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**Next-gen University Entrepreneurship:
Unleashing the Power of Drop Shipping for Students**

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Abstract

This study investigated the effects and advantages of drop shipping as a business model for university students. A qualitative research approach was utilised, featuring semi-structured interviews with 20 students from a large university. The findings revealed that education in drop shipping empowers students through "Empowerment through Knowledge," aids them in overcoming business challenges as seen in "Overcoming Challenges," offers pathways to financial independence, illustrated in "Financial Independence," cultivates entrepreneurial skills as emphasised in "Building Entrepreneurial Skills," encourages networking and collaboration as highlighted in "Networking and Collaboration," and broadens their global business reach, as stated in "Global Reach." The results bear practical significance for university administrators, career counsellors, and entrepreneurship educators, indicating that institutions could integrate drop shipping-related courses, workshops, and mentorship programmes to better prepare students for success in e-commerce. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the potential of dropshipping as a viable entrepreneurial path for students.

Keyword: *University Entrepreneurship; Drop Shipping; Experiential Learning Theory; Entrepreneurial Opportunity Recognition Theory*

Introduction

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has significantly impacted dropshipping by facilitating automation, integrating AI, and enhancing digital marketing capabilities. This transformation has made dropshipping a more accessible and scalable business model. Tools for automation, provided by platforms like Shopify and Oberlo, streamline order fulfillment, inventory management, and customer interactions, reducing overhead costs and improving operational efficiency for entrepreneurs (Chaffey, 2022). AI-driven marketing strategies, such as personalised ads and targeted campaigns on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, enable dropshipping businesses to expand their global reach (Keller, 2021). The increasing adoption of blockchain technology for supply chain transparency is also boosting consumer trust in the products available (Rachinger et al., 2019). As a result, dropshipping is witnessing significant growth, with the global market projected to reach \$476 billion by 2026, outpacing traditional retail expansion (Statista, 2023).

Dropshipping offers significant advantages, particularly for students or aspiring entrepreneurs with limited financial resources. Since

merchants do not need to buy inventory or manage warehouses, it requires little upfront investment (Chopra, 2003). This low-cost entry makes it accessible to those with limited funds. The model also provides operational flexibility, allowing businesses to be run from anywhere with an internet connection (Victor, 2018). Dropshipping reduces overhead costs, simplifies supply chain management by eliminating the need for inventory tracking, packing, and shipping (Victor, 2018), and enables easy access to a broad customer base through online marketing (Michael, 2017). While challenges like low profit margins and supplier errors exist, dropshipping remains an attractive, low-risk business model that offers convenience for both merchants and customers (Chen et al., 2011). Therefore, dropshipping enables ambitious individuals, particularly students, to become independent business owners, making it an appealing option for aspiring entrepreneurs.

Over the last ten years, the market value of the dropshipping business model has grown significantly. In 2021, the global market value of dropshipping reached US\$22.99 billion, with an expected annual growth rate of 23.4% from 2023 to 2030 (Koroljov, 2023). This remarkable growth is mainly fueled by the rise in online business transactions, with technological advancements facilitating the emergence of startups, including dropshipping ventures, which benefit from enhanced e-commerce platforms, automation tools, and digital marketing strategies. The surge in online shopping, especially in cross-border e-commerce, has opened new opportunities for entrepreneurs. However, dropshipping faces several challenges, including a lack of technological literacy among older business owners and ethical concerns that could impact its success (Khan, 2023; Widana et al., 2023). Key ethical issues in dropshipping include supply chain transparency, where consumers might not be fully aware of the origins or conditions of the products they buy (Busari, Aminu, & Zakariyyah, 2021). Moreover, excessive markups by retailers can mislead customers regarding the true value of products (Busari et al., 2021). Intellectual property issues also arise, especially when drop shippers sell counterfeit or unlicensed items, potentially violating trademarks and patents (Busari et al., 2021). These factors can erode consumer trust and jeopardise the long-term viability of the dropshipping model.

The rise in e-commerce and online business transactions during and following the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift to the dropshipping entrepreneurial model. While the pandemic had negative health and economic consequences, it is generally acknowledged that it

accelerated the growth of e-commerce and e-business in the global market (Gorecka & Zborowska, 2020; Khan, 2023; Pokhylko et al., 2021). Dropshipping is a business model where customers purchase products from a third-party supplier, who then ships them directly. With the evolution of e-commerce, e-business, and the Internet of Things (IoT), dropshipping has become increasingly accessible to young people. This younger generation has the technological skills necessary to navigate digital platforms and tools effectively.

