

THE PERCEPTIONS OF SMME_s OWNERS/MANAGERS TOWARDS ADOPTING AND USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SMME_s SURVIVAL AND GROWTH DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN RURAL KWAZULU-NATAL

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Abstract

The Covid-19 crisis has posed critical challenges on survival and growth of Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) worldwide, particularly in rural areas such as KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). This study investigated the influence of perceptions of rural SMMEs owners / managers regarding adoption and usage of social media as a tool for survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis. The quantitative design was adopted, and data was collected from 374 rural SMMEs in KZN by a questionnaire. The study employed convenience, purposive, and quota sampling techniques. The data collected were analysed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) (version 27.0). The study revealed that rural SMMEs had a negative perception in adopting and using social media during the Covid-19 crisis. The recommendations of the study suggested that rural SMMEs should use social media to network with more customers and SMME owners /managers need to adopt social media strategy implementation to reduce management perceptions constraints led to business failure regarding rural SMMEs survival and growth during Covid-19 crisis.

Keywords: SMMEs, Social Media, Covid-19 Crisis, Survival, Growth, Rural KZN, SMMEs Perceptions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Van Scheers (2016) and Price (2019) emphasised, social media can be used as an important key driver for SMMEs, in the unprecedented circumstances these small enterprises are faced with, to promote their products and services locally and internationally in the 21st century to create job opportunities, reduce poverty and contribute to the country's economic growth.

Despite the good intention of promoting SMME establishment in South Africa (SA), the Covid-19 crisis has impacted negatively on SMME survival and growth (Nyawo 2020; Sugandini, Effendi & Istanto 2020). SMMEs play a significant role in employment creation and are regarded as one of the chief drivers of economic growth (Mosweunyane, Rambe and Dzansi 2019).

SMME owners /managers are reluctant to use these technological advances, since they believe advanced technologies can be harmful to business productivity. There is thus an uncertainty that social media has a probability of reputation risk for the business because social media may impact negatively on business productivity in the workplace (Mazzarol 2015). Hence, this study seeks to investigate the impact of perceptions of SMMEs owners /managers towards adopting and using social media for SMMEs survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The literature review of this study focussed on the technology acceptance model theory that was used to navigate the in-depth insights of rural SMMEs perceptions towards adopting and using social media during the Covid-19 crisis for their survival and growth and the use of social media as tool to reach more customers by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis. This section also provided the conceptual framework for the study and development of research hypotheses from the literature review.

3. TECHNOLOGY ACCEPTANCE MODEL (TAM) THEORY AS THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

TAM was developed by Davis (1989), with this theory indicating the connecting associations between structure patterns, perceived social media usefulness (PU), and perceived of ease of use (PEOU) as well as attitude on use and actual usage behaviour. In the case where users are subjected to new technology, the judgment on how and when to use it is influenced by several factors.

These factors entail PU; the level at which an intended user considers using a particular new technology would improve their job performance, and PEOU; and the probability a person is convinced using a specific system would be free from effort. TAM theory consists of six constructs that are PU, PEOU of social media, attitude towards using new technology, perceived trust, perceived risk and perceived enjoyment by SMMEs, with regard to social media use by SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis, in the scenario of social media acceptance (Alalwan *et al.* 2018).

TAM, therefore, indicates PU, PEOU of social media, attitude regarding the use of a new technology platform, and perceived trust, as well as perceived enjoyment to use social media by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis (Che Nawi *et al.* 2019; Davis, *et al.* 1992; Mishra and Tyagi 2015), which are discussed as follows:

3.1 Perceived social media Usefulness (PU) by SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis

Nurqamarani *et al.* (2021) viewed the perceived usefulness of the concept in such a way, customers portrayed their belief that technology is useful in the survival and growth of the business enterprise. Rural SMMEs are not excluded in this case, where PU emphasises user belief in the use of new technology, such as social media, to boost their performance (Davis 1985; Purnamasari *et al.* 2020; King *et al.* 2006).

This implies there is a probability to measure perceived usefulness on the basis that new technology is able to, through for instance social media platforms, improve business enterprise survival and growth (Purnamasari *et al.* 2020). Therefore, the PU of social media by rural KZN SMME owners was critical for them to adopt and use social media for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

3.2 Perceived of Ease of Use (PEOU) of social media by SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis

PEOU is known as the degree in which an individual believes that through using a specific system would lead to a free of effort (Davis 1989; 1986). This means the user would find it very easy to use a new technology such as social media to improve his/her own job performance. Nevertheless, in reference to this study, acceptance of a social media platform is heavily dependent on ease of use.

