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Vol 4, No 3 (2014)

Table of Contents

Articles

Health Service in the Community Health Center of Mojoagung <i>Candra Lya Nirmayanti</i>	1-11
Management of Family's Finances and Family Wholeness: Evidence from Ilishan-Remo Community, Ogun State, Nigeria. <i>Amanze Philemon Omerenna, Alu Chituru Nkechinyere A, Oyeboode A. O., Donald Akinmade</i>	12-24
HIV and AIDs Stigma and its Influence on Coping Mechanisms: A Case of People Living with HIV and AIDS within a Rural Set up in Maragua District, Kenya <i>Jesca K. Kinoti, Agnes P. Zani</i>	25-36
An Experiment in Plagiarism Detection in Academic Research Articles Using Attributional Techniques <i>Khalid Shakir Hussein</i>	37-48
Infrastructural Vandalism in Nigerian Cities: The Case of Osogbo, Osun State. <i>Ola, A. B, Adewale, Y.Y</i>	49-60
The study of the effect of united Nations Technology Indexes on Economical Development of Iran (from 2000 to 2012) <i>Mohammad Ahmadzadeh Ghasemabadi, Sahar AraghiZadeh, Safoora kashefi</i>	61-68
The effect of universities establishment on social development in Iran cities <i>Azam Khatibi</i>	69-78
Effectiveness Of Insecticide-Treated Mosquito Nets (Itns) In The Control Of Malaria Disease Among Slum Dwellers In Port Harcourt Metropolis, Rivers State. <i>Nnodim, A.U, Urang, E. S, Uzoije, T. A</i>	79-85
Birifoh Belief System: Perspectives From Birifoh-Sila Yiri, Upper West Region, Ghana <i>Mahmoud Malik Saako, Samuel N. Nkumbaan, Christopher Boatbil Sormiteyema, Azerikatoa D. Ayoung</i>	86-99
Personality Type and Emotional Intelligence of Prospective Teachers <i>Shazia Zamir, Quratul Ain Hina, Shabana Zamir</i>	100-107
Eradicating Women Trafficking: A Religious Educational Perspective <i>Rose Uchem</i>	108-118
Ethnicity, Paragon of power in Afghanistan (1747-2014) <i>Ehsan Shayegan</i>	119-124
Assessment of Self-Concept among Children with Special Needs <i>P. Neeraja</i>	125-133
Impact of Mental Health on Personal Growth Initiative (PGI) among University Postgraduates <i>Hemant Lata Sharma, Ritu Rani</i>	134-147
A Study of Adoptive Families In Jammu <i>Rajni Dhingra, Anamika baru, Preeti Thapa</i>	148-152

Aesthetics Of The Marriage Of Anansewaa: A Stylistic Analysis Of Sutherland's Language	153-160
<i>Felicia Annin</i>	
Urbanization and Environmental Problem: An Empirical Study In Sylhet City,Bangladesh	161-172
<i>Md. Faysal Ahmed, Md. Shahidul Islam</i>	
Socio-Cultural and Demographic Issues in E-Business Conflict Resolution: The Nigerian Case	173-181
<i>Patrick A. Edewor, Ajibade Ebenezer Jegede</i>	
Characteristic and Social Processes of Poverty Reduction in Rural Community: An Empirical Finding	182-191
<i>Sugeng Harianto, Kliwon Hidayat, Keppi Sukei, Yayuk Yuliat</i>	

Socio-Cultural and Demographic Issues in E-Business Conflict

Resolution: The Nigerian Case

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Abstract

Modern business presents different experiences for different people as well as for different classes in all socio-cultural environments. As e-business creates possible openings for business, it also raises some issues especially when evaluated in the light of current global happenings. While a few of these issues are technically determined, others affect economic, political, cultural and socio-demographic compositions of human society. This paper undertakes a systematic analysis and exploration of the socio-cultural and demographic issues in the environment within which e-business takes place in Nigeria. It considers the emergence of e-business and then raises socio-cultural issues such as mode of production, economic structure, norms/legal/security issues and beliefs as well as demographic issues including size of population, spatial distribution, age and sex composition and components of population dynamics (fertility, mortality, migration) as enhancing and inhibiting factors engendering conflict in e-business promotion. Finally, it proffers solutions to the inherent conflicts arising from these inhibitive tendencies.

