



DEMYSTIFYING KNOWLEDGE SOCIALIZATION AND SERVICE DIFFERENTIATION OF SELECTED INFORMATION-TECHNOLOGY FIRMS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Acquiring knowledge and skills is important facet for growth and development. Organisations have seen the necessity of create emerging ideas through socialization so as to meet up with the standards of the evolving world. The technology industry remains one which has huge potential and has made considerable progress in the last few years. A good number of IT firms are slowly beginning to carve a niche for themselves and deliver impressive products and services. IT firms have become highly competitive and despite their efforts in creating new knowledge, they are still faced with challenges of diverse socialization of ideas, innovative technologies, cultural syndrome and competencies for service differentiation. This array of challenges facing many IT firms in Nigeria forces one to question their levels of innovation. This study was specifically, descriptive and managers of three hierarchical levels (strategic, tactical and operational) in the four selected IT firms were selected as subjects of study. The target population of this study comprised IT firms that were listed on JarusHub Nigeria (2017), Nigerian Yellow Pages (2011) and Nigeria Search Engine (2011) which are the commonly used business directories in Nigeria. The multi stage sampling technique was adopted which comprised purposive, stratified and; convenience (availability) sampling techniques. A structured questionnaire was

adopted for the study. A Likert-type scale structured-questionnaire and a variance-based (SMART_PLS) were used for data collection and analysis respectively. The findings show that advances in technology (internet) have helped the IT firms to provide new ways to socialize knowledge and differentiate services from their competitors. It was concluded that knowledge only gets effectively socialized when employees are truly engaged, both with one another and with their goals and 'when dialog happens, knowledge flows and businesses thrive'. This implies that IT firms gain advantage over competitors by increasing and embedding technology interactions to lean in and build deeper partnerships with various stakeholders. Though, one of the challenges observed in sustaining the knowledge created is inadequate training of the employees. Hence, there might be need to send them out for training so that they would know how to exploit the knowledge they have.

Keywords: Knowledge, Socialization, Service differentiation, Technology, Performance, Innovation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Acquiring knowledge and skills is important facet for growth and development. The constant evolution of society has motivated humanity to engage in continuous professional development. People have seen the necessity of create emerging ideas through socialization so as to meet up with the standards of the evolving world. It has been observed from extant literature that the creation of knowledge in organizations primarily depends on people and how they socialize the information they receive (Nonaka, Toyama & Konno, 2000; Hong, 2010; Anand, Ward & Tatikonda, 2010; Atolagbe, 2018). Thus, various types of socialization manifest in the organization, depending on the type of information required by the firms, and the type of context, structure and existing organizational culture which centres on the analysis of information needs. Thus, organizational socialization can be understood as an important facilitator for knowledge construction process between internal and external agents to the organization.

Socialization of knowledge commonly emphasise on ability of individuals to convert new knowledge through shared experiences. To simply put, socialization practice enables team members incorporate the perspectives of other team members while deliberating on the process improvement (opportunities, problems and solutions). Studies (Gebauer, Edvardsson, Gustafsson and Witell, 2010; Jabbour, 2012; Kramer, 2012; Ibidunni *et al.*, 2018) have shown that the mode of knowledge is often created through the process of interacting with the major stakeholders, discussing, analysing and spending time together in same environment. In the same vein, Jordan (2012) who examined the effect of organisational knowledge creation on firm performance stated that socialization process occurs through mentoring, observation, imitation and hand of practices without the use of language. Linderman (2010) opined that socialization process is promoted by shared experiences through enabling individuals to empathize with each other and incorporate each other's feelings and belief about their shared experiences. Anand, *et al.*, (2010) discovered that in the context of process

improvement, socialization practices is promoted by assembling cross-functional project teams.

Whilst firms in developed countries grapple with new products/services through research and development, developing countries especially in Nigeria, struggle with service differentiation, innovation & healthy learning culture (Lawal, Worlu & Ayoade, 2016). Shafiwu and Mohammed (2013) and Shih, Chang and Lin (2010) state that business organisations are greatly disadvantaged, if not crippled, as a result of knowledge loss. The array of challenges facing many organizations especially, information-technology (IT) firms in Nigeria forces one to question their levels of innovation. While socialization has been recognized as the driving force for creating new knowledge; knowledge creation has been identified as a strategy for driving innovative performance. Saghier and Nathan (2013) in their work stated that one of the strategies firms adopt to improve their innovative process and achieve distinctive advantage is through service differentiation.