Nunkoo, Juwaheer and Rambhunjun (2013) emphasised PEOU is the degree to which a person believes use of a technology is free from effort, however, Nasser and Prabhakar (2017: 55–62), and Nasser *et al.* (2017) added it depicts the situation whereby the user of new technology portrayed trust in the use of technology, which is free of cognitive effort.

This infers users of new technology will not only derive the benefits of learning, the new technology, such as social media, would also be easier and more acceptable to use (Najib and Fahma 2020). Therefore, PEOU of social media by SMMEs in the times of Covid-19 crisis would have encouraged the SMMEs to adopt and use social media to attract existing and prospective customers, in order to increase their revenues during the Covid-19 crisis, to ensure their survival and growth.

3.3 Attitude towards using social media by SMMEs during the Covid -19 crisis.

In the context of this study, attitude refers to the positive or negative attitude of the new technology user towards the use of social media. Several studies emphasised attitude to use IT is a key factor in the analysis of technology usage behaviour (Davis 1989; Davis *et al.* 1989; Kuo & Yen 2009; Liao *et al.* 2007; Lu *et al.* 2009), in addition to users that partake in the use of social media platforms. The sharing of information on social media platforms also changes participant attitudes (Soderlund & Rosegren 2007).

Lee *et al.* (2008) revealed remarks from other users influence participant attitudes either positively or negatively. However, a positive attitude is consequently crucial for adoption and use of social media to take place effectively. This required owners-managers of SMMEs to have the right attitude to use social media in their businesses, as a survival and growth tool during the Covid-19 crisis, for their survival and growth in the subsequent economic recession (Ahamat Ali and Hamid 2017; Al-Adwan *et al.* 2020).

Behavioural intention is regarded as user willingness to use the new technology, which is a good predictor benchmark of actual use that denotes the repeated use of technology over time (Bamberg *et al.* 2003; Zhong 2021; Venkatesh *et al.* 2000). This implies, in the context of this study, SMME owners-managers had to be willing to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis to ensure their businesses survive and grow during this crisis.

3.4 Perceived trust on using social media by SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis

Trust is as a concept regarded as an act of preparedness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party, based on the anticipation the other will perform a specific action important to the trustor, despite the capability to control that other party (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman 1995;

Che Nawi *et al.* 2019). This means trust is critical in social interaction and factors affecting new technology adoption, where it affects the consideration of using the social media platform (Hallikainen 2015). Perceived trust is expected to affect the adoption of social media as a business platform.

Building trust is a process that takes time and once trust is built, an individual's behavioural intention is affected, and it leads to specific decision-making (Akinwunmi, Olajubu, and Aderounmu 2015). In this study, perceived trust is defined as the degree of trust an individual has in social media as a reliable business platform, with perceived trust expected to affect the adoption of social media positively (Che Nawi *et al.* 2019).

A recent study by Akinwunmi *et al.* (2015) found trust is important in technology adoption; this study involved the adoption of cloud technology. In studying the adoption of mobile commerce among early adopters of mobile services in SA, Joubert and van Belle (2013) found trust has a strong positive effect on adoption.

Ahamat *et al.* (2021) investigated factors influencing social media adoption in small businesses, with a questionnaire used to collect data from management, experts, entrepreneurs, and employees. The study findings revealed a significantly strong positive relationship between perceived trust and social media adoption and use.

This infers perceived trust in SMME using social media was of utmost importance to build trust for these enterprises to adopt and use social media during the Covid-19 crisis, in order to penetrate the market to improve sales for survival and growth in this crisis.

3.5 Perceived risk (PR) to use social media by SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis

PR is defined as the process that influences customer confidence to consider the actions of their purchase decision (Im, Kim, & Han 2008). Hassan *et al.* (2006) elucidate that PR is referred to as a loss when an action's consequences are not favourable and an individual perceives the consequences will be unfavourable.

Risk is regarded as a situation where the possibilities of outcomes from a decision are unknown; because of this, risk is regarded as an important factor in new social media technology adoption and usage. Empirical evidence suggests PR has a negative effect on adaptation intention (Featherman & Pavlou 2003), adoption of online banking services (Farzianpour *et al.* 2014), PU and PEOU in the online shopping channel (Li & Huang 2009).

This suggests when the PR is high, it hinders the adoption of technology, and the lower the PR, the more likely it is a new technology will be adopted. Individuals will always have a certain level of PR towards technological adoption, and they are aware of the risks involved.