Keywords: Socio-cultural, demographic, e-business, conflict resolution, globalization, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Modern global environment is saturated with myriads of communication technological innovations. The most recent of these is the Internet. The creation of the Internet graphically illustrates the emergence of globalization era (Harf and Lombardi, 2004). The impact of Internet revolution can be measured across diverse socio-economic activities entrenched in the global market. Just as the Internet technology boosts some related arms of scientific field of inquiry, it also accelerates the pace of business and, concomitantly, socio-economic development in diverse nations of the world. Reduction in the cost of business and little complexity involved in establishing electronic connectivity is clearly a prime factor in this growth (Curtis and Cobham, 2004).

The field of business appears most enhanced as far as this development is concerned since the emergence of the Internet further strengthens the traditional relationship between commerce and technology. Internet provides for accelerated and stress free business interaction and simultaneously facilitates both accessibility and cross boundary business promotion. The Internet not only provides businesses with virgin environments for expansion of business and related commercial activities, but equally facilitates exchange activities in the traditional market places (Coupey, 2005:1). The operational coverage of this medium in the field of business remains visible cross culturally.

It is noticeable that the fusion of business activities and Internet technology has significantly transformed the environment and structure of business. This is quite visible in the existence of the global market place, unimpeded automation of transaction, 24/7 open window for business interaction; global connectivity and proficient investment climate among other advantages the medium offers.

Businesses all over the world accommodate electronic boost for obvious reasons. These range from low cost of business entry to timely consummation of investment returns often made possible through the Internet use. In addition, it may also include reduction in cost needed to make goods and services knowable, accessibility to business enhancing information, virtuality devoid of physical space in business operation, circumvention of spatial obstacles and total eradication of business touting (Curtis and Cobham, 2005).

However, no matter the pecuniary reason propelling Internet adoption in businesses, there are a gamut of conflicts attendant of such decisions affecting investment. The transaction of business electronically, a development commonly referred to as e-business, suggests that cross-cultural conflicts are likely to increase and continues to challenge the traditional methods of transactionary relationship.

Modern business presents different experiences for different people as well as for different classes in all socio-cultural environments. As e-business creates possible openings for business, it also raises some issues especially when evaluated in the light of current happenings all over the world. A substantial number of these issues involve those emanating from modern e-business environment.

While a few of these issues are technically determined, others affect economic, political, cultural and socio-demographic compositions of human society. Such issues carry different magnitudes of implications and at the

same time function to inhibit the success and the maximization of business opportunity globally. It is on this basis that an increasing importance needs be placed on the analysis and resolution of myriads of challenges that modern e-business poses to the overall business environment. It is against this backdrop that this paper undertakes a systemic analysis and exploration of the socio-cultural and demographic issues often encountered in the environment within which e-business takes place in Nigeria. It considers the enhancing and inhibiting factors engendering conflict in e-business promotion. Finally it proffers solutions to the inherent conflicts arising from these inhibitive tendencies.

2. Emergence of E-business

E-business involves a wide spectrum of business activity using Internet technologies (Napier, *et al*, 2001). It entails conducting business through the manipulation of the Internet thereby engendering virtuality of interaction between separated partners over a geographical space. Prior to the advent of modern business innovation, the market place remained the only medium for the exchange of goods and services. Physical contact of both parties in transactionary relationship was pre-requisite to a successful outcome. However, the technological leap which affected both transportation and information sectors globally brought a dramatic change which equally generated a tremendous impact on the world of business.

Furthermore, the development in the communication industry later promoted commercial interaction through the manipulation of the super highway. The overall effect of this development on modern business in its global context propelled the conduct of trade via the medium of electronic technology. The later occasioned the birthing of the Internet mediated business that is globally known as e-business. Prior to the attainment of this level, the world experienced a gradual evolution in technological breakthrough within a continuum with its initial manifestations rooted in the distant past.

Along varied measurable continuum are breakthroughs that heralded the improvement or increase in global business and, more specifically the later development which paved way for electronic business. These include the discoveries of locomotive and automobile. These were accompanied by trans-border transportation system supported by ocean liners discovery. Consequently, these three major breakthroughs dramatically boosted cross boundary interconnectivity and as a result, socio-cultural linkages became registrable and visibly pronounced in the field of business (see figure 1).

Spontaneous economic growths were recorded by nations with remarkable exposure to the aforementioned breakthroughs. This also produced an expansion in the production capacity of the affected states in contradistinction to several other nations that were without such opportunity in the global community. The unprecedented growth in economic related activities was concomitantly supported by the expanded demands for goods and services promoted by world population increase. In its modern usage, recent development driving global trade is closely entrenched in the World Wide Web culture obtainable via the use of Internet.

