2.221
CFI	>0.90 [48]	.912
RMSEA	<0.7 [47]; <0.8 [51]	.062

V. Results And Analysis

Having confirmed the model fit for SEM, which is the most robust and accurate statistical package for multivariate relationships ([52], [53], [54], [55]), the researcher proceeded to analyse the data using the parametric covariance-based structural equation modelling (**CB-SEM**) technique. The technique is considered suitable for large sample sizes as was the case in this study ([48], [56]). This is in contrast to its counterpart – the variance-based structural equation modelling (VB-SEM) or the 'partial least squares' structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) – which is considered more robust for sample sizes less than 200 ([48], [56]). In addition, the assumption for multivariate normality was met, with a kurtosis of 7.162, which is above the suggested minimum of 7.0 (7.162>7.0) [57] and a multivariate critical ratio above the stipulated minimum of 1.96>21.192 ([58], [59]), further confirming the study's suitability for SEM. Consequently, the researcher engaged CB-SEM as the optimal modelling technique that best addressed the latent variable interactions, as well as multilevel regression analysis, using path coefficients, both unstandardized and standardised as shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3: SEM Standardised Regression Weights (SEM) for Societal Factors

			Estimate	Standardised	S.E.	C.R.	P
DIFF	<---	SI	.030	.113	.011	2.669	.007
DIFF	<---	PR	-.006	-.017	.015	-.386	.699
DIFF	<---	PI	-.009	-.023	.016	-.551	.582

The results in **Table 3** show the standardised path coefficient for social interaction (SI) at 0.113, which signalled a strong relationship between the exogenous variable (social influence) and the endogenous variable (diffusion) [41]. The standard error was 0.011 and the critical ratio of 2.669 was greater than the minimum threshold of 1.96 (thus above the 95% confidence level) [60]. The *p*-value was significant at 0.007<0.05. The results for the other dimensions, namely, perceived risk (PR) and personal interaction (PI) were not significant, with *p*0.699>0.05 and *p*0.582>0.05 respectively. Model fit tests were carried out to validate the model derived from the structural equation modelling. Results in **Table 4** confirm the study model fit.

Table 4: Model Fit Results for Final Model

Goodness of Fit Index	**Threshold(s) and author(s) supporting**	**Finding(s)**
CMIN/DF	<3.0 [35], [47]	2.103<3.0
CFI	>0.90 [48]	0.910>0.90
PNFI;PCFI	>0.5 [48]	0.624; 0.674>0.05
RMSEA	<0.7 <0.7 [47]; <0.8 [51]	0.043<0.7 and < 0.8

VI. Discussion And Hypotheses Confirmation

The foregoing analysis of the results attained from the research exposes a significant departure from extant literature which confirms all the three factors of the societal context to be significant in influencing diffusion of e-business in SMEs. This study confirms only one out of the three, as explained in the sections that follow.

6.1 Social Influence (SI)

SI exhibited a significant influence on e-business diffusion (path coefficient of 0.113, critical ratio is 2.669>1.96 and p=.007<.05). This confirms the position taken in literature by several researchers ([11], [6], [8], [9], [10]). It shows that influence from referents, both social and business associates, plays a significant role in the decision-making process associated with e-business diffusion within the Zimbabwean business environment. This kind of influence is linked, to a greater extent, with collectivist cultural settings which characterise developing nations like Zimbabwe. On the basis of the findings and the subsequent analysis and discussion, **H1: Social influence has a significant influence on e-business diffusion in the SME sector in Zimbabwe**, is confirmed.

6.2 Perceived Risk (PR)

With respect to **PR**, the results show that this is not significant in influencing the adoption of e-business (standardised path co-efficient of -0.017, critical ratio of -0.386<1.96 and *p*=0.699>0.05). This indicates that the SMEs in Zimbabwe do not consider risk as a significant factor in their decision on whether or not to use e-business in business transactions. This result goes contrary to literature which has shown **PR** as a negative predictor of e-business diffusion. This indicates that there are other stronger issues that impede diffusion in SMEs outside risk considerations, for instance, lack of finance or trained personnel, among other things. This result also indicates a change in perception among SME owners and managers. Such change likely emanates from the general use ICT applications for basic personal communication and transactions like email, social media, payment systems through mobile money transactions and other uses. This reduced the initial risk phobia which existed at the advent of technology

usage. From these observations, the second hypothesis, **H2: Perceived risk has a significant negative influence on e-business diffusion in the SME sector in Zimbabwe**, is refuted.