In emerging markets like Zimbabwe, the trend of online shopping has followed the global shift towards digital entrepreneurship. This growth is primarily fuelled by rising mobile phone usage and digital innovation. Zimbabwe's e-commerce market was estimated at around US\$216 million in 2023, with expectations to double to US\$401 million by 2027, indicating a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 17% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2024). User penetration in the online market was around 27% in 2023 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2024). The demographic of online shoppers is mostly male (69.7%), with the largest age group falling between 25 and 34 years (71%), followed by the 18–24 years group at 25.6% (Start.io, 2024). Mobile transactions dominate the payment sector, accounting for approximately 96% of commercial transactions conducted via mobile devices (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2024). Popular mobile payment solutions such as EcoCash, Telecash, and OneMoney have significantly improved online buying options for even unbanked individuals (ZimAdvocate, 2024). Nevertheless, challenges remain; logistics and delivery systems need enhancement, particularly in rural areas, although innovative solutions like "click-and-collect" have started to emerge (The Sunday Mail, 2024). These trends suggest that dropshipping has strong potential in mobile-driven economies that are digitally interconnected, even in areas where traditional infrastructure is underdeveloped.

Engaging university students in a deep examination of their entrepreneurial interests is crucial, making it necessary to consider dropshipping as a feasible opportunity for those aspiring to entrepreneurship. This is particularly pertinent for business students interested in e-commerce but who might lack extensive experience or significant financial backing (Gerhát, 2024). University students are known for their resourcefulness, adaptability, and eagerness to explore new opportunities, making them ideal candidates for entrepreneurial ventures (Gerhát, 2024). As the educational landscape shifts, universities globally increasingly acknowledge the importance of fostering an

entrepreneurial mindset in their students (Iwu, Maziriri, Sibanda, & Makwara, 2024). Thus, examining dropshipping's potential as a starting point for university students aiming to start their own businesses is vital. This approach not only encourages innovative thought but also aids students in developing an entrepreneurial mindset, equipping them to become self-sufficient business owners.

Moreover, it is important to emphasise that the function of dropshipping as a springboard for entrepreneurship within the university context has been largely overlooked (Nurhayati et al., 2022). This study explores the dynamics and opportunities dropshipping presents for university students.

The paper includes a literature review, theoretical framework, research design and methodology, results and discussions, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

A Review of Relevant Literature

Drop Shipping: An Overview and Evolution

Drop shipping is an evolving and cooperative online business model where retailers collaborate with external suppliers to fulfil customer orders directly (Ligaraba et al., 2023). In this setup, the retailer concentrates on marketing, customer acquisition, and business expansion, while a third-party supplier manages the inventory and shipping. Despite varied definitions in academic literature, scholars widely agree that drop shipping includes a profit-sharing arrangement that aligns the interests of manufacturers, suppliers, and retailers (Yu et al., 2017). The growth of drop shipping has closely followed the rise of global e-commerce platforms like eBay and Amazon, enabling small entrepreneurs to tap into expansive markets with minimal upfront inventory costs (Ligaraba et al., 2023). Furthermore, advancements in digital advertising through channels such as Facebook Ads and Google Ads have also spurred the rise of drop shipping by providing cost-efficient customer targeting strategies.

The emergence of Alibaba was a crucial turning point, as it facilitated connections with Chinese manufacturers and provided affordable products for global markets, which lowered entry barriers. The continuous transition to online shopping maintains the global attractiveness of drop shipping. By 2024, global e-commerce sales are expected to reach approximately \$6.3 trillion, with forecasts suggesting continued expansion, underscoring the growing opportunities for drop

shipping entrepreneurs. Figure 1 shows the consistent rise in digital buyers around the world from 2014 to 2021.