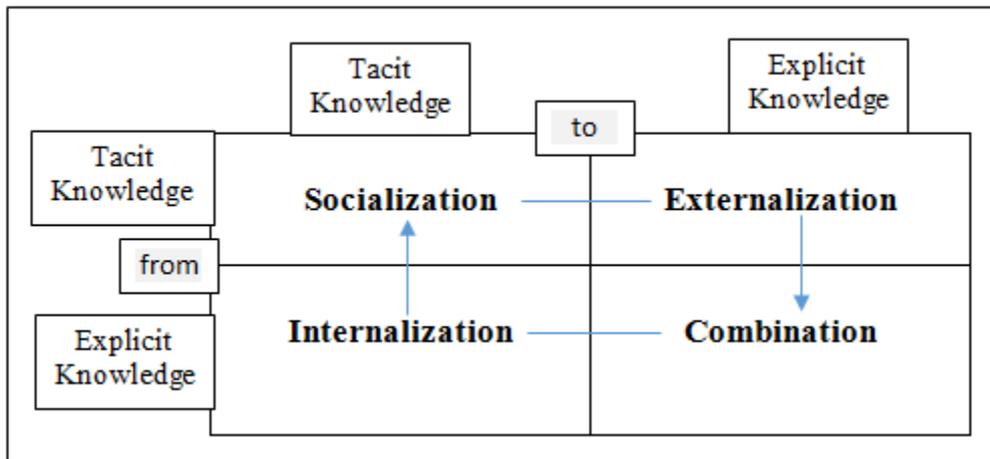
Service differentiation is a design pattern which a firm obtains in order to promote distinct differences in its offering to customers and on the long run, to establish a competitive advantage and positioning. By implication, this means that teams must work together, collaborate, brainstorm, come up with new ideas, techniques and methods that will help distinguish their firms from others and to generate service differentiation. Remarkably, the growth of organisational socialization in developed and developing economies reflects the increasing demand for knowledge as an intangible asset for growth (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2004; Sagsan & Bingöl, 2010; Goodall & Baker, 2015).

In Nigeria, where the business environment is characterized by high uncertainty, knowledge creation has become one the most important assets for organisations, especially the information-technology (IT) firms. IT firms have become highly competitive and despite their efforts in creating new knowledge, they are still faced with challenges of diverse innovative technologies, cultural syndrome and competencies for service differentiation (Sagsan & Bingöl, 2010). Though, few studies (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2004, Peltokorpi, Nonaka and Von, 2009, Saghier and Nathan, 2013) have only shown how socialization significantly influence performance but when it comes to local literature, there are no discussions on the factors that drive/motivate knowledge socialization in achieving service differentiation especially in the context of Information-Technology Firms in Nigeria.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Knowledge defined

Knowledge can be defined as the act of knowing (with absolute certainty) through experience or education. Knowledge is an intangible asset in human beings and held in high esteem. An organisation's success will depend on the availability of knowledge within it. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) developed a knowledge-based theory (SECI Model) which examined how knowledge is created and managed within an organization. This theory argues that two types of knowledge exists namely explicit and tacit knowledge. Four basic processes are needed to create and transfer knowledge within the task environment. These processes are socialization, externalization, combination and internalization (SECI). Nonaka and Von (2009) defined tacit knowledge as embedded knowledge in the mind which is difficult to articulate. Today, tacit knowledge is becoming an interesting field for researchers because it is what adds value to an organisation. There will be a great improvement of an organisation if it is able to capture its tacit knowledge as presented in Figure 1.



Source: Nonaka and Takeuchi (1996)

As depicted in Figure 1, socialization is the process of transferring tacit knowledge to tacit knowledge; externalization is the transition from tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge; while combination focuses on the process of combining explicit knowledge with explicit knowledge, and lastly internalization which convert explicit knowledge to tacit knowledge. Specifically, our focus will be on the tacit to tacit knowledge transfer which according to Nonaka (1994) will be more effective through the socialization process. Tacit knowledge is intangible and embedded in the human mind. It can be in the form of hunches, insight, judgements, morals, values, principles and intuition. It is a personal knowledge which is developed from individual beliefs, values, hunches, intuitions, actions, experiences, reflections and hypothesis of others. It is often difficult to articulate. It can only be communicated through the individual's behaviour, work task or interaction and sharing experiences.

