A SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISE PERSPECTIVE ON POLYCHRONICITY AND FIRM PERFORMANCE IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study delves into the concept of polychronicity and its implications for firm performance in the context of information technology (IT) start-ups in Ghana. Polychronicity refers to the ability to handle multiple tasks simultaneously or switch between them fluidly. We selected six purposefully chosen IT start-ups, representing both the southern and northern zones of Ghana, to participate in this research. Drawing upon grounded theory methodology, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key personnel, including managers, chief executive officers (CEOs), and founders, to gain insights into their understanding of polychronicity and its effects on organizational performance. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative approach was adopted to obtain a richer understanding of the phenomenon, considering that financial data disclosure by small start-ups can be limited. The findings reveal that IT start-ups operating in a dynamic and uncertain technological environment are more likely to adopt polychronic cultures as a strategy to respond to the demands of the modern knowledge economy. The flexible and adaptable nature of polychronicity enables these start-ups to handle diverse project requirements and make the most of their limited resources, ultimately contributing to enhanced performance. Moreover, the study uncovers that in the pursuit of success, IT start-ups in Ghana prioritize not only financial metrics but also non-financial aspects, such as customer satisfaction, innovation, and cost-saving strategies. This broader view of performance aligns with contemporary management literature, which emphasizes the significance of organizational outcomes beyond financial measures. By providing a nuanced perspective on performance at the small business level, this research contributes to the strategic orientation literature and broadens the understanding of polychronicity as a cultural variable that can be cultivated by a group of individuals in a given context. Furthermore, it sheds light on how polychronicity drives organizational outcomes from the perspective of social identity theory, wherein employees' identification with their organization fosters collective dedication and commitment. Overall, this study presents novel insights into the relationship between polychronicity and firm performance in IT start-ups within a developing economy context.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of time has long been a crucial factor in understanding strategic organizational behaviours (Cummings and Staw, 1995). It plays a vital role in organizational decision-making, and its importance in the quality of decision-making and planning processes is highlighted in modern organizations (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997). Time is particularly critical for resource-scarce firms like entrepreneurial ventures and small businesses (Rosenbusch, Brinckmann, & Bausch, 2011), where efficient time allocation directly impacts performance (Siren, Parida, Frishammar, & Wincent, 2020). In today's work environment, tasks are becoming more complex and interconnected, and employees are increasingly required to engage in multiple activities and events simultaneously. Information technology and workplace changes, such as downsizing, teamwork, and job enrichment, have significantly altered the nature and speed of job performance, rendering traditional approaches to maximizing employee performance outdated (Ilgen and Pulakos, 1999).

Organizations' decisions and strategies are influenced by their firm-level strategic orientation, encompassing strategy-making practices, managerial attributes, and entrepreneurial actions. For instance, T-Mobile recently revamped its sales and customer service units to align with contemporary trends, blurring the lines between customer service and sales (Dixon, 2018). Such time orientation becomes especially relevant for resource-constrained environments like small businesses, where resource efficiency is paramount. In such settings, employees may be encouraged to switch between tasks or perform multiple tasks simultaneously (Bluedorn, Kalliath, Strube, & Martin, 1999).

The modern business landscape is marked by increasing turbulence and volatility, necessitating timely responses from individuals, groups, and organizations for survival and profitability (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1991). Polychronicity is a concept describing how individuals prefer to structure and utilize their time, often involving performing several tasks at once or switching between tasks (Mittal & Bienstock, 2019; Bluedorn et al. 1999). It is closely related to organizations' adaptive practices in today's dynamic context of hyper-competition, where quick decision-making and effective utilization of resources are essential for gaining a competitive advantage.