A recent study looking into factors that influence consumer attitude towards SNS-based marketing, found PR affects attitude negatively. Based on the above empirical evidence, it can be stated PR affects the adoption of technology (Mishra & Tyagi 2015; Che Nawi *et al.* 2019).

3.6 Perceived enjoyable to use social media by SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis.

Enjoyment is perceived by several scholars as one of the critical factors that influence technology adoption and use, because when the user has a sense of joy in the process of using technology, there is a higher chance the individuals will adopt and use technology (Davis *et al.* 1992; Che Nawi 2019). By implication, the enjoyment of using technology influences the usage attitude (Davis 1989), which was confirmed by Cha and Koo (2015) and Sigala *et al.* (2012), who revealed, in the study for travel information search, enjoyment was shown to have a positive influence in the use of social media and communication technology.

Kim *et al.* (2016) added users of social media suggested that enjoyment of usage of social media was a contributory factor for usage of social media in a private club. These indications by the above researchers propose enjoyment can influence the use of new technology. Hence, it can be deduced that social media could have impacted social media use by rural SMMEs, for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

3.7 Justification for using TAM theory in this study

According to TAM, the intention to use technology will determine whether a person will use the technology (behaviour). This theory is significant in this study, because the study derives three constructs from TAM: PU and PEOU of social media, as well as attitude towards using new technology (Pentina *et al.* 2012; Lee *et al.* 2006).

Ahamat Ali and Hamid (2017) emphasised, in reference to social media use, the construct of perceived trust should be added to describe acceptance of social media. Prior research further suggested perceived enjoyability and perceived risk in the context of TAM influence usage behaviour, which directly affect social media adoption and use by small businesses (Che Nawi *et al.* 2019; Davis *et al.* 1992; Mishra and Tyagi 2015).

TAM theory has been used by many researchers in different fields to evaluate behavioural factors that influence technology adoption at the level of both the individual and the organization (Awa *et al.* 2015; Razak and Latip 2016; Ahamat Ali and Hamid 2017; Al-Adwan *et al.* 2020). This implies that in this study, TAM theory will assist to provide in depth understanding of evaluating the behavioural factors of rural managers/owners regarding their perceptions in adopting and using social media for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN.

4. THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS TOOL TO REACH MORE CUSTOMERS BY RURAL SMMEs DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

De *et al.* (2020) further highlighted the Covid-19 crises compelled businesses to use digital technologies such as social media, due to physical distancing and global lockdowns. The global lockdowns caused an increase in patterns of behaviour in conducting business. Thus, governments made significant efforts to mitigate the systematic risk posed by the coronavirus. This forced governments of countries worldwide to increase security procedures, and numerous nations came to a complete halt (Dzigbede *et al.* 2020; Caduff 2020; Benavides and Nukpezah

2020; Uddin *et al.* 2021), which created opportunities for SMMEs to adopt social media during the Covid-19 crisis for their survival and growth. This depended heavily on the financial position of SMMEs, whether they could afford to cater for social media cost, relative to its use during the Covid-19 crisis (Umukoro *et al.* 2020). This placed information systems and networks at the centre of businesses to sustain themselves during Covid-19 crises (De *et al.* 2020). This infers the Covid-19 crises necessitated businesses responding to economic disruptions, uncertainty, and recession through designing robust corporate strategies for them to survive in the ever-changing environment. This further required businesses to invest in IT infrastructure (Khodieva and Khodieva 2020).

As stated by Kietzmann *et al.* (2011) and De *et al.* (2020), for the purposes of reputation, increasing sales, as well as improving survival of rural SMMEs, businesses invested in social media during the Covid-19 crisis. This means rural SMME survival, growth and sustainability were at risk, and they had to devise techniques to cope with the turbulent environment the Covid-19 crisis caused. The NYDA (DBSB 2020) conducted a study on the Covid-19 crisis impact in 2020, which suggests the Covid-19 crisis affected 88 percent SMMEs of 1 000 businesses. The findings portrayed that 22 percent SMMEs were faced with a decline in cash inflows, 26 percent did not manage to generate income, and 16 percent did not generate sales. Therefore, SMME survival was constrained. The Covid-19 crisis also forced consumers to embark on online shopping and it was discovered that approximately 37 percent consumers increased this activity. It may be deduced SMMEs invested in social media use in the course of the Covid-19 crisis. SMMEs, particularly rural SMMEs, were faced with an economic recession caused by the Covid-19 crisis, which impacted negatively on SMMEs cash inflows. Gray (2020) pointed out small businesses were faced with economic turmoil due to the uncontrollable crises, resulting in a lack of finance for rural SMMEs and some temporarily closed. Hence, it was difficult for some SMMEs to adopt social media to penetrate the marketplace to advertise their products and services to customers during Covid-19. The crisis, therefore, directly affected self-employed individuals more than other employed individuals and SMMEs more than large businesses in Europe, the USA, and other parts of the world (Kritikos *et al.* 2020; Digitally Driven 2020, 2021).

5. DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

To draw the conclusion on literature review, the following hypotheses were deduced for the research aim and objectives. The hypotheses are categorised as the null hypothesis (Ho) and alternative hypothesis (Ha).

Ho1: There is no relationship between the level of trust in social media and its usefulness and the influence on the perception of rural SMME owners /managers to use social media for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

Ha1: There is a relationship between the level of trust in social media and its usefulness and the influence on the perception of rural SMME owners / managers to use social media for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

Ho2: There is no relationship between minimising product distribution costs and increasing revenue and the impact of Covid-19 on rural SMME use of social media for their survival and growth.

Ha2: There is a relationship between minimising product distribution costs and increasing revenue and the impact of Covid-19 on rural SMME use of social media for their survival and growth.

6. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The study findings revealed a significantly strong positive relationship between perceived trust and social media adoption and use. This infers perceived trust in SMME using social media was of utmost importance to build trust for these enterprises to adopt and use social media during the Covid-19 crisis, in order to penetrate the market to improve sales for survival and growth in this crisis (Ahamat *et al.* 2021). This implies that the lack of trust by rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis may lead to negative perception to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis. When rural SMME managers/owners have a negative perception of adopting social media in economic constraints such as the Covid-19 crisis, they will decrease the chances of marketing their goods and services during restrictions imposed by governments of countries worldwide. The lack of trust would thus affect the demand of products and services by customers and potential customers. In return, this can reduce rural SMME survival and growth during economic turmoil (Nyawo 2020; Zeidy 2020; Janssen and Van der Voort 2020; Kottika *et al.* 2020). This may result to the lack of demand of products and services of rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis. This created the need to examine how social media was perceived as useful by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis in KZN. This infers that the rural SMMEs should embrace digital technologies, even when faced with potential threats to compete in their sector and in international markets in order to survive and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

7. AIM OF THE STUDY

To investigate the impact of perceptions of SMMEs owners/managers towards adopting and using social media for SMMEs survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN.

8. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To examine how social media was perceived as useful by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis in KZN.
- To determine the influence of social media as a tool to reach more customers by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis in KZN.
- To suggest the critical measures that can be used by rural SMMEs to improve the situations during the turbulent environment on tough times such as Covid-19 crisis in KZN.

9. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology of this study was discussed below.

9.1 Research Design

The empirical research was conducted through a self-administered questionnaire where a quantitative research design was adopted and assisted the study to form hypotheses and cater for deductive reasoning where a study tested and accepted as well as rejected the hypotheses. The quantitative method was used to investigate the impact of perceptions of SMMEs owners/managers towards adopting and using social media for SMMEs survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN. The research design was descriptive and cross sectional in nature.

9.2 Target population

According to the StatsSA Quarterly Labour Force Survey (2020), there are 166 331 SMMEs in the KZN Metro and 247 740 SMMEs in the KZN non-Metros, which amount to 414 070 SMMEs in KZN. However, this study focussed on larger rural populations to get adequate SMMEs owners/managers, which were situated in geographical areas such as Amajuba District Municipality, Zululand Municipality District, Amajuba District Municipality and King Cetshwayo District Municipality.

9.3 Sampling Strategy and Sample Size

According to the StatsSA, Quarterly Labour Force Survey (2020), there are 414 070 SMMEs in the province of KZN. Ajay and Micah (2014) and Remler and Van Ryzin (2015) state the sample size can be calculated by the following formula:

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 pq}{d^2}$$

Hence, to determine the exact sample size, the above formula is used. The sample size for this study would thus be $n = 0.9604/0025 = 384\ 1600$, that is, the sample size is equal to 384 KZN SMMEs. This implies that the survey was conducted from the SMMEs of rural KwaZulu-Natal, comprises a total sample size of 374 SMMEs in rural KwaZulu-Natal. The use of a convenience sampling method was also pivotal to this study, as participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate, through completing a closed ended questionnaire. Quota sampling was used to obtain the desired sample and it was also used due to time and financial constraints. Purposing sampling was used to select rural SMMEs owners /managers in rural KZN, which were assumed that they have experience and influence of adopting and use social media during the Covid-19 crisis.