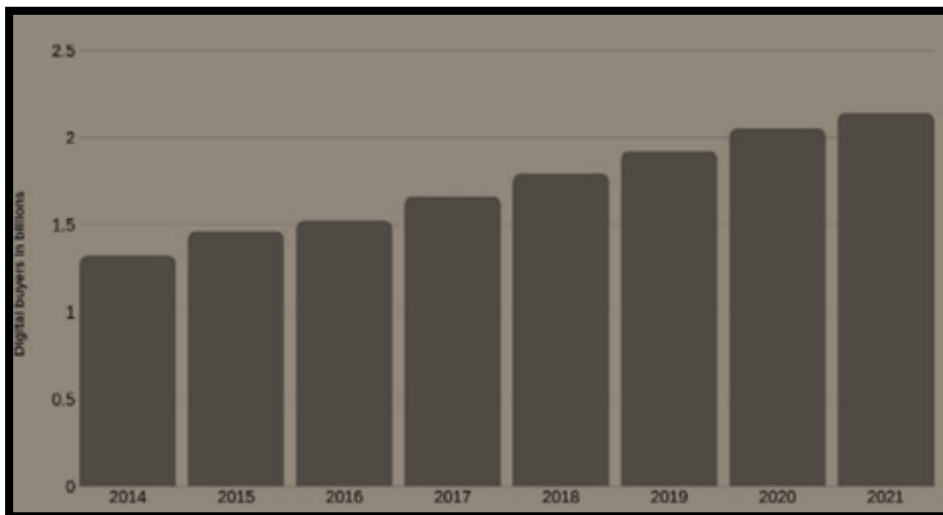


Figure 1: *Growth in the number of digital buyers*

Source: *Koroljov (2023)*

With the rapid increase in digital consumers, it is no wonder that e-commerce is experiencing significant growth. Chevalier (2022) reports that e-commerce sales totalled \$5.2 billion in 2021, with projections estimating they will hit \$8.1 trillion by 2026 (See Figure 2).

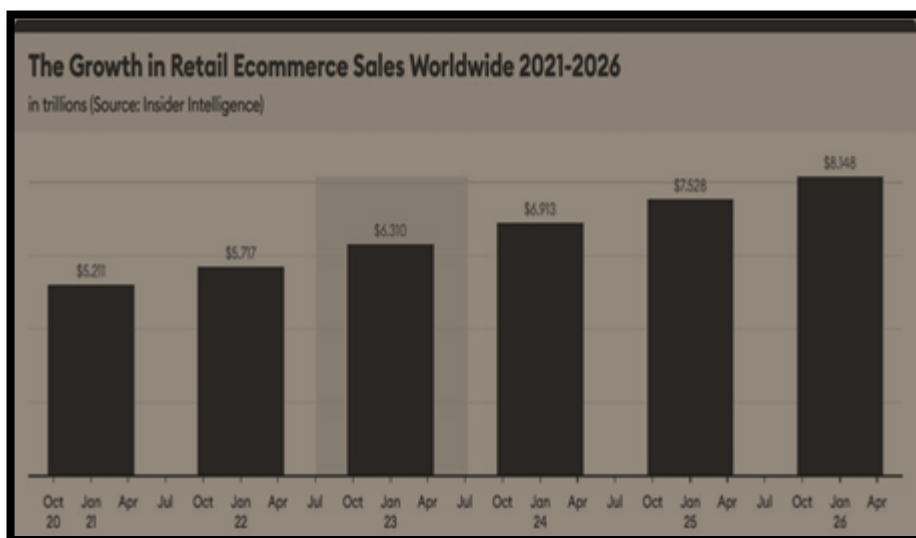


Figure 2: *Sales Growth of Retail E-commerce*

Source: *Insider Intelligence (2022)*

The rapid increase in online shoppers and retail e-commerce sales highlights the benefits of drop shipping. Numerous entrepreneurs are taking advantage of this model, known for its low start-up costs. Since there is no requirement for warehousing or inventory, entrepreneurs can easily launch a new business with minimal capital (Hayes & Youderian, 2013). Dropshipping creates a lucrative opportunity for new entrepreneurs, such as university students who may lack the resources to invest in inventory. Examples of drop shipping ventures initiated by university students include Dropstore, Student Startup, Beauty and Cosmetic Microbrands, and Fitness Equipment stores. Additionally, drop shipping entrepreneurship offers scalability, minimising the necessity for a larger workforce (Hayes & Youderian, 2013).

Furthermore, adopting a dropshipping entrepreneurship model in the retail sector ensures flexibility. With convenient internet connectivity, running a business worldwide becomes less complicated. The advancements of Industry 4.0 have enabled 24/7 operations worldwide. According to Hayes and Youderian (2013), the drop shipping model can be easily managed as long as effective communication is maintained with both customers and suppliers. Additionally, the adoption of drop shipping provides entrepreneurs with the advantage of simplicity. By utilising e-commerce, entrepreneurs are relieved of the burden of physical products, making business management easier. Potential challenges include managing supplier relationships and ensuring product quality. There is no longer a need to handle tasks such as packing, shipping, and tracking inventory (Hayes & Youderian, 2013).

Drop shipping poses several challenges, such as the difficulties in collaboration between suppliers and drop shippers, often complicated by trust issues (Hayes & Youderian, 2013). Consequently, this can result in delays in delivery, incorrect packaging, and even product damage. To alleviate these issues, effective communication and ethical considerations are essential.

Critical Insight

While dropshipping is not a universal solution, it provides a viable chance for students in Zimbabwe's challenging economic environment to become entrepreneurs. It fosters self-reliance, enhances digital skills, and familiarises young individuals with the basics of global trade, acting as both an economic resource and an educational opportunity.