2.2. Socialization defined

This is tacit to tacit knowledge transfer and it can be physical or experiences shared like brainstorming and spending time or living in the same environment and difficult to formalize and interpret (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2004; Kim, Im & Slater, 2013). Nonaka's (1994) dynamic theory of organisational knowledge creation holds that organisational knowledge is created through a continuous dialogue between tacit and explicit knowledge via four patterns of interactions, socialization, externalisation, combination, and internalisation. Socialization represents the interaction between individuals through mechanisms such as observation, imitation or apprenticeships. It has been observed that the degree to which individuals will acquire knowledge is influenced by the environmental support. Many people will better transfer and acquire tacit knowledge in the face of high environmental support than in the face of low environmental support, where people are more relaxed to socialise and express themselves. This is due to the fact that many people can easily act on their tacit knowledge through visualisation and in case scenarios. When people socialise, there is collectivism and exchange of intra-organisational knowledge. This knowledge is what boosts the organisation's performance and gives it competitive advantage.

2.2.1. Tacit to Tacit (Socialization//Sympathized knowledge)

Tacit knowledge comprises world views and mental models, and involves mutual trust. Since tacit knowledge is extremely difficult to communicate, the key to exchanging it is shared

experience, which can be acquired by spending time together or working in the same environment. According to Nickols (2010), tacit to tacit knowledge can be transferred through observation, imitation and practice. Shih, et al. (2010) argues that tacit knowledge could be managed through observing human information process and be shared by using social information process mechanism within the professional task environment.

In socialization, tacit knowledge is shared between individuals or among a group. This is based on common mental models which are defined by Nonaka and Takeuchi as knowledge structures held by members of a team (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). This enables the team to form accurate explanations and expectations for the task, and in turn, to coordinate their actions and adapt their behaviour to the demands of the task and to other team members. Socialization typically occurs in a traditional apprenticeship. Apprentices learn the tacit knowledge needed in their craft through observation and hands-on experience, rather than from written manuals or textbooks. Socialization yields sympathized knowledge assets, such as shared tacit knowledge that is built through joint hands-on experience amongst the members of the organisation, and between the members of the organisation and its customers, suppliers, and affiliated firms.

Firms have to build their own knowledge assets through their own experiences. Their tacit nature is what makes sympathized knowledge assets of the firm-specific, difficult- to-imitate resources that give a substantial competitive advantage to the firm (Nonaka *et al.*, 2000). This interaction can be either between employees (carrying internal knowledge to the firm) or with customers and suppliers (involving knowledge coming from outside the firm). Socialization can occur through informal meetings, observation, imitation and practice (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2004; Shih, Chang, & Lin, 2010).

Socialization is the sharing of tacit knowledge among a group of people either through observation, practice, discussion, or sharing notes (Nonaka, 1994). This form of knowledge creation never takes an explicit form. Nonaka *et al.*, (2000) feels this is a limited form of knowledge creation because neither the teacher nor the learner ever learns the systematic insight into their knowledge. Marwick (2001) and Linderman, Schroeder & Sanders (2010) believes that since socialization is concerned with the sharing of ideas information technology use can promote collaboration and communities. On-line technologies like e-meetings and chat can facilitate the sharing of knowledge. In this process, tacit knowledge will be transferred through social contact (communications and interactions) such as discussions, sharing experience, simulation, practice, observation and so on among organisational members.

2.3. Service Differentiation

According to Shafiwu and Mohammed (2013), differentiation is the degree in which a firm adds values to existing product, or introduces new product with unique features to a new or existing market. Philip Kotler also stated that differentiation as an act of designing meaningful differences to distinguish a firm's offering from competitors' offerings. Service differentiation serves as the way a firm use the various marketing mix activities such as the features of the products/service to help their customers/clients see the product/service as being unique, different and better from that of the firms' competitors. Scholars such as Lamb, Hair, and McDaniel (2009) and Lawal, Worlu and Ayoade, (2016) asserted that service differentiation has to do with a firm coming up with a positioning strategy that would be used to distinguish their own services from that of their competitors. Service differentiation tends give a firm competitive edge over their competitors. A firm can also position their product/service as a high featured product/service that satisfies the needs or

wants of a particular market segment. If a firm decide to compete with similar features (product size, performance, delivery) of other firms and make relevant improvement on them, they tend to have more competitive advantage than other firm (López-Nicolás & Meroño-Cerdán, 2011; Worlu, Evioghnesi, Ajagbe & Okoye, 2015).