9.4 Data Collection

The quantitative data was collected through self-administered 5-point Likert scale questionnaire from 374 rural SMMEs of Vryheid, Empangeni, Richards Bay, Newcastle, Ulundi, Dundee and Ixopo (ubuhlebezwe) in KZN, therefore, collected the quantitative data in

accordance with the research objectives with the purpose to address the study hypotheses.

9.5 Data Analysis

The quantitative data analysis uses descriptive and statistical inferential statistics to represent the data. In the case of this study, the data collected were analysed using the Statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) (version 27.0). This software assisted the researcher to perform descriptive and frequency analysis, as well as correlation, tabulation, t-test analysis and inferential statistics, including Cronbach's Alpha, Factor Analysis, Kaiser Maier Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's tests. The data was presented in tables and graphs.

9.6 Reliability and Validity

The content validity was carried out on the data collection instrument through using seasoned experts who provided views on validity of the tool. Validity was also ensured by piloting the questionnaire to the selected members of the target population. The pilot study made a point that challenges were attended to at the early stages, to curb any shortcomings in the main study, while it also permits the researcher to assess the research method suitability and its appropriateness, thus improving questionnaire validity (Sürücü & Maslakçı 2020). The researcher ensured improvement of reliability for the instrument, where internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's coefficient alpha at 0.70. Internal consistency estimates reliability by grouping questions in a questionnaire that measure the same concept (Taber 2018: 1279; Nawi *et al.* 2020).

10. RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

The presentation of results, discussion and interpretation of findings reveal the following results based on the structured questionnaire, which was designed in consultation with the literature review in accordance with research objectives.

10.1 Demographic profile of respondents for the study

The demographic information of the respondents studied is depicted in table 3 below.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents for the study (N=374)

Demographic Classifications	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	233	62.3
Female	141	37.7
Age group		
18-24 years	167	44.7
25-31 years	103	27.5
32-38 years	24	6.4
39-48 years	77	20.6
49 years and more	3	0.8
Race		
African	368	98.4
Coloured	4	1.1

Indian	1	0.3
White	1	0.3
Highest qualification		
National Diploma	184	49.2
B Tech	80	21.4
Honours	8	2.1
Masters	1	0.3
PhD	1	0.3
Others	100	26.7
Nature of the business		
Financial	26	7.0
Manufacturing	20	5.3
Services	221	59.1
Mining	74	19.8
Others	33	8.8
Type of ownership		
Sole Proprietor	115	30.7
Partnership	29	7.8
Manager of the business and co-owned	3	0.8
Corporation	173	46.3
Others	54	14.4
Source of finance for the business		
Own Capital	341	91.2
Bank Loan	31	8.3
Others	2	0.5
Reason for starting the business		
Unemployment	219	58.6
Alleviation of Poverty	149	39.8
Extra Income	6	1.6
Business Location		
Vryheid	244	65.2
Ulundi	33	8.8
Dundee	32	8.6
Empangeni	23	6.1
Richards Bay	20	5.3
Newcastle	20	5.3
Ixopo (Ubuhlebezwe)	15	4.0
Scope of the business		
Local	372	99.5
National	2	0.5

According to **Table 1**, the number of respondents in this study is N =374. The majority in this demographic profile are males (62.3%). In terms of age group, the majority are 18-24 years, which is 167 respondents (44.7%). The majority ethnic group that responded are Africans, which is 368 or (88, 4.41%). Many respondents (184 or 49.2%) in this study have the highest qualification, which is National Diploma. Most respondents in this study are from the service sector, which is 221 (59.1%). Most respondents (115 or 46.3%) have a type of ownership, which is referred to as corporation, which many respondents (341 or 91.2%) have a source for

starting their own businesses out of their own capital. However, most respondents (219 or 58.6%) started their own businesses because of high unemployment rate they are faced with, and most of them (244 or 65.2%) have businesses, which are in Vryheid and finally, most of the respondents (372 or 99.5%) have the scope of business, which focusses on local market, which a purpose of targeting local customers.