Studies have shown that employees' competencies lead to superior performance, and the ability to juggle multiple tasks enhances job performance (Poposki and Oswald, 2010). Organizations that intentionally embrace polychronicity as a strategy can boost employee performance by encouraging experimentation and minimizing the fear of failure (Mohammed and Nadkarni, 2014). As multitasking becomes a prevalent aspect of many jobs, there is a renewed interest in polychronicity from administrative and managerial perspectives (Szameitat, Hamaida, Tulley, Saylik, & Otermans, 2015). While research on multitasking and interruptions has provided insights into individual behaviour, there has been a lack of focus on how the workplace context shapes multitasking behaviour and its impact on performance, especially in small business settings. The prevailing work culture in organizations plays a crucial role in influencing employee behaviours and performance (Blount and Leroy, 2007). Polychronicity is even viewed as a component of organizational culture. However, the link between a polychronic work environment and firm-level performance has received limited empirical investigation. This study seeks to explore the connection between a polychronic work environment and firm performance in small businesses.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the next sections delve into the theoretical foundation and review of the literature on polychronicity. Then, the research

methodology is presented, followed by the theoretical and managerial contributions of the study. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing limitations and suggesting future research directions.

Theoretical Perspective

This study is based on Tajfel's (1979) Social Identity Theory, which emphasizes the importance of group membership for individuals' sense of pride and self-esteem. Social identity refers to the perception of belonging to an organization, where individuals define themselves in terms of the groups they are part of (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Group membership gives individuals a sense of belonging to the social world, and to enhance self-image and acceptance, individuals value the status of their groups and aspire to conform to their norms, values, beliefs, and traditions. This can also lead to discrimination and prejudice against those outside the group.

In an organizational context, social identification occurs when employees strongly identify with their organization, leading them to engage in behaviors that align with organizational goals (Jones, 2010). The organizational environment provides job resources that contribute to enhancing personal resources, such as self-efficacy and self-esteem, reducing hindrances to job demands and impacting organizational performance (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014; Barney and Felin, 2013).

Within the framework of social identity theory, an individual's identification and affection for an organization influences their dedication and willingness to sacrifice for the organization's success. For instance, employees who identify strongly with an organization embracing polychronicity may devote themselves to its polychronic culture and work towards its success. As part of the collective, they share social and personal resources, allowing for efficient task-switching and multitasking and leading to creative problem-solving for the organization.

Individuals within an organization favoring polychronicity are likely to inspire others to follow suit to be part of the social categorization and cohesion that underpins the group. Working in a polychronic environment, employees are more likely to proactively enhance their capabilities to manage challenging job demands. Fear of being labelled a nonconformist can lead members to act in accordance with group norms. In social identity theory, group membership is authentic and vital to the individual, making failure seen as a collective failure. Consequently, members' efforts, ideas, and expertise are directed towards positive organizational outcomes to avoid collective failure.

Polychronicity Concept

The concept of polychronicity, first introduced by Hall (1959) in cultural anthropology, refers to the temporal dimension of culture (Arasaratnam, & Doerfel, 2005). In polychronic cultures, individuals prefer to be involved in multiple tasks or projects simultaneously and switch their attention back and forth among them. In contrast, monochronic cultures favor organizing tasks sequentially and completing one project at a time. Polychronicity encompasses both preference for multitasking or task switching and the belief that others should also engage in such behavior. Hall's work identified certain cultures as polychronic and others as monochronic. People in polychronic cultures are compatible with exploring various alternatives simultaneously, enhancing opportunities for creative problem-solving. However, later works have shown conflicting results regarding polychronicity as an individual-level or cultural-level construct.

This study adopts the perspective that polychronicity is a cultural variable that can be cultivated and learned within organizations. Employees who identify with a polychronic organizational culture are likely to invest in the organization's success, as they see themselves as part of a collective with shared resources. This collective identity motivates them to adapt and thrive in a polychronic work environment, ultimately leading to positive organizational outcomes. However, there are potential downsides to working polyphonically, including attention fragmentation and shallow evaluation of issues. Polychronicity has been linked to challenges with coordination, meeting deadlines, and time awareness. Additionally, cultural predictors of polychronicity have yielded inconsistent results in empirical studies, warranting further academic inquiry to solidify the understanding of polychronicity as a cultural-level variable, particularly at the organizational level.