2.4. Knowledge Socialization and Service Differentiation among IT firms in Nigeria's Context

There is presently a global awakening in the IT sector about the relevance of new market innovation (NMI). IT industry has become very notable in this millennium and one of the most rapidly developing sectors of the economy (Seidler-de Alwis, & Hartmann, 2008; Jordan, 2012). As technology continues to evolve and the world becomes even more digital, questions are often raised regarding Africa's role in creating new knowledge. The technology industry remains one which has huge potential and has made considerable progress in the last few years. A good number of IT firms are slowly beginning to carve a niche for themselves and deliver impressive products and services (Linderman, et al. 2010; Atolagbe 2018). While these IT firms are still miles away from the standards and output, the progress made in a relative short period of time is well-deserving of optimism. The issues regarding the IT firms' growth are well documented from the cost of technological know-how to its application and creation of valued-products. Nigeria has trailed in comparison to other countries when it comes to service/product differentiation. The typical issues surrounding lack of technological advancement among the IT firms include the lack of access to useful/quality information (Ibidunni, et al. 2018), inability to create disruptive products/services (Marwick, 2001), insufficient environmental and management supports (Shafiwu & Mohammed, 2013), inadequate training programmes (Worlu, et al, 2015) and the perversion of the medium for negative vices as well as a lack of policies (Goffin & Koners, 2011) that facilitate the adoption of technology. With a growing number of firms emerging from the south-western region, IT firms must recognise the need for IT training, especially at the grassroots level. This is a critical point to note as it has been demonstrated that the acquisition of these skills can greatly help in facilitating service differentiation. To provide further credence to the IT training, the services of Oracle, KPMG, IBM, DBI (the Digital Bridge Institute) were retained as the brand spared no expense in providing a truly insightful and meaningful learning experience. To benefits from the turn of the millennium, the need for IT firms to build technological minds equipped with the skillset and appetite to innovate and achieve competitive advantage cannot be over-emphasised.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was specifically, descriptive and managers of three hierarchical levels (strategic, tactical and operational) in the four selected IT firms were selected as subjects of study. The target population of this study comprised IT firms that were listed on JarusHub Nigeria (2017), Nigerian Yellow Pages (2011) and Nigeria Search Engine (2011) which are the commonly used business directories in Nigeria. The multi stage sampling technique was adopted which comprised purposive, stratified and; convenience (*availability*) sampling techniques. A structured questionnaire was adopted for the study. The data collection instrument comprised 22 (twenty-two) statements created from the literature (*see Table 1*), aimed at establishing the relationship between knowledge socialization and service differentiation. A Likert-type scale containing five variations, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagreed' was applied. The collected information received quantitative treatment and was analysed statistically. Four IT firms were selected based on their performance,

constituting a total 96 (ninety-six) respondents: 30 (thirty) from company 'A'; 20 (twenty) from company 'B'; and 22 (twenty-two) from company 'C'; and 24 (twenty-four) from company 'D'. The identification of participants and companies was kept confidential in accordance with the ethical research procedures. A variance-based model and regression were used to analyze the data with the use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) *version 22* and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), PLS3.

Table 1 Items in the Questionnaire and their Sources

Latent construct	Number of items	Source(s)
<p>Socialization process of sharing of experiences through brainstorming and it is usually difficult to interpret and formalize</p>	8	Nonaka <i>et al.</i> , (2000); Shih, Chang & Lin (2010)
<p>Service differentiation the degree in which a firm adds values to existing product, or introduces new product with unique features to a new or existing market. This helps their customers/ clients see the product/service as being unique from that of their competitors</p>	5	Shafiwu and Mohammed (2013); Berkowitz <i>et al.</i> , (2002)

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire items were presented to supervisors, experts, and relevant professors in the field on the research context. To demonstrate the construct validity, the study used Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to verify the factor structure/loading of a set of observed variables. Measurement model of composite reliability was also used to ascertain the reliability of the items. Figure 2 indicated that each item was above the threshold of 0.07 as recommended by Brown (2000); while Figure 3 demonstrated the Average Variance Extracted for the variables with a threshold above of 0.05.