10.2 Presentation of research results

The presentation of the research results was briefly discussed as follows:

10.2.1 Rural SMMEs perceived social media to be useful

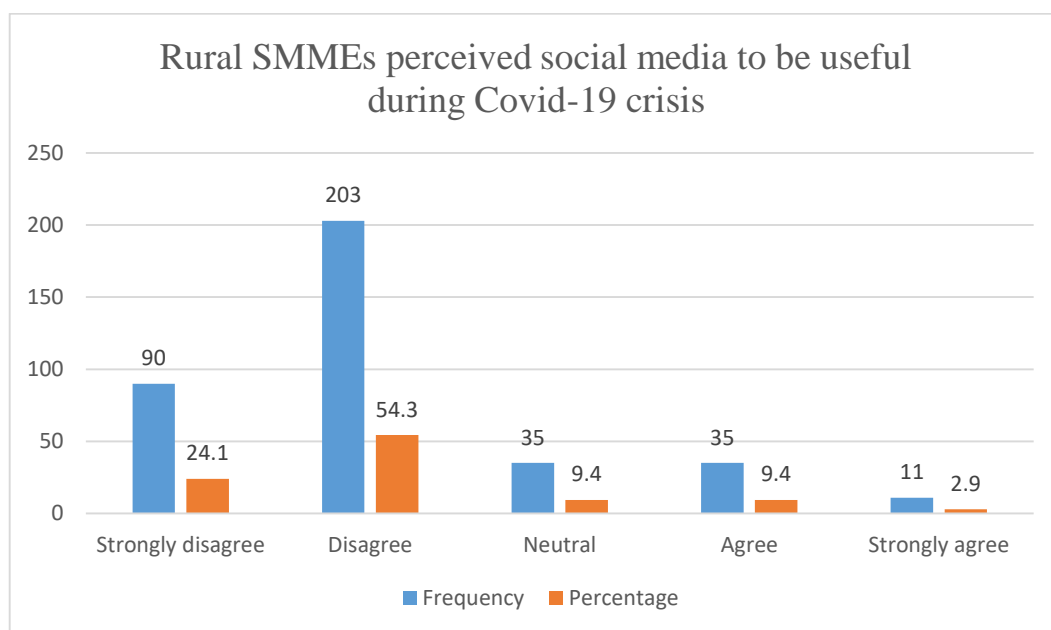


Figure 1: Rural SMMEs perceived social media to be useful.

As reflected in figure 1, a significant number of respondents disagreed (203 or 54.3 percent) and strongly disagreed (90 or 24.1 percent) the use of social media was perceived useful by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis. Only 35 respondents (9.4 percent) were neutral to the statement, while 35 respondents (9.4 percent) agreed and 11 (2.9 percent) strongly agreed with the statement.

Figure 1 also depicted that some respondents strongly agreed (11 or 2.9 percent) and agreed (35 or 9.4 percent) that rural SMMEs perceived social media to be useful during the Covid-19 crisis. A Chi-square test was conducted to establish how rural SMMEs perceived the usefulness of social media during the Covid-19 crisis for their survival and growth in KZN. For this variable, results indicate ($\chi^2 = 319.583$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), illustrating insufficient PU of social media impacted the use of social media by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis.