Method

The concept of polychronicity presents a complex and multifaceted nature, as it can be viewed both as a cultural-level construct and as a dispositional trait. Understanding this concept requires a deeper exploration, and a qualitative approach offers a more comprehensive understanding compared to the prevalent quantitative approaches in existing research. While previous studies on polychronicity have mostly used quantitative methods, a qualitative approach can provide valuable insights that enrich our comprehension of the concept, especially when examining its connection to performance.

A qualitative approach is particularly beneficial for investigating performance in small businesses, as they are often hesitant to disclose their financial data publicly and may not be legally obligated to do so. By allowing small businesses to offer qualitative insights into their understanding of performance, a more nuanced and detailed perspective on performance at the small business level can be obtained.

The study adopts grounded theory, aiming at theory building. Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that focuses on generating new theories that are empirically "grounded" in data about reality. It employs a pragmatic data analysis approach, based on individual experiences and dynamic situations, while remaining open-minded and flexible in research designs to accommodate unpredicted participants and sample sizes. Using grounded theory methodology is well-suited for an exploratory study like this, focusing on a specific group of decision-makers at the small business level. By analyzing the data and generating codes and categories, the study aims to establish the link between polychronicity and performance, allowing emergent concepts to emerge from the analysis.

Overall, employing a qualitative grounded theory approach helps to delve deeper into the phenomenon of polychronicity, facilitating a better understanding of its implications for organizational performance. The study acknowledges the need for a more profound appreciation of polychronicity to make sense of its consequences concerning performance.

During a recent job fair organized by the Youth and Entrepreneurial Agency (YEA), we purposefully selected six information technology (IT) start-ups from the southern and northern zones of Ghana to participate in our study. We focused on start-ups that were approximately six years old, representing fairly new ventures. The choice to focus on IT start-ups is driven by their importance in creating employment opportunities, especially in the knowledge economy, where knowledge workers play a crucial role.

The rise of the knowledge economy has led to complex work environments, and traditional managerial power has diminished, giving rise to job crafting and bottom-up approaches. This environment fosters idea generation, promotion, and implementation, which align with polychronicity, the ability to handle multiple tasks simultaneously or switch between them fluidly. IT start-ups, with limited employees and diverse project requirements, can benefit from the flexibility and adaptability that polychronicity offers.

Moreover, the high technology industry has more polychronic temporal cultural norms, allowing for elastic time management compared to traditional work settings. IT start-ups operate in an uncertain and dynamic environment due to rapid technological and market changes, embodying risk and managerial discretion. Therefore, we predict that polychronic culture may play a crucial role in adapting to the demands of this modern and fast-paced technological landscape.

Four companies from the southern zone and two from the northern zone consented to participate in our study, with a larger representation from the southern zone due to its higher number of companies at the job fair. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with focal persons within these start-ups, such as managers, chief executive officers (CEOs), and founders. As part of the grounded theory method, data gathering and analysis occurred concurrently and systematically using continual comparison methods. We identified recurring themes and categories, aiming to elicit underlying theories regarding the relationship between polychronicity and firm performance.

It is worth noting that the study was exploratory, and the participating companies preferred to remain anonymous to avoid any potential issues with tax authorities. Therefore, we refer to them by initials in our analysis. The qualitative approach allowed us to delve deeper into the understanding of polychronicity and its impact on performance, which is often challenging to capture through quantitative methods, particularly for start-ups reluctant to disclose financial data publicly. Overall, this study contributes to the growing literature on polychronicity in the context of small IT start-ups in a developing economy like Ghana Table 1.