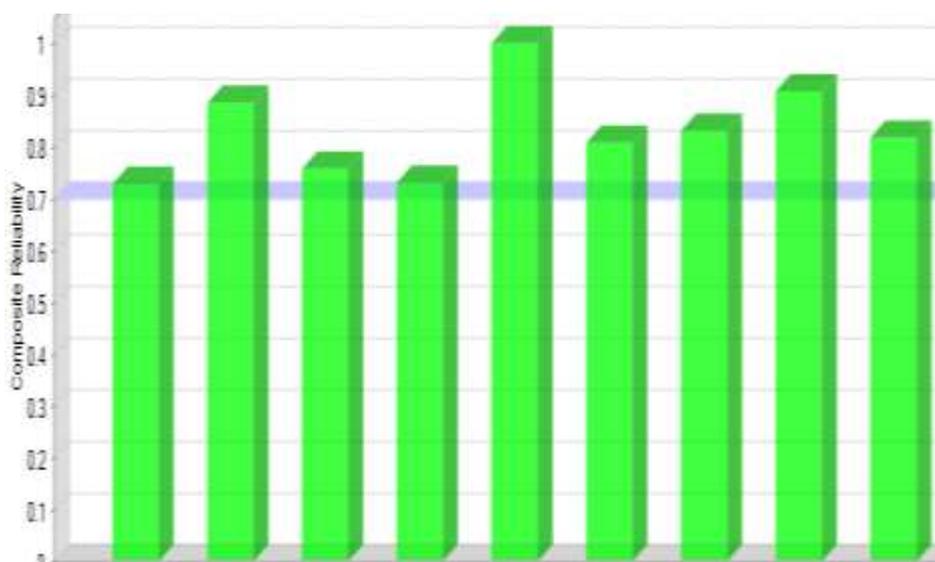


Figure 2 Composite Reliability of the Items

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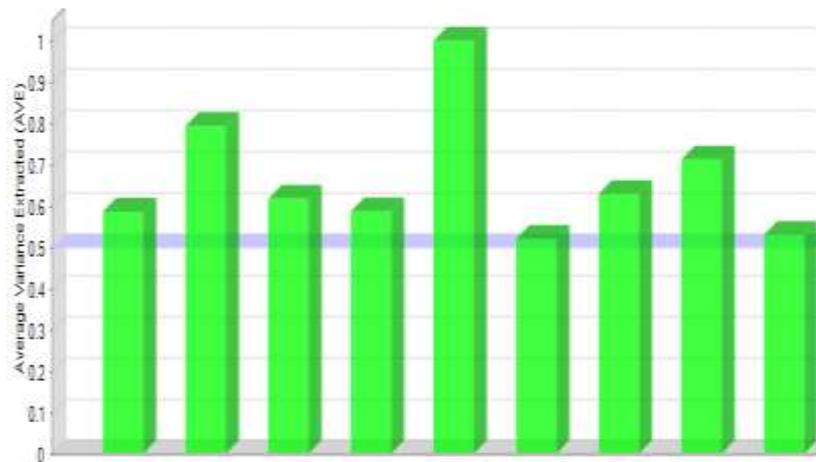


Figure 3 Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

Out of 120 copies of questionnaire distributed to the managers of three hierarchical levels (strategic, tactical and operational) in the four selected IT firms, only 96 copies, representing 80%, were retrieved to form the basis of the analysis. The descriptive statistics of the items for knowledge socialization is shown in Table 2:

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Knowledge Socialization among Selected IT firms

s/n	Variables	Selected IT firms				Total Average Mean
		Firm 'A'	Firm 'B'	Firm 'C'	Firm 'D'	
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
1	The employees receive training to be able to share knowledge with other co-workers	4.2340 (.85477)	4.0071 (.80428)	4.0638 (.90192)	4.2931 (.87304)	4.1495
2	The employees use information acquired to come up with new ideas	3.9752 (.86258)	3.8558 (.89534)	3.9504 (.61065)	4.0567 (1.13814)	3.9596
3	The firm stimulates employees to seek information that will improve the work itself	3.7941 (.79968)	4.0013 (.67316)	3.8794 (.70101)	4.1371 (.79531)	3.9529
4	There is encouragement to share information, both internally to the company and externally.	4.1171 (.70064)	3.9040 (.70467)	3.8865 (.88394)	4.3948 (.69710)	4.0756
5	There is high presence of motivation to seek information outside the company's environment.	3.8201 (.93437)	3.9471 (.76117)	3.8014 (.73884)	4.1773 (1.02076)	3.9365
6	The firm encourages individuals to create knowledge that goes beyond the immediate needs of the work performed	3.8688 (.75742)	4.2204 (.64167)	4.0780 (.93943)	4.2908 (.91231)	4.1145
7	The firm encourages proactive behaviour in individuals to improve both the work and relationship for good communication	3.8369 (.86071)	2.2825 (.43299)	3.1702 (1.43066)	4.0426 (1.03863)	3.3330
8	The firm prepares individual to be a team player	3.9787 (.64619)	4.0393 (.55487)	3.8440 (.75052)	3.9078 (1.07910)	3.9424
Total Average Mean		3.9531	3.7822	3.8342	4.1625	3.9330

4.1. Test of Hypothesis

Socialization of knowledge does not have significant influence on service differentiation

This hypothesis was statistically tested using SMART_ Partial Least Square (PLS) structural modelling to (i) identify whether or not there is a relationship, and (ii) examine the degree of the relationship, between the independent (that is, socialization of knowledge) and

dependent variables (service differentiation); and finally, (iii) to analyse the significant effect of the variables under study. The correlation analysis is represented by the inner weight and it reflects the degree of linear relationship between two variables as presented in Figure 2.

Extant literature has shown that the larger the values, the stronger the relationship. Hence, the range of values to explain the degree of association and statistical correlation coefficient between two (2) variables is determined using the decision rule presented below:

4.2. Decision Rule

- A path- coefficient (inner weight) of 0.6 to 0.9 is regarded as high, strong and positive correlation (relationship);
- A path coefficient (inner weight) of 0.3 to 0.6 is regarded as a moderate and positive correlation (relationship);
- An inner weight of 0.1 to 0.3 is regarded as a weak and positive correlation (relationship); and
- A path coefficient of -1 means that for every positive increase in one variable, there is a negative decrease of a fixed proportion in the other.

Hence, to establish the degree of relationship, SMART PLS was adopted. SMART PLS is only concerned with measurement model assessment with reflective formative constructs and show model fit indices. The reason for using SMART PLS is to have robust findings and the results are consistent at large. Partial Least Square also measures the close association between the model and facilitates different indicators of goodness-of-fit as recommended by Kaplan (2008), Bentler and Wu (2002) and Brown (2000). The analyses of this hypothesis were presented in Figure 4 and Tables 3 & 4 respectively.

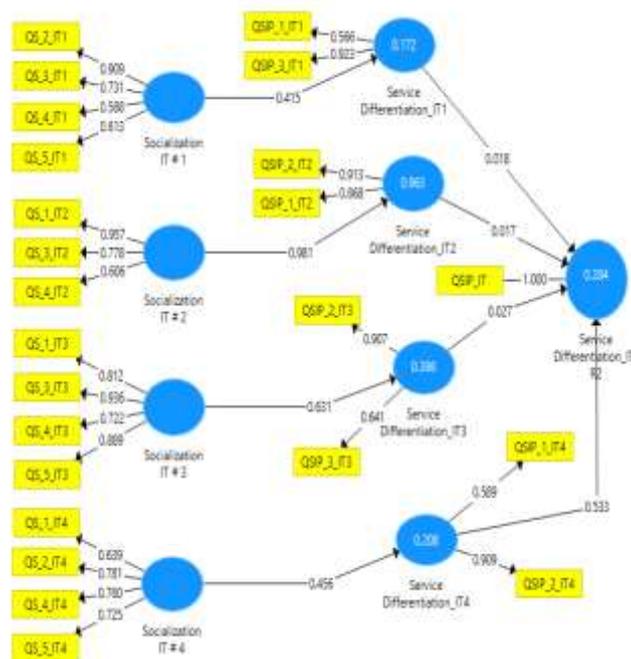


Figure 2 Structural Models and Path Analysis of the variables

Figure 2 showed the structural model of knowledge socialization and service differentiation in the four selected IT firms. Based on the statistical result, two (IT # 2 and IT # 3) out of the four selected IT firms recorded a significant and strong relationship between

