

THE IMPORTANCE OF NETWORKS IN THE ACQUISITION OF MARKETING INFORMATION RESOURCES FOR SMALL SIZED ENTERPRISES (SSEs) IN TANZANIA – A THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

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Abstract

Marketing information (MI) is a key resource to any firm. That is why investment in its acquisition is indispensable. To the Small-scale enterprises (SSEs) which contribute significantly to the poverty reduction and development of the economy of developing countries such like Tanzania the efficient, timely and effective gathering of the MI is important. The competitive and dynamic nature of the environment makes further emphasis on this point redundant. The most cost efficient way of gathering such MI is through the entrepreneur's social and inter-firm networks. But the contents and structure of both inter firm and social networks have had differing and contradicting results when it comes to their contribution in accessing the MI. Thus, further empirical studies in the African and Tanzanian context in particular is necessary. This working paper proposes a theoretical model for the purpose. Four propositions concerning marketing information and networks are developed.

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Key words: Networks, Marketing information, Social Networks, Inter firm networks and Marketing environment

BACKGROUND

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly recognized as being important in the world. Recently, government policies and programs have started putting emphases in supporting competitive markets, private sector initiatives, privatization of parastatals, increased self-reliance and reduced government participation in the economy (Harson & Shaw 2001). As a result the central issue dominating policy debates around the World, and in particular the Sub Saharan Africa, has been how to stimulate social and economic growth through the development of small and medium-sized enterprises. Tanzania is not exception in this respect. One small enterprise sector that potentially counts for such growth is the manufacturing sector, which is said to contribute 12% of the GDP in Tanzania. The structure of the sector is being taken over by the private sector slowly. The private sector, which breeds small sized manufacturers, has great potentials in bringing new technologies, new management and networks to enhance their future development and to be able to compete in the market.

Manufacturing industries in Tanzania are said to employ close to 200,000 people and offer more opportunities with the growth of the sector. By employing an increased number of the Tanzanian population, this sector is contributing to fighting poverty through increased income of both rural and urban population. They are also said to be the springboard to the development of a strong industrial sector (UNIDO 2003). Investing in developing this sub sector is therefore imperative. Such efforts of developing the Small Sized Enterprises manufacturing sector (SSE) in Tanzania requires among others access to updated, efficient and trusted marketing information (MI) suitable for providing competitive and more acceptable products in the market both local and international. We think MI gathering is indispensable for any SSEs survival and prosperity. That is why it has been regarded as lifeblood for any firm. So the question of whether MI is important or not is irrelevant. The dynamism nature of the environment furthermore makes accessibility to target market information imperative. The dilemma remains on how should SSEs access the marketing information (MI) affordably but efficiently.

It has been observed in other countries that among others *networks* have had impact on the success of the SSEs. Such networks have been instrumental in the success of the enterprise through providing with different resources (including marketing information) needed by those firms' existence and survival (Aldrich and Zimmer 1986). If networking successfully contributes to increased marketing information the growth of the small business sector could increase in both domestic and export markets. Rutashobya and Jaensson (2004) showed that engaging in networks made female entrepreneurs start exporting, which is a very important network implication and could contribute to the growth of small firms significantly. But the key issue that drives an interest in this paper lies on 'what kind of networks yield more marketing information? Social network theory depicts that the structure and contents of networks are key in enjoying potential benefits of the networks (Mitchell 1969) but empirical evidence produce contradictory results as to what ought to be appropriate structure and contents.

Problem identification

Marketing Information (MI) may be regarded as information about what customers need in terms product attributes, price desired, appropriate distribution and effective communication to them (Hirsch and Peters: 2000). Survival and prosperity of the organizations have been connected to the ability of the organizations in determining needs, wants and interest of the target market and delivering the desired satisfactions more effectively and efficiently than what competitors do (Kotler et al.: 2001). Seeking information about what the market needs has therefore been indispensable.

MI relevance for the survival and prosperity of the small firms has been reflected in several studies. Morris (1998, p.33) points out that constraints facing small and medium

enterprises (SMEs) in the world to include the strict legal and regulatory environment, lack of *access to markets*, premises and financing, lack of appropriate skills, poor technology and poor infrastructure. These problems are not significantly distinct from those in Africa and Tanzania in particular. Wangwe (1999) and Nyiti (2000) point out problems facing Micro and Small enterprises (MSE) in Tanzania to include external sector reforms, fiscal reforms, domestic deregulation, physical and technological infrastructure, the banking and finance structure, legal and regulatory framework, lack of access to training and *information* and *market related constraints*. Borter (2000); Temu (2000) argue that SSEs in Tanzania suffer from an unfavourable business climate, shortage of capital, stiff competition, legislative problems, cheap imported articles, lack of business and management skills, shortage of *information* and access to advisory services. K'obonyo (1999) on the other hand counts on liabilities of smallness, newness and therefore *isolation* as constraints.

In response to these problems, the Tanzania has taken various policy-based measures, which began with removal of repressive environment of the Small and Medium sized enterprises -SMEs (Verspreet and Berlage 1998). In turn, motivating environment for the emergence of small business tailored institutions for providing finance, training and advisory services were gradually developed. Despite some successes many of those institutions have been labelled as ineffective and bureaucratic in delivering services. Moreover, efforts directed at assisting SSEs in accessing market/marketing related information has been inadequate despite 'market constraints' being cited as one of the critical problems (Imperial College: 2002). There are no set institution arrangements to help firms access MI and give them assistance to penetrate new markets. The resulting impact is that small firms have found it difficult to compete and hence continued to suffer from number of problems including the one of limited market scope. There have been continued declines both in sales and employment in many categories of firms in the manufacturing sector of Tanzania (Verspreet and Berlage 1998). Rutashobya and Allan (2001) alert that SMEs prosperity has not been given adequate attention despite its social and economic importance in Tanzania.

Potential advantages that smaller firms can derive from a network of relationship have recently attracted the attention of public agencies charged with assisting SMEs development. For example, The Guardian (2003) quoted the Insurance Institute of Tanzania (IIT) president arguing for the need to create local networks for local operators so that they survived in the era of globalisation. O'Donnell et al. (2001,p.5); Premaratne (2001); Jensen and Greve (2002) cited benefits of networks as information access, introducing to business associates and providing product and service ideas, finance and support access. For the Small scale Enterprises, networks have been considered more important because of special characteristics that differentiate them from conventional marketing in large organisations.

Despite the MI importance to the SSE manufacturing sector the explanation as to how networks contribute to the success of the business is scanty, have extremely differed and sometimes contradicting. One view is that the structure of networks matters greatly. Structure is explained by the degree of redundancy and size of networks (Burt 1992). Accordingly, low ¹redundancy/low dense networks promote more access to resources than high redundant (high dense) networks. Other literatures however, indicate that high redundancy avail more resources than low redundant networks (Jenssen and Greve 2002). The other structural aspect, which has been frequently mentioned but not given adequate attention, is the network size (Mitchell 1969). In some cases it has been argued that what matters more in access to resources is not the strength of ties but only the size. Still others argue that it is not only the size of networks but also how diversified and effective actors are (Burt 1992).

¹ Redundancy and density have frequently been used interchangeably

The other strong view is that the content of the networks is what matters more. The content of network has sometimes been referred in terms of the strength of ties (Aldrich and Zimmer: 1986; Jensen and Greve: 2002). Accordingly, weak ties yield more resources than strong ties. The other contradictory view is that strong ties are more rewarding in terms of access to resources than weak ties (Jenssen and Greve 2002)

An interesting study by Premaratne (2001) came with a typology of Inter-firm, Social and Support networks in explaining the relationship between networks and resource accessibility. He was able to conclude (though not beyond the size of networks) that different types of network had different potentials to the access of information, finance and non- material support in Sri Lanka. It is worth then dissecting this typology further by integrating it with the structure and contents of networks (Characteristics of networks) in trying to provoke a much more critical discussion. However, initially only inter-firm and social works will be studied because these are the more visible types of networks.

The argument by Mitchell (1969) is that what matters in the entrepreneurial networks is both intensity (Structure) and interconnectedness (Content) of the members of the network. However, more of the few related studies, mostly in developed countries concentrated on the structure of the networks and little room were given to its content. Even though, such studies have been non-SSE specific and point to contradictory results. The typology given by Premaratne (1998) has not been adequately studied. Such position is probably explained by the fact that the field of networks has only recently gained its importance in the business field and that different country context produce different result.

Overall, understanding the types and characteristics of networks and how they impact on a firm's ability to align itself to the market needs is crucial to improving marketing competitiveness and therefore prosperity of the SSEs. The study about the types, nature and content (network ties) of entrepreneurial networks is therefore timely and imperative. This is partly why Rutashoby and Allan (2001) proposed the need to explore the influence that social ties have on business development in Tanzania. The focus of the study therefore lies in developing the model that will be used to answer the following question:

What roles do structure (density and size), and contents (strength of ties) of inter firm and Social (types) networks play on marketing information acquisition of the SSEs' manufacturing firms from a theoretical perspective?

Paper objectives

The paper develops the conceptual framework/model, for studying the effects of entrepreneurial networks on the marketing information acquisition of the SSEs manufacturing firms in Tanzania. The model examines:

- 'The influence of Density', 'Size' and Strength of ties of the *Inter- firm networks* among entrepreneurial SSEs on MI.
- The influence of 'Density', 'Size' and Strength of ties of the *Social Networks* among entrepreneurial SSEs on MI.
- Whether the SSEs inter firm networks gathers more MI than Social networks.

Literature review on Network concepts

A review of most literature shows that research into entrepreneurial networks falls into two principal categories: inter-firm networks and social networks and are often subsumed into one general network construct, which contains aspects of both (O'Donnell et al. 2001).

Inter-firm Networks has been referred to, as connection or interaction between a focal firm and other firms- be competitive or non-competitive firms (Premaratne 2001). Jaensson

and Nilsson (1997) argue that by networking small enterprises are able to reap advantages in at least joint purchasing, cooperation and marketing. It is clear from network theories that firms will operate collaboratively if they see it attractive to share with other firms. With collaborative efforts, economies of scale might be attained in resource and information acquisition, hence improve competitive ability of the SSEs.

Social networks refer to business collaboration of the focal firm owner manager with friends, acquaintances or relatives (Premaratne 2001). From business point of view, actors may be seeking advice, giving advice or both; exchanging technical and marketing information, exchanging gossip about others in the organization, making loans and collecting interest, giving/receiving moral support in a time of crisis as well as sharing affections or secrets. At times the network perspective has evolved due to critique of the old marketing paradigm that considers markets as areas of free exchange (Brunninge, 2001, P.2).

Linking Networks and marketing information

It is clear from the literature that is no single universally acceptable definition of networks. But the minimum most authors agree is that networks involve actors/units/nodes who are connected in certain structure for certain anticipated gains. In constructing our own operational definition we acknowledge the Birley and Callghan (1994) definition in conjunction with perception given by Shuman and Twombly (2001,p.43) and Iacobucci (1996). Thus *Networks* shall be defined as consisting of a set of actors and their structural and content relations, where the focal firm regularly and for a sustained period interacts, at least informally with friends, family members or other firms for the purpose of gaining economic advantages in accessing the information and other resources for their gainful use.

The key to success is for the SSEs to tailor its offer to the needs of the target market. To be able to do that, SSEs are to engage in actively interacting with other actors in order to acquire such information on pricing, distribution, communication/promotion and product quality from the marketing environment as desired by the market. Our operational definition of *Marketing information (MI)* looks at MI as information acquired by a focal firm through networks about customers' needs in terms of product attributes, desirable price, distribution decisions and effective communication in the light of both macro and microenvironment forces. Such information can range from pro actively (formally) sought to passively (informally) obtained information.

So this study reveals different proposed structure and content of networks explaining amount of marketing information (MI) to be acquired by the SSEs.

Theoretical reflections

We think that Network related theories and models play complimentary role in the Network academic field. Inevitably the justification of investing in the networks is explained by several theories. We draw from the Transaction Cost Exchange (TCE) theory (Williamson 1975, 1985) the network relevance to the SSEs in terms of availing reliable and efficient information. For the SSEs networks are particularly needed because of being a cheaper source of accessing MI. Through the *inter-organisational based* theories (Ford 1990) we draw the relevance of the Inter-firm /business networks in accessing MI from the environment. A firm is seen as dependent on its environment in accessing inputs. Other firms are regarded as efficient agents in acquiring such MI. The challenge for the focal firm is to develop effective relations with such firms seen as a potential source of information. So inter firm type of network is reflected. In the *social network* theory (Mitchell 1969) the relevance of social relations in business is expressed. More important is how structure of the networks in terms of density and size impact the

information accessibility. The theory reflects the relevance of density, durability of relationship, strength of ties and frequency of interaction in the MI acquisition. The SSEs should hypothetically develop appropriate strength of ties, durable relationship and should frequently interact. We draw from *social exchange* theory (Blau 1964) the importance of reciprocity, long-term relations and trust in resource accessibility through networks. In our context the theory contributes to the content of networks. We learn from *Resource dependence* theory (Emerson 1962) that power can be used to gain access to more resources from other actors. However, this applies more on hierarchically based networks. In the *choreographer model* (Shuman, Twombly and Rottenberg 2001) we learn the relevance of resource acquisition through networks in meeting customers needs and wants. Focal firm need to have information and other resources and network is one effective way to access such resources. Through the *network* model (Brown, Butler and Phan 1990) we see integration of social and inter- firm network being reflected as important in the success of the firm through resource access. Based upon an integration of this theoretical background we now develop our conceptual framework to study the network characteristics and content in relation to marketing information.

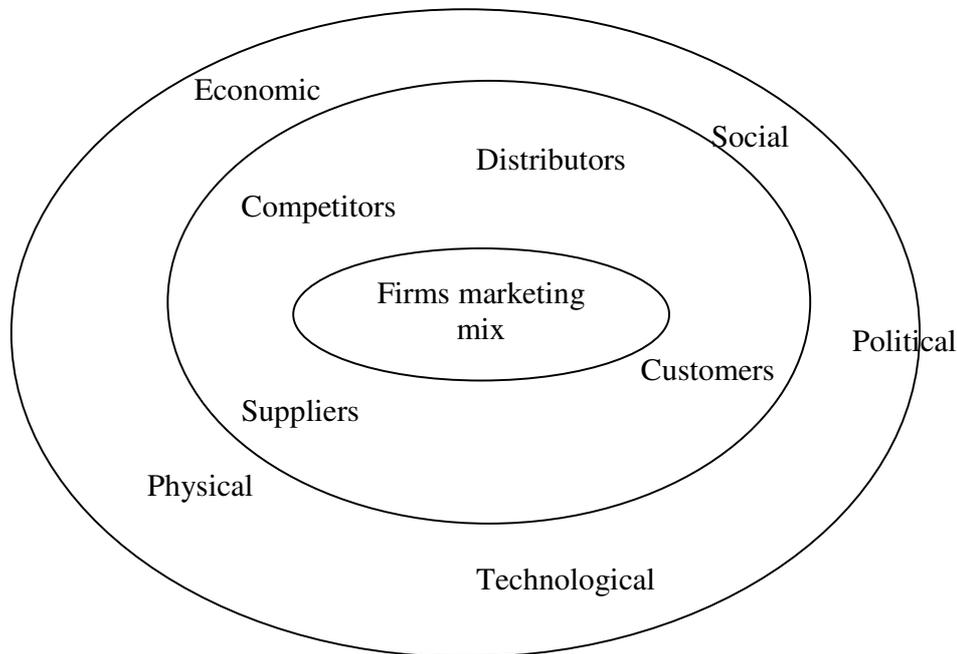
Conceptual Framework

It has already been inferred in the 'inter-organization based theory' that, the firm depends on its environment for the access of inputs including the MI and therefore it seeks to manipulate and control its environment. In order to obtain such MI the organisation is seen to develop relations with a number of other business and social networks. It is these networks that interacts with the environment and reciprocally receive and deliver MI to the focal firm. The Conceptual model is based on this broad view. We begin by dissecting the environment into its parts in order to comprehend the conceptual framework developed.

Marketing Environment -a point of departure

It is clear that successful organisations are potentially those that understand their environment as today the firms are facing expanding and rapidly changing marketing environment (Tanyeri et al. 2001). Marketing environment consists of the actors and forces outside marketing that affect firms ability to develop and maintain successful transactions with its target customers (Kotler et al. 1999). A similar definition is provided by Jobber (1998) who defines the marketing environment as consisting of actors and forces that affect a company's capability to operate effectively in providing products and services to its customers. Successful firms know the vital importance of using their marketing research and intelligence systems constantly to watch and adapt to the changing environment. However, in the case of Small Manufacturing firms the chances of using these approaches are slim due to low capacity in finance and knowledge among them. Such prohibitive characteristics suggest the use of networks as an alternative and affordable way to scan the environment.

Figure 1: The marketing environment attributes



Source: Adopted from Jobber, D. (1998)

It is convincing in *figure 1* to believe that the marketing mix is designed to meet the interest of the target market. This is possible but only after environmental scanning. Environment scanning implies the process of monitoring and analysing marketing environment whereby the economic, social, legal, technological, and physical forces are monitored (Jobber: 1998). These are considered as part of Marketing Information and tend to shape the context within which suppliers, the company, distributors, competitors do business. It provides the essential informational inputs to create a strategic fit between strategy, organisation and environment. (Jobber: 1998). This implies that the marketing strategy i.e. marketing mix design depends greatly on the marketing information obtained from both the macro and microenvironment. We argue in this study that such environment scanning is facilitated through establishing networks and that SMEs can use the networks as channels through which they can get access to the necessary resources.

It is important to recognise that no firm exist in a vacuum and since marketing is all about looking outward and meeting customers needs and wants, the organisation has to take into account what is happening in the real world. The marketing environment presents many opportunities and threats that fundamentally affect all elements of the marketing mix (Brassington and Pettit 2000). The implication is that MI is distilled from the marketing environment through networks. The MI in turn affects the marketing decision making of the SMEs manufacturing.

Marketing Environment and MI modelling

We already defined the Marketing information from the context of the marketing mix elements. In this model we depict that it is from the marketing environment that Marketing mix elements are being shaped. We show in this part briefly though, how the MI relates to

the Product, Price, Place and Promotion (4ps). Most of this wisdom is drawn from Brassington and Pettit (2000). Marketing mix consists of a set of controllable variables that a firm uses to influence the interest of the target market (Kotler et al. 1999). It includes the product, price, place and promotion, which are often abbreviated as 4ps.

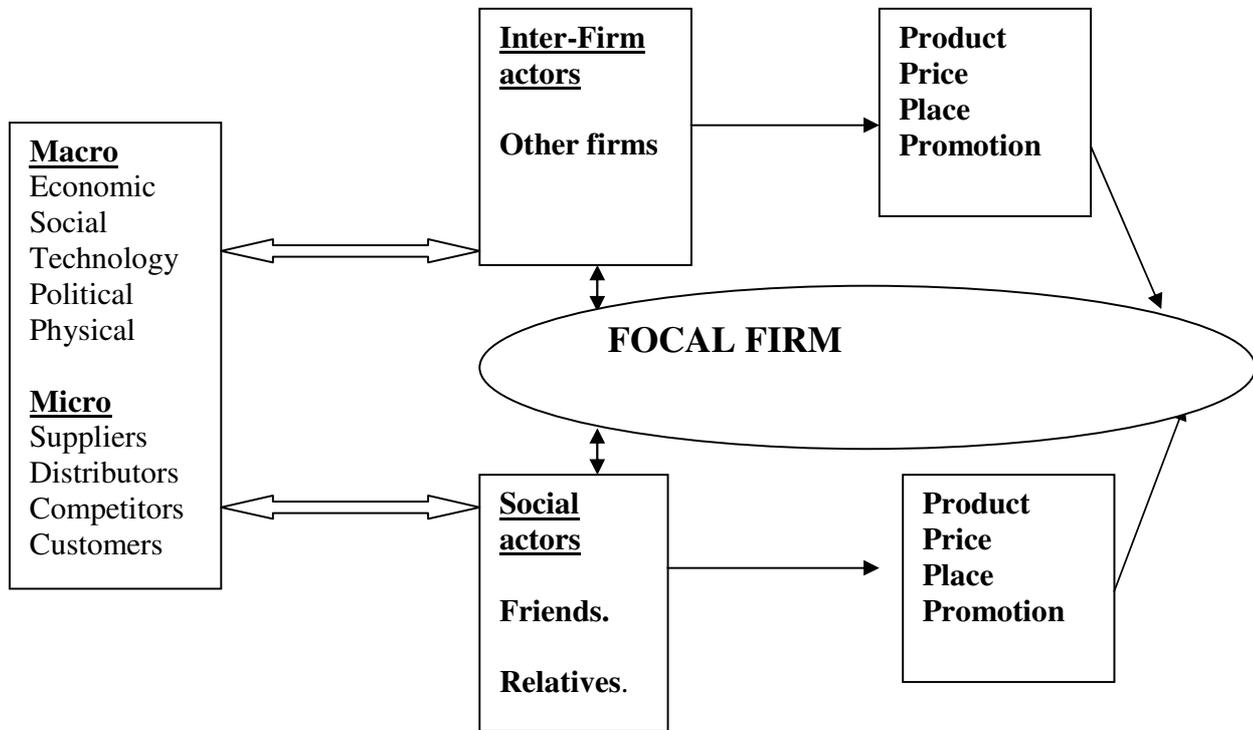
In terms of *product*, the environmental factors help define exactly what customers want, what (legal) it is possible to provide them with and how it should be packaged and presented. *Pricing* is influenced by external factors such as competitors, pricing policies, government taxation and what customers can afford. *Promotion* on the other hand, is affected through being constrained by regulation, but also inspiring the creativity that develops appropriate messages to capture the mood of the times and the target audience. The external environment also affects the strength of the relationship between manufacturers and distributors. Competitive pressure at all levels of the *distribution channel*, technology encouraging joint development and commitment in terms of both products and logistics, shifts in where and how people want to buy: all help to shape the quality and direction of inter-organisational relationship.

It is important to note that the Macro environmental forces shape the microenvironment variables and hence the later affect the marketing mix too. Thus the marketing mix is very dependent on the external environment but the problem is that the environment is very dynamic, changing all the time. The organization has therefore to keep pace with change and even anticipate it (Brassington and Pettit 2000). We argue that social and inter firm networks can be used as environmental 'ears and eyes' of entrepreneurial firms. As a result the MI desired by SSEs manufacturing firm could be acquired through those networks.

Network and Marketing Information access

Given the above background we wish to propose a study on the role that density, size and social ties of networks play in MI gathering. It is through these network characteristics that marketing information is accessed (Shuman et al: 2001,p. 206). It is worthwhile at this juncture to acknowledge the findings by Shaw (1999), who carried out a qualitative research on the impact of social networks in the development of small service firms. It was found that participants perceived information about competitors and customers to have impacted upon their development in two ways. Firstly, *information* provided to them from their *social network* had assisted in the their development by creating and expanding their *client base* without incurring tendering expenses. Secondly, *information* about competitors was perceived to have improved the *design proposal* developed by case firms and contributed towards their acquisition of *new and repeated business*. Advice on *pricing* strategy was also sought for friends/family owning and managing small firms. Such advice was perceived to have *helped* the firm. Although Shaw did not use the following model but we see her study contributing empirically into it.

Figure 2: Entrepreneurial Networks Model for the SMEs



Marketing environment ↔ Types of Networks → Amount of MI

Own Entrepreneurial model for the SMEs



-Networks



-Information flow



Interaction between networks and environment

The above model shows the inter firm and social networks having different potentials in terms of accessing informational requirements of the focal firm. The information is being acquired from the environment. Accordingly, access of marketing information through networks assist in cutting two major constraints: time and money (Holbek and Jenssen 1998). But we already pointed out that size, density and strength of ties of networks have different potentials to accessing such marketing information. The proposition is that such characteristics of networks will have different potentials depending on whether the relationship is inter-firm based or Social based. The nature of the network characteristics on the basis of a typology of inter- firm and social networks are thus related to the extent to which a focal firm enjoys MI access in its aggregate. Such information involves those leading to enabling the focal firm to meet customers' needs more competitively. Specifically, they include those related to desired product attributes, price, distribution and effective communication/promotion.

In the above model we are able to compare the role that each characteristic has on MI accessibility through our typology of inter-firm and Social Networks. The two types of network are then compared in terms of their potentials to effectively access MI. It is this information generated through networks that goes to the SMEs manufacturing sector.

TENTATIVE PROPOSITIONS

The basic argument is that MI gathering of the SMEs in Tanzania is partly explained by the structure and contents of networks. Moreover the inter-firm and social networks shape such characteristics. Business units may form networks, but relationship takes place between people. It is therefore inadequate to talk of inter-firm networks without talking about social networks. In the end it is people who determine how well networks perform. **We therefore propose that** the lower the density of Inter-firm networks the higher the amount of marketing information, and the lower the density of Social networks the higher the amount of marketing information. Density is reflected by the degree of connections among the actors. Our **second proposal** is that the higher the number of weak ties in the Inter firm network the more the amount of marketing information, and the higher the number of weak ties in the Social network the more the amount of marketing information. The strength of ties is reflected by the emotional closeness of actors in the social networks and the frequency of interaction among the inter firm contacts. Our **third proposal** is that the higher the size of Inter-firm networks the higher the amount of Marketing information, and the higher the size of Social Networks the higher the amount of marketing information. The size is measured by simply counting the number of contacts. Our **last proposal** is that there is a significant difference between Inter-firm and Social Networks in terms of marketing information accessibility. We propose that inter firm contacts yields more marketing information than social networks.

METHODOLOGY

The population under study will be a set of SSEs manufacturing firms in the only two cities of Tanzania employing between 6-49 people. This is due to resources constraints and a need to control for geographical disparities among the regions in Tanzania. Precisely, firms under study are Food processing, leather and footwear, wood and metal work because these are the most popular firms by SSEs in Tanzania. The definition of small firm is constructed from the ministry of Industries and Trade and the Small industries organisation of Tanzania (SIDO). The sampling unit is a two-stage process (Barrington and Pettit: 2000). The individual firm will be selected and in this case 200 firms will be involved. Then owner or owner managers within the selected firms will be selected for interview. Selected firms must have been in operation for at least five years to capture the time effect of networking. This is in line with studies done by several scholars like Gilmore et al (2001) and others. A self administered structured questionnaire will be used. The SPSS software will be used to analyse the quantitative data to determine the relationships and correlation between the contents and structure variables with marketing information amount.

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