The dropshipping process comprises four essential stages within the larger supply chain (Busari et al., 2021). First, aspiring dropshippers must establish an online seller account with major e-commerce platforms like Amazon, Alibaba, or Lazada (Pretorius, 2001). These platforms act as marketplaces where retailers can advertise and sell their products, requiring all registered sellers to comply with the specific terms set by the platform. Next, retailers must identify trustworthy dropshipping companies that provide competitive and high-quality products (Zorzini, 2018). Reliability in dropshipping partners is crucial, as retailers often rely on the information provided, without the means to inspect the products physically.

The third step requires the retailer to examine the dropshipper's catalogue, select products for sale, and upload them to the chosen platform for customer orders (Zorzini, 2018). Affordable and trustworthy products draw online shoppers, who are often very price-sensitive and value quality assurance along with return policies. Besides offering competitive prices, it is crucial to choose a dropshipper that guarantees timely shipping and delivery, as this has a major impact on online sales (Michael, 2017).

Zorzini (2018) also noted that order fulfilment is among the weakest aspects of e-commerce. Finally, retailers must sell products on the platform while overseeing payments, managing shipping, and confirming product deliveries. This strategy shows that retailers do not need to invest in inventory or goods upfront; they can still achieve profitability through the existing supply chain model (Michael, 2017). A diagram illustrating the dropshipping operational process is provided below (Figure 3).



Figure 3: *Dropshipping model example*

Source: *Busari, Aminu, & Zakariyyah (2021).*

Explanation of Figure 3: Dropshipping process

Referring to Figure 3, "The Drop Shipping Process," the research highlights that Zimbabwe's geographical position presents specific challenges and opportunities in the e-commerce sector. The model shown in Figure 3 outlines a global framework where the online store, commonly operated by students in this scenario, serves as a link between the customer and the supplier. This approach eliminates the need for students to physically maintain inventory, thus avoiding the logistical difficulties that come with conventional importation.

Theoretical lenses

This research investigates the viability of drop shipping as an entry point for university students. Based on experiential learning theory and entrepreneurial opportunity recognition theory, it offers a theoretical framework for analysing the results.

Experiential learning theory

The experiential learning theory, introduced by Kolb (1984), describes how knowledge is generated through experience transformation. This theory posits that after an individual has an experience, they reflect on it, and through this reflective process, they convert it into knowledge that ultimately affects their future actions (Belanger, 2011). Byrne and Toutain (2012) argue that these learning theories offer valuable insights into entrepreneurship and learning. According to them, experiential learning theory closely aligns with the learning processes in hybrid entrepreneurship, which are action-oriented and based on both experience and prior knowledge (Belanger, 2011). Experiential learning emphasises the application of experiences to acquire knowledge (Karami & Tang, 2019), specifically highlighting the reflective aspect of learning (Belanger, 2011). Politis (2005) indicates that the success of entrepreneurs' second and third ventures suggests that the personal experiences gained from their initial venture provide knowledge that boosts the success of future endeavours. Experiential learning theory has been extensively applied to analyse individual behaviour (Roberts, 2006; Hedín, 2010; Ferreira, 2020; Moseley et al., 2019; Uhm et al., 2019). To the best of the authors' knowledge, no research has examined this topic in relation to dropshipping as a business model for university students within the Zimbabwean context, presenting an opportunity to enhance the contextual significance of this theory for dropshipping education and programmes.

Entrepreneurial opportunity recognition theory

Marvel and Lumpkin (2007) describe entrepreneurial opportunity recognition as a continuous learning process that harnesses a wealth of information, challenging the conventional view in literature that sees the environment as static (Park, 2005). This implies that in addition to an individual's capabilities and ongoing efforts to identify entrepreneurial opportunities (Lee and Venkataraman, 2006), knowledge of the marketplace enhances the generation of new ideas and concepts related to entrepreneurial opportunities (Stevenson and Gumpert, 1985), while its influence on opportunity recognition is also significant (Ozgen, 2003). Furthermore, the process of recognising entrepreneurial opportunities is shaped by several influencing factors. These factors can be divided into personal traits, such as prior knowledge or information (Shane, 2000; Ardichvili and Cardozo, 2000), entrepreneurial alertness (Kirzner, 1973; Tang et al., 2012), entrepreneurial learning (Corbett, 2007; Dimov, 2007a, b), creativity (Shane, 2003; Ardichvili et al., 2003), and external

influences, including environmental change (Baron, 2006; Shane, 2003) and social networks (Singh, 2000). This paper explores the theory of entrepreneurial opportunity recognition to demonstrate how individuals, particularly university students, identify opportunities like drop shipping. This theory highlights the essential role of perceptual and cognitive skills in recognising opportunities, indicating that observant individuals are more inclined to detect opportunities by staying attuned to environmental changes and cues.