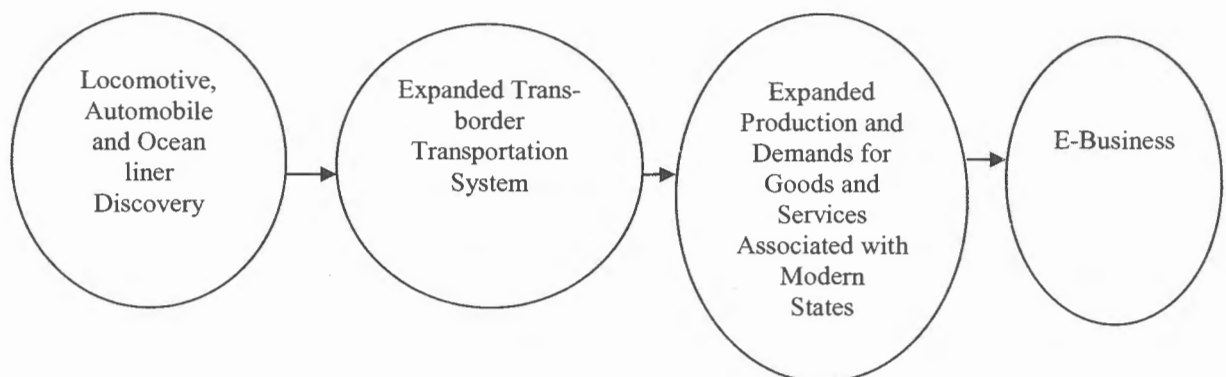


Figure 1: Technological continuum of accelerators in global E-business

The origin of e-business in the same sense can be traced to an innovation in information technology; initially driven by what was called 'electronic data interchange' which later metamorphosed into full blown Internet services through the World Wide Web (Huff *et al*, 2002). The adaptation of the Internet to commercial purposes in the early 1990s brought in the intensification of trade among relatively unknown cultures. This resulted in an expansive electronic business relationship involving individuals, organizations and nations. The widespread electronic linking of individuals and businesses automatically created a new economic environment in which

time and space are less limiting factors and thus promoting information flow on investible opportunities across diverse socio-cultural environments.

This also functions to reduce or eradicate the relevance of the intermediaries and conferring on customers increasing amount of power (Nupier *et al*, 2001). E-Business, succinctly put, includes everything having to do with the application of information and communication technologies (ICT) to the conduct of business between corporate bodies, industrial organizations or between business entities and individuals or customers. It is the conduct of business implicated in the virtual community with nations of the world manipulating the Internet medium for trade relationship and deriving benefits emanating thereof. Electronic dimension of business encompasses electronic commerce, Internet commerce, Web commerce, electronic fund transfer and electronic data interchange (Huff *et al*, 2002). The Internet has opened the door to different ways of trading especially computer mediated trading between hitherto unconnected people and communities.

Research has shown that in the last 5-10 years, there has been explosive growth in e-business development. Although, the prime factor necessitating such tremendous growth remained closely knitted to reduced cost in doing business and the flexibility of manipulating Internet technology in the world of business, the new business arrangement is also ridden with its unique contradictions (Curtis and Cubham, 2004). These contradictions are socio-cultural and demographic in their consequences.

The diagram shown in figure 2 illustrates the socio-cultural and demographic issues in e-business globally. These issues are examined in the subsequent sections of the paper.

3. E-Business Conflict and Principles of its Resolution

E-business conflict consists of myriads of contradictions involved in doing business electronically. It is composed of inhibitive cues, practices and activities often at variance with the operation of wired and wireless business interaction. Conflict is a situation of tension caused by many factors (Lewin, 1940: Coser, 1965: Folger *et al*, 1993). Its existence in the realm of e-business is closely tied to the change in the traditional mode of trading which developed as a result of mass production (Mohammed, 1999). There are several dimensions of e-business conflict with each having implications for e-business operation. While some are determined by technological deficiencies, a gamut of others lies in social, economic, political, legal, ethical and cultural dimensions of society. This current discourse focuses on the socio-cultural and demographic issues in e-business conflict resolution. Just as Galtung (1990) viewed conflict as “avoidable insults to basic needs”; e-business conflicts are also avoidable in their consequences for e-business growth. The attempt at making socio-cultural and demographic challenges avoidable constitutes the major thrust of this paper.