socialization and service differentiation while IT # 1 and IT # 4 had a significant and moderate relationship between the two variables. Hence, the positive association between socialization and service differentiation in the four selected IT firms is an indication that as each of the organisation’s practice encourage their workers share individual experiences and skills, service differentiation is also increasing especially in the IT firms.

Table 3 Result of the R-Square and Model Fit

Matrix	R Square	R Square Adj
Knowledge Socialization ->Service Differentiation_IT1	0.172	0.163
Knowledge Socialization -> Service Differentiation_IT2	0.963	0.963
Knowledge Socialization -> Service Differentiation_IT3	0.398	0.392
Knowledge Socialization -> Service Differentiation_IT4	0.208	0.200
Knowledge Socialization -> Service Differentiation IT	0.284	0.254
Model Fit		
SRMR	0.163	
Chi-Square	83.622	
NFI, GFI	0.921, 0.963	

Table 4 also demonstrated the results of the R-Square and Model Fit. Basically, the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 28.4%. This implies that the tested measures of socialization of knowledge jointly explain 28.4% of the variance in service differentiation. The result of the model also met the requirements of the ‘goodness of fit’ as recommended by Fornell and Larker.

Table 4 Path Coefficients Hypothetical Decision

Variable	Original sample	Sample mean	SD	T-Statistics	P-Values	Decision
Socialization _IT Firm 1	0.415	0.427	0.259	2.736	0.001	Significant
Socialization _IT Firm 2	0.981	0.984	0.034	6.728	0.000	Significant
Socialization _IT Firm 3	0.631	0.642	0.091	7.252	0.000	Significant
Socialization _IT Firm 4	0.456	0.461	0.116	4.361	0.000	Significant
Dependent Variable: Service Differentiation						

Source: Field Survey (2018)

The hypothesis for each IT firm is accepted because the significant value is less than 0.05. It can be depicted from the path co-efficient and hypothetical decision that 28.4% of service differentiation of IT firms is explained by socialization of knowledge. Hence, the findings reject null (Ho) and accept alternate (H1). This means that Socialization of knowledge has significant influence on service differentiation of selected IT firms.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings depict that employees of the selected IT firms gather, interpret, interact and share tacit knowledge about the environment they operate. Tacit knowledge of socialization process in the IT firms are only captured through shared experience, intuition and relevance. These have often resulted to new world view, mental models and mutual trust. In the IT firms, the findings revealed that there is sharing experience type of discourse where employees share mental model, conduct creative dialogue and build mutual trust based on

experience, intuition and relevance. This support existing studies. Goffin and Koners (2011) further argued that people cannot truly understand without experience. According to Nonaka and Von (2009) in order for socialization to take place, individual people should share face-to-face experiences, which then makes it possible to transfer tacit knowledge. In order for socialization to be effective, Hong (2010) suggests spending prolonged hours every day attending social events and working under a team structure, and developing a close and enduring working relationship with other colleagues. It can be concluded that socialization process has created a platform among IT firms where hidden knowledge is shared among employees who might be interested in increasing their knowledge and learning new skills. This pattern fosters members of the firms to dialogue at the informal way, to participate discussions, to be transparent, that all support spontaneous characteristic.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Gaining an advantage over the competition means forging strong and plentiful partnerships that is built and maintained through technology. Thus, with the IT firms' settings being a social community with a collective culture, its employees have the responsibility of gaining and sharing their embedded knowledge for better performance of themselves and consequently the organization. Basically, IT firms need to focus on developing an organization that is agile and fit for the future, able to change course and continue to thrive amid constant disruption. Sampled organizations should consistently provide a platform where newly created knowledge can also be distributed (diffused) to workers for them to gain more individual experiences and skills. Similarly, in managing the creation of new knowledge, managers of the selected IT firms need to engage in effective knowledge management through collaboration and partnership with clear values, purpose and messaging in order to compete and succeed.

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