10.2.2 Rural SMMEs perceived social media to be easy to use

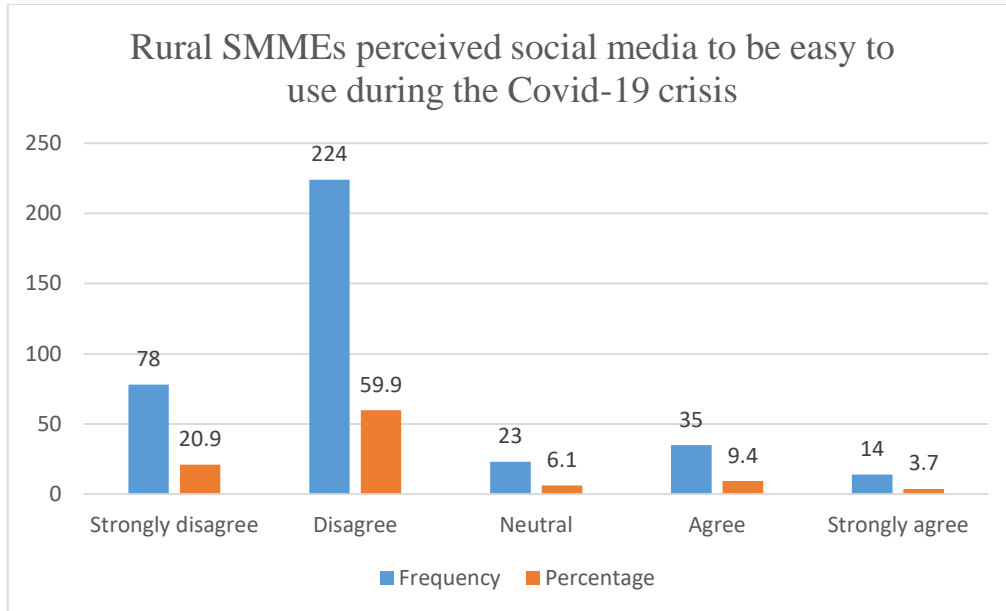


Figure 2: Rural SMMEs perceived social media to be easy to use

Figure 2 illustrated that a large number of respondents (224 or 59.9 percent) disagreed and 78 (20.9 percent) strongly disagreed the use of social media was perceived easy to use by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis. Only 23 (6.1 percent) remained neutral to the statement, while 35 (9.4 percent) and 14 (3.7 percent) respondents, respectively, agreed and strongly agreed with the statement. A Chi-square test was conducted to establish whether rural SMMEs perceived social media as easy to use during the Covid-19 crisis, for their survival and growth in KZN. Results for this variable indicate ($\chi^2 = 404.209$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), illustrating that unsatisfactory perceived ease of using social media impacted on its use by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis. Figure 2 also showed that most respondents strongly disagreed and disagreed that social media use was not perceived easy to use by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis.

10.2.3 Rural SMMEs trusted the use of social media

As depicted in figure 3, a significant number of respondents (192 or 51.3 percent) disagreed and 104 (27.8 percent) strongly disagreed rural SMMEs trusted the use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. A smaller number of respondents (29 or 7.8 percent) remained neutral with the statement, while 35 (9.4 percent) respondents agreed and only 14 (3.7 percent) strongly agreed with the statement. A Chi-square test was conducted to establish whether rural SMMEs trusted the use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis, for their survival and growth in KZN. For this variable, results indicate ($\chi^2 = 293.674$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), illustrating that unsatisfactory perceived trust to use social media impacted on its use by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis.

