

## **Lost in Transfer?**

**Exploring the Influence of Culture on the Transfer of Knowledge Categories.**

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## **Abstract**

Supported by an extensive review of four-domains of literature (knowledge management, organisational learning, culture, and retail), this study examines the influence of national culture on transfer of knowledge categories in top supermarkets in Africa and the United Kingdom (UK). Data from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 40 store managers (SMs) was used to examine how the SMs transfer the five sales performance drivers – selling-related knowledge, the degree-of-adaptiveness, role-clarity, cognitive-aptitude, and work-engagement – to their subordinates. The study finds these UK supermarkets’ knowledge transfer (KT) practices as embedded in Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and project-based learning. SMs from African supermarkets exploit various opportunities to build interpersonal relationships and trust with knowledge-holders, thereby facilitating learning and KT. This study links such behaviours to ‘Ubuntu’ – a well-established African philosophy/ethics. The study finds socialisation, externalisation, and internalisation as common knowledge assets in African supermarkets, in contrast to socialisation and externalisation in their UK counterparts. This study found that, despite these variations in their strategic priorities regarding knowledge assets, these five sales performance drivers are transferred successfully in the supermarkets in both continents that participated in the research. This offers a new insight that challenges the extant theorising that KT praxis varies between diverse cultures.

## **Keywords**

Knowledge Transfer; Knowledge Categories; Knowledge Assets, Culture; Supermarkets; Africa; UK.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to examine whether national culture impacts knowledge category (KC) transfer within the retail supermarket knowledge domain when there are differences in the national culture of the countries involved. Notwithstanding the wealth of research on knowledge transfer (KT), the influence of culture on KT has been explored only to a limited extent (Li & Lee, 2015). Although both language differences and culture have been found to create knowledge blocks (e.g. Ford & Chan, 2003; Wei, Samiee, & Lee 2014), the question whether national culture impacts the transfer of KC is still overlooked. Therefore, this study explores in more detail, if, and how, national culture impacts the transfer of the five sales performance drivers – selling-related knowledge, the degree of adaptiveness, role-clarity, cognitive-aptitude, and work-engagement – in top supermarkets in Africa and the UK.

Knowledge categorization – the act of selecting evidence and partitioning data in chunks, e.g. the Yellow four-wheel drive BMW, the Green hybrid Toyota SUV, etc., (Ross, Maupin & Timura, 2011) – is one of the building blocks of thought (Smith & Medin 1981). By helping to reduce an immeasurable amount of information into manageable parts (e.g. with the cars above), KC facilitates memory and communication (D’Andrade, 1995), which makes every day thinking and problem-solving structurally easier (Kurtz & Honke, 2020). Yet, a paucity of KC research and the narrowness of the contexts and actors explored have weakened the theoretical development of KC research. With a few notable exceptions – such as a scalable method for measuring the relevancies between categories to facilitate the identification of experts in certain domain (Zhu, Chen, Xiong, Cao & Tian, 2014) and how to minimize inert construction to promote spontaneous transfer (Kurtz & Honke, 2020) – many aspects of KC are still relatively unexplored. One aspect that has not yet crystalized as an

area of KC research is the influence of national culture on the transfer of KC in diverse cultural settings.

By identifying similarities among problems, category construction facilitates consistency in solving workplace problems (Kurtz & Honke, 2020). Therefore, professionals become more ‘expert-like’ in problem solving (Chi, Feltovich, & Glaser, 1981; Rottman, Gentner, & Goldwater, 2012). Yet, there is a paucity of empirical data that examines whether, and how, professionals actually transfer the appropriate KC to their target end users to facilitate consistency in problem-solving at work, and which this author believes is a significant omission in the theoretical development of KC research. As previous KC studies have focused either on category construction (e.g. Kurtz & Honke, 2020) or on expert findings (e.g. Zhu *et al.*, 2014), research that examines the effectiveness of various institutional techniques of KC transfer (Engle, 2012) are also crucial for the theoretical development of KC research. Yet, the difficulty of transfer and a lack of motivation for a successful KC transfer have been recognised (Kurtz & Honke, 2020).

Using Nonaka’s (1994) knowledge curved model and his four stages of knowledge (i.e. socialisation, combination, externalisation and internalisation) as the theoretical lens, this paper, therefore, examines the effectiveness of KC transfer techniques within the retail supermarket knowledge domain in various cultural settings. This empirical investigation of KC transfer in supermarkets aims to identify their transfer techniques, their effectiveness, and if culture is a barrier to a successful KC transfer in these supermarkets. This study has two major contributions. First, to establish whether professionals in various cultural settings transfer the appropriate KC to their target end users. Second, to motivate theoretically the future KC transfer research, as the theoretical ideas and themes in this study can be replicated and be broadly applied to future KC transfer research, it, therefore, contributes to the broadening and strengthening of the theory development of KC research.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature on knowledge transfer, the link between culture and knowledge transfer, and barriers to KC transfer. Section 3 discusses the methodology. Section 4 presents and analyses the data, while Section 5 discusses the results. Section 6 concludes the paper and reveals both the practical and theoretical implications of this study, as well as suggestions for further research.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Theorizing Knowledge Transfer (KT)***

KT involves the movement of good ideas from one part of an organisation to others that can maximize its value (Kang, Rhee & Kang, 2010, p. 2). Indeed, KT is by no means a novel concept in the knowledge management literature. Knowledge creation (Chen, 2008; Nonaka, 1994), knowledge codification (Hall, 2008; Zander & Kogut, 1995) and KT (Mesquita, Anand, & Brush, 2008) are all emphasized. Themes such as knowledge generation, knowledge capture, knowledge storage, knowledge dissemination, knowledge appropriation and the application of knowledge have also been examined extensively (see, for example, Winkler, 2014). Extant research (such as, Wai Ko & Liu, 2017; Alexopoulos & Buckley, 2013) has examined issues of trust in KT. KT is also argued to be an effective network-bridging structure, and which is crucial for enhancing individual firm performance (Cross & Cummings, 2004), and is thus a key source of competitive advantage for organisations (Levin, Walter, Appleyard & Cross, 2016; Argote & Ingram, 2000).