We draw from George Simmel’s assertion on conflict resolution. Simmel (1904) argued that conflict is designed to resolve divergent dualism. He saw conflict as a means of achieving some kind of unity. In this regard, conflict exists to instantiate its resolution. In a way, conflict in e-business, by principle, points to the direction for its resolution in line with the uniqueness of each facet of the identified problems. Conflict resolution helps to solve seemingly deep intractable problems and brings about a transformation (Burton and Sandole, 1986). It makes a dynamic process since as one category of challenge is solved it equally attends to subsequent others. From this premise, an analytic problem solving method developed by Burton and Kelman (1999) is adapted. This method involves the integrative effort which takes account of major challenges and mediating their consequences with the view to expanding the benefits of e-business globally. It is a combination of analytical approach and problem solving strategy.

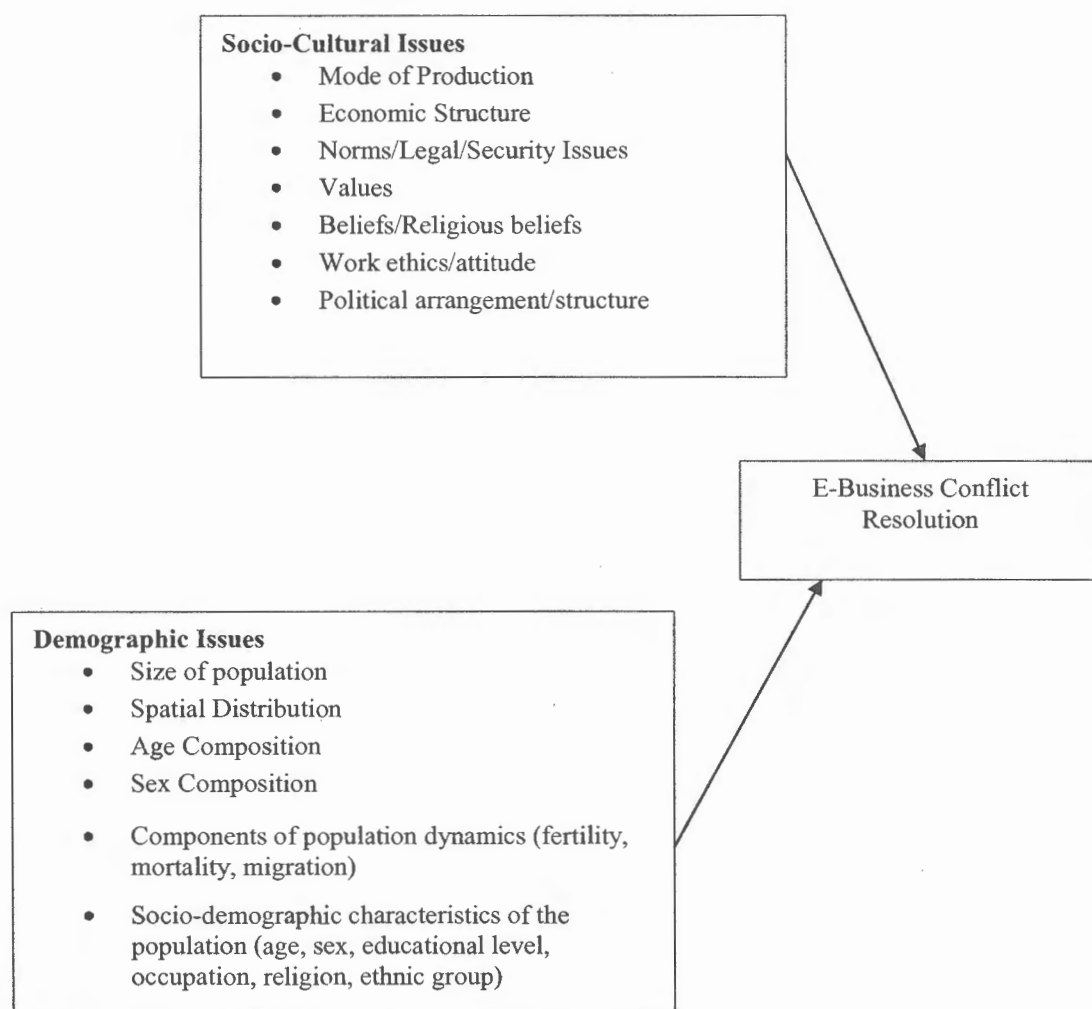


Figure 2: A schematic representation of socio-cultural and demographic issues in e-business conflict resolution

4. Socio-cultural and Demographic issues

Challenges confronting e-business globally overshadow the advantages the medium portends to offer in transactionary relationship. The conflict is rooted or often draws inspirations from the imbalances affecting trade relationships hitherto existing among sovereign states globally. Apart from the fact that the skewed effect endemic in international trade negatively affects developing economies (most African countries inclusive), it is clearly evident that e-business era promotes a vast array of socio-cultural and demographic challenges requiring clear definition, professional examination as well as determining the quality of efforts needed for their resolution. These issues reflect in political, economic, cultural, psychological, demographic, ethical and legal environments of e-business as presented in the subsequent sections.