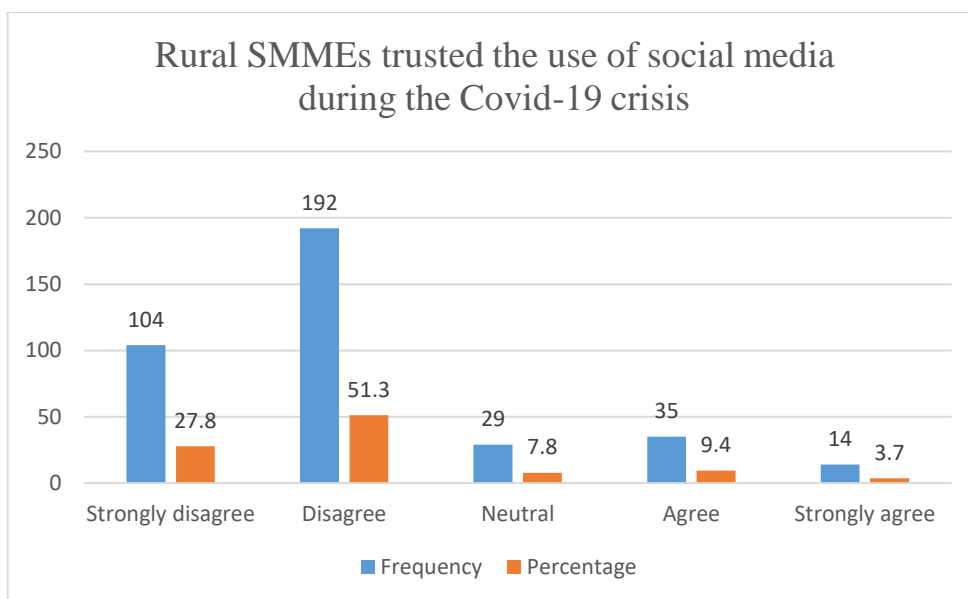


Figure 3: Rural SMMEs trusted the use of social media

10.2.4 Rural SMMEs perceived the use of social media as not risky

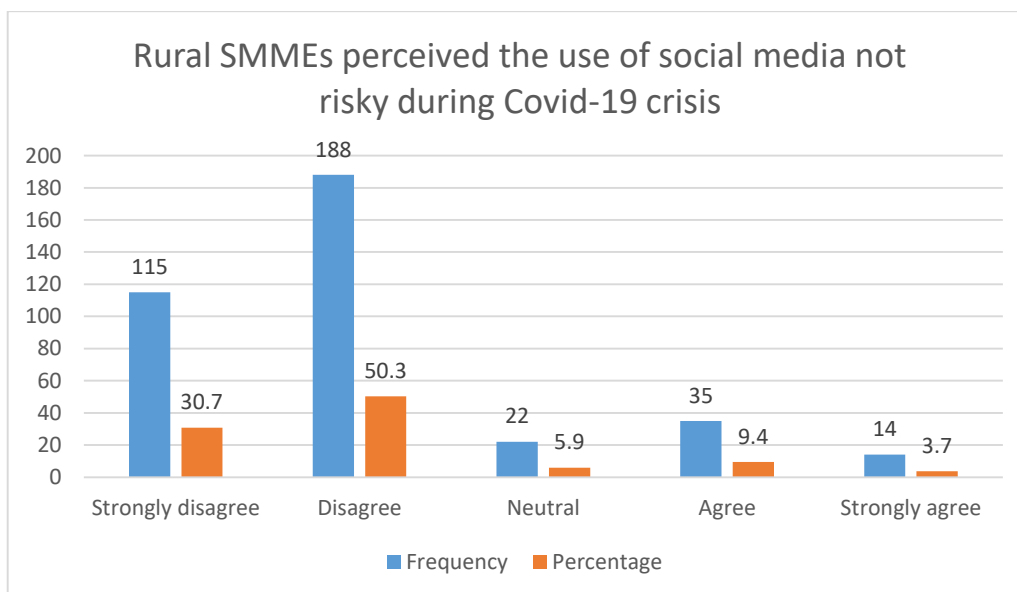


Figure 4: Rural SMMEs perceived the use of social media as not risky

As illustrated in figure 4, a significant number of respondents (188 or 50.3 percent) disagreed and 115 (30.7 percent) strongly disagreed rural SMMEs perceived the use of social media not risky during the Covid-19 crisis. A smaller number of respondents (22 or 5.9 percent) remained neutral with the statement, while 35 (9.4 percent) respondents agreed and only 14 (3.7 percent) strongly agreed with the statement.

A Chi-square test was conducted to establish whether rural SMMEs perceived the use of social media as risky during the Covid-19 crisis for their survival and growth in KZN. For this variable, results indicate ($\chi^2=300.786$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), illustrating a strongly significant perceived risk on the use of social media by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis.

10.2.5 Rural SMMEs perceived the use of social media to be enjoyable

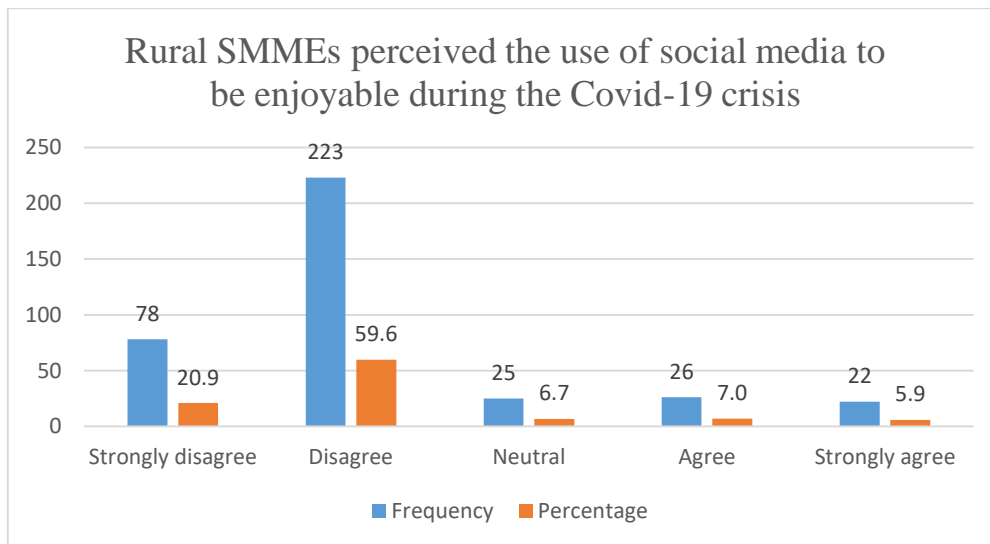


Figure 5: Rural SMMEs perceived the use of social media to be enjoyable

As illustrated in figure 5, a large number of respondents (223 or 59.6 percent) disagreed and 78 (20.9 percent) strongly disagreed rural SMMEs perceived the use of social media to be enjoyable during the Covid-19 crisis. A smaller number of respondents (25 or 6.7 percent) remained neutral with the statement, while 26 (7.0 percent) respondents agreed