

The influence of ICTs in SMEs: How ICT affordances affect the intended stakeholder engagement

An exploratory multiple case study



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Abstract

The goal of this study is to give insight in how the current digital transformation influences the intended stakeholder engagement in SMEs, by researching the effect of ICTs on the relationship between SMEs and stakeholder engagement. This has been realized by conducting an abductive, exploratory research. The nature of this study is qualitative and 7 individuals of different organizations have been interviewed. In this study CSR is seen as a part of stakeholder engagement and thus organizations who are actively concerned with CSR have been selected for the interviews. As practicing CSR has become very important for organizations to stay legitimate and so consequently for their viability, studying the influence of ICTs is important. This is important as ICTs have opened up new possibilities for SMEs to be more engaged with their stakeholders. Moreover, in this multiple case study SMEs are central, because within the literature there is a focus in MNEs, while SMEs cover most of the business and must be considered relevant as well. New affordances have been identified and in particular the affordances communication and communication, accessibility and automatization can influence the intended stakeholder engagement of SMEs. When these affordances are utilized properly, this can enhance stakeholder engagement, which results in enhanced legitimacy within an organizational field.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is nowadays more important than ever. In the corporate area it is considered a longstanding practice and more and more organizations are including a strong CSR focus into their businesses (Lacy & Kennett-Hensel, 2010). This is partly due to the motivation and actions of socially responsible customers (Golob, Podnar, Koklič & Zabkar, 2019). The awareness of the ethical implications of the behavior of organizations are increasing among consumers and they expect that organizations meet certain quality standards (Lamberti & Lettieri, 2009). Governmental organizations are also paying more attention to business ethics and CSR over the years. CSR initiatives, such as the United Nation Global Compact, which encourages organizations to act sustainable and behave responsible, have engaged many organizations (Lacy & Kennett-Hensel, 2010). Over the years, organizations worldwide have redesigned their corporate policies to anticipate on these changes and thus improve their competitive positioning (Miles, Munilla, Darroch, 2006). However, the idea of organizations acting in a socially responsible way is for some paradoxical, as the maximizing of profits and shareholder value is the *raison d'être* for organizations (Campbell, 2006). This view is also supported by other important acknowledged authors, such as Friedman (1970). Friedman argued that the only social responsibility of doing business, is the maximization of profit. Thus, it can be said that there is a contradiction between who the central parties are for organizations: the stakeholders or the shareholders.

Some studies indicate that it is also beneficial for organizations to incorporate a CSR policy, as firms are rewarded by consumers for CSR practices (Marin, Ruiz & Rubio, 2009). CSR practices are known to increase customer loyalty by mediators such as trust, identification and satisfaction (Martínez & Del Bosque, 2013).

Lee (2008) has described the conceptual evolution of CSR over the decades and concludes that "CSR needs a broader perspective that examines not just corporations' social responsibility, but also society's responsibility in keeping corporations accountable" (p.69-70).

Even though the it might be beneficial for organizations to incorporate CSR policies, because it is rewarding, this adaptation can also be explained differently. To explain the phenomenon of organizations including CSR practices more and more into their business, one can consult institutional theory. This theory explains that the environment of the organization can exert power on the organization. This can be seen as a way of the society to keep organizations accountable for their actions. In this theory organizations might act responsible, because of institutional conditions. When take into account the organizational field, these institutional conditions differ per field. O'Connell, Stephens, Betz, Shepard & Hendry (2005)

describe the organizational field as “the various stakeholders who either impact or are impacted by corporate activities and outcomes” (p.94). These stakeholders can vary from environmentalists to government officials and to competitors. Organizations seek to be legitimate to the stakeholders within this organizational field. If an organization is perceived as illegitimate in an organizational field, it threatens the organizations ability to thrive and consequently its viability. Organizations that secure their legitimacy are more likely to succeed (O’Connell et al., 2018). From this perspective, it can be said that organizations are anticipating to changes in their organizational field, such as the increased awareness of CSR, in order to stay legitimate. This is true according to Scherer, Palazzo and Seidl (2013) as they mention that businesses are, even though they were reluctant at first, engaging in sustainable development in order to stay legitimate.

But who are these stakeholders that O’Connell et al., (2018) are talking about and how can they be identified? A possible way to define stakeholders is as ‘any group who can affect or is affected by the achievements of the organization’s objectives (Mitchell, Agle & Woods 1997 p.869). Furthermore, they identify salient stakeholders, those who possess the attributes power, legitimacy and urgency, and thus are more important for the survival of the organization.

However, this tells us something about how stakeholders potentially are identified, not how organizations communicate with these stakeholders. More specifically, nothing about how organizations communicate with stakeholders in order to stay legitimate in the eyes of the organizational field. Scherer, Palazzo and Seidl (2013) suggest that an organization can consult three different types of legitimacy strategies to “(re)establish the congruence between their organizational practices and social expectations” (p.11). These strategies can be either moral, cognitive or pragmatic. Yet, in order to know if improvements are made with the used strategies, a measurable concept of CSR is needed. As legitimacy is an importance aspect of stakeholder engagement, and CSR is an important aspect of legitimacy, stakeholder engagement and CSR are intertwined. Devin and Lane (2014) point this also out by arguing that “engagement is at the crux of CSR” (p.450).

Interaction with stakeholders means the need of communication. Miles, Munilla and Darroch (2006) have already proposed the use of strategic conversations in CSR strategy formulation. Strategic conversations include direct, open ended and bi-directional dialogues between management and other relevant stakeholders, to enrich the communication process. However, the way organizations can communicate with stakeholders has changed drastically the past decade. The benefits of the rapid evolution of information and communication technologies (ICT) have already been mentioned by Hasnaoui and Freeman (2010), such as

communication and interaction within communities and organizational learning. However, ‘rarely is the field of ICT examined as a means and a modality to implement CSR’ (p.39). Thus, it is important to include ICTs in the research of CSR, because ICTs are indispensable in present life, as well as in business (Freeman & Hasnaoui, 2010).

This raises the question how ICT nowadays facilitates communication with stakeholders, whom in the end determine organizational legitimacy and thus are important for the viability of organizations. Although this question is of big importance for organizations to provide some insights in how the current technology can positively affect the open discourse with their stakeholders, some specification regarding what kind of organizations is necessary. In this thesis the focus will be on SMEs, as CSR is predominantly researched within MNEs (Lepoutre & Heene, 2006). Smaller sized organizations have more difficulties with publicly report their CSR practices, as this is too expensive. Moreover, they put more focus on their CSR communication to strengthen relationships (Baumann-Pauly, Wickert, Spence & Scherer, 2013). Furthermore, ICTs have enabled the development of transparency and openness (Bertot, Jager & Grimes, 2010) and gives more possibilities for organizations to interact with society, as ICTs created new opportunities to communicate (Conole & Dyke, 2004). Moreover, Conole and Dyke (2004) have developed a taxonomy of affordances to understand the application of different technologies better. Because of these developments within ICTs, it is interesting to research what effect ICTs have on the relationship of SMEs with their stakeholders. More precisely the effect of ICT affordances in SMEs, on stakeholder engagement. This results in the following research question: ‘*How do the current information and communication technologies influence the intended stakeholder engagement of Small and Medium Enterprises?*’. The objective is to give insight in how the current digital transformation influences the intended stakeholder engagement by conducting an abductive exploratory study in SMEs to research the effect of ICTs on the relationship between SMEs and stakeholder engagement.

This question will be answered by conducting semi-structured interviews in different SMEs in different sectors, to give a broad overview of the influence of ICTs on stakeholder engagement in SMEs. The range of the number of employees also differ, however all of them fall within the criteria of SMEs. This study is a starting point for further research.

This is a qualitative study and will have an abductive, explorative nature. It will contribute to the current literature by exploring how ICTs influence the intended stakeholder engagement of SMEs. The nature is abductive, as current theoretical concepts will be measured, but when new insights are discovered, these findings can be used for the development of new theory.

Organizational members with sufficient knowledge about ICTs and stakeholder engagement will be interviewed in several organizations, to get a broad overview.

The theoretical relevance of this research is that it will provide new insights regarding how the different ICT affordances of Conole and Dyke (2004) influence the intended stakeholder engagement of SMEs. This will result contributing to the theory by generating insights about which affordances can particularly be useful in achieving stakeholder engagement. This consequently results in a practical relevance, as stakeholder engagement is a part of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) and thus important for the viability of the organization. When the influence of the different affordances are identified, ICTs can be used more effectively to increase stakeholder engagement, and eventually increased legitimacy. Moreover, it will offer solutions for better stakeholder engagement, when ICTS are not fully utilized. Being able to efficiently use ICTs will reduce costs of the organization.

As stakeholder engagement is seen as a part of CSR in research (Bowen, Newenham-Kahindi & Herremans, 2010; Devin & Lane, 2014; Baumann-Pauly & Scherer, 2013), the societal relevance is high. When organizations are able to use ICTs more effectively, this will result in an increased stakeholder engagement. The higher the stakeholder engagement, the more responsible the organization is (Sloan, 2006). Society will thus benefit from a higher stakeholder engagement, as the organizations will practice more CSR activities.

This research starts with elaborating the relevant concepts stakeholder engagement, information and communication technologies (ICTs) and SMEs in chapter 2. The methodological choices regarding this research will be explained and further elaborated in chapter 3. More information about the case and interview partners will be presented here as well. Chapter 4 presents the results that emerged from the interviews, while in chapter 5 these findings will be discussed. After this, the conclusion and recommendations will be presented in chapter 6.

Chapter 2 Theoretical framework

In this chapter the relevant concepts of this study will be discussed. As first stakeholder engagement will be elaborated, then information and communication technologies and as last the choice for focusing on SMEs will be discussed. Different definitions and perspectives will be elaborated, and the chosen definition will be explained.

2.1 Stakeholder engagement

First, some specification should be made about who is seen as a stakeholder. If a group or individuals can affect or is affected by the organizations purpose, it is perceived as a stakeholder (Freeman, 2004; Mitchell et al., 1997). Stakeholder engagement is nowadays becoming a strategy for both profit and non-profit organizations (Bowen et al., 2010). In very general terms it can be defined as: “the process of involving individuals and groups that either affect or are affected by the activities of the company” (Sloan, 2009, p.26). Ethical and social responsibilities of organizations are an increasing concern and organizations are trying to provide better communication about their activities to gain engagement (Burchell & Cook, 2006). Moreover, stakeholder engagement can be used to “gain legitimacy, manage social risk and even co-develop innovative solutions to social problems with community members through a well-designed community engagement strategy” (Bowen, et al., 2010, p.1). These benefits are varied, just as the concept of stakeholder engagement. The concept of stakeholder engagement is widely known, but a shared understanding of the meaning of the concepts or characteristics is lacking (Sloan, 2006). First of all, there can be made a distinction between scholars who view stakeholder engagement from a moral or strategic perspective. When we talk about moral stakeholder engagement, power differences and strategic motivation do not hinder the communication with the stakeholders and awareness is raised about how biases can harm judgement (Noland & Philips, 2010). On the other hand, they talk about strategic stakeholder engagement, in which stakeholder engagement is included in the part of an organizations’ strategy, by seeing stakeholders as individuals, to reconceive the purpose of business.

Legitimacy is an important part of stakeholder engagement and is defined as: “a generalized perception or assumption that organizational activities are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms” (Suchman, 1995, p.577). This is relevant for stakeholder engagement, as it assesses whether the organizations behavior is matching criteria relative to a particular social group. There can be made a distinction between pragmatic, cognitive and moral legitimacy. Pragmatic legitimacy bases social acceptance on

perceived benefits, while cognitive legitimacy bases this on unconsciousness taken-for-grantedness, and moral legitimacy on whether the activity is the right thing to do (Suchman, 1995).

Organizations are also using the concept of legitimacy as a tool to ensure stakeholder engagement. Moreover, they are trying to show off how they are contributing to society, proving how corporate socially responsible they are, to gain stakeholder engagement (Devin & Lane, 2014). Noland and Philips (2010) conclude in the end that the Ethical Strategists' (strategic stakeholder engagement) position is more attractive, and thus seeing stakeholder engagement from a pragmatic legitimacy perspective, due to the confluence of conceptual and practical concerns. However, Palazzo and Scherer (2006) argue that there must be a shift towards moral legitimacy within corporate legitimacy, as this will become the source of societal acceptance. Baumann-Pauly and Scherer (2013) build further upon the idea that there must be a shift towards moral legitimacy and developed a framework in which corporate citizenship (CC), which is less operationally vague than CSR, can be assessed. This framework consists out of three dimensions: commitment measures, structural and procedural measures and interactive measures. In the framework the shift towards moral legitimacy is addressed in the interactive dimension. They argue that if organizations want to manage corporate legitimacy, interactive elements must be integrated in their implementation strategy of CC. This is done in the dimension via stakeholder feedback and by supporting collaborative initiatives to CC. Thus, this means that engagement is a part of CSR.

This claim is supported by Devin and Lane (2014) as they argue that "engagement is at the crux of CSR" (p.450). They have built upon some older literature of Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997) in which they developed a theoretical model to stretch the importance of organization-public relationships. More specific, Devin and Lane (2014) are using the theoretical framework of antecedents, implementation and consequences as a tool to study the connection between engagement and CSR. For the implementation of engagement, they identified four subthemes: identifying stakeholders, how engagement occurs, stakeholder expectations and legitimation processes. These subthemes are derived from reports of nine different organizations in different industries. However, only three of the nine organizations have specifically addressed how they have engaged with the stakeholders that they identified.

A more measurable way to assess and gain stakeholder engagement are community engagement strategies (Bowen et al., 2010). They have built upon the 'continuum of community engagement' and distinguished three different type of engagement strategies: transactional, transitional and transformational engagement. Engaging in the strategies will result in

increasing long-term legitimacy for the organizations. According to them a community engagement strategy is “the subset of a firm’s corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities that are directed towards individual citizens and community groups” (p. 1), and thus CSR and stakeholder engagement are interrelated. With transactional engagement the involvement is the lowest, while transformational engagement is the highest form of involvement and here integration of the community is happening. With transactional engagement there is one-way communication from firm to community, with transitional engagement this is two-way, but not balanced and with transformational the two-way communication is balanced. The distinction of the different strategies can be seen in the corporate stance, illustrative tactics, communication, number of community partners, frequency of interaction, nature of trust, learning, control over process and benefits of outcomes and can be found in table 1 (Bowen et al., 2010). Thus, the actions taken by an organization can eventually be categorized into one of three strategies, depending on how they fulfilled the indicators mentioned. In the following table the distinction between the three different engagement strategies are further elaborated, having examples how the elements of the strategies are specified (Bowen et al., 2010, p. 305). When organizations are aiming for more affluent relationships with the community, shared accountability and shared ownership to problems and solutions, the transformational engagement strategy should be followed.

	Transactional engagement	Transitional engagement	Transformational engagement
Corporate stance	Community investment/ information “Giving back”	Community involvement “Building bridges”	Community integration “Changing society”
Illustrative tactics	Charitable donations Building local infrastructure Employee volunteering Information sessions	Stakeholder dialogues Public consultations Town hall meetings Cause-related marketing	Joint project management Joint decision-making Co-ownership
Communication	One-way: firm-to- community	Two-way: more firm- to-community than community-to-firm	Two-way: Community- to-firm as much as firm- to-community
Number of community partners	Many	Many	Few
Frequency of interaction	Occasional	Repeated	Frequent
Nature of trust	Limited	Evolutionary	Relational
Learning	Transferred from firm	Most transferred from firm, some transferred to firm	Jointly generated
Control over process	Firm	Firm	Shared
Benefits and outcomes	Distinct	Distinct	Joint
Illustrative studies	Brammer and Millington (2005) Gabriel (2006) Stern (2001)	Foo (2007) Maranville (1989) O’Regan and Oster (2000)	Parker and Selsky (2004) Tracey et al. (2005) Westley and Vredenburg (1991)

Table 1 The three community engagement strategies (Source: Bowen et al., 2010, p. 305)

Within the literature there is an underlying assumption that the higher the stakeholder engagement is, the more responsible organizations are (Sloan, 2006). From this, and all of the previous discussed literature, it can be concluded that moral legitimacy (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Baumann-Pauly & Scherer, 2013), corporate social responsibility and stakeholder engagement cannot be seen separate from one another. However, within the literature, the definitions of stakeholder engagement and ways to measure it, are distinct. Noland and Phillips (2010) mention the different perspectives of how to perceive stakeholders, but are unable to give appropriate criteria of how to measure the level of stakeholder engagement. Bowen et al. (2010) have described 3 different forms of engagement, in which the higher the level the engagement, the long-termed legitimacy. The interactive dimension of CC is developed specifically by Baumann-Pauly and Scherer (2013) describe the relationship with external stakeholders, yet is not able to give a precise description of how to measure the degree of stakeholder engagement. The framework of Devin and Lane (2014) is also developed to clarify implementation of engagement, but here only a third of the companies were able to describe how they did this. A representative framework is necessary to conduct this study and for this reason the framework of Bowen et al., (2010) is used as starting points for measuring stakeholder engagement. The different aspects on which the strategies can differ will be used to see which kind of engagement strategies are in play in the different organizations under investigation. However, the abductive part of this study allows for an open mind towards other possibilities of identifying stakeholder engagement.

2.2 Information and communication technologies (ICTs)

As interaction with stakeholders is necessary to gain stakeholder engagement, communication is central to this process. The importance of communication has already been established decades ago by Walton (1969) and mentions communication as “the most significant factor accounting for the total behavior of the organization” (p.109). Walton believed that by understanding the organizations systems of communication, the dynamics of the organizations could be understood. Devin and Lane (2014) also stretch the importance of communication in the implementation of engagement, as this indicates a lack of transparency and may result in stakeholders questioning the organizations legitimacy. However, a distinction is made between one-way and two-way communication (Bowen et al., 2010), yet there is no clarity of how information and communication technologies (ICTs) influences and can support communication. Mishra and Mishra (2013) already suggested to research further how ICTs can contribute to stakeholder management.

When consulting UNESCO (2009, p.120) , the definition of ICTs is “Diverse set of technological tools and resources used to transmit, store, create, share or exchange information”. These tools and resources include for example the internet, telephony and broadcasting technologies. These technological tools and resources have the potential to stimulate communication and collaboration, which consequently means potential for learning through engagement with others. Moreover, discursive interaction is due to ICTs more affordable (Schembera & Hengevoss, 2019).

Within the literature there are a lot of negative effects mentioned, that can arise from the increased dependence and use of ICTs. These negative effects include the displacement of jobs, the creation of social isolation and the draw of more energy (Bansal, 2019), as well as using ICTs to post hateful material, in order to influence opinions (Gröndahl, Pajola, Juuti, Conti & Asokan, 2018). Also, the overload of information that is provides results in confusion and might mislead people (Conole, 2002). On the other hand, ICTs have some real benefits for society, as it helps with creating more transparency and less corruption (Bertot, Jaeger, Grimes, 2010). It also provides more possibilities for more cost-efficient ways of communication and collaboration (Schembera & Hengevoss, 2019).

For this study, the focus on the effects of ICTs on interaction and communication are of most important, as this is a part of stakeholder engagement. ICTs are important as it gives organizations the potential to reshape their interaction with other organizations, as well as with the individuals in their network (Freeman & Hasnaoui, 2010). To better understand the application of different technologies, the taxonomy of ICT affordances of Conole and Dyke, (2004) can be used. Affordances are defined by Salomon as “the perceived and actual properties of a thing, primarily those functional properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used” (p.51). In total, Conole and Dyke (2004) have listed 10 affordances. All these affordances are considered to have both a positive and a negative side. Not all of these affordances will equally be relevant in the context of this study, and for this purpose the 5 affordances accessibility, speed of change, diversity, communication and collaboration and reflection, have been chosen. These have been chosen, because organizations are able to exert some influence over these affordances. For example, organizations can influence the affordance ‘reflection’ by responding to stakeholders’ critical questions.

Accessibility

This affordance entails that because of ICTs, there is a relatively easy access to vast amounts of information. This access does not only entail the use of internet, but also through knowledge

networks and shared communities of users. As having access to more information is a benefit, it also comes with some serious challenges, such as information overload, the possibility of poor information quality and consequently the need for more control over this information. A more critical view on all the accessible information is necessary, so that users have the ability to select the information that is of quality.

Speed of change

Information is changing rapidly, the reassessment of experiences are continuously. This continuous reassessment of information is possible due to the ICTs, which allow for the spread of information rapidly throughout the world. As information is guiding in decision making, this raises some concerns. The quality, lack of authority and lack of reflection result in more shallow thinking, as ICTs create a world in which conflicting and changing information is present. This results in less informed decisions.

Diversity

As ICTs are relatively accessible, information about other users' experiences can be obtained easily throughout the whole world. This information can be from experts, but ICTs can also be used to share own experiences, as well as learning more about the perspectives of others. However, not all experiences might be accurate and could be used to mislead, if someone is not reporting the truth regarding a situation.

Communication and Collaboration

The continuous development and increased use of ICTs enable new ways to be more engaged with one another through new forms of dialogue and communication. Communication can also take place online, which entails that there are new means of information sharing and communication. Through communicative discourses, there is engagement with differences and acknowledgement of diversity. Concerning issues regarding this are that if individuals are spread out across communities, this could result in lack of identity and peripheral engagement. Furthermore, not all users have the appropriate communication and literacy skills to effectively use the ICTs.

Reflection

As users of ICTs do not have to respond simultaneously, which gives the user the opportunity for reflection and critical examination of the information gathered, before responding. The

information is also subjected to greater populations. This enhanced potential for reflection and criticism results in “new opportunities for knowledge claims to be considered” (Conole, & Dyke, 2004, p.118). However, as mentioned before, the speed of change of information is so rapidly, there is no time for deliberate judgement of all the changing information. The result of this are more pragmatic and reflective immediate responses.

2.3 Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs), ICTs and stakeholder engagement

Characteristics that can separate SMEs from larger organizations include financial turnover, assets, market share, numbers employed and ownership (Curran & Blackburn, 2001).

Even though CSR is becoming more important and is indispensable in managerial practices (de Bakker, Groenewegen & den Hond, 2005), the main research of CSR is employed in larger organizations (Lepoutre & Heene, 2006). Arguments for this are that SMEs do not have enough resources to implement CSR properly and are not able to access as much information as large organizations. Some argue that for these reasons researching CSR in SME is less important (Tilley, 2000). However, SMEs “constitute 99% of all businesses in the EU and are responsible for 66% of total employment and half of the total value added in the EU” (Lepoutre & Heene, 2006, p. 257). One can conclude from this that even though SMEs are smaller in size, they have a serious impact on society, as there are many of them.

The role of ICTs are especially important in SMEs, as ICTs are playing a huge role in the development of SMEs. When correctly exploited, ICTs can contribute to the growth of organizations (Matthews, 2007). ICTs invalidate arguments such as that SMEs do not have access to as much information, as ICTs provide easy accessibility to information (Conole & Dyke, 2004). Furthermore, ICTs enlarge possible ways to communicate with stakeholders, and communication with stakeholders is important for SMEs, as more public statements about their policies are too costly (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013). More benefits of ICTs include that businesses can anticipate upon the needs and preferences of stakeholders and this will consequently contribute to a sense of ownership and commitment (Juciute, 2007). Thus, ICTs facilitate communication with stakeholders which necessary for stakeholder engagement, which is seen as a subset of CSR.

As research has ‘overlooked’ the importance of CSR in SMEs, the focus in this research will be on them. Furthermore, it has been established that SMEs do have an impact on society and for this reason CSR practices are as important in these organizations, as in large ones. Communication is for great importance in SMEs, and the development of ICTs provide more and easier possibilities for SMEs to interact with their stakeholders.

Chapter 3 Methodology

In previous chapters the theoretical concepts of this study have been elaborated as well as the necessity for this study. In this chapter the choices regarding the methodology will be explained and substantiated. The case will be discussed more in depth, and relevant information about the interviewees will be disclosed. Furthermore, quality issues and research ethics will be discussed as well.

3.1 Research strategy

The research will be conducted in an abductive way, as this “enables the researcher’s engagement in a back and forth movement between theory and data in a bid to develop new or modify existing theory” (Awuzie & McDermott, 2017, p. 357). In this study this entails that already used conceptualizations are going to be used, however there is still possibility to create new knowledge inductively.

Furthermore, in this study the epistemology is considered to be relativism. This is a subjectivist approach that entails that things exist, because we talk about it (Symon & Cassel, 2012). Moreover, this means that “there is no objective truth to be known” (Sayward, 1987, p.278). Abductive research is also in line with the epistemology relativism, as it gives possibility for inductive reasoning and within relativism the constructed realities of individuals are of importance to create knowledge (Sayward, 1987). This fits with the qualitative research method that is used to investigate this multiple case study. The qualitative method gives the opportunity to investigate a phenomenon in depth (Vennix, 2011). Multiple organizations have been chosen, in order to collect more varied data. A face-to-face interview enables a ‘special insight’, as it gives the involved actors the possibility to explain their perspectives on the subject (Alkinson & Silverman, 1997). The phenomenon in question are SMEs, in which the intended stakeholder engagement is going to be studied, as well as the use of ICTs. Stakeholder engagement is an abstract concept which better can be studied with qualitative research, as feelings are thoughts are better studied via this approach (Baarden, 2009).

3.2 Case description

In this study 7 interviews have been conducted to study the role of ICTs on stakeholder engagement. The objects under investigation in this study will be different SMEs. As not all SMEs have a specific CSR program, or a CSR program at all, a requirement to participate in this study for the SMEs was that they needed to have a CSR policy. This results in having a sample in which every organization is able to talk about CSR. Additional information about

CSR can also be found on the websites of the organizations or their annual report. Furthermore, the organizations were informed that a variable of the study would be ICTs. This resulted in having interviewees with sufficient knowledge about CSR and ICTs, as the organization referred to them as point of contact. As this is an exploratory study, the industry of the organizations has been considered irrelevant. Interviewing SMEs with a CSR policy and use of ICTs has already specified the context of this research. Characteristics, such as gender and age, have not affect the choice of interviewee. As some of the SMEs differ in industry, the answers of the interview questions might differ. If the answers differ (or do not differ at all), underlying factors will be attempted to identified.

As mentioned before, the interviewees have specifically been chosen upon the knowledge they have about the relevant topics. This results in having interviewees from all different organizational levels. In appendix 1 an overview is given of all the interviewees, their function, sector and the total interview time. The Industry Classification Benchmark (ICB) by the FTSE Group (FTSE Russel, 2017) is used to indicate the industry. After that sectors have been identified. Now the organizations will be discussed in more detail, in order to shed some understanding upon the role of the interviewee in the organization.

Interviewee A

The interviewee is founder and CEO. She wants to bring innovative beverages to the global market. The organization is in its first year, but already emphasizes how important they think CSR is. This is done through several ways. First of all, everything is packed in social workplaces. Secondly, part of the revenue goes to charity. In this way the CEO tries to give society something extra.

Interviewee B

The second interviewee is the owner of a restaurant. The restaurant was nominated for the CSR-awards in 2019 for the municipalities Berg en Dal, Beuningen, Heumen, Mook en Middelaar, Nijmegen of Wijchen. They were nominated because they have a lot of attention for employee wellbeing and are have several initiatives regarding CSR. The interviewee is owner of the restaurant and is actively involved with all kind of initiatives on the area of CSR.

Interviewee C

Interviewee C is a member of the management team of the business she works at. She started in 3 years ago working for the business, which has now shops throughout the Netherlands. CSR

is important and the organization has several collaborations with involved parties on the area of sustainable employability and social employer ship. They try to engage everyone from society and offer jobs without a job interview. Furthermore, they are actively working in engaging stakeholders through several online platforms.

Interviewee D

Interviewee D is the CEO of a logistics company and as CEO he is the face of the organization. The organization is founded in 2000, is a facility business and counts 83 employees. The primary activities of the organization include delivering logistics services and assembly solutions for other companies. CSR is considered to be very important. CSR is tried to implement it throughout the whole organization. He thinks that you can get the same results, get better, when you take into account the society.

Interviewee E

Interviewee E is a business manager for a congress and meeting centrum. His main focus is on finding organizations who want to organize meetings in their facility. He is actively trying to bring in new business which matches with the core values of the organization. Acting socially responsible is at the core of the organization

Interviewee F

Interviewee is the director of a family hotel, which has been occupied with CSR for a very long time. The hotel has their own vineyard, beehive, cattle and spring water. The hotel is always looking for ways to be more sustainable and are actively involved with their employees.

Interviewee G

The last interviewee is an E-commerce manager. The organization offers a range of custom plastic plates. One of their core values is that people matter, and thus engage in sustainable relationships. Another core value is that they keep the communication with their stakeholders as simple as possible, on order to not complicate things. As e-commerce manager this interviewee has charge over tasks, such as social media and the optimization of websites.

3.3 Data collection

The data sources in this study are respondents from various organizations. These interviewees were beforehand well informed about the topic of this study, to ensure that they would have

sufficient knowledge to answer the interview questions. The method that is used are semi-structured interviews, as this gives the possibility to delve deeper into some aspects and if there are any ambiguities, there is scope for clarification (Vennix, 2011). Furthermore, interviewees can better express their feelings and opinions in semi-structured interviews, than other interview approaches (Flick, 2009). These interviews have been conducted through online communication and had an average length of 40 minutes. When agreed upon by the interviewee, skype is used as this facilitates a further connection (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). If this was not possible, an interview was conducted through telephone. Even though that some see this as a less favorable way of conducting interviews, it brings benefits such as reduced distraction and perceived anonymity (Drabble, Trocki, Salcedo, Walker & Korcha, 2016).

Every interviewee received a short introduction of the researcher about the topic. The first questions of the interview were regarding the introduction of the interviewee. After that some questions regarding the concepts have been asked, to develop common understanding. When it was clear what the interviewee understood by those different concepts, the questions regarding the aim of this research begun. The interview protocol can be found in appendix 2.

The interviews were recorded and have been transcribed afterwards. The interviewees have been conducted in Dutch, but when passages that have been used to support the findings, have been translated to English. The interviewees are being referred to in the following way: Interviewee 1 is Interviewee A (IA) which is consistent with the index of appendix 1. The references of the organizations are consistent with the references of the interviewees. This means that interviewee A is an employee of organization A. The full transcripts can be found in appendix 6.

In addition to interviews, content analysis has been used to verify the the data. This is a non-reactive way of analyzing, as the data collected is already out there, but this data still has to be interpreted. Content analysis can be used as an objective tool for analyzing meanings that are reported (Symon & Cassel, 2012). Here are social media accounts and CSR reports consulted to verify compliance of collected data

3.4 Operationalization

In chapter 2 the core concepts of this study have been elaborated. Both of the concepts have a theoretical concrete definition and specific tools have been chosen to measure the concepts. In order to provide a clear overview, the definitions and tools have been composed in table 2. The operationalization of these concepts can be found in appendix 3.

The dimensions of stakeholder engagement have been retrieved from table 1 in chapter 2, where these dimensions are mentioned as indicators for one of the three community engagement strategies. Moreover, this results in the indicators not being that different from the dimensions. The choice has been made to not directly ask questions about these indicators, but to categorize afterwards, based on the data collected. An item that is derived from this concept is: ‘Who would you regard as stakeholders?’ and will result follow up questions such as: ‘Why did you mention these specific stakeholders?’, ‘What do you want with these stakeholders when it comes to CSR?’ and ‘What is the interest of that stakeholder for you?’. In the end this will result in being able to identify which strategy is being pursued in the analysis of the data.

For ICTs, the dimensions are the selected affordances accessibility, speed of change, diversity, communication and collaboration and reflection. About these affordances some direct questions will be asked, such as : ‘To what extent is the organization trying to influence the reflection process of stakeholders?’ and ‘How is the organization trying to influence the diversity of information online?’. Follow up questions will include questions such as: ‘What are you are trying to accomplish with doing this?’ and ‘How does that work exactly?’. This results in being able to identify the mechanism between the effort that is done and the results that come forth out of this.

Concept	Definition
Stakeholder engagement	‘the process of involving individuals and groups that either affect or are affected by the activities of the company’ (Sloan, 2009, p.26) and can be measured by three different community engagement strategies, which categorize engagement as transactional, transitional or transformational engagement (Bowen et al., 2010).
Information and communication technologies (ICTs)	‘‘Diverse set of technological tools and resources used to transmit, store, create, share or exchange information’’ (UNESCO, 2009, p.120) and to understand the application of different technologies, the taxonomy of ICT affordances of Conole and Dyke, (2004) can be used. Affordances are defined by Salomon as ‘‘the perceived and actual properties of a thing, primarily those functional properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used’’ (p.51). The affordances accessibility, speed of change, diversity, communication and collaboration and reflection have been chosen.

Table 2 Definition core concepts (Source: Author’s own collected data)

3.5 Data analysis

Within this study an abductive research method is used to examine the data. This is a mix between inductive and deductive research. This method entails that existing theoretical frameworks are used in the beginning of the data analysis as guidelines, but depending on the

results, these frameworks can be altered. Using abduction for data analysis thus might result in the reconstruction of a conceptual theory and it helps with both the explanation and the understanding of the results (Fischer, 2001).

The used method to analyze the data is the Gioia methodology. This method fits within the relativism epistemology that is considered relevant in this study, as it has a basic assumption that the world is socially constructed (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013). Moreover, it supports analyzing the data in a systematic inductive way and within this study inductive reasoning is a part of the analysis. “Ultimately, informed theory building and theory testing are both necessary if organizational study in to fulfill its potential for generating work that has originality, utility, and prescience” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 16). A distinction is made between constructs and concepts. Constructs are measurable or operationalizable and derived deductively from theory. Concepts, however, are less specified and mostly discovered during inductively analyzing the data. The focus of the Gioia method (2013) are the perceptions, expectations and the interpretations of the interviewees. To capture these perceptions, expectations and interpretations, a multi-stage analyze procedure is executed. First, 1st order analysis, in which informant-centric terms and codes are used is presented. Then secondly, 2nd order analysis is conducted in which researcher-centric concepts, themes and dimensions are developed (Gioia et al., 2013). This results in 1st order concepts in which words of the interviewees are reflected and 2nd order concepts in which the researcher labels these different 1st order concepts. Then, if appropriate, overarching dimensions are created in which different 2nd order themes are combined. As research method is abductive, there are two ways to generate the codes and aggregate dimensions. They can be derived deductively from existing literature, but they can also be generated inductively by new knowledge that has arisen in the data. In order to give an overview of the codes that have been identified, a code book has been generated. This codebook consists of 2nd order concepts derived from literature and codes developed inductively based on the data collected. A definition of every 2nd order code is given, as well as an example of a passage that illustrates this code. Every 2nd order code must be supported by substantial evidence of the existence of that code, which will be displayed in the codebook that can be found in appendix 4.

3.6 Quality criteria

The external validity of this study is low, as it is a qualitative research and serves as an exploratory study (Smaling, 2009). Moreover, transferability is not a goal of qualitative research, but it is to examine a phenomenon in depth.

When using the semi-structured method for conducting interviews, the internal validity is higher than with other forms of conducting interviews. This is due to the fact that it gives opportunity to go into depth with some answers, as well as the possibility to get opinions formulated better (Vennix, 2011). Prior to the interview it was stated that the interview will be processed anonymously. This has been emphasized, in order to assure that interviewees will share as much information as possible. This also guarantees the internal validity (Vennix, 2011).

In order to ensure trustworthiness, a member check is conducted after analyzing the results. Member checking is a “way of finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with the participants’ experiences” (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, p. 92). It is a process of verification of transcripts and the underlying interpretations in these transcripts (Carlson, 2010).

Conducting interviews via Skype results in less commitment from the interviewee than with face-to-face interviews, and thus it was easier for participants to drop out. It is also more likely that participants drop out last minute (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). To minimize the risk of drop outs, the participants have been involved in the progress of this research with updates, in order to maximize engagement as much as possible.

Confirmability has been tried to secure by providing a code book (Symon & Cassel, 2012). The code book provides an overview of where the data came from, with supporting passages from the interviews.

3.7 Research ethics

As already mentioned in the quality criteria, anonymity of the interviewees and the organization where they are employed has been secured by not revealing names in this research. Information about the different organizations are also as general as possible, but still provide a good picture of the core activities. When conducting interviews via Skype, it is also more easily to ensure anonymity (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). This has also been communicated to the different organizations, in order to inform them properly. Moreover, all the organizations have also been informed about the specific aim and methods of this study, which has resulted in informed consent about what specifically is being researched. All of the interviewees have volunteered to participate. The research ethics have also been guaranteed by asking the interviewees if they still wanted to participate in the research, as the current circumstances (the Corona virus) may have changed their priorities.

Another topic that concerns research ethics, is the way that the data is stored. All the collected data has only been available to the researcher self, the supervisor and the interviewees. This resulted in data not being leaked. The interviewees had access to the data, because a

member check has been used to check if the collected data was accurate. This choice has also been made, because the interviews were in Dutch, while this research is written in English. When translating it to English, the essence of what was said could have been changed, so an extra check was placed in order to secure the message of the interviewees.

4 Results

In this chapter the results of the 7 conducted interviews are being presented. The interviews have been coded accordingly to the Gioia Method (Gioia et al., 2013), which means that 1st and 2nd order codes have been assigned, as well as overarching dimensions. 2nd order codes have been assigned accordingly to the operationalization presented in chapter 3 and if appropriate, new codes have been generated, as this study has an abductive nature. The full codebook can be found in appendix 4 and the complete data structure of the affordances can be found in appendix 5. For stakeholder engagement, the operationalization has provided already a sufficient overview of how the concept is constructed. The concepts will be discussed separately and in the end the relation between the concepts will be presented. In the conclusion these results will be used to answer the research question that is central in this study.

4.1 Stakeholder engagement

This chapter will describe what kind of stakeholder engagement strategy the organizations under investigation are trying to pursue. This will be done by using the three different stakeholder engagement strategies from Bowen et al., (2010), which has been elaborated in chapter 2. The different organizations will be classified in one of these strategies, which are transactional, transitional or transformational engagement. As this is a multiple case study, the organizations will first be discussed separately, in order to eventually being able to point out differences and similarities.

Transactional engagement

Organization E

As a business manager, interviewee E is mostly concerned with bringing in new business. While doing this, he looks if there is similarity in the core values about sustainability and corporate responsibility. The organizations always try to make a connection with the nature in order ‘to provide more than just only a location’. While facilitating a meeting for organization, they add an information session to connect the theme with something concerning nature. Furthermore, they always try to raise awareness about a nature reserve they support in Belize. Interviewee E feels that having all of those meetings there, ‘already supports that organization being more sustainable’. Communication can be seen as one-way firm to community and knowledge is mainly transferred from the firms, as interview E says that: *“Our educational division is larger and more important than our sales division.”* (IE, p.119). Signs are placed throughout the location, to inform people about ‘how much water is being saved’ and ‘how waste is being

minimalized'. They also train employees internally. Benefits are distinct, as organization E focuses mainly on educating people to be more conscious as *"If you only have one who is going to think about it, then I think you are already doing well."* (IE, p.122). Organization E can be categorized as having a transactional engagement strategy as they are 'giving back' to society.

Organization G

Interviewee G works as an e-commerce manager and considers their customers, employees and partners as the most important stakeholders. Moreover, he states that : *"We simply go for a long-term sustainable cooperation, both with external partners and with our employees. We carefully select our partners and we carefully select our employees."* (IG, p.142). CSR is embedded in their business by making 'custom made packages for every plate'. Also, all of the products they have are already 100% recycled and all of the waste is being recycled as well. Transport is being optimized because of this which consequently is *"..cheaper, but also results in a smaller footprint for the society."* (IG, p.141). The CEO of the organization 'is really into sustainability', which resulted in building a sawmill that is self-sufficient through solar panels. Many communities are involved, as the target audience includes almost everyone, because they want to 'serve everyone'. Learning is transferred more from firm and some is transferred to the firm by helping their customers how to make something and by customers sharing their crafts via the organization. Moreover, their supplier is 'technically a competitor with who we collaborate' and organization G having control over the process 'is more efficient and effective for them as well'. Even though CSR is embedded in the business practice of organization G, there is transactional engagement. This can be concluded mainly due to data reflecting that they are mostly investing in the community

Transitional engagement

Organization A

Interviewee A mentions that the people from the social workplace, customers and suppliers are currently her most important stakeholders. The relationship between them is described as 'respectful, trustworthy and meaningful' and 'together you make a company'. They listen to her and she listen to them. Building a bond with them is something that she finds very important. Moreover, she feels that she and her stakeholders both get something out of the relationship. She explicitly chose to the packaging and sending of her product at a social workplace, where people with a mental disability work. This results in a joint benefit for her, as well as for the people who work there. Those people work there need daytime activities and are very happy

that she chose them over a commercial organization. Organizations should not only exist to make profits, but they should be used to do good as well. She mentions repeatedly that *‘‘With bigger companies you see a lot of times that the money of the charity eventually ends up in the pockets of the big bosses, or in large advertising budgets.’’* (IA, p.56). She tries to prevent this by hand picking herself the charities she donates a part of her profit to. The control over the relationship is currently with interviewee A, as she explains that when she has a lot to figure out, she has less contact with her stakeholders. Furthermore, the frequency of the interaction can be described as repeated as she mentions that *‘‘Sometimes when something is going on you have more contact with each other. It depends a lot.’’* (IA, p.59). Thus, the communication is two-way, but more firm-to-community. She is aware of the fact that she can’t force customers to act in a socially responsible manner, but she can do it herself. Moreover, she hopes that she is being picked by customers, because of her practicing CSR. The used packaging is environmentally conscious, and she tries to educate people by telling what to look at when buying the product. Even though organization A has some of the characteristics of transformational engagement and has genuine intentions to do good, the engagement is being classified as transitional.

Organization C

For organization C, there is a central focus on employees. The organization uses open hiring to give people an opportunity they normally wouldn’t have. The organization argues that *‘‘There are too many rules built around that you should pay attention to when applying for a job, which has become very standard in the Netherlands and we actually want to throw that overboard.’’* (IC, p.89). They also have a collaboration with the municipality to get people out of debt and back to work. Within the organization they refer to this as ‘the social heart of the organization’. Interviewee C indicates that she expects that relation of the people they help to be ‘two-sided’, as they ‘invest a lot, but get nothing in return’. However, she also mentions that some of those people ‘come from far’ and she will try her best to make it work, as ‘she can’t bring herself to just give up on them’. This means learning is mostly transferred from the firm, but the organization also learns as every person brings along their own tacit knowledge to the firm. People have the possibility to ‘develop and grow’. Benefits and outcomes are thus joint, as *‘‘You can get a win-win from that. You can put someone in their own strength.’’* (IC, p.91). There is a ‘natural hierarchy’, it is ‘a flat organization’, ‘everyone can say anything’ and ‘employees are very happy the way we treat them’. This indicates there is a lot of trust with their employees. Therefore, organization C can be classified among transitional engagement,

as “*We always look how to can break through something.*” (IC, p.89), which indicates that they are still building bridges.

Transformational engagement

Organization B

As organization B is a family business, interviewee B has been actively involved with the organization his whole life. Employees are considered to be very important and he made up his own CBA for his employees as he ‘is able to pay more’ and he wants to ‘raise the bar’ which resulted in higher wages. Interviewee B is actively involved in all kinds of social initiatives, which almost resulted in him winning a CSR award. Together with other entrepreneurs in the area he has created several initiatives to make the area more accessible for people with a disability. The quote: “*Yes, especially with other companies! Bringing something together simply provides added value.*” (IB, p.77) illustrates how important he finds it to work together with others on joint projects. Communication with others is necessary to ‘come up with ideas’ as otherwise ‘you’re doing business with blinkers on’. Knowledge is thus jointly generated and having a group of enthusiastic people to create something good, results in ‘great successes’. To support local entrepreneurs in the area, he is part of Oregional, which helps distribute different products throughout the region. Furthermore, he has been involved with the VVV for several years and is an active member of local, departmental and national industry associations of hospitality. All of these findings indicate that organization B is following a transformational engagement strategy, in which he is trying to ‘change the society’.

Organization D

Interviewee D started his own company after many years at ‘big American companies’ where he realized that he “*..would like to show that you can also create a successful company in another way. That is just paying attention to people, making people think along with you.*” (ID, p.100). The most important stakeholders are his customers, his partners and the municipality where he gets candidates to train. These candidates are normally considered to be ‘underprivileged’ and are given a chance to work at his organization. This eventually leads to a ‘win-win’. His organization also organize meetings every quarter for customers and contacts, to talk about ‘socially oriented themes’ and ‘to create something together’. He even joined a political party, in order to make a change through there as well. Furthermore, he is setting up an academy with other entrepreneurs to ensure that ‘people at least can receive an employment contract of 40-hours’. Here knowledge is jointly generated. “*Doing business is of course just*

making a profit, yes to be there in a few years' time, but it also has to do with doing something for society.” (ID, p.101-102) illustrates his desire to do good. It can be concluded that organization D can be classified within transformational engagement. Joint benefits, co-ownership, project managements and jointly generated learning are at the base of this.

Organization F

Interviewee F is currently working as a director for his family business. Employees are considered to be very important as Interviewee F indicates that: *“Look eventually your organization is nothing without the people you work with. It is not a success without them.”* (IF, p.128). Throughout the years CSR is already considered to be very important, as much that employees even need to sign special ‘CSR contracts’ to ensure them to be more sustainable. Employee wellbeing is very important, and lot of two-way conversations take place about their personal life. Interaction is thus frequent, and trust can be labelled as relational. Organization F also try to be self-sufficient by having their own ‘beehive, cattle, source water and vineyard’. They also have banned plastic out of the hotel completely. This results in *“..making our footprint as little as possible.”* (IF, p.126). Guests are made aware of these initiatives and there is more learning transformed from the firm, than the other way around. To involve employees even more, they sponsor among others ‘a football team, swimming team and netball team’. These teams are actively involved in projects the organization sets up. Furthermore, suppliers are also seen as important stakeholders and several collaborations with regional suppliers are created. These organizations are chosen because of their ‘sustainability aspect’. Practicing CSR is *“Not for the commercial, but simply because we believe that is the only way to do it right.”* (IF, p.125). However, these days a special ‘green key label’ is necessary to attract more business, as some organizations are only allowed to go to locations who have this label, even though for example ‘our cattle have better circumstances than the meat we are allowed to buy’. Organization F has integrated their stakeholders into their business completely and is thus labeled as having transformational engagement.

4.2 Information and communication technologies (ICTs)

In this chapter the different affordances of Conole and Dyke (2004) are being discussed by identifying these affordances in the collected data. Moreover, some other affordances have been identified that have not been discussed in chapter 2, but are relevant for this study. New affordances that have been identified are also discussed.

Accessibility

Option overload

As ICTs have enabled us with easily accessing lots of information, it is also ‘‘not possible to not use ICTs in a modern business.’’ (IB, p.84). Moreover, ICTs enable users to be on many different platforms as it facilitates the accessibility of these platforms. For organizations this can be very difficult as Interviewee A indicates that: ‘‘sometimes it is really too much for me’’ (IA, p.61). All of the other organizations (B, C, D, E, F, G) deal with this by ‘partly outsource their marketing activities’ or to ‘having a separate department for marketing’. This way these activities have full attention, instead of being performed besides the core business.

Verification of information

Having access to more information is beneficial, however sometimes one could question whether the information is true. Nowadays there are lot of review website where users can obtain information, but the quality of this information should be questioned. Independent review sites are created to ensure that different reviews are intertwined to give an accurate rating with reviews of people who actually bought the product and ‘‘Therefore we cannot manipulate, you really have to have made a purchase.’’ (IC, p.95). However, here are various reviews websites where people don’t even have to actually buy the product, in order to be able to place a review. Moreover, on some review sites ‘the reviews are made public immediately, without time to respond to the review’ (IG). This results in possible false claims about the organization. Interviewee F indicates that in the end no review website is transparent: ‘‘In the end, TripAdvisor or something similar is not transparent either. Of course, you also have Trivago and things like that and they are not transparent either. They just want you to book on that site. Same on booking.com. They will do everything to make sure you book there.’’ (IF, p.133). Even though these sites are created to give an accurate view of certain products or organizations, it can be questioned whether these sites properly reflect reality. However, sites like this open up new channels of communication, where the stakeholders have more options to communicate with the organization.

Speed of change

None of the interviewees have indicated that they experience difficulties with the fact that ICTs allow for information to spread rapidly throughout the world. There is no supporting data that organizations have difficulties with reassessment of experiences. This may be due to the fact

that not all organizations are of substantial size and therefore less concerned with rapidly changing information.

Diversity

Inspire people

As ICTs facilitate the spreading of other users' experiences, this diversity also results in inspiring others. All of the different platforms result in being able to target different people through various channels. This can either be from entrepreneur to entrepreneur, where Interviewee A says: *"The benefits of ICTs are that it enables you to come in contact with people you want to be in contact with. You can get a lot of inspiration from other entrepreneurs."* (IA, p.62) or it can be from organization to its customers where *"It inspires people to get started."* (IG, p.147).

Obtain experience

Organizations use all kind of tools to measure to what extent other users rely on different review websites, before placing a purchase. Data that support this are paraphrases such as: 'Research has shown that people do research first before making a purchase, especially for a large purchase.' (IG) and 'A lot of people look at reviews before they book, we are very busy with this now' (IF). This result in organizations monitor behavior, an affordance that will be elaborated in 4.2.6. Furthermore, all of the interviewees have indicated that people only write a review when they are very satisfied, but more often they write one when they are dissatisfied. The quote: *"For 1 bad review you only have to do something wrong once, but for 1 good review you have to make 100 people happy."* (IF, p.136) reflects this accurately. This means that while obtaining experiences from others, there is an area in between that is unmentioned, and thus people are making decisions while missing information. People 'don't write reviews when expectations are met' (IE).

Misleading information

In 4.2.1 the affordance accessibility and the need for the verification of information has already been elaborated. However, as these affordances are interrelated, the need for verification of information is raised by misleading information. As purchase behavior is influenced by reviews, products with possibility lower quality, but higher prices are being purchased. Interviewee A points this out. *"Then you think "oh that product has 157 reviews with an average 4.5 star, while I have tasted that product myself". It just really isn't of good quality, because of the points I just listed about my own knowledge of it. Then yes, that is sometimes*

very sad and unfortunate.” (IA, p.68-69). Interviewee A deals with this by trying to educate potential customers where to look for when reflecting on the quality of a product. Moreover, Interviewee D indicates that all organizations deal with bad reviews, but this doesn’t mean that these reviews are true.

Communication and collaboration

Different communication channels

As there are so many possible ways to be in touch with someone, this also results in users using different channels. *”There are just all different ranks that you have to take into account and everyone has their own needs. That is not possible in 1 means of communication.”* (IC, p.93). For organizations this means that they need to use as many of those channels as possible, to reach their stakeholders. *“..there are so so many ways to get in contact with someone.”* (IA, p.61). This results in being ‘overwhelmed’ and it raises questions where to put focus.

Increased efficiency via collaboration

ICTs have enabled new ways of collaboration. This can be with partners as well with partners who have the same vision as you. Organization D has compared their routes with other transport organizations and figured out to be more efficient together. *“If you can join forces and fill the trucks better, you don't have to drive gas cars, but you can reduce your CO2 emissions.”* (ID, p.104). The same applies for organization G, where *“It is often more efficient and effective to let it go through us, because everything then goes through our systems.”* (IG, p.143). When organization E has a potential customer, but they are fully booked, he immediately tries to make contact with a competitor within the area, to ensure that the business stays within the area.

New means of information sharing

The use of ICT enables new means of information sharing within organizations, between organizations and with the community. Organization B has set up an E-learning for their employees *“..to ensure that the level of knowledge rises to a higher level.”* (IB, p.85). This way of spreading new knowledge can also be found in organization D, where interviewee D is working on creating an ‘academy’ together with other organizations. In this academy he wants to spread the knowledge of different organizations to employees, who then will be able to work across the different organizations. Interviewee A uses the online communication possibilities to educate (possible) customers about where to look for when buying the product.

Communicate non-core business activities

All of the organizations have indicated that they use all kind of different social platforms that have been created by ICT. Interestingly they all indicated that the content that they post on these platforms is never about the core business of their organization. Interviewee A indicates that the content she posts is to 'hopefully build a bond with someone' (IA) by showing them that there is also a story and a face between the organization. Interviewee B, D and F say they posts this to create 'goodwill and to let something know to everyone', while organization G uses this to inspire people into creating things themselves. The main difference between these organizations are that the underlying reason of G is to stimulate business, while the others are posting to be more engaged.

Reflection

As discussed in 4.2.3 diversity, ICT facilitates the reflection process of people by enabling them to do research before booking or buying something. This means that people are more critical than ever and information online influences their decisions. However, organizations can also manipulate those people, what results in immediate, uncontrolled decisions.

Critical examination

As people are more critical due to ICT, they also ask more and more of organizations. Interviewee C points out that this is the result of other organizations that raise the bar. *"The customer also really wants more and more and more, which is also a bit of the education of how they are raised by other companies such as Coolblue."* (IC, p.96). Interviewee C argues that this a negative side effect of ICT, as customers their expectations are raised and not all (small) organizations can live up to this.

Reflective and pragmatic responses

Organizations can respond to the fact that people are sensitive to certain information that is displayed. As mentioned before, organizations are willing to do a lot, in order to ensure that you book or buy something by them. This is supported by data obtained from interviewee F, where he indicates that *"At booking.com they always say it is the last room, while I still have 10 left."* (IF, p.133). This results in people booking quicker there, then on the original site and thus organizations need to pay commission to external partners. Furthermore, if organizations are better in 'manipulating' customers, they already have a head start in comparison to organizations that have less resources to invest in this. *"What is difficult, of course, is that some*

companies are better at PR and better at marketing, but also have more experience, and they all get top star reviews.” (IA, p.68).

Monitor behavior

As discussed in 4.2.3 diversity results in people being able to rely on each other’s experiences. This consequently result in organizations wanting to influence these experiences and take actions which increases the chance that the customer is buying at them. Conole and Dyke (2004) have already raised their concerns about the fact that ICTs enable surveillance of its users, yet these days surveillance has evolved towards monitoring behavior. Organizations are actively monitoring the behavior of (potential) customers. *“The search behavior of that, we actually lead the customer to our site.” (IG, p.143).*

Findability

The data showed that organization are trying to lead customers to their pages by paying different organizations money. Interviewee F explained this in detail: *“When you know which words they are looking for, you can also pay google money again to ensure that when people search for those words, google leads them to your page. Yes, that way you try to sort of communicate with the guests without them noticing” (IF, p.131).* Thus, when organizations have enough money to invest in this kind of ‘tricks’, customers are directed towards their websites. These activities are a task itself and interviewee E indicates that *“Our guys are very busy with ensuring that we are findable” (IE, p.114).* The same applies for interviewee D, who also ‘has a special team that ensures that the findability of the website is enlarged’.

Tracking movements

On a website of an organization itself, it is also possible to track the movement of the user of that website. *“Especially when I create such a page and put it online, I really want to see in my first weeks: where do people go, what do they look at.” (IF, p.130).* This results in organizations being able to optimize their websites, in order for customers to buy something with less effort and a shorter buying process.

Anonymity

Another new affordance that has been identified in the data is that users of ICTs can respond anonymous, which also results in some claims being questions, as it is easier to be more extreme when your identity is hidden.

Anonymous responses

ICTs have enabled people to be anonymous and thus being able to respond without having to face the consequences what their reactions might bring along. Organizations deal with people like this a lot, however ‘these reactions need to be filtered’ (IE) and ‘sometimes people need to realize that there is a face behind an organization as well’ (IA). *“There is nothing easier than, how can I say this polite, sitting behind a screen and give your opinion, while being anonymous.”* (IE, p. 116). Furthermore, when people respond anonymously, organizations are less able to correct possible mistakes, as they don’t know their identity and they are less able to verify whether the claim is true or false.

Automatization

Automized responses

Another functional property of ICTs that can be identified is automatization. This entails that organizations can send automated responses. This can vary between automatic messages about writing reviews, chatbots, as well as newsletters to make contact. Organizations C, D, E, F and G use automized messages asking their customers/guests to write a review. This results in having more reviews where people can look at, even though ‘only 17% of the people write a review’ (IG). Organization A and B don’t use these automatic messages for reviews, as organization A does this manually for the personal touch and organization B dislikes emails like that and thus don’t want to send those himself. However, not everything can be automized accordingly to Interviewee C, as *“in customer service there is literally the word service and we believe that you cannot automatize that.”* (IC, p.98).

Immediacy

The ICT affordance immediacy appeared in this study as well. When consulting Conole and Dyke (2004), immediacy is defined as *“The speed with which information can be exchanged via the web and email has led to a shift in user expectations in terms of response times to requests from other users”* (p. 120).

Reaction speed

The importance of this affordance in the context of this research is been illustrated by interviewee B: *“I mean if you send an email you do not expect an email back within an hour, but you also do not expect that an email will be sent back 2 weeks later. Then you should have sent a letter ... Yes, the medium provides a certain reaction speed. A letter is simply about a few*

days, an email goes between the same day or a maximum of 1 or 2 days later. A WhatsApp message, yes there should actually be a bit quicker to respond. And yes, if you really want to speak to someone quickly, you have to call.” (IB, p.84-85) This results in people always being ‘available’, as people have their phones on them on free days as well. Interviewee A thinks it is important to always respond to messages, as *“little connections are also important”* (IA, p.65).

4.3 Relation stakeholder engagement and ICTs in SMEs

In this chapter the findings about the relationship between the intended stakeholder engagement of SMEs and the influence of ICT on this is being discussed. The different identified stakeholder strategies will be linked together with affordances in special. This means that similarities between organizations in the same stakeholder engagement strategy are trying to be pointed out, as well as trying to reflect how utilizing an affordance differently can result in having better (or worse) engagement with stakeholders. Having better engagement is beneficial for organizations, as this enhances legitimacy and legitimacy is necessary for organizational survival.

Transactional stakeholder engagement and ICT

With transactional engagement, the engagement is relatively the lowest. Organization G tries to exploit the diversity that has occurred due to the current ICTs, by trying to let people inspire each other. This means that the organization is providing information to others, instead of co-generating this information. The same applies for organization E, where educating people in order to be more conscious is a main goal of the organization.

Transitional stakeholder engagement and ICT

With transactional stakeholder engagement the corporate stance is to ‘build bridges’. In the data it can be displayed that organization A uses ICTs in order to build a bond with her stakeholders. This is possible due to the various means to get in touch with someone. The frequency of interaction is also increased in organization C, via automated messages.

Transformational stakeholder engagement and ICT

What stood out in the data is that organizations B and D use the new means of information sharing that are possible due to ICT, to educate their stakeholders. The affordance that is central to this is communication and communication. This results in sharing knowledge with them, as well as being able to learn from them as well, like starting an academy together with other

entrepreneurs (ID) or starting an eLearning (IB). This is an example of how ICT has enabled illustrative tactics such as joint projects. Moreover, this has resulted in joint benefits, for the stakeholders as well as for the organization. Organization F uses ICTs to show the joint projects and thus communicate non-core business activities, in order to get more people involved.

5 Discussion

This chapter reflects on the theoretical and methodological choices made in this study. There will be critically looked at possible assumptions and choices that have been made. Furthermore, the role as researcher is being discussed.

5.1 Theoretical reflection

A theoretical choice that has been made in this study, has been to choose the framework of Bowen et al., (2010). This framework was chosen, because they have combined years of literature about stakeholder engagement strategies and have visually displayed this in a table. This resulted in being able to distinguish which strategy is in play, based on the differences of the corporate stance, illustrative tactics, communication, number of community partners, frequency of interaction, nature of trust, learning, control over process and benefits of outcomes. However, these indicators have not been elaborated further, and thus the precise definition of each of these indicators was not fully clear. Moreover, as three different strategies have been identified by Bowen et al., (2010), they haven't indicated to what extent an organization can be classified in one strategy, while also having some characteristics of another. This has caused some difficulty when organizations needed to be classified in one of the three strategies, as it was not clear if an organization should possess all of the characteristics, or a majority of the characteristics. The choice has been made to classify an organization when they had a majority of the characteristics. This was chosen, because otherwise it would have been very difficult to classify organizations, as during the interviews there have not been specific questions about all of the indicators of the engagement strategies. This might have harmed the theoretical quality of this study, but the categorization of the organizations relative to each other is accurate. This means that organizations E and G are less engaged than organizations A and C, and organizations B, D and F are the more engaged than A and C. Furthermore, the framework was eventually helpful in categorizing the organizations, which was necessary in this study.

Another theoretical choice that might have harmed the quality of this study has been the interpretation of the word 'stakeholders'. This word has been properly defined in chapter 2, but some confusion can arise when Bowen et al., (2010) talk about 'the community'. In the interviews, organizations have been asked to state their most important stakeholders, accordingly to the definition provided by Sloan (2009, p.26) in chapter 2. This means they have not talked about 'the community', yet some stakeholders that have been mentioned are part of the community. The term stakeholders with the provided definition has been chosen, as this

resulted in having a broader and clearer concept of stakeholders where the interviewees could talk about.

The affordances of Conole and Dyke (2004) have proved to be relevant for this study and this theoretical choice should not be questioned. However, in chapter 2, 5 affordances have been chosen and this could've been with more thoughtful deliberation. The affordance 'speed of change' turned out to be not important in this context, while 'immediacy' has proven to be. This could be avoided by considering that the speed of change is less important in SMEs, as information is changing on a different pace. Eventually this has been corrected by adding 'immediacy' when this affordance was identified in the data. However, new affordances have been identified and this together with the fact that the article of Conole and Dyke is published in 2004, the actuality of the affordances can be questioned.

Furthermore, after thoughtful deliberation the decision was made to not include a conceptual model in this study, as would cause more confusion than it would clarify. The concepts have been presented clearly enough and a visual representation was thus not necessary.

5.2 Methodological reflection

As discussed in chapter 3 of this study, the external validity is low. However, as this is an exploratory study, the goal is not to have transferable results. The aim of the results is to provide insight in the relationship between the chosen ICT affordances and the intended stakeholder engagement in the context of SMEs.

The internal validity of this study has been attempted to be guaranteed by conducting semi-structured interviews and by processing the interviews anonymous. Interviewees have been informed that the interviews would be processed this way and all of them have indicated that they appreciate that, but that they would've still done the interview if it wasn't anonymous. This indicates that the interviewees felt comfortable enough to talk openly about the topics discussed. During the interviews some interviewees indicated that they didn't understand a question or that they found the question hard to answer. With examples this ambiguity has been attempted to be clarified. This was not always entirely successful, so sometimes there was guidance during the interview in order to obtain the correct information and talk about the central topics. This has partly harmed the internal validity of this study, as the interviewer is not considered to be independent anymore, as influence has been exerted.

Furthermore, chapter 3 states that a member check has been conducted to control if the results are congruent with the experiences of the interviewees and thus if the data has been

interpreted correct. This member check has been conducted, but not the same depth that was originally planned. The cause of this is lack of time and the decision was to have a short phone call, instead of an elaborated conversation about the findings of the study in detail. However, this means that trustworthiness is still guaranteed.

The code book provided in appendix 4 guarantees the confirmability of this study, as the codes can be checked there, as well as supporting quotes for the codes. In this codebook also new affordances have been added, as these have been identified in the data.

5.3 Reflection on the role as a researcher

As the epistemology in this study is considered to be relativism, this has some implications on the study. This means that as a researcher, I find that reality is context dependent, thus there is no objective truth and things exist because we talk about it. This has affected the conduct of the interviews, as interviewees were free to talk about their own truth, which was dependent on their own reality. This also means that the realities of all of the interviewees are considered to differ from each other and that similarities between organizations are also context dependent. However, in order to draw a conclusion, comparisons were made and differences needed to be pointed out.

Furthermore, I have not been personally involved with one of the interviewees or organizations in general, which has ensured that the organizations were relatively equivalent in my view. This has resulted in processing all of the data in the same way, instead of unconsciously put preference over an organization in relation to another.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

In this chapter the research question: *‘How do the current information and communication technologies influence the intended stakeholder engagement of Small and Medium Enterprises?’* will be answered. This will be done through the obtained results, which are presented in chapter 4. The goal that is central to this is: The objective is: *‘Give insight in how the current digital transformation influences the intended stakeholder engagement by conducting an abductive exploratory study in SMEs to research the effect of ICTs on the relationship between SMEs and stakeholder engagement’*. Moreover, the relevance of this study is being discussed.

6.1 Conclusion

The Bowen et al. (2010) framework has provided several dimensions that determine when to classify an engagement strategy as transactional, transitional or transformational. For an organization is most beneficial to have a transformational engagement strategy, as this results in long-term legitimacy. Organizations have been questioned about their relationship with their stakeholders, as well as how they use ICTs in their daily business operations. It can be concluded that from the affordances of Conole and Dyke (2004), ‘collaboration and communication’ can exert the most influence in the context of the stakeholder engagement strategies of Bowen et al., (2010). This can be concluded because utilizing the affordance ‘communication and collaboration’ in a certain way, results in being able to have enhanced illustrative tactics, generate knowledge jointly, having shared control over the process and have joint benefits, that are central in determining in what stakeholder engagement strategy is in play. The affordance ‘accessibility’ has resulted in the need for verification of information, what is being done by review websites. This enhances two-way communication and can increase the frequency of interaction with stakeholders. However, the transparency being questioned is those sites can be questioned, but utilizing this affordance properly could be beneficial. The frequency of the interaction can also be influenced by utilizing ICTs in a certain way. A new affordance that has been identified in the data, is ‘automatization’. Organizations these days make more and more use of automatized messages, chatbots or newsletters, to stay in touch with their stakeholders and make more contact. To conclude, the ICT affordances collaboration and communication, accessibility and automatization can influence the intended stakeholder engagement as they open up possibilities to be more engaged with stakeholders and thus enhance stakeholder engagement, accordingly to the dimensions provided by Bowen et al., (2010).

Furthermore, the affordances diversity, reflection have deductively been identified in the data. Inductively 3 new affordances have been identified, which are monitoring behavior, anonymity and automatization. However, all of these affordances, except automatization, have proven not to have any influence on the 9 dimensions of the chosen definition of stakeholder engagement strategies that are provided in chapter 2 and thus do not exert influence on the intended stakeholder engagement of SMEs.

6.2 Recommendations

Scientific relevance

This study has displayed the relationship between the affordances described by Conole and Dyke (2004) and the different stakeholder engagement strategies of Bowen et al., (2010). This relation hasn't been researched before and thus this study is a contribution to the literature. Especially the importance of the affordances: communication and collaboration, accessibility and automatization have proven to be of importance when trying to enhance the intended stakeholder engagement of SMEs.

As this study builds upon the affordances that have been identified by Conole and Dyke (2004), a contribution to the literature has been done by identifying 3 new affordances due the abductive nature of the research strategy. The affordances: monitoring behavior, anonymity and automatizing can be added to their literature. Moreover, it is important to point out that the affordance monitoring behavior is an adjustment of the currently existing affordance surveillance. This adjustment has been made, as it has been over a decade and there have been developments in ICT that go beyond surveillance.

Practical relevance

This study can be of great help for organizations that struggle with their viability and for organizations who want to enhance their intended stakeholder engagement, as this study highlight the importance of being legitimate. Legitimacy is a part of stakeholder engagement and being legitimate in the organizational field is important for organizations to thrive. Knowing that specific ICT affordances can enhance stakeholder engagement is thus interesting for organizations and is specifically interesting for the management team and the marketing department of an organization.

Recommendations follow up research

Questions that remain unanswered in this study are regarding other possible relations between stakeholder engagement strategies and ICTs. In this study, the relation between some, but not all, affordances and the intended stakeholder engagement of SMEs has been pointed out. However, there possibly could be other relations between the affordances and stakeholder engagement, as choices in this study has resulted in narrowing down concepts. In follow up research researchers should not hold on to the 9 indicators that are provided by Bowen et al., (2010), as the concept of stakeholder engagement is evolved in the last years, as well as the affordances of Conole and Dyke (2004). Furthermore, as suggested in the 5.1 Theoretical reflection, the actuality of the affordances should be questioned. This means that in follow up research this should be researched as well, as well as maybe identifying a list of new affordances that are relevant in today's society.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Index interview partners

Abbreviation	Function	Industry	Sector	Interview time
IA	Owner/CEO	Consumer Staples	Beverages	59:26
IB	Owner	Consumer Discretionary	Travel and Leisure	54:30
IC	MT member	Consumer Discretionary	Personal Goods	40:35
ID	CEO	Industrials	Industrial Transportation	38:30
IE	Business manager	Consumer Discretionary	Consumer Services	32:31
IF	Director	Consumer Discretionary	Travel and Leisure	56:13
IG	E-commerce manager	Consumer Discretionary	Household Goods and Home Construction	32:41

Table 3 Overview interview partners (Source: Author's own collected data)

Appendix 2: Interview guide

Welcome and introduction

- How long have you been working for
- What is your current position and what tasks do you perform?

Common understanding

- What do you understand by the term stakeholder engagement?

Stakeholder engagement

- Who would you regard as stakeholders?
 - o Can you identify a top 5 or 3 of the most important stakeholders?
 - o Why did you choose these stakeholders?
 - o How do you communicate with these stakeholders?
 - o What do you want with these stakeholders when it comes to CSR?
 - o What is the interest of these stakeholders for you?
 - o What do these stakeholders represent for you?

Common understanding

- What do you understand by the term information and communication technologies?
 - o What do you understand by accessibility, speed of change, diversity, communication and collaboration and reflection (provide definitions to not lose time)

Information and communication technologies

- How are ICTs currently used within the organization? Examples
- To what extent do you think that using ICTs influences practices within the organization?
- How is the organization trying to influence the vast amount of information that is online?
 - o What are you are trying to accomplish with doing this?
 - o How does that work exactly?
- To what extent is the organization trying to influence the continuous reassessment of experiences and changing information?
 - o What are you are trying to accomplish with doing this?
 - o How does that work exactly?
- How is the organization trying to influence the diversity of information online?
 - o What are you are trying to accomplish with doing this?
 - o How does that work exactly?
- How is the organization utilizing the communication and collaboration possibilities that can occur online?
 - o What are you are trying to accomplish with doing this?
 - o How does that work exactly?
- To what extent is the organization trying to influence the reflection process of stakeholders?
 - o What are you are trying to accomplish with doing this?
 - o How does that work exactly?

Closing questions

- Are there plans of your organization to use ICTs more?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?
- Thank you for participating
- Information about what is going to happen with the data

Appendix 3: Operationalization

Definition	Dimension	Indicators	Example items
Stakeholder engagement	Corporate stance	The positioning of the organization in relation to the community. Can vary between giving back, building bridges and changing society	<p>‘Who would you regard as stakeholders?’</p> <p>‘Why did you mention these specific stakeholders?’</p> <p>‘What do you want with these stakeholders when it comes to CSR?’</p> <p>‘What is the interest of that stakeholder for you?’</p>
	Illustrative tactics	Sharing of money	
		Sharing of time	
		Sharing of skills	
	Communication	The ratio of communication between organization and community	
	Number of community partners	The amount of community partners an organization has	
	Frequency of interaction	The amount of interaction between the organization and community. Can vary between occasional, repeated and frequent	
	Nature of trust	The amount of trust between the organization and the community. Can vary between limited evolutionary and relational	
	Learning	The ratio of knowledge spread between organization and community	
	Control over process	Refers to the control of the firm or joint control	
Benefits and outcomes	Benefits and outcomes that come forth out of the interaction		

Definition	Dimension	Indicators	Example items
Information and communication technologies (ICTs)	Accessibility	The amount of information accessible	How is the organization trying to influence the vast amount of information that is online?
	Speed of change	Reassessment of experiences	
		Changing information	
	Diversity	Experiences and perspectives of others	
	Communication and collaboration	Level of engagement with others	How is the organization utilizing the communication and collaboration possibilities that can occur online?
		Means of information sharing and communication	
	Reflection	Critical examination of gathered information	To what extent is the organization trying to influence the reflection process of stakeholders?'
		The consideration of knowledge claims	

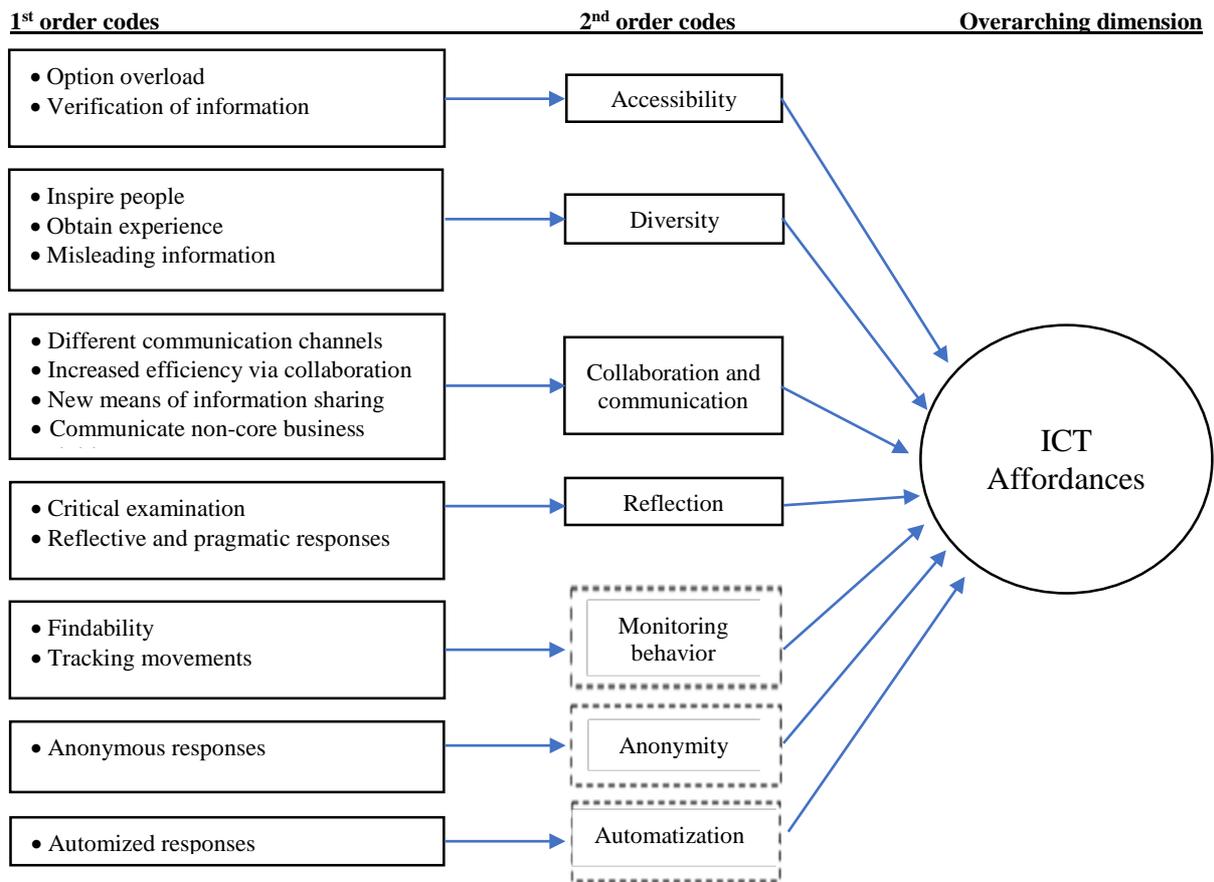
Appendix 4: Code book

Concept	2nd order codes Darker blue: deductive Lighter blue: Inductive	Definition	Example
Stakeholder engagement		The process of involving individuals and groups that either affect or are affected by the activities of the company'' (Sloan, 2009, p.26) and three different strategies can be identified: transactional, transitional or transformational engagement	
	Corporate stance	The positioning of the organization in relation to the community.	<i>''I find it really important to build a bond'' (IA, p.60)</i>
	Illustrative tactics	Sharing time, money or skills	<i>''You need to invest a lot of time and energy'' (ID, p. 102)</i>
	Communication	The ratio of communication between organization and community	<i>''We communicate a lot'' (IF, p. 129)</i>
	Number of community partners	The amount of community partners an organization has	<i>''This means we can serve everyone'' (IG, p.144)</i>
	Frequency of interaction	The amount of interaction between the organization and community. Can vary between occasional, repeated and frequent	<i>''... and we actively look for contact with customers'' (IE, p. 116)</i>
	Nature of trust	The amount of trust between the organization and the community. Can vary between limited evolutionary and relational	<i>''I think there is a lot of trust in each other'' (IA, p.59).</i>
	Learning	The ratio of knowledge spread between organization and community	<i>''There are possibilities for employees to learn and to spread that knowledge again to others'' (IE, p. 120)</i>
	Control over process	Refers to the control of the firm or joint control	<i>We are now establishing a kind of acedemy. We do this with a number of organizations'' (ID, p.109)</i>
	Benefits and outcomes	Benefits and outcomes that come forth out of the interaction	<i>'' ..but if you tackle nice fun projects together, that you benefit from it together, and thus enjoy it both'' (IB, p.77)</i>
ICT Affordances		Affordances are defined by Salomon as ''the perceived and actual properties of a thing, primarily those functional properties that determine just how the thing	

		could possibly be used” (p.51).	
	Accessibility	ICTs enable the easy access to vast amounts of information throughout various means	<i>‘Yes, ICT has made the world a lot smaller and more accessible to us’ (IB, p. 84)</i>
	Speed of change	As information is changing rapidly because of ICTs, experiences are continuously being reassessed	
	Diversity	ICTs ensure that the experiences of other users are easy accessible	<i>Research has shown that people do research first before checking on ekomi or kiyo before making a purchase, especially for a large purchase. (IG, p. 146)</i>
	Communication and collaboration	ICTs enables users to be more engaged through new ways of communication and new means of information sharing	<i>‘‘Yes, well you know, if you all have a bit of the ambition to let each other grow, then you think of each other. ‘ (ID, p.109)</i>
	Reflection	Not having to respond immediately and information being subjected to greater populations result in reflection and critical examination	<i>‘‘The customer also really wants more and more and more, which is also a bit of the education of how they are raised by other companies such as Coolblue.’’ (IC, p.96)</i>
	Immediacy	The users expectations have shifted regarding response times	<i>‘‘Yes the medium provides a certain reaction speed.’’ (IB, p.84)</i>
	Monitoring behavior	Due to ICTs, the behavior of users can be monitored and this data can be used to ‘manipulate’ users	<i>‘‘I have a special team for this, and another team that mainly ensures that the findability of our website is increased’’ (ID, p.107)</i>
	Anonymity	Users of ICTs can be anonymous and thus identities of users can stay hidden	<i>‘‘There is nothing easier than, how can I say this polite, sitting behind a screen and give your opinion, while being anonymous’’ (IE, p. 116)</i>
	Automatization	ICTs enable the creation of automatic messages. This can be about writing reviews, chatbots, as well as newsletters to make contact	<i>‘‘Positive are the developments. You can automate more and more.’’ (IC, p.96)</i>

(Source: Author’s own collected data)

Appendix 5: Data structure



(Source: Author's own collected data)

Appendix 6: Interview transcripts

The transcripts have been submitted separately in an attached document.