Apart from the varied intensity of socio-cultural and demographic related conflict in e-business, there are diverse pre-disposable factors increasing the challenges of doing global business in the modern era. These range from multiplication of information technology, increasing speed of information and idea flow, challenges of managing the flow and structuring/controlling interaction and diversity of financial regimes across major boundaries of the world. This paper only focuses on the socio-cultural and demographic issues in e-business environment.

4.1 Socio-Cultural Issues in E-Business Conflict Resolution

Analyzing socio-cultural issues will entail the discussion of the economic, cultural, political, religious, ethical, legal and security issues in e-business conflict. These issues are considered one after the other.

4.1.1 Economic Dimension

The globalization of the world economies has accelerated the breaking up of traditional habitats without providing new ones (Franklin, 2009). E-business has its origin in globalization. Globalization is an increase in impact on human activities of forces that span national boundaries. These activities can be economic, social, cultural, political, technological, or even biological, as in the case of disease (Goldin and Reinert, 2006).

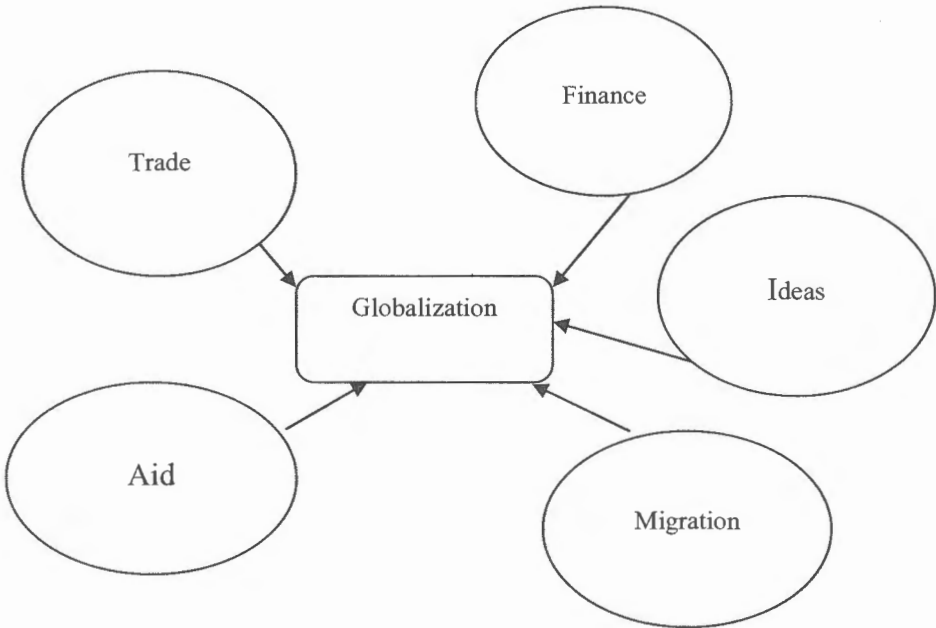


Figure 3: A schematic representation of the dimensions of globalization

There are five dimensions of globalization and within which trade or e-business takes a central place. The other four include: finance, aid, migration and ideas. The most central of these five dimensions involves trade organized both locally and globally. The magnitude and the dimension that e-business assumes in our modern day is measurable in the multiplication of technology, unimpeded access to resource cross-culturally, yearning towards attaining cost friendly transaction, availability of cross boundary customers, willing global competitors and availability of international market (Jepma and Rhoen, 1996).

There are diverse economic issues contending with the expansion of e-business opportunities and benefits. One of such challenges relates to the neglect of human capacity development prerequisite to smooth e-business take-off. The challenge relating to human capacity development remains a sensitive issue hampering the consummation of the opportunities e-business offers. There are visible gaps in human capacity development generatable through diffusion from the advanced economies when compared to what the nation has garnered in knowledge and technological know-how. Nigeria's productive capacity remains at a low ebb due in part to the absence of technical resource. Industrial output is abysmally low and barely sufficient to boost the export sector of the economy. Competitive edge can only be generated and sustained when the technical sector of the economy is able to adapt, manipulate and put to use modern technologies designed to service the e-business environment. There is the need to harness the proven knowledge and technology needed to take Nigeria to the next level.