Methodology

Sample

In qualitative research, smaller sample sizes are often suitable since the aim is to delve into depth rather than achieve statistical generalisability (Creswell, 2013). A total of 20 participants was chosen to facilitate an in-depth examination of the impact and advantages of dropshipping among university students while also ensuring manageable data for thorough analysis. Data saturation, which is reached when no new themes or insights arise, occurred after roughly 17 interviews, with the final three reinforcing the redundancy of data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Research indicates that in qualitative studies using semi-structured interviews, sample sizes ranging from 12 to 30 participants are usually adequate to achieve saturation and yield reliable outcomes (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). Therefore, the selection of 20 participants was considered sufficient to provide both depth and credibility in addressing the research questions.

A non-probability convenience sampling method was employed to select participants (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). The researchers opted for non-probability convenience sampling because of its cost-effectiveness and efficiency in the context of academic project deadlines (Bhardwaj, 2019). This approach was particularly beneficial given the tight time constraints typical in academia. Convenience sampling involves gathering data from participants who are willing, easily accessible, or otherwise available to the researcher (Wienclaw, 2019). To minimise interviewer bias and enhance credibility, the researchers utilised a semi-structured interview guide for consistency, trained interviewers to maintain neutrality and avoid leading questions, and practised reflexive journaling to reflect on and reduce personal biases. Additionally, we performed member checking by giving participants summaries of their responses to

verify the accuracy and authenticity of the data we collected. The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to select participants:

- Participants were required to be registered university students.
- Participants needed to have acquired knowledge about drop shipping from a lecture in one of the entrepreneurship modules offered by the university.
- The interviews took place on university premises, in the participants' auditoria and lecture halls, ensuring they felt comfortable responding in their familiar environment. Interviews were scheduled with each participant based on convenience and availability. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Data collection took place over a period of six months, from January 2023 to June 2023. Participant permission was obtained for recording the interviews, and pseudonyms were used to safeguard the participants' identities. The demographic characteristics of the participants are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: The participants' demographic characteristics

Participant number	Pseudo-name	Age	Gender
1	Student 1	23	Female
2	Student 2	24	Male
3	Student 3	21	Female
4	Student 4	19	Male
5	Student 5	19	Female
6	Student 6	18	Female
7	Student 7	19	Male
8	Student 8	22	Female
9	Student 9	23	Female
10	Student 10	24	Female
11	Student 11	25	Male
12	Student 12	23	Male
13	Student 13	22	Male
14	Student 14	22	Female
15	Student 15	27	Female
16	Student 16	21	Male
17	Student 17	23	Male
18	Student 18	25	Female
19	Student 19	24	Male
20	Student 20	21	Male

Source: *Authors' own work*

Data collection method: semi-structured interviews

For this study, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Interviewing serves as the primary method of data collection in qualitative research (Sobuce, 2012). Such interviews facilitate data generation through conversations about participants' everyday

experiences (Thompson, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students, designed around specific topics while still offering significant flexibility in depth and range (Ncanywa, 2014). Additionally, Maziriri and Madinga (2015) noted that these interviews incorporate both targeted questions (to gather known information) and open-ended questions (to uncover unexpected insights). This format allows the researcher to pose additional questions as needed. The interview guide was created following a systematic procedure. Initially, a literature review identified key themes related to “The next-gen university entrepreneurship: Understanding the power of dropshipping students.” Draft questions were crafted to explore these themes while giving participants space to express new ideas. The initial version of the guide was reviewed by two experts in qualitative methodology to verify that the questions were clear, relevant, and unbiased. A pilot study with three students outside the main sample was conducted to test the interview guide. Feedback from this pilot led to minor adjustments, including rephrasing two questions for clarity and eliminating one redundant item. This iterative process ensured the interview guide was both reliable and valid for capturing in-depth qualitative data aligned with the research goals. All interviews were digitally recorded to ensure accurate responses. The researchers meticulously took notes on a hard copy, and transcriptions were checked against the audio recordings for accuracy. In total, 20 interviews were conducted with the students.

Strategies to ensure data quality and reporting

Strict protocols were adhered to in order to guarantee data quality and reporting. Initially, an interview guide was crafted and assessed by experts, then it was tested in the validation phase. Additionally, the data collection process extended over 6 months, providing ample time for meticulous transcription and researcher contemplation.