6.3 Personal interaction (PI)

The results of this study (standardised path coefficient -0.023, critical ratio -0.551 and *p*-value p=0.552>0.05) showed that need for face-to-face interaction – **PI** – which characterises high context [13] cultural groups in connotative cultural settings [30], had no significance in influencing e-business diffusion. This is counter to the position taken in literature, where **PI** is said to have a significant predictive influence on e-business diffusion ([10], [61], [62], [13]). As pointed out in literature review, the obsession with personal interaction (face-to-face transactions) was born out of fear of perceived risks envisaged in any new situations or ideas. The fact that this fear has been shown in the results of this study to be no longer a deciding factor in the diffusion process is indicative of the penetration of technology in general and the level of usage for basic personal transactions, as stated earlier. This has reduced the security concerns about virtual transactions due to the knowledge acquired through the usage of ICT necessitated by the changing environment. From these observations, the third sub-hypothesis, **H3: Personal interaction has a significant positive influence on e-business diffusion in the SME sector in Zimbabwe**, is rejected.

6.4 The main hypothesis

From the preceding discussion of the three sub-hypotheses of the study, it is evident that the societal context has an influence on e-business diffusion, albeit deriving from only one of the three factors investigated in this study**.** Therefore, the overarching hypothesis, **H0: The societal context influences e-business diffusion in the SME sector in Zimbabwe,** is confirmed**.**

VII. Conclusions, Implications And Contributions

7.1 Conclusions

The research has succeeded in establishing and confirming the societal factors that influence e-business diffusion in SMEs in the Zimbabwean market space. However, the final results indicate that only one out of the three societal factors that constitute the societal context, as investigated in this study, influences e-business diffusion. Only social influence was confirmed as influential. The other two, **PI** and **PR,** were discounted. This means that Hofstede's [11] cultural characteristic of 'uncertainty avoidance' and Hall and Hall's [13] posited need for 'face-to-face communications' in high context cultures have no significant effect within the SME sector in Zimbabwe. This is in contrast to the findings of other researchers. This could be a result of different time lines between earlier studies and the current study, with attendant developments in the ICT field which have led to adjustments in old attitudes. It could also emanate from the difference in the study contexts and focus. From the results of the study, the researcher reconfigured the initial conceptual framework into the empirical model shown in **Figure 2**.

Final Study Model

FIGURE 2: Empirical Research Model: Influence of Societal Context on E-Business Diffusion in the SME Sector in Zimbabwe (2021).

7.2 Managerial and Policy Implications.

The results and conclusions of the study have implications on managerial and policy issues that require attention by the respective policy makers. Managers need to appreciate the fact that technology is here to stay. The current operational business environment created by the world pandemic of COVID-19 has entrenched e-business as the most viable business model for future survival, growth and development. This means, they need to go beyond the cultural norms and beliefs of their market and realise that business operations are cross-cultural. Societal considerations should be based on global business tenets if the SMEs in Zimbabwe and elsewhere are to be truly the engine of growth and recovery for their national economies. This behoves both government and the business fraternity to work together in coming up with business strategies that are in line with the 'new

normal' necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. They need to recognise that, just as the pandemic has defied national borders, so does the use of e-business. Those who adopt a 'wait and see' attitude will find themselves pushed out of business. Government support is critical in Zimbabwe, in terms of financial resources to enable SMEs to acquire the necessary equipment and develop requisite internal systems for e-business adoption, as well as training and development for the acquisition of the relevant skills to run such systems.

7.3 Contribution of the study

This study has contributed to the body of knowledge relating to the influence of the societal context on e-business diffusion. Most studies on Hofstede's and the Halls' cultural dimensions were based on the developed world and the Far East countries. They focused mostly on management or leadership issues (for example, the Globe studies). Research on the African continent also focused mainly on the effect of culture on management issues. There are no studies specifically assessing the impact of Hofstede's and the Halls' cultural dimensions on e-business diffusion among the SMEs in Zimbabwe as adopted in this study. This makes the current study a pioneering research, which had limited extant literature to draw from.

VIII. Conclusion

This study has shown that national cultural idiosyncrasies do not necessarily predict the adoption of new business ideas and concepts such as e-business. Rather, it is the global business norms that control the diffusion of these innovations. The limitation posed by fear of the latent risk in the usage of technology has been dissipated by the general application of basic technology in day-to-day transactions like, email communication, mobile money transfers, internet banking and others. This also means that the need for personal interactions has become an insignificant consideration in the diffusion process. Management need to appreciate the importance of technology in advancing their organisations and remaining competitive on the world markets. At the same time, Government needs to ensure that the SMEs are financially supported to develop the required technological systems which are a pre-requisite to the diffusion of e-business in organisations. Above all, it is paramount for Government to revamp and develop the national ICT infrastructure to provide the vital platform to support the firms' internal systems. This will, in turn, capacitate SMEs to be major contributors to the nation's economic development. It will also be vital enabler in achieving the Zimbabwe Government's vision of attaining an upper middle income economy by the year 2030 through innovation and industrialisation.

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