The advent of e-business in most developing countries has been reported to have triggered measurable economic imbalance capable of distorting the import of global business interaction. While Ndulu *et al* (2007) report a major shift in developing countries' export structures, towards more manufactured goods and fewer resource export, Leonard and Strauss (2003) have decried the distortions inherent in global trade. These distortions remain more visible and measurable today than ever in financial incentives often granted by world financial bodies, extreme debt burdens occasioning acute poverty, acute competition between home and foreign goods, difficulties

in determining business model, cost of procuring technologies, meeting telecommunication needs and the extreme debt engendering local conflicts in most African countries.

Apart from those identified by Leonard and Strauss, concrete evidence shows that most African nations including Nigeria are far more becoming subservient to developed economies in this regime of e-business than what hitherto existed. Porter (2001) argues that Internet (and varied opportunities attached with it) is not necessarily a blessing for businesses because "it tends to alter industrial structure in a way to dampen the overall profitability". Industrial base of most nations in Africa has suffered setbacks for obvious reasons. There are visible cases of industrial closure across diverse sectors in Nigeria owing to the socio-economic environment generated by the impact of e-business interaction cross-culturally. Notably, a significant number of nations in Africa is excessively reliant on the industrialized world for their consumables and thus invariably occasioning the depletion of their local economic resources.

In its totality, Africa in general and Nigeria in particular has become a dumping ground for industrial goods coming from advanced industrial societies. These are having implications for the local economy. The implication of massive importation in its effects involves the unbridled accessibility to foreign goods, impulsive consumption of imported goods or products by the locales, dislocation or massive closure of local industries, unprecedented unemployment rate, high rate of crime and other social problems. Despite the opportunities it claims to offer, E-business has consistently numbed the thinking of the indigenous population and in turn diverting their attention away from the imbalance global trade has come to enforce.

Countries pushing their goods and services to Nigeria, for instance, are gaining at the expense of the consistently collapsing manufacturing sector of Nigeria's economy. This has reinforced an unequal trade relation between Nigeria and her trade partners in the international community. The argument in this regard is that no matter what e-business may seem to offer Africa, and indeed Nigeria commenced the absorption into the global trade from an extremely uneven platform and this is systematically nurtured to this present stage. In resolving the conflict attendant to economic issues, strategic measures directed towards improving capacity building via embedding educational curriculum remains crucial. Educational inputs across various levels of learning must respond to the modern demands in the world of e-relationship. The importance of technological know-how and being proficient in the technicalities involved in Internet driven business will assist stakeholders and users to enjoy the benefits derivable in e-business. As part of the requirement for e-business success in Nigeria, related e-technologies should be made available at affordable cost to developing nations. Apart from those affecting technology, there is also the need to solidify the industrial base of Nigeria's economy. This will reduce the acute reliance on the industrialized nations for local consumables. It will also help conserve most foreign earning accruing to Nigeria.

4.1.2 Cultural Dimension

The tenacious reliance on the traditional mode of production closely linked with the indigenous cultural practices constitutes one of those factors inhibiting the diversification required by modern e-business. Evidently, Nigeria operates the economic culture of complacency and conservatism with little semblance of reform. Nigeria's economy is predominantly a consuming economy. Its foundational structure rests solidly on oil exportation without commensurate development in the manufacturing sector. This development has spanned many decades and concomitantly attended by uncommitted attention towards reforming the manufacturing sector of the economy.

Evaluating this within the historical context of the nation's economy, agriculture has hitherto been the bedrock of Nigeria's economy. However, recent development shows that the sector is nearing a collapse. There is much over reliance on importation of consumable goods and the promotion of foreign goods and services that are diametrically opposed to what the local economy requires for growth. The structure of Nigeria's economic output reveals that agriculture contributed 33 percent of the GDP in 1980 and by 2005 it dropped to 17 percent. In the same way, industry contributed 41 percent in 1980 and this rose to 57 percent in 2005. The growth in the industrial sector is basically indicative of the expansion of oil and other allied industries. Notably, the manufacturing sector was badly affected within the period under review. It contributed 6 percent in 1980 and nosedived to 4 percent in 2005 (World Development Indicators, 2006). This by implication presents a unilineal flow of income from crude oil exportation and zero income in manufacturing. There is visible absence of the manufacturing base needed to service the yearnings of the global economy.