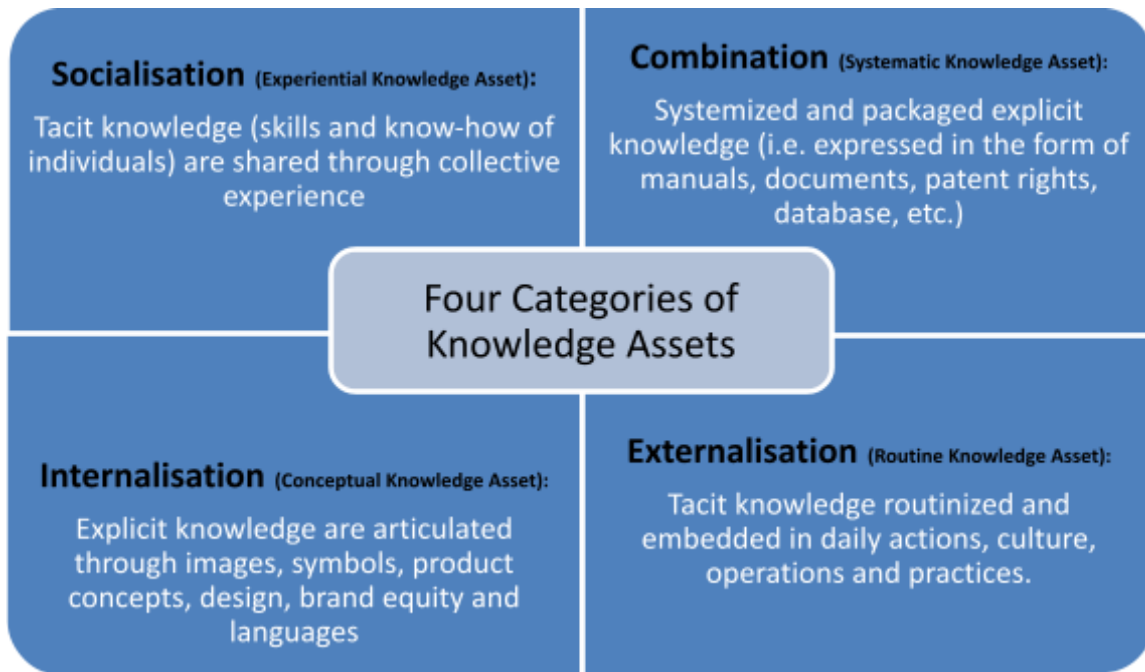
Based on organisations' motivation for KT, Nonaka *et al* (2000, p. 6) grouped them into two categories: (1) 'an information processing machine', which simply aims to transfer

knowledge through interactions; and (2) a category that creates and defines problems, develops and applies new knowledge to solve the problems, and then further develops new knowledge through the action of problem solving. In the latter category, through facilitated problem solving, an organisation's KT strategy links to the problem based learning (PBL) (Hmelo-silver, 2004) and project based learning models (Rooij, 2007). Both earlier (e.g. Lowerntal, 1996) and later (e.g. Hmelo-silver, 2004) studies have linked PBL to engendering motivation to learn, effective problem solving skills, self-directed learning (SDL), flexible knowledge, and effective collaboration skills, through open-minded discussions. Therefore, is an effective way of transferring tacit knowledge (Ahmad, Zainol, Darus, Marzuki & Baharom, 2011).

Although open-minded discussions amongst workers are key factors for KT (Oborn, Barrett & Racko, 2013), the KT literature tends to focus on the explicit components of knowledge such as codified guidelines or published papers (Ward, Smith, House & Hamer, 2012), neglecting the need for an effective transfer of both tacit and explicit components as a necessity to build competitive advantage. In particular, tacit knowledge is considered to be crucial for creating and sustaining effective corporate culture and managerial mindsets throughout the organisation (Politis, 2002). Although explicit knowledge can easily be communicated and transferred (Nonaka, 1994; Polanyi, 1962), tacit knowledge can be a greater source of competitive advantage, since, if managed effectively, tacit knowledge can hardly be copied by rivals (Nonaka, 1994; Thomas, 2002). Yet, tacit knowledge can be a significant barrier to KT. In fact, the literature (e.g. Castree, Kitchin & Rogers, 2013) has identified knowledge stickiness and the tacit nature of knowledge as among the major institutional barriers to KT. Indeed, knowledge is sticky because it often resides in the minds and infrastructures of its originators, especially in large bureaucratic organisations where factors that relate to organisational power and politics can result in a unit's knowledge stock

(Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000). Besides, knowledge stickiness could be due to a lack of motivation (i.e. on the part of the owners of the knowledge) to share (Randel & Ranft, 2007; Szulanski, 1996) or a lack of willingness (i.e. on the part of the knowledge seekers) to cooperate, and which, in turn, can combine to hamper the transfer and absorption of new knowledge (Burt, 2005). Szulanski (1996) has also identified the inability to interpret the information, poor absorptive capacity, and poor retentive capacity on the part of the receiver, and a distant or problematic relationship between the source and the receiver as among the major inhibiting factors to KT. And yet, the tacit nature of knowledge is another barrier to KT. And because much knowledge is tacit, they become harder to verbalize and are, therefore, better communicated by demonstration, and which is why KT is an active process that requires much thought and effort, and yet its success is still not guaranteed (Castree et al, 2013). Due to such difficulty in transferring tacit knowledge, as a way to facilitate the creation and transfer of knowledge, Nonaka's (1994) theory has developed Polanyi's (1968) idea of tacit knowledge into a more applied direction (Nonaka, 1994, p. 16). Nonaka (1994) advances a knowledge curved model and argues that learning can arise from the conversion of explicit (easily written down and transmitted) and tacit (implicit and difficult to transfer) knowledge. Nonaka (1994) has also distinguished four stages of knowledge. These include socialisation (the process of knowledge creation through collective experience), combination (the process of creating explicit knowledge from explicit knowledge, i.e. by re-categorizing, re-contextualizing etc.), internalisation (the transformation of explicit knowledge into tacit) and externalisation (the transformation of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, reminiscent of the traditional idea of "learning").

**Figure 1: Nonaka's Four Stages of Knowledge**



**Adapted from: Nonaka, Toyama and Konno (2000)**

Notwithstanding such theoretical innovation (in Figure 1 above) of these authors, there is a lack of empirical data that compares the usefulness of this theory in cross-cultural settings. This aspect is another important gap which this study seeks to address.

***Transfer of Knowledge Category (KC)***

Certain KCs (e.g. the five categories central to supermarket performance in Table 1 below) are not widely known by others (Martin, et al., 2012, p. 30), and hence losing them could have substantial negative impact on operational excellence, costs, profitability, growth, and even the survival prospects of an organisation (Schafermeyer & Hoffman, 2016, p. 89). Therefore, Hoffman and Hanes (2003) call for their early capture, while the organisation creates enough lead time for a systematic planning of their successful transfer, before they are gone.

**Table 1: The Five factors that drive sales performance**

Predictor	Definition	Examples of included variables
Selling-related knowledge	The depth and width of the knowledge base that salespeople need to size up sales situations, classify prospects, and select appropriate sales strategies for clients (Leong, Bush & John, 1989, p. 164).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Product / Technical Knowledge</li> <li>● Customer Knowledge</li> </ul>
Degree of adaptiveness	The altering of sales behaviours during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation (Weitz, H. Sujan & M. Sujan, 1986, p. 175).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Adaptive Selling</li> <li>● Ability to Modify Sales Presentations</li> </ul>
Role Clarity	Adequate understanding of information needed to perform the job adequately and being certain about the expectations of different role set members (Singh, 1998, p. 70).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Role Clarity</li> <li>● Role Ambiguity (reversed).</li> </ul>
Cognitive aptitude	Category that includes measures of a general factor of mental ability, verbal ability, and quantitative ability (Vinchur, Schippmann, Switzer & Roth, 1998, p. 589).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● General Mental Ability (IQ)</li> <li>● Verbal Intelligence.</li> </ul>
Work engagement	A persistent positive affective-motivational state of fulfilment (Sonnetag, 2003, p. 518).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Enthusiasm</li> <li>● Citizenship Behaviours</li> </ul>

**Adapted from: Verbeke, Dietz and Verwaal (2011).**

Unfortunately, organisations rarely prepare their knowledge seekers (in advance for receiving such a specialised knowledge in Table 1 above), or train and motivate the owners of

such knowledge in readiness for its effective transfer (Hoffman & Ward, 2015). Another barrier to the successful transfer of such a specialised KC is the lack of commitment and willingness of its holders to share knowledge. And because such virtues (such as commitment and willingness) are characteristics of engaged employees, Schafermeyer and Hoffman (2016) warn against using certain categories of staff (e.g. employees who are aware that they will be laid off, newly employed and volunteers in a non-profit) to transfer a specialised KC, as they may either be unlikely to help transfer such knowledge, or may do so ineffectively (Schafermeyer & Hoffman, 2016, p. 89).