Ensuring the quality and rigour of the research

The research's quality and rigour were upheld through various methods. The authors utilised peer debriefing and member checking at all stages of the research - planning, execution, and dissemination (Treharne and Riggs, 2015). To boost the credibility and trustworthiness of our findings, we implemented two essential validation techniques: peer debriefing and member checking. For peer debriefing, we selected two experts in qualitative research methods who had familiarity with the study's topic, ensuring they were not involved in data collection or analysis to maintain an

unbiased viewpoint. These sessions occurred after the initial data analysis, where we examined the findings, interpretations, and potential biases with them. Their feedback helped enhance our analysis and interpretations for rigorous and comprehensive data representation. Additionally, once the analysis was complete, we sent a summary of the findings to five participants from the sample for feedback. These participants were chosen for their willingness to engage and the diversity they brought to the sample. They assessed the findings and indicated whether the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. We addressed any discrepancies and adjusted the analysis as needed. This process bolstered the trustworthiness of our conclusions by ensuring accurate data interpretation. Following Johnson et al. (2020), the authors also practised reflexivity and implemented safeguards against possible biases. The researchers adhered to the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to affirm the research's trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In this study, credibility was attained by providing an authentic portrayal of the findings and the phenomenon under investigation, aligning closely with reality. For transferability, the richness of the data and results offers a solid foundation for future research to pursue similar studies.

Narrative analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using NVivo 11, software for qualitative data analysis. The analysis employed a structured coding process that started with inductively developing initial codes through a comprehensive review of the transcripts. A hybrid coding method, merging inductive insights with deductive elements from relevant literature, was applied to enhance the codes. Two researchers independently coded a subset to maintain inter-coder reliability, addressing any discrepancies through collaboration. NVivo supported the implementation of the final coding structure, allowing for effective organisation, theme tracking, and pattern identification. Storytelling elements such as orientation, abstract, and coda informed the narrative analysis, which helped in organising the participants' narratives and highlighting significant experiences related to dropshipping.

Determination of the main narratives

After the coding process, similar codes were organised into broader themes based on their conceptual similarity, frequency, and relevance to the research questions. This categorisation was iterative, drawing from

both inductive insights and theoretical frameworks. Codes that were frequently mentioned and held significant conceptual importance were prioritised in the development of themes. Ongoing analysis helped continuously refine these themes to ensure both clarity and accuracy, in line with the reviewed literature. As a result, a cohesive set of empirically grounded narratives emerged, reflecting the participants' experiences and bolstering the study's theoretical contributions.

Findings

The data analysis uncovered five significant narratives. The first narrative highlights how dropshipping education empowers students by providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills to start their businesses. Participants feel confident that they can take control of their financial futures, rather than being limited by traditional employment. The second narrative examines how dropshipping education aids participants in overcoming the hurdles of launching and managing a business. They acquire effective strategies for managing logistics, customer service, and marketing, and many enjoy the flexibility that dropshipping presents. The third narrative centres on financial independence, a key aspect of dropshipping education. Participants acknowledge that with the right knowledge, they can establish sustainable income streams while continuing their studies. Dropshipping offers opportunities for scalable businesses and passive income. The fourth narrative underscores the entrepreneurial skills participants cultivate through dropshipping education, including problem-solving, communication, marketing, and fostering a growth mindset. Participants appreciate resourcefulness and innovation. The fifth narrative focuses on networking and collaboration. Dropshipping education connects students with similar-minded peers, creating a supportive network of student entrepreneurs. Collaboration is essential for growth within the industry, and participants recognise the importance of cultivating strong relationships. These narratives underscore the global impact of dropshipping education, broadening participants' views on business opportunities. They discover that geographical limitations no longer hinder their ability to reach customers worldwide, thanks to technological advancements and the insights they gained from dropshipping education. The forthcoming sections will delve into these findings, along with relevant quotes and stories.

Narrative 1: Empowerment through knowledge

This narrative illustrates how drop shipping education has empowered students, providing them with the knowledge and skills to start their own businesses. Participants shared that they feel confident and prepared to take charge of their financial future, liberating themselves from the constraints of conventional job opportunities. One participant remarked that:

"Drop shipping education has given me the knowledge and tools to turn my passion into a profitable business. I no longer feel limited by traditional job opportunities."

Narrative 2: Overcoming challenges

In this narrative, participants explore how drop shipping education has enabled them to tackle the challenges involved in launching and managing a business. They have acquired effective strategies for managing logistics, customer service, and marketing. Additionally, some have gained from the flexibility of drop shipping, which helps them navigate time constraints and limited resources.

Starting a business can be daunting, but drop shipping education has helped me overcome challenges. I have learned strategies to handle logistics, customer service, and marketing effectively.

Furthermore, a different viewpoint emerged from a participant, who stated:

As a student, I encounter time constraints and limited resources. Dropshipping has enabled me to launch a business without the need for inventory or a physical store, making it a game-changer.

Narrative 3: Financial independence

Achieving financial independence is an essential component of drop shipping education. With the right knowledge, participants realise they can create sustainable income sources while still in school. Drop shipping presents opportunities for scalable businesses that yield passive income, allowing them to take charge of their financial futures.

A participant noted that:

"Through drop shipping, I have gained control over my financial destiny. Instead of relying solely on a part-time job, I can build a scalable business that generates passive income."

"Drop shipping education has empowered me to become financially literate. I am learning to manage my finances effectively, make smart investment decisions, and build long-term wealth."

Narrative 4: Building entrepreneurial skills

This narrative highlights the extensive entrepreneurial skills that participants have acquired through drop shipping education. These skills go beyond mere business management, incorporating problem-solving, communication, marketing, and an innovative mindset. Participants see failure as a means to achieve success, prioritising resourcefulness and creativity.

Drop shipping education is not just about running a business; it is about developing valuable entrepreneurial skills. I have honed my problem-solving, communication, and marketing abilities.

According to another participant:

Drop shipping has allowed me to develop a growth mindset. I have learned to embrace failure as a stepping stone to success and continuously seek opportunities for improvement.

Narrative 5: Networking and collaboration

Drop shipping education has enabled students to network with others who share their interests, creating a supportive community of student entrepreneurs. Collaboration is regarded as crucial for advancement in the drop shipping sector, leading participants to recognise the importance of building relationships with suppliers, customers, and other entrepreneurs.

One of the most valuable aspects of drop shipping education is the opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals. I have formed a network of fellow student entrepreneurs who support and inspire each other. Collaboration is essential for growth in this industry.

Moreover, a different participant expressed:

I never realised how important networking could be until I entered the drop shipping world. I have learned the value of building relationships with suppliers, customers, and other entrepreneurs through education. It is a community that fosters growth and innovation.

Narrative 6: Global reach

The story of global reach highlights how drop shipping education has expanded participants' views on business prospects. They have come to realise that they are no longer limited by geography when it comes to reaching customers around the world. Utilising technology and insights gained from drop shipping education, they can access a worldwide business marketplace.

Drop shipping has opened up a whole new world of possibilities. With the knowledge I have gained, I can reach customers from all around the globe. Education has shown me that geographical boundaries no longer limit the potential for business growth.

Moreover, it was conveyed by a different participant that:

I used to think that starting a business required a physical store and a local customer base. Drop shipping education has shattered that notion. Now I understand that the world is my marketplace, and I can leverage technology to connect with customers worldwide.

Discussion of results

Although research on drop shipping entrepreneurship among next-generation university students is limited, existing mainstream literature highlights its importance (Koroljor, 2023; Miljenovic & Berisa, 2022; Nurhayati et al., 2022). This study aimed to explore the impact and benefits of drop shipping as a business model. Through narrative analysis, it was revealed that dropshipping education has empowered students, equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed to start new businesses. This empowerment stems from leveraging e-commerce, which alleviates entrepreneurs from managing physical products, thus simplifying business operations. Consequently, tasks like packing, shipping, and inventory tracking are no longer required (Hayes & Youderian, 2013). This aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which posits that learning occurs through the transformation of experiences. Notably, entrepreneurial universities include entrepreneurship curricula designed to equip students with a variety of competencies and knowledge essential for success in today's business environment (Dzingirai, 2020).

Secondly, the findings indicated that education in drop shipping enabled university students to tackle challenges related to starting and managing a business. Despite facing obstacles such as economic instability, funding constraints, skills gap, and issues of trust and

legitimacy, entrepreneurial activities continue, driven by necessity instead of opportunity (Mandongwe & Jaravaza, 2020; Ruzungunde, Chinyamurindi, & Marange, 2023). These entrepreneurs often depend on informal networks, personal savings, or mobile money platforms to establish their businesses (Ojong, Simba, & Dana, 2021). This supports the theoretical insights of Hages and Youderian (2013), who observed that the drop shipping entrepreneurial model is characterised by low capital requirements, as it removes the necessity for a warehouse and inventory. Thirdly, the results showed that drop shipping can lead to financial independence, a notion echoed by Miljenovic and Berisa (2022) and Nurhayati et al. (2022). Fourthly, it was noted that drop shipping education has fostered the development of broader entrepreneurial skills. In this context, the current literature highlights the significance of drop shipping in enhancing entrepreneurial skills that encourage entrepreneurial pursuits (Cook, 2022; Nurhayati et al., 2022; Putra & Zulfikar, 2022; Vellve & Burgos, 2018). Fifthly, it was found that drop shipping education enabled university students to build connections with like-minded peers.

It is widely acknowledged by scholars that networking and collaboration are essential elements of entrepreneurship (Cozzolino et al., 2023; Drummond et al., 2023; Zardini et al., 2023). Furthermore, it has become clear that drop shipping education has expanded university students' global outlook on business opportunities. In this context, drop shipping offers the advantage of reaching a global market (Khan, 2023; Widana et al., 2023). However, challenges remain, particularly ethical concerns that may hinder the success of drop shipping ventures (Khan, 2023; Widana et al., 2023).

Practical and theoretical implications of the study

This study presents both theoretical and practical implications. While the research on entrepreneurship in education is vast, this study provides a distinctive viewpoint by analysing drop shipping through the frameworks of experiential learning theory and entrepreneurial opportunity recognition theory. These theories illustrate how students can gain from participating in drop shipping as an entrepreneurial activity. This research enhances the fields of experiential learning and opportunity recognition by highlighting action-based learning derived from experience and prior knowledge (Belanger, 2011). Additionally, there is a chance to broaden the scope of these theories in the context of drop shipping education and programmes.

Opportunity recognition theory evolves by highlighting the crucial role of perceptual and cognitive skills in spotting opportunities. Individuals who are observant and attuned to changes in their environment are more adept at identifying these opportunities. Practically, students acquire essential entrepreneurial skills through dropshipping, which resonates with theories of experiential learning and opportunity recognition. They can earn income by utilising the university ecosystem. Yet, drop shipping also poses challenges such as intense competition, lower profit margins, rising costs, and diminished control over operations. To overcome these obstacles, students should cultivate strong partnerships with suppliers, streamline shipping processes, boost customer service, optimise product assortment, efficiently manage inventory, and address payment issues effectively.

The findings indicate that university stakeholders- including management, administrators, career counsellors, and entrepreneurship educators- should actively promote and support entrepreneurship education and experience. This backing is vital for the success of revenue-generating activities like drop shipping.

Limitations and future research

The study underscores the viability of dropshipping as a potential entrepreneurial avenue for university students but recognises several limitations. These limitations include a limited, deliberately chosen sample of 20 participants, which affects generalisability, and possible selection bias arising from the participants' prior interest in e-commerce. Additionally, the regional emphasis narrows the applicability of the results in diverse contexts. Future research should aim for wider, more representative sampling, encompass various educational settings, and explore longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches. Broadening the geographic focus to incorporate other provinces or SADC countries may provide a more thorough understanding of dropshipping's potential.

Conclusion

This research examined dropshipping as a potential pathway into entrepreneurship for university students, particularly in a developing economy context. Using a qualitative methodology, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 student participants, revealing important insights into students' perceptions, engagement, and benefits derived from dropshipping as an entrepreneurial model. Although the

study confirms that dropshipping has low entry barriers and fits well with students' academic schedules, it also acknowledges structural and institutional challenges that limit its scalability and long-term success. Thus, specific policy and institutional recommendations are vital to fostering and maintaining student-driven entrepreneurial efforts in this area.

Recommendations for Universities:

1. Embed practical e-commerce modules (including dropshipping) within entrepreneurship or business curricula to develop digital business literacy among students.
2. Establish incubation hubs or entrepreneurship centres that provide access to shared resources, mentorship, internet facilities, and supplier networks.
3. Facilitate industry-academic partnerships to create experiential learning opportunities and expose students to real-time business environments, including logistics and digital marketing.
4. Develop micro-grant funding or seed capital programmes aimed explicitly at low-capital digital ventures, such as dropshipping, to enable students to test and scale their ideas responsibly.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Government Stakeholders:

1. Promote national youth entrepreneurship policies that explicitly recognise and support digitally driven business models, such as dropshipping.
2. Ensure access to affordable, high-speed internet infrastructure, especially in university and rural areas, to remove a key barrier to online business engagement.
3. Encourage financial institutions to develop student-friendly funding mechanisms or fintech platforms tailored for low-capital e-commerce ventures.
4. Develop regulatory frameworks that support the transition of informal entrepreneurial ventures into formal enterprises, enabling student entrepreneurs to scale legally and sustainably.

In conclusion, for dropshipping to evolve from a side hustle to a more structured entrepreneurial journey for students, focused support at both the institutional and policy levels is essential. These interventions will enhance self-employment and innovation, contributing to national

objectives of decreasing youth unemployment and encouraging inclusive economic engagement.

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