The fundamental issue in the context of this deficiency is that no country can harness the benefits of e-business without imbibing the culture of raising the platform for mass production needed for exchange in the global market. E-business only affords nations with the capacity for mass production to thrive and remain profitable. Culturally, the productive sector of Nigeria's economy is still substantially traditional and also being operated at subsistence level. In this wise, the spontaneity of competitive framework required for e-business to thrive has

been displaced and hence Nigeria is not for now competing for any comparative advantage with any nation of the world except in the area of oil exportation. In resolving the challenges emanating from cultural issues, economic diversification is central. The development of rural economies and the financing of small scale production will boost the generation of exportable products and likewise increase foreign earnings. To stir-up competitive trade relationship, therefore, investible loans should be pumped into the system so as to expand the productive/manufacturing sector of the economy. Bumper production will invariably increase exchange interaction between Nigeria and her trade partners.

4.1.3 Religious Issues

E-business has encouraged the demystification of religion globally. Internet trade promotes anonymous interaction among the transacting party and underplays the importance of sameness of beliefs in economic relationship. The profanity factor driving individuals and organizational choice and supply of goods and services often required alongside relational and product compatibility implicated in religious morality has been significantly underplayed through the Internet medium. In most cases, decency is thrown overboard as religious faithful now consume and manipulate products and ideas that negate their religious principles or dogmas. E-business promotes the infiltration of "worldliness" into the religious environment. E-business increases the magnitude of enticement and promotes lusting after mundane things within the religious circle. Consequently, in a rampaging manner the wind of the "flatness" of the world experienced through the auspices of e-commerce has swept through the church and the mosque thus leaving the institutions with the challenge of re-molding their adherents in consonance with the dictates of their religions. Basically, in as much as nations of the world cannot determine the axis or regions to partner with in trade due to religious inclinations, efforts should be made by parties to respect the sacredness of partners' religion through vetting of products made available to and ideas dissemination in the context of e-business. Sincerity and absolute trust should grow spontaneously in the course of partnering with others in business and this must adequately reflect on how we give credence to their faith.

4.1.4 Political Issues

E-business presents a two edged sword in its implication for governance. While the advent of e-business has further increased inter-boundary cooperation, it also in the process necessitated declining sovereignty among nations of the world. In Nigeria, the predictive and managing capacity of politicians to plan and control the manufacturing sector of the national economy has often been made non-effective by the availability of information about and the existence of tangible foreign goods that can be generated through the click of a button. In addition to the aforementioned there is porosity of national borders and the excessive dumping of foreign goods rigorously promoting three dimensions of complications for Nigeria's economy. In its effect, dumping often triggers the reduction in prices of foreign goods and low patronage for local or indigenous goods. The pillage of this often occasions the closure of most manufacturing units likely resulting in acute retrenchments and unemployment. Finally, the complexities of retrenchment and unemployment promotes the depletion of national resources often channeled towards the control of brigandage, robberies, incidental crimes and other social vices. Governments in Africa have more than a lot to chew as a result of foreign bombardments in all spheres of the economy. Apart from the limitations in the exercise of power among inter-governmental bodies, e-business equally raises the problem of policing and mediating international trade. In most Third World Countries, there are visible incapacitation on the part of governments in addressing or arresting the new trend in cyber fraud and the ever soaring international crime projected by other nations against the local economy. In proffering solution to this, inter-boundary cooperation in the control of e-business relationships among modern states assume the utmost importance in the face of porosity of major international boundaries in the era of e-business. Governmental arbitration and agentic policing towards conforming to the rules and standards of e-business will further enhance trade expansion among nations.

4.1.5 Socio-ethical, Legal and Security Issues

There are also socio-ethical and legal issues. As with all technological advances, the benefits of Internet connectivity are coupled with associated risks (Software, 2005). The hazards take a variety of forms, from non-business web surfing to confidential data leak. In its operation, the Internet presents a two way technical related challenges to e-business arrangement. First, it creates room for the collection of personally identifiable personal information about business partners. The information includes users name, address, phone number, e-mail and other business driven data. Second, it also affects non personal information such as server, personal computer adapted for business, browser type, etc. These two technical related problems increase the vulnerability of partners in business. Confidentiality of transaction becomes eroded as a result of intrusion, interception and

unwarranted access to business information. The illegal intrusion into private information through hacking or surfing exposes business secrecy and also increases the magnitude of risks associated with conducting e-business. E-business encourages the concentration of log in names and demographic data about the user often collated from those displayed by web publishers or domain web of e-business organization. E-business users become vulnerable when decision to place order is reached by the transacting party.