Table 1 SUMMARY OF COMPANIES INTERVIEWED	
Name of company	**Business description**
Os	Business software development
ST	Cloud services
D.O	Software development
R.S	Software solutions
Ks	Fintech
TCT	Software

Source: Field data, 2021.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is critical in grounded theory methodology. Accordingly, several steps were followed to ensure good theories were generated. Firstly, two external independent experts in grounded theory vetted our sample of interview transcripts, coding sheets, and interpretations and confirmed their consistency (Patton, 2002). Next, to ensure credibility in the coding process, codes generated from the interviews were constantly compared with our own memos or reflective notes. Also, the study went through a member check, here, the final findings were sent

to participants to confirm that the overall findings reflected the views articulated in the interviews and mirrored their true experiences (Tan, 2010).

Study Findings

The current study was intended to determine how polychronicity affects firm performance within a small business context. Anchored on grounded theory, it focuses on theory building based on thematic analysis. From the data, findings can be discussed based on the following broad themes:

Survivability

For small businesses in the technology sector in Ghana, resources are a major constraint and the situation is even dire for technology small businesses where hyper-competition is an additional headache. Small businesses in information technology, have the double agony of managing both resource scarcity and brutal competition. The data revealed that for small businesses in the technology sector in Ghana, being polychronic is about the sustainability of their businesses. For them, surviving the mortality rate that confronts most startups in their early stages is their prime preoccupation. The following statements from the interviews support the above claims:

#DO: *"Remember, we are very much interested in survival at this stage of our life. We have to deploy our resources judiciously, efficiently and optimally to stay in business and be competitive. That is our goal as of now. Things are very difficult, considering the kind of environment in which we work in, so survival is our number one interest"*

#KS: *"The issue is about the survival of the business, we work as a unit, and everybody knows how things are done here (polychronicity). We do not have comfort zones. Interruptions and doing multiple things simultaneously are the order of our work. Anybody who had a stint in our business will know those interruptions, information sharing, and back-and-forth movements are an integral part of the business. We are still small in the environment, that is the only way we survive in the business"*

#TCT: *"We are growing steadily as a technology company. As beginners, things are not rosy as we would have wished, but we are not daunted by the teething challenges that confront us daily. As the saying goes, a seed decomposes before it germinates. We will weather the storm associated with our newness and grow from strength to strength. What we need as of now is resilience to move beyond this phase of our development"*

Cost Cutting

The data further exposed the idea that small businesses within the technology space in Ghana are cost sensitive and see cost-saving as an important corporate strategy, especially small businesses that are already struggling from resource scarcity. Exploring cost-cutting strategies like polychronicity makes it possible for small businesses to offer products to customers at a reduced cost, offsetting competitors. Lowering average and marginal costs are typical benefits that may accrue to businesses that pursue this strategy (Dickson, 1992). From the data, this is captured as follows:

#RS: "We are forced to behave this way (polychronicty) because we are constrained by limited resources, compelling us to make judicious use of our scarce expertise. Otherwise, we would have to expend non-available resource to hire additional hand to assist, which we don't have as of now. The system (polychronicity) creates an indirect way by which we improvise, giving us the chance to save resources for other engagements"

#ST: "Creating a working culture for people to juggle among several tasks within same time period makes it easier for us to save cost and explore many opportunities. The collaborative work we countenance here make us smarter, otherwise we would have to outsource so many things, which comes at a cost to us. The environment we have (polychronicity) makes us versatile, creative, and above all us give us the chance to reduce our cost of conducting business"

#TCT: The cost of overheads and other associated costs continue to be an albatross on necks. The smartest way to navigate this is to create a culture of this kind of system (polychronicity, where we can make maximum use of our expertise. Here, we operate like "Jack of all trades" affording us the opportunity to cut down cost to the barest minimum. That is one of the surest ways we can pick up as young entrepreneurs operating in a very hostile climate"

Innovation

Innovation is a key socio-economic motivator, which drives many entities towards it. In the technology industry, innovation is the way to go, judging from the volatile nature of it. Businesses need to be innovative to guarantee their competitive spirit (Drucker 1985; Weerawardena, O'cass, A., & Julian, 2006). This is understandable considering the disruptive nature of the environment in that small technology startups find themselves. From the data, it illustrates how small businesses are using polychroncity as a failsafe mechanism to respond to the exigencies of the time.

#ST: "In our work domain, it seems impossible to avoid doing several things at once, because that is what makes us creative and innovative. Working on one thing leads to interactions with a colleague or colleagues, back and forth movements, in some cases outside your comfort zone" That is the nature of this very environment."

#RS: Our ability to churn out new products speedily and innovatively rests on us collaborating, communicating as opposed to operating in silos. I can assure you, we may not be able to do enough if we don't talk to each and tolerate disruptions. Remember, the path finder does not that the path is not straight. It takes interruptions to point out such things to us. It happens on daily basis to us.

#OS: If you asked me, I will say that this kind of work culture makes us carry out many things at once: By so doing, we search for new, alternative ways of carrying out these jobs. By looking for new ways of carrying out various tasks make us frame up novel ways to doing things. In the course of this, our confidence is strengthened through which colleagues can take on risk, knowing very well that everybody is in support should things go negative. As you may be aware, as we take on new ideas, we become creative and innovation is the ultimate winner"

From the foregoing, it is reasonable to conclude that polychronicity makes it possible for small businesses to access innovation which has been preserved of large firms with the financial muscle to diversify risk (Gupta, Smith, & Shalley, 2006). Small businesses are more likely to be innovative because they have a more receptive climate for arriving at speedy decisions and ambitious projects, less bureaucratic bottleneck and more flexible structure, higher ability to

adjust and improve, and less difficulty in accepting and implementing change (Chandy and Tellis, 2000).

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is seen as critical for firm's success in today's competitive marketplace, and (Haverila and Fehr, 2016) treat customer satisfaction as a strategic goal for most firms. Having customers satisfied is paramount and can help small businesses in many ways such as repeat purchase, customer loyalty and be competitive (Salunke et al., 2019). Because small businesses are characterized by flexibility, dynamism, creativity, quick reaction to customers' needs and ability to express personal touch (Krajnakova et al., 2015) which nourishes customer satisfaction. The statements below capture the belief in customer satisfaction.

#Os: The real essence of our existence is to get our customer satisfied. Regardless of what we do, we are obliged as an entity to keep our ears to the ground to listen and address the concerns of our customers. There has been a number of occasions where we had to stop what were are doing and address customer concerns regarding what had been "done, dusted and sealed", before going back to continue the task for the day. Mind you, we would repeat these countless number of times as long as that will make the customer satisfied and excited about what we provide as an entity".

#KS "Can you imagined a scenario, where as a financial tech company, we don't interact among ourselves as a group and the customers for whose interests we operate as entity. Interacting with ourselves makes us creative and smarter and with customers makes us a serve them better. For us, customers getting satisfied are the biggest excitement for us. When we deliver our products and our customers don't give us calls to complain about the deployment of our service, we assumed we are doing well. On a number of occasions, we have been proactive, in the scheme of thing; we always get in touch with customers to get feedback about what we had delivered and inquire whether they have experienced challenges regarding the use of our products at their ends. We understand the competition in which we find ourselves, we don't joke with customer satisfaction! Under conditions like these, moving back and forth in tasks executions becomes the order of the day, because anything can happen; including the unexpected, urging colleagues, do many things simultaneously"

#TS: "We should not lose sight of the fact that this business in a communal venture. Our goal should not just be about profit or revenue. Creating an enabling environment which makes it possible for people to switch task within the same time block makes them versatile and test their resilience. At the height of this, you are expanding their creativity, collaboration and communication skills. My horizon as a software developer broadens, not because I was doing what I do best, but my adaptability to sort multiple tasks at once to beat deadlines and the capacity to attend to clients problems on the spur of the moment, regardless of the situation I found myself, without losing anything scheduled to be done. As an expert in this field, I do not expect my work to be linear, it is just impossible. You see, flexibility and adaptability is the way to go, that is the only way to keep your client satisfied".

The ability to juggle several tasks, tolerate interruptions, collaboration and communication which underpin polychronicity ensure timely delivery of quality products and services to meet customers demands.

Profitability

From a financial performance standpoint, organizational success is typically defined and measured in terms of accounting pointers of cash flows and profitability (Srivastava et al. 1999). Intriguingly, startups in the IT sector in Ghana consider making profit as a future project. They see themselves as laying foundations for better things to come in the future. The views articulated below accentuate this position. They see themselves as heading towards profitability with their current situation.

#Os: "As an upcoming technology company operating a developing economy, where resource scarcity is the order of the day, what we need as of now, is our ability to conserve scarce resources and deploy our expertise in an optimizing and efficient manner. That is the surest way we can guarantee profit for ourselves in the future. Without cutting cost and stretching ourselves, doing many things meant for many people, we cannot make it"

#KS: "Honestly, we are operating in this manner (polychronicity) because we need to be efficient and productive at the same time. We operate in an environment where the IT infrastructure is costly, making the cost of our business costly, so we have to improvise, if we have to make gains in the future. Once things are getting better, our profit number would begin to appreciate"

#DO: "To be fully profitable as an entity at this time of our journey is extremely difficult. As long as we remain in business, getting things done as we anticipate as a group, we are happy. We are upbeat about the future as we lay a fulfilling background to make it possible for us to rake the full benefits of our labor. As of now, we don't make that much as an entity in terms revenue but the future looks promising"

#TCT: "As the situation normalizes, we will earn the needed revenue, we so desire. As of now, we are not that liquid, we only make ends meet. If you are managing things, as we wait for greater things, why would you confine yourself to single task a time? You got to behave like an octopus!

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study addresses a significant knowledge gap in the entrepreneurship literature by linking polychronicity to firm performance in a non-quantitative manner. It is the first of its kind to investigate the relationship between polychronicity and firm performance in technology-based small firms in a developing economy context like Ghana. The findings suggest that small technology startups in Ghana prioritize survivability, cost-saving, customer satisfaction, and innovation as important organizational outcomes. This aligns with contemporary management literature that emphasizes the importance of non-financial performance measures alongside traditional financial metrics.

The study challenges the traditional notion of firm performance solely from an accounting perspective, encouraging a broader perspective that includes nonfinancial measures like customer satisfaction and innovation. Although financial measures are seen as important for future endeavors, small technology startups in Ghana currently focus on addressing structural

difficulties to enhance future financial performance. Additionally, the study contributes to the literature by examining firm performance from the perspective of small businesses operating in a highly volatile and developing economy context. It sheds light on the strategic orientation of small startups, especially those facing resource constraints due to their small size and newness. Polychronicity emerges as a viable practice for small businesses in their formative years to navigate challenges effectively.

Moreover, the study expands the understanding of polychronicity as a cultural-level variable that can be learned and deployed by a group of individuals within a specific work context, influencing organizational-level performance. It is in line with social identity theory, highlighting how a work context that favors polychronicity fosters collective pride and motivation for organizational success, even if it means prioritizing collective interests over individual ones. For small business entrepreneurs in the technology industry, adopting polychronicity as a working culture can improve survival prospects in the competitive technology sector in Ghana. While instant profitability may not be achievable, preparatory groundwork through polychronicity can pave the way for future profitability. However, the study has some limitations. Generalizing the findings beyond the context of small technology startups in Ghana should be approached with caution. Future research could replicate the study in different jurisdictions and sectors to validate the results. Additionally, investigating the relationship between polychronicity and firm performance in more mature small technology enterprises and comparing them with startups would yield valuable insights. Exploring the direct and indirect relationships of polychronicity in future studies could further enhance understanding. Lastly, adopting a mixed-method approach with triangulation mechanisms can add depth to future research in this area.

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