### ***Culture and Knowledge Transfer (KT)***

Culture is not an entirely new concept in the KT literature. Prior studies (e.g. Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston & Triandis, 2002; Boh et al., 2013) have examined the role of national culture in knowledge transfer between firms. However, empirical data that examines the role of national culture on KC transfer is lacking. Earlier studies also found that all knowledge is local (Geertz, 1973), as it is the product of socialisation (Barth, 2002), and that its transfer is heavily constrained by the social and cultural contexts in which it is embedded (Lucas, 2006; Qin, Wang & Ramburuth, 2017; Szulanski 2000; Winkler, 2014). For instance, in their study of two multinational Israeli software development companies and their affiliates in India, Zaidman and Brock (2009, p. 297) found that ‘who talks to whom’, ‘the willingness to share knowledge,’ and ‘the type of information transferred’ are all dependent on professional workplace norms and national cultures.

Hofstede utilised his 1980 (and later 2001) dimensions of national culture to show how nations seem to differ in their behaviours, norms and values. He identified five dimensions. Power distance: the degree to which the less powerful members of a culture expect and

accept that power is distributed unequally; Individualism/collectivism: the degree to which individuals are assimilated into powerful cohesive ingroups from birth, for protection, and in return for absolute loyalty (from the individual), as against independence; Uncertainty avoidance: the degree to which a group/society is orientated towards anxiety, nervousness and a need for clear guidelines at work; Masculinity/Femininity: the degree to which values such as assertiveness, performance, success and competition which are considered masculine are preferred to values such as caring for the weak and vulnerable, warm personal relationship, high quality of life and solidarity which are considered feminine; Long-term/Short-term orientation: the degree to which a society/group invests in their future (such as, mortgage, thrift, pension pot and training and development), as against short term materials (such as fulfilment of social obligations, respect for tradition and preservation of “face”).

However, the scope of this study examines only how power distance and individualism / collectivism can impact the transfer of KC in the supermarkets studied in both continents, as these two cultural dimensions are the most significant in examining KT in diverse cultural settings (Boh *et al.*, 2013). Like most Western countries, the UK’s culture is identified as highly individualistic (Boh *et al.*, 2013), whereas previous studies (e.g. Van Dyk and De Kock, 2004) had found South Africa to portray strong collectivistic characteristics, and with a score of 30 (Falade, 2018), Nigeria, like every other African culture, is considered collectivist (Triandis, 1989). In individualistic cultures, individuals see themselves as unattached to the group (Bochner & Hesketh, 1994), and are accordingly inclined to pursuing their personal goals (Boh *et al.*, 2013). This makes knowledge sharing very problematic in individualistic cultures (Bhagat *et al.* 2002; Simonin, 1999). Unlike in individualistic cultures, people in collectivist culture are inclined to collectivist attitudes of cooperation, interdependence, low levels of competition and long-term commitment to group membership (Hofstede, 1980).

These make knowledge sharing within collectivist cultures very high and more effective (Ardichvili, Maurer, Li, Tim & Stuedemann, 2006; Bochner & Hesketh, 1994).

Unlike in Africa and most parts of Asia where power distance is high (Hofstede, 1980), the power distance in many Western countries including the UK is low (Boh *et al.*, 2013). In low power distance countries such as the UK, leaders relate to their followers as colleagues. Therefore, the likelihood of knowledge sharing and KT is higher in low power distance countries (Boh *et al.*, 2013), unlike in high power distance countries (of Africa and most parts of Asia) where subordinates interact less with their leaders (Hofstede, 1980). This distinction makes both knowledge sharing and KT more problematic in high power distance countries.

The KT practices in African and UK organisations vary considerably due to disparities in national cultures and the design of individual KT environments. UK organisations' KT practice links to PBL and project-based-learning paradigms. For instance, the rising costs of conducting technology related research and development (R&D) in the UK motor industry (e.g. Beecham & Cordey-Hayes, 1998) and the UK university-industry (U-I) collaborations for KT (e.g. Hewitt-Dundas, 2012; Vick, & Robertson, 2018) show that these organisations' motivations for engaging in KT is to solve impending problems. PBL is learning that is tailored to suit specific pre-set objective(s) – as against conventional spoon-feeding rote-learning that is instructive and trainer-designed (Walker, Bridges & Chan, 1996). One significant feature of PBL is the use of a practical problem to stimulate successions of learning experiences (Yeo, 2007). Here, learners critically reflect on the prevailing problem to untie the different sides of the problem under investigation (Yeo, 2007), thus encourages generative learning, adaptive learning, team learning, as well as independent learning (Senge, 1990). However, it could be argued that both PBL and project-based learning would likely work better in very structured environments, and, not so well in unstructured environments.

Empirical investigation into KT practices in African organisations (e.g. Ado, Su & Wanjiru, 2017) found that Africans actively take advantage of multiple cultural and informal relationships (including building clandestine relationships) to support their learning and facilitate knowledge transfer. Their study found that when working with foreigners they perceive as difficult and unwilling to share knowledge, African workers utilise various strategies, mechanisms, and tactics, and which are often informal to build trust (with such overseas partners), and eventually managed to obtain significant amount of knowledge and learning from such difficult partners, despite their unwillingness and lack of openness to share knowledge with these Africans (Ado *et al.*, 2017). Such a metaphysical force that helps Africans connect to people in search of knowledge, epitomises the African traditional custom known as ‘Ubuntu’ – a long-established ethics and philosophy which has originated with ancient African societies, yet, still marginalized in the mainstream ethical discourses (Murove, 2014). Centred on oneness in a community, Ubuntu is a well-known African philosophy which also translates as ‘I am what I am through others.’ Therefore, it can be argued that ‘Ubuntu’ would likely work better in highly collectivist environments, unlike in highly individualistic environments.

Although earlier studies (e.g. Rokebach, 1968) argue that national cultures affect individual employees’ behaviour and actions (including KT) in organisations, subsequent studies (e.g. Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000, p. 475–476) found that KT will be effective provided that the receiver has the motivation and capacity to capture and absorb the knowledge being the object of the transfer. Liyanage *et al.* (2009, p. 124) and Winkler (2014, p. 231) argue that the answer to the following questions will determine the effectiveness of KT practice. First, is the transferred knowledge compatible with the existing knowledge within the organisation? If yes, then it aligns with the internal needs of the organisation and the local market. Second, does the receiver value the knowledge in the possession of the

source? Finally, is the source motivated to reveal the knowledge? This aspect implies that a successful transfer of the five sales performance drivers would be guaranteed in the supermarkets that participated in the research in both continents, provided the following conditions are met. First, if the research participants are motivated to transfer this KC. Second, if their subordinates value the knowledge and have the capacity to capture and absorb it. Thirdly, if the knowledge is compatible with the internal needs of these supermarkets and their local markets.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative approach. Using raw data from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 40 store managers (SMs) from top supermarkets in Africa and the UK, the study examines the influence of national culture on transfer of knowledge categories from the SMs to their subordinates. The standard of rigour required in qualitative research has been highlighted by Gibbert and Ruigrok (2010). The authors argue that, although such criteria for rigor (e.g., construct validity, internal and external validity, and reliability) which are embedded in the positivist approach might be lacking in qualitative studies, qualitative studies can still address an extensive degree of rigor through a comprehensive analysis of the actual research actions performed by a researcher (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010). Similarly, in his investigation of an exemplary qualitative research, Lee (1999) also argues that a standard qualitative research study should be conducted with a sophisticated standard of methodological rigor and transparency, be thorough enough, and with positive outcomes that are valued over a long period but, most importantly, should create additional knowledge for managers. For Lincoln and Guba (1985), to be considered valid and reliable, qualitative studies must meet the criteria of: credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability.

Therefore, to show the amount of rigor involved in this study, this section offers an in-depth account of the research activities undertaken by the researcher, including the methods involved in the data collection and analysis processes, and, as such, improves the validity and reliability of this study (Creswell, 2007; Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2012; O'Reilly, Paper & Marx, 2012).

### ***Sampling Strategy – Purposive Sampling***

Even though some classifications of purposive sampling might seem conflicting, they all state one thing – the researcher is sampling with a purpose (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). Therefore, Wong (2008) argues that, provided the target participants are distinct or well-defined (such as store managers of top supermarkets in Africa and the UK), purposive sampling is the most suitable approach.

### ***Supermarket Selection***

To improve the validity of this study, the following criteria were adopted in the selection of the supermarkets: (a) supermarkets that belong to the top 10 (i.e. in terms of their overall performance and rating) in their respective countries, which suggests that they are (b) obviously recognised as highly competitive; and are of (c) international standards. These selection criteria have helped the researcher to choose those supermarkets that rely on KT to drive performance. Therefore, the participating UK supermarkets were the UK's BIG four – Tesco, ASDA, Sainsbury's and Morrison's supermarkets. The selection of their African counterparts was based on the ranking by Chambers of Commerce in both Nigeria and South Africa.

### ***Store Manager (SM) Selection***

The following criteria were adopted in the selection of the participating managers: (a) a clearly defined managerial hierarchy in each organisation, to show that (b) each selected participant is easily identified as a SM in their organisations, (c) the selected participant must be in charge of a group of employees who are under them, so that (d) each participant has some KT responsibilities and power over a group of employees. (e) Each participant manages a branch of their supermarket; and, as such, (f) often collaborates with senior management teams in the headquarters for planning and decision making, before transferring such knowledge to their subordinates. These selection criteria have allowed the author to identify those SMs who have KT responsibilities. Such a setting also suits the central research question and allows the study to examine and compare whether, and how, national culture impacts the transfer of the five sales performance drivers in diverse cultures. However, due to the large number of willing participants from the UK, 20 participants were selected from the UK's BIG four – Tesco, ASDA, Sainsbury's and Morrison's supermarkets. In total, 10 participants were selected from Nigeria, and 10 from South Africa's big chains.

### ***Justification for the Size of the Sample***

Although there is no consensus on the actual sample sizes for non-probabilistic samples in qualitative research (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006), recommendations do exist for the actual sample sizes, and yet, they are contradictory. 'For many research projects eight respondents will be perfectly sufficient' (McCracken, 1988, p. 17), whereas Bertaux (1981) argued that 15 participants should be the smallest acceptable sample size. For Morse (1994),

at least six participants are recommended for phenomenological studies, while Creswell (1998) recommends between five and twenty-five interviews for a phenomenological study. Kuzel (1992) recommends six to eight interviews for a homogeneous sample. Therefore, the total of 40 interviews conducted in this study exceeds these authors' prescribed sample sizes.

### ***Data Collection***

To enable participants to elaborate on KT in their organisations, and in their own words (Liu & Rong, 2015), this study has adopted in-depth semi-structured interviews. Therefore, although some general orienting questions (Filho & Rettig, 2016) were used to represent the key issues addressed by this study, the researcher also endeavoured to maintain a flexible approach to interviewing by allowing each participant to speak freely with minimal interference from the researcher. This approach allowed participants to reflect, construct and reconstruct their individual experiences, as befits a constructivist stance (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 260). The conversations focused on gathering data that will reveal: (1) the nature of their KT environment; (2) the KT processes in these organisations; and (3) the type of information transferred during the process. This approach, therefore, has enabled the researcher to determine whether, and how, national culture impacts the transfer of the five sales performance drivers – selling-related knowledge, the degree of adaptiveness, role-clarity, cognitive-aptitude, and work-engagement – in top supermarkets in Africa and the UK. The data were collected through store visits between September 2014 and June 2015. The 40 interviews produced (approximately) 88 hours of in-depth raw data, and which equates to an average of 2 hours and 20 minutes per interview. Overall, the researcher sent between one and three emails to each participant to inform them of the purpose of the study, but also to solicit their consent. As a result of this perseverance, most of those contacted were

willing to participate, but not without some conditions for their participation – that the interview occur during their businesses’ quieter periods and an assurance (from the researcher) that the interview could be paused at any point midway if they needed to attend to their businesses’ needs.

***Data Collection and Analysis Process***

<u>Case study steps</u>	<u>Activities</u>
Step 1	Establish the focus and scope of the research
Step 2	Decide the individual supermarkets to include in the ‘multi-site case studies’
Step 3	Develop the research questions.
Step 4	Decide the appropriate research instruments and protocols, e.g. the appropriate qualitative data gathering techniques, in this case, the semi-structured interviews.
Step 5	Determine the ‘suitable’ participants: a vertical and horizontal slice of the case studies to establish whether each prospective participant is involved in KT, or not.
Step 6	Data collection period – UK Supermarkets (September – December 2014)
Step 7	Data collection period – Nigerian Supermarkets (January – March 2015)
Step 8	Data collection period – South African Supermarkets (March – June 2015)
Step 9	Data analysis commences (See below for the steps involved)

Step 10	Literature comparison: identification of similarities and differences between the raw data and the extant literature
Step 11	Attaining closure: literature and data saturation achieved
Step 12	Dissemination: report and article development

### ***Data Analysis***

The data analysis draws from both Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six stage process and Strauss and Corbin’s (2008) recommendations for data reduction, data display and drawing conclusions.

### ***Data familiarization***

This stage commenced with the author listening to the recorded audio interviews multiple times until familiarity with the raw data was achieved. The researcher then began the transcription of all the audio files into written ones. A cross-check then followed to compare all the transcripts against the recorded audio interviews. Although no significant differences were evident in the contents, a few of the interview quotes were amended following the review, to improve their readability.

### ***Generating the initial codes***

Having transcribed all the interview data at this stage, the coding of the interview transcripts began, and which involved segmenting the transcribed data into units of text to enhance meaning making. Such a rigorous coding process was undertaken recursively until enough distinguishing categories emerged (Eisenhardt, 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 2008), and which has helped to identify a range of KT issues that pertain to individual supermarkets, and which hitherto were not included in the original design of this study. For instance, as the researcher

collapsed the subcategories containing their motivations for KT practices, it became clear that – while the KT practices in the UK’s top supermarkets are triggered by a retail problem/project – their African counterparts were built around ‘Ubuntu’. However, even though each category and subcategory of data were coded independently, confusion still emerged on few occasions, necessitating the researcher to revisit the raw interview data to review and modify the coding to align with the corresponding content-themes. This process, indeed, was continuous until validity was achieved. Having achieved validity at this stage, the next stage has involved demonstrating a more formal interpretation of the relationship between the interview answers and the corresponding (themes in the) literature (Liu & Rong, 2015).

### ***Searching for themes***

In this third step, the researcher grouped these meaningful units of text by similarity of meaning, into themes, taking into consideration both their relationships with the corresponding literature and the key issues addressed in this study. These grouped meaning units were then subjected to independent scrutiny (by the three critical friends mentioned in step 4 below), and in a few instances, recoding and regrouping were needed before consensus was reached between the researcher and these three critical friends.

### ***Reviewing the themes***

Three experienced qualitative researchers were involved for expert checks. Playing both the roles of external researchers as auditors (Filho & Rettig, 2016) and critical friends (Kember et al., 1997) the three well trained qualitative researchers provided constant constructive feedback following various peer debriefing meetings with the researcher. In a few cases, few data units needed to be recoded and regrouped until consensus were reached at each stage.

### ***Definition and naming of themes***

In the fifth step, based on suggestions by the three critical friends, names for the regrouped and refined themes were defined, capturing the essence of each identified themes.

### ***Report writing***

Finally, the results were displayed within the manuscript write-up and explained coherently, allowing the development of broader narratives. Lastly, a researcher has to move back and forth amid the literature and the empirical data to ensure that thorough and reliable analyses and comparisons between the prevailing theory and the data is achieved (Liu & Rong, 2015). This final process has helped in establishing a very strong link between the empirical data and the extant literature, especially, with respect to theory development and the potential contributions of this research study.

## **Findings**

This section reveals (1) the organisations' strategic priorities regarding knowledge assets; (2) the KT processes; and (3) the types of information transferred in the KT process, to help (4) determine whether, and how, SMs transfer the five sales performance drivers in the supermarkets studied, and, (5) to establish if, and how, national culture impacts the process. Participants tended to focus on socialisation, which include regular meetings between SMs and their teams to share knowledge (i.e. through collective experience, cf. Nonaka, 1994) and to plan and control resources to implement agreed objectives. In coding the interview transcripts, the researcher observed the extent to which participants engaged in socialisation in rather holistic ways, and, possibly, not surprisingly, as experiential knowledge assets as a source of KT can be rich and nuanced. However, one significant observation in the data from

the three countries was the absence of combinations (i.e. systematic knowledge assets). To help make sense of the data, four themes relating to the different responses from participants are termed *socialisation, externalisation, internalisation and problem-based learning*. This categorisation follows Nonaka (1994), Nonaka et al. (2000), Hmelo-silver (2004), Rooij (2007), Lowerntal (1996), and Ahmad et al. (2011).

### **Socialisation**

In terms of the organisations' strategic priorities regarding knowledge assets, socialisation is a common KT approach in the African supermarkets studied. Indeed, participants from Africa revealed taking actions (including touring round their communities) to develop extensive ties and connections with colleagues and competitors in order to learn from them:

*“I spend Sunday afternoons to visit similar stores to learn different ways of doing things...”* (Nigerian participant 6).

*“... I visit similar stores to learn from them... in turn I convert the result of such visits into a plan which I share with my top management and staff...”* (Nigerian participant 4).

*“...there is a forum for managers and staff to meet occasionally to share ideas and learn from each other...”* (South African participant 12).

Creation of informal structures, building channels and ties with others, impromptu visits and clandestine learning mechanisms were also found to be specific informal learning advantages and KT mechanisms in African organisations studied by Ado *et al.*, (2017). Theoretically, exploiting opportunities through informal actions and the creation of informal contexts are

found to be important for learning, and, more importantly, is conducive for knowledge transfer (Ado *et al.*, 2017):

*“I do go to the company’s board of directors for dialogue and knowledge...”* (Nigerian participant 2).

*“... I often identify where and when necessary actions such as expansion or relocation are needed, or areas that will bring development to the staff or satisfaction to the customers... I usually share such ideas with the staff during my Monday morning briefings with staff...I also brief the top management on areas that need improvement”* (South African participant 17).

These quotes above reveal how African managers utilise some ad hoc interactions and meetings, including using informal channels or justifications to skip their immediate bosses in the hierarchical structures to gain new knowledge or access learning resources directly from other persons/units/departments possessing the knowledge. Confidence and fearlessness are qualities of good learners (Ado *et al.*, 2017), and with such potentials they learn more. There are two main reasons for this approach. First, informal characteristics contribute significantly to how knowledge transfer occurs. Second, informalities have the potential to become the rule of the game for knowledge creation and transfer (Ado *et al.*, 2017):

*“I regularly review the skill set of my team...each time I identify a skill gap I don’t hesitate to advise the top management on how such skill gap could be filled...”* (Nigerian participant 5).

*“... I anticipate the future needs of the store on daily basis and I translate the results of such forecasting into an agenda which I share with staff and management during our monthly meetings”* (Nigerian participant 1).

Most participants from Africa said they foresee and identify the future needs of their stores and meet with staff and management to share such knowledge (i.e. through collective experience, cf. Nonaka, 1994) and to plan and control resources to implement them (McGurk, 2010). Interactions between workers (Oborn et al, 2013) are considered to be crucial for creating and sustaining an effective corporate culture and managerial mindsets throughout an organisation (Politis, 2002). In particular, these quotes resonate very well with an African ethical and philosophical concept – Ubuntu – that is based on the idea that, as humans, we ought to depend on each other to attain our ultimate wellbeing (Murove, 2014). Indeed, this study has also shown that Ubuntu has a significant influence on the knowledge seeking, knowledge generation, knowledge sharing and KT environments in Africa.

Collective experience (i.e. through socialisation, cf Nonaka, 1994) is also a common approach to KT in the UK supermarkets studied. UK participants interviewed revealed foreseeing, identifying and analysing the future needs of their businesses (including the training needs), and meeting with staff to plan and control resources to implement them (McGurk, 2010).

*“...the moment I discovered that there are many Asians in the area that is covered by my store I discussed with my team how we should change the store to suit the needs of this special group of customers...”* (UK participant 31).

*“Although I don’t necessarily identify the future needs of the business as that is done at the strategic level of the business, whenever my top managers communicate me with their strategic decisions, as a team leader I do share such information with my team and I try to identify who is best at what, so as to drive their capabilities”* (UK participant 23).

Similarly, positive interactions (Lapkin, Swain & Psyllakis, 2010), through cooperative learning (Doolittle, 1997) have been found to facilitate competency development (Dunphy & Williamson, 2004).

*“... whenever I am given my key performance indicators (KPIs), I always look at it with my team in order to ensure that we consider whether we’ll be able to achieve them, then I will tell the top management whether we think that those KPIs are achievable or not. At times, based on the budget we have, and with good explanations, my team would convince the top management to either review the budget or the KPI, or both” (UK participant 38).*

Likewise:

*“... at times when we meet as a team to discuss some changes in the business environment, we have been able to force the top management to change our budgets. For instance, a recent example was when we anticipated the arrival of a fierce competitor very close to my store, we made the top management to increase our budget...” (UK participant 27).*

Similarly:

*... during his monthly visits (to my store) I normally walk around (the store) with my operations manager to identify things that need changing in the store. For example, during his visit earlier today, we decided that we are going to introduce more Polish brands to suit the locals in the area that is covered by my store, as this area is quite ethnic... so, after this interview, I will have to brief my team on what I have agreed with my operations manager” (UK participant 24).*

The above quotes have shown that open-minded discussions amongst workers are key factors for KT (Oborn, Barrett & Racko, 2013). Regular interactions among workers provide opportunities for questioning some taken for granted assumptions. Such reflective learning opportunities (Kolb, 2014) are particularly crucial for sharing tacit knowledge (skills and know-how of individuals) through collective experience (Nonaka, *et al.*, 2000).

### **Problem based Learning**

Apart from demonstrating a collective approach to learning, the KT culture of the UK supermarkets (as revealed above) also shows that their KT efforts are embedded in problem solving. PBL is about understanding a problem and producing actions that tackle the problem (Argyris & Schön, 1996) through necessary enablers (such as guided action, definition of problem, open communication, reflection, utilisation of resources, knowledge sharing and investigation) that facilitate the cognitive and behavioural aspects of whole-person learning (Yeo, 2007), e.g:

*“... a recent example was when we anticipated the arrival of a fierce competitor very close to my store, we made the top management to increase our budget...”* (UK participant 27).

*“...the moment I discovered that there are many Asians in the area that is covered by my store I discussed with my team how we should change the store to suit the needs of this special group of customers...”* (UK participant 31).

Based on the conviction that adult learners have comparatively more work and life related problems (Yeo & Gold, 2010), both the PBL and project-based learning are considered most effective for adult learners, as both (models) portray where knowledge is created for a

specific purpose (Yeo, 2007). Many participants from the UK also demonstrated that they engage in KT to execute a particular project, e.g.

*“...during his (i.e. the operations manager’s) visit earlier today, we decided that we are going to introduce more Polish brands to suit the locals in the area that is covered by my store, as this area is quite ethnic... I will have to brief my team on what I have agreed with my operations manager”* (UK participant 24).

*“...whenever my top managers communicate me with their strategic decisions, as a team leader I do share such information with my team and I try to identify who is best at what, so as to drive their capabilities”* (UK participant 23).

With such revelations as seen in the quotes above, it confirms that the UK supermarkets KT practice is entrenched in solving an impending retail problem or executing a project, and which links to the PBL (Yeo & Gold, 2010; Boud & Feletti, 1991; Dochy et al., 2003) and project-based learning (Helle, Tynjälä & Olkinuora, 2006; Olesen & Jensen, 1999) models.

### **Externalisation**

However, apart from the ‘experiential knowledge asset’, another form of knowledge asset found in the data from Africa is the ‘routine knowledge asset’. The quotes below reveal how SMs from Africa source tacit knowledge, convert them to explicit knowledge to make them more transferrable and comprehensible, and try to utilise various plans, including meetings, briefings and one-to-one discussions to transfer such knowledge and make them embedded in the daily actions, culture, operations and practices of their supermarkets:

*“... I visit similar stores to learn from them... in turn I convert the result of such visits into a plan which I share with my top management and staff...”* (Nigerian participant 4).

*“On weekly basis I do have meetings with our top management to discuss the future needs of the business...it involves sitting down with the top management to do some evaluations and analysis of previous performances and results and looking into the foreseeable future to forecast future performances and results. I do translate the outcome of such meetings into plans to be shared with my staff, and as a consequence it can lead to training and developmental activities for those concerned...such as on-the-job trainings, personal one-to-one coaching and briefings to the staff concerned”* (South African participant 19).

Although tacit knowledge is viewed as crucial for creating and sustaining effective corporate culture and managerial mindsets throughout the organisation (Politis, 2002) and can hardly be copied by rivals (Nonaka, 1994; Thomas, 2002), it can be difficult to communicate and transfer (Nonaka, 1994; Polanyi, 1962). The quotes below reveal how participants from Africa and the UK exert much time and effort as they adopt several measures to try to transform tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, then transfer and embed them in their organisational cultures and daily operations of their supermarkets:

*“I do anticipate the long-term needs and the future directions of our business. For instance, I was able to anticipate what happens (to the grocery sector) in case of ‘fierce’ competitors like the Wal-Mart entering the market..., I try to figure out our business’s key strengths (i.e. whether it is in our brand, price, etc.) so we can build and capitalize on such assets while facing stronger rivalry... I therefore translated such vision into a plan that I shared with my staff and management team during our monthly*

*meeting... and allowed others to also bring in their own ideas and suggestions...this often led us to further training and developments for the people concerned” (South African participant 12).*

However, apart from their experiential knowledge assets, externalisation (i.e. a routine knowledge asset) is also found in the data from the UK. Participants from the UK revealed their ways of sourcing tacit knowledge, transforming them into explicit knowledge and they try to transfer and embed them in the daily actions, culture, operations and practices of their supermarkets.

*“... The first time I realised that customers are now shopping more often today than they used to do in the past 5 years or so, as a consequence I translated such knowledge into a plan which I shared with my team and we resolved what we have to be doing differently in order to change with the customers’ shopping habit...” (UK participant 40).*

Likewise,

*“... I have been able to identify the quickest growth areas, the shrinkage areas and the stagnated areas in my store and as a result the team goes into further brainstorming, and at times, colleagues undergo further training and development sessions such as, on-the-job coaching, or booking someone on a course to do, or simply briefing the whole team as a result of that” (UK participant 32).*

Because specialised KC is mostly tacit (Nonaka, 1994; Thomas, 2002), they are difficult to verbalize, interpret, absorb and retain (Szulanski, 1996). Therefore, much thought and effort, face to face communication and demonstration are needed to enhance communication, interpretation, absorption and retention (Castree et al, 2013). In other words, much thought

and effort are needed to aid transformation of tacit into explicit knowledge, for easy transfer and comprehension.

### **Internalisation**

Internalisation (i.e. a conceptual knowledge asset) is another form of KT practice found in the African supermarkets studied. Raw quotes show how African store managers source explicit knowledge, transform them to tacit knowledge and articulate them through product concepts, images, symbols, product design, brand equity and languages and share them with their teams:

*“...I have just arrived from a training session on ‘customer service for today’s businesses’, and which was organised by the headquarters. With the aid of the training manual provided following the session, I have just been demonstrating to colleagues who were not opportune to attend [the training session] how to apply such skills in customer service situations”* (South African participant 16).

*“... just last week my boss coached me on how to deal with unruly employees, difficult customers, and on other issues such as refunds, complaints and enquiries, recording transactions and preventing losses on sales...and I had to teach my staff the same...”* (South African participant 11).

*“...here is a plan (showing the plan to the researcher) which I invented on how to improve the store’s security against shop-lifters, and which I am still training my team on how to use”* (Nigerian participant 2).

These findings confirm that, while socialisation, externalisation, and internalisation are common knowledge assets in the African supermarkets studied, their UK counterparts use

socialisation and externalisation. And, while these UK supermarkets' KT practices are embedded in the problem-based learning (PBL) and project-based learning models, their African counterparts exploit various informal (including clandestine) opportunities to build interpersonal relationships and trust with knowledge holders, thereby facilitating learning and knowledge sharing. Such behaviours of African managers resonate very well with 'Ubuntu' (Murove, 2014). The discussion section next addresses how the five sales performance drivers are embedded in the raw interview data.

## **Discussion**

The UK supermarkets' KT process is normally triggered, and driven by, a specific retail problem or a project that needs the team's urgent attention, and which links to both the PBL and project-based learning models. As a process, PBL is where a team identifies a problem of critical relevance to them, identifies learning objectives to tackle this problem and explores different means of unpacking, understanding and solving the problem through self-directed inquiry and dialogue (Yeo & Gold, 2010; Boud & Feletti, 1991; Dochy et al., 2003). A related approach to PBL is project-based learning (Helle et al, 2006; Olesen & Jensen, 1999). Based on the conviction that adult learners have comparatively more work and life related problems (Yeo & Gold, 2010), both the PBL and project-based learning are considered most effective for adult learners, as both (models) portray where knowledge is created for a specific purpose (Yeo, 2007). Through causal reasoning processes (Senge, 1990) generated by the PBL, this learning method is used to establish the cause-and-effect relationship of a problem under investigation, such that, by altering the supermarket environment, a retail team can prevent a reoccurrence of a similar unwanted event in the future (Yeo, 2007).

Participants from African supermarkets have developed a number of informal and opportunistic learning behaviours, knowledge seeking aptitudes and KT tactics. These include developing ties, building trust and connections with knowledge holders, and sometimes skipping their immediate bosses in the hierarchical structures to gain new knowledge or access learning resources directly from other persons/units/departments possessing the knowledge. Ado *et al.*, (2017) argue that, because good learners are fearless and confident, informal learning behaviours can help them learn more. Such an informal, but proactive learning environment (Ado *et al.*, 2017) in African organisations not only demonstrates sustained knowledge-seeking behaviour but epitomises high levels of resourcefulness in African managers. For instance, Badaracco (1991, p. 98), found that, for one partner to secure embedded knowledge from another, (s)he must have direct, intimate, and extensive exposure to the social relationships of the other partner. Inkpen and Tsang (2005, p. 158) also argue that, as mutual trust is developed (between partners), each partner will be more willing to share knowledge. Such a metaphysical force that helps Africans connect to people in search of knowledge epitomises the African traditional custom known as ‘Ubuntu’. In particular, Ubuntu (which is based on the idea that as humans we ought to depend on each other to attain our ultimate wellbeing), has, indeed, shown its significance in the knowledge seeking behaviour, knowledge generation, knowledge sharing and the KT environments in the African supermarkets studied. This paper, therefore, makes the argument that the effectiveness of Ubuntu not only lies on the significance of interpersonal relationships in knowledge sharing, but in building a competitive advantage for firms. This insight also enhances our original understanding of humans as relational beings. This, therefore, challenges the contemporary theorising of humans as individualistic and self-interested beings, and which has sadly dominated our mainstream academic literature (Murove, 2014).

However, while socialisation, externalisation and internalisation were common in the data from African supermarkets, their UK counterparts rely only on socialisation and externalisation (Nonaka, 1994) for their KT processes. In other words, no supermarket in either of the regions studied seemed to adopt a ‘combination’ approach (i.e. a Systematic Knowledge Asset) (Nonaka, 1994) for their KT process. Such lack of systemized and packaged explicit knowledge, is, perhaps, because of the busy nature of supermarkets, as sales managers and their teams are most likely unable to devote time to reading manuals, documents, patent rights, database, etc.

This study has also found that, despite the variations in these supermarkets’ strategic priorities regarding knowledge assets, and in the cultural dimensions of their host environments (e.g. Hofstede, 1980, 2001), the five sales performance drivers are transferred successfully across all the supermarkets studied in both continents. This finding is evidenced below.

### ***Work engagement***

Work engagement was embedded in the KT processes of supermarkets in both continents. For example, comments by South African participant 17 and UK participant 32 revealed a high level of enthusiasm and citizenship behaviours. Sonnentag (2003) argues that high levels of enthusiasm and citizenship behaviour by sales managers are proof of work engagement and are related to a persistent positive affective-motivational state of fulfilment (Sonnentag, 2003, p. 518).

### ***Cognitive aptitude***

Interview data from Africa and the UK also reveal significant evidence of high cognitive aptitude in their KT practices. For instance, UK participant 32 and South African participant

12 reveal strong evidence of ability to solve difficult retail puzzles, including brainstorming ideas to adapt to the changing business environment. These are indications of high levels of cognitive abilities. Verbeke et al. (2011, p. 424) argue that, through effective KT practice, intelligent sales managers help their team to shape how customers conceptualize their own needs and how the product or service of the selling firm relates to this view.

### ***Selling-related knowledge***

Selling-related knowledge was also evident in their KT practices. For instance, responses from UK participant 40 and Nigerian participant 4 reveal both strong technical knowledge and customer knowledge, evidenced in their ability to quantify sales situations, classify prospects, and select appropriate sales strategies that suit the changing customers' buying habit. Selling-related knowledge implies understanding the roles of specific buying-center members and what products or services mean for them (e.g., who is an "influencer" or "decision maker"). It also entails an understanding of how products or services diffuse across markets (e.g., who is an "early adopter" or a "late adopter") (Verbeke et al, 2011, p. 422). As Vargo and Lusch (2004) would argue, this aspect reflects an understanding of both the products and customers that is required to present and "co-create" solutions for customers. Such depth and width of the knowledge base are needed by sales managers in order for them to quantify sales situations, classify prospects, and select appropriate sales strategies for clients (Leong et al, 1989, p. 164).

### ***Degree of adaptiveness***

There was also strong evidence of a high degree of adaptiveness in their KT practices. For instance, comments by UK participant 40 and South African participant 19 revealed that, after sourcing relevant information regarding the varying nature of their selling situations, participants interact with their teams on how to alter their selling behaviours based on the

perceived information. However, a degree of adaptiveness involves a sales manager's ability to alter their team's behaviours during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation (Weitz et al, 1986, p. 175), and which is due to the team's ability to modify sales presentations (Verbeke et al, 2011).

### ***Role Clarity***

Role clarity was also embedded in the knowledge transferred in the supermarkets. For instance, comments by South African participant 11 and 16, and UK participant 23 revealed that, after interactions with top managements and training consultants regarding information needed to perform various job roles adequately, participants try to identify who is best at what, and communicate such expectations for each job role to relevant team members. Not surprisingly, Verbeke et al (2011, p. 423) had found that, when role expectations are clear, salespersons perform better, and that sales managers with sufficient cognitive abilities will acquire more job-related knowledge, know who is best at what, assign roles clearly and appropriately, hence, will utilize these to help their team excel faster.

In summary, the key findings of this study are as follow. The UK's top supermarkets' KT practice is embedded in the Problem Based Learning (PBL) and project-based learning models. Their African counterparts have developed a number of informal and opportunistic learning behaviours, knowledge seeking aptitudes and KT tactics, and which include developing ties, building trusts and connections with knowledge holders, and sometimes skipping their immediate bosses in the hierarchical structures to gain new knowledge directly from other persons possessing such knowledge. Such a proactive attitude of building relationships in search of knowledge epitomises the well-known African philosophy – Ubuntu.

The study also found variations in these supermarkets' strategic priorities regarding knowledge assets – socialisation, externalisation and internalisation are common knowledge assets in African supermarkets, in contrast to socialisation and externalisation in their UK counterparts. Therefore, a key finding identified across the data is that these supermarkets seem to be aware that their store managers (and their teams) are too busy to devote time to reading information expressed in manuals, documents, patent rights, database, etc., hence, there is a lack of 'combination' (i.e. Systematic Knowledge Asset, *cf* Nonaka, 1994) in the dataset. Finally, and equally interesting is that, despite these variations in these supermarkets' strategic priorities regarding knowledge assets and in the cultural dimensions of their host environments (e.g. Hofstede, 1980, 2001), this study finds successful transfer of the five sales performance drivers in the supermarkets in both continents. This implies that despite the high-power distance and the collectivist culture of Nigeria and South Africa, as against the low power distance and the individualistic culture of the UK, national culture did not appear an obstacle to the transfer of these five categories central to supermarket performance in both continents. Therefore, this study provides a counterbalance to previous studies that found variations in KT praxis across dissimilar cultures.

However, these findings have some important implications for both managers and researchers alike.

### **Implications of the study**

The study has two significant implications – practical and theoretical.

#### ***Implications for Practice***

Specialised KC (such as the five sales performance drivers) could contain some essential information on a specific topic (Schafermeyer & Hoffman, 2016, p. 89), and which are not widely known by others (Martin, et al., 2012, p. 30). Thus, losing them could have a significant impact on operational excellence, costs, profitability, growth, and even survival prospects (Schafermeyer & Hoffman, 2016, p. 89) of an organisation. Although a successful transfer of these five sales performance drivers across all continents could mean that specialised KC transcend cultural, historical and geographic boundaries (Fraser & Lepofsky, 2004), this paper still recognises the difficulty of attaining an effective transfer of knowledge in practice (see, for example, Nonaka, 1994; Powell, Koput & Smith-Doerr, 1996). This begs three crucial questions. First, what are the barriers to a successful transfer of such a specialised KC? Second, how could such barriers be overcome? Third, how can organisations identify, motivate and train holders of such a specialised KC and their seekers to enhance their successful transfer in organisations?

Given the crucial role of the five categories central to supermarket profitability, survival and growth (Schafermeyer & Hoffman, 2016), Hoffman and Hanes (2003) calls for an early capture of such a specialised KC, and to create enough lead time for a systematic planning of its successful transfer before it is gone. Yet, because organisations rarely train and motivate holders of such a specialised KC (for their effective transfer) and their seekers (in readiness for receiving such a knowledge), their transfer is likely to be incomplete (Hoffman & Ward, 2015). Another barrier to a successful transfer of such a specialised KC is knowledge stickiness (Burt, 2005; Castree, Kitchin & Rogers, 2013; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Randel & Ranft, 2007; Szulanski, 1996), and which is due to the lack of commitment and willingness on holders (of such a specialised KC) to share (Schafermeyer & Hoffman, 2016) and lack of willingness (i.e. on the part of their seekers) to cooperate (Burt, 2005). And because such virtues (such as commitment, cooperation and willingness) are characteristics of

engaged employees, Schafermeyer and Hoffman (2016) warn against using certain categories of staff (e.g. employees who are aware that they will be laid off, newly employed and volunteers in a non-profit) to transfer such a specialised KC, as such people may not likely help transfer such a knowledge, or may do so ineffectively (Schafermeyer & Hoffman, 2016, p. 89). Knowledge stickiness can also be minimised through planned mentoring programme, as the mentee (who is usually a more experienced professional would normally possess much of such a specialised KC knowledge) could help transfer not only such a knowledge (Russell & Nelson, 2009) but the culture of the organisation (Stead, 2005) to the protégé. Yet, holders of specialised KC should be encouraged to regularly organise relevant seminars and workshops with the aim of transferring such a specialised knowledge, while attendees should be encouraged to take adequate notes and ask questions during such sessions.

### ***Implications for Theory and Suggestions for Further Studies***

Nonaka (1994) has distinguished four knowledge assets – socialisation, combination, externalisation and internalisation. By extension of our knowledge of Nonaka's theory, this study has found that, not all knowledge assets are valid in certain professional settings. For instance, this study has found a lack of 'combination' (i.e. Systematic Knowledge Asset, cf Nonaka, 1994) in the KT practice of the supermarkets studied in both continents, and which implies that systemized and packaged explicit knowledge is not a suitable knowledge asset for store managers and their teams who perhaps are too busy to devote time to exploring knowledge expressed in manuals, documents, patent rights, database, etc. This, therefore, provides a direction for subsequent KT studies, as this paper suggests that further studies should examine the usefulness of each of these knowledge assets in other occupational/professional settings. As the findings imply, specialised KC could transcend

cultural, historical and geographic boundaries (Fraser & Lepofsky, 2004), it also implies that (since the theoretical ideas in this study can be broadly applied to future KC research) further studies on KC could examine the transferability of other KCs in other organisational and job settings, and in different cultural contexts. Similarly, as this study was conducted in Nigeria, South Africa and the UK, further studies on transfer of the five sales performance drivers should replicate the findings of this research in other cultures and compare their findings with this study. Finally, by enlightening the process through which knowledge categories can be transferred, it broadens and strengthens the theory development of knowledge categories research. It could also have a significant impact on the development of KT, knowledge management, organisational learning and retail-related studies.

## **Conclusions**

Following an extensive review of the knowledge management literature, (and moderated by) the retail literature, culture, and the OL literature, this study extends the KT literature by examining the influence of national culture on the transfer of knowledge categories in top supermarkets in diverse cultural settings. Despite the lack of consensus on KT processes, one thing is settled – KT involves moving good ideas from one part of an organisation to others that can maximise its value (Kang et al, 2010, p. 2). And, of essential importance, is: does the receiver value the knowledge in the possession of the source? Is the source motivated to reveal the knowledge? And, does the receiver have the motivation and capacity to capture and absorb the knowledge being the object of the transfer (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000, p. 475–476). Furthermore, this study has shown that, even with such advanced theories such as Nonaka (1994) and Szulanski (1996; 2000), major institutional barriers (such as knowledge stickiness and the tacit nature of knowledge) still remain (Castree et al, 2013). Further, this

study has found that the KT practices of the UK supermarkets is triggered by the need to solve a specific retail problem, or to execute a project, and which is synonymous with the models of the PBL and project-based learning. Their African counterparts KT practices depict a rebirth of the traditional African ethics and philosophy known as 'Ubuntu'. This study has also shown that Ubuntu is not only conducive for but facilitates learning and knowledge transfer. This study has also found that, while socialisation, externalisation and internalisation were found in the KT practices of the African supermarkets, only socialisation and externalisation (Nonaka, 1994) were found in their UK counterparts', showing a lack of 'combination' (i.e. a Systematic Knowledge Asset, cf Nonaka, 1994) across the data. Such lack of systemized and packaged explicit knowledge suggests that, perhaps, participants are too busy to devote time to exploring knowledge expressed in manuals, documents, patent rights, database, etc. The empirical evidence also reveals that, despite the variations in these supermarkets' strategic priorities regarding knowledge assets, the five sales performance drivers – selling-related knowledge, degree of adaptiveness, role clarity, cognitive aptitude and work engagement – were all transferred successfully. This new insight not only challenges the current theory that KT praxis vary between diverse cultures but suggests two significant conclusions. First, specialised KC could transcend historical and geographic boundaries. Second, despite the high-power distance and the collectivist culture of Nigeria and South Africa, as against the low power distance and the individualistic culture of the UK, national culture did not appear to be an obstacle to successful transfer of these five categories central to supermarket performance in both continents.

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