Responding to business advert or receiving ordered items exposes privacy and set risk on motion. Once business information is sent, it is automatically discovered in six different places: sender's desktop, sender's mail server, senders ISP, recipient's ISP, recipient's mail server and recipient's desktop. In the process of information flow, it is clearly evident that most times, there are traces of looping into the flow of information at either points where such flow would be registered. Having explained the socio-cultural related issues in e-business, a brief discussion of demographic issues affecting e-business will be examined. Modern business organizations should of necessity put in place strict measures directed at securing privacy. Information regarding business transaction in e-business environment should be preserved and covertly handled to reduce the risk involved in doing business. The use of match codes concealing the identities of business parties remains crucial to the warding off of threat. The match code takes care of personal identity of the partners and assuages the threat to privacy and to build up confidence.

4.2 Demographic Issues

It is evident that there is continual infusion of demography and business in both traditional and modern era (Pol and Thomas, 1997). Demography is the study of human population. It includes the study of size, distribution, composition and change dimension related to human population as well as the associated dynamic factors of migration, fertility and mortality.

The most important interaction between demography and e-business involves the reliance of the later on population data espoused in the aggregate characteristics of the population structure such as age, sex, income, occupation etc. and particularly how these variables affect the business environment of the market. In addition, modern business is interested in current demographic conditions in order to arrive at a projection implicated in changes that are likely to be generated by the interaction of migration, fertility and mortality, as they contrast and expand e-business market for goods and services.

In the age of e-business, the major demographic issue is centrally located in population explosion observable in most developing countries. Related to this is the dearth of data on population variables. In the context of population explosion, demographic intuition about the structure, size, distribution and composition are relatively non-existent. Data required to aid e-business in most African countries including Nigeria appear to be limited and often inaccurate because of either the inconclusiveness of census exercises or contentions about census figures generated after a head count. There is also an acute non-committal to market research at both micro and macro levels of developing economies which, in most cases, result into stagnation of the economy.

The precursor of demographic issue occasioning conflict lies firmly in the dearth of data needed to make effective and accurate e-business decisions in such countries. Available data generate a gap between what e-business tends to offer and what is currently utilized by most African local economies including Nigeria. The open window in global trade via electronic medium also presents a crucial issue in relation to the ratio of those who are computer literate among Nigerian people. There seems to be a vast majority of non-computer literate group compared to those with computer know-how. Part of this challenge is the limited access to computer by the general population. Consequently, computer/internet compliant level is invariably low across the general population (excluding the section of the population manipulating the medium for crime related activities) and as a result there exists a little appreciation of the potential of e-business in fostering the much needed socio-economic development at individual and organizational levels. Ndulu *et al* (2007) argue that African countries have not treated ICT as an important sector for economic growth and prosperity. Governments in Africa are also indicted of monopolizing or restricting Internet access by making its procurement extremely expensive and treating imported ICT facilities by private investors as consumer goods rather than investment goods. Little is done to encourage growth of the ICT sector. This is of major concern to e-business.

Considering demographic issue affecting e-business expansion in Nigeria and in other parts of Africa, therefore, it is important to note that the availability of accurate demographic data that will enhance the acceleration of e-business is sacrosanct to deriving the benefits the new arrangement offers. Expansion of trade can only be realized when accurate data on structure, size and distribution of national population are readily available. This will also give a clear picture on the size and nature of computer literate segment of the population as well as

those who are yet to get themselves acquainted with the medium and the benefits derivable thereof. In relation to demographic issue, governments are equally expected to encourage computer literacy. It should also expedite action on the education of the citizenry on what modern e-business offers.

5. Conclusion

The union between business activities and Internet technology has remarkably transformed the global trade environment thus leading to substantial improvement in cross cultural relationship. However, this affinity is not without its attendant cost and, by implication, translating into issues that must be resolved in order to maximally enjoy the benefits of e-business. The issues raised in this paper require prompt attention so as to help most developing nations measure up commensurately under the new business arrangement. The resolution of conflict in this regard revolves around the major stakeholders in e-business environment including governments, investors, agencies, religious and economic institutions as well as other policy makers. Collaborations at all levels will further enhance the growth of e-business in most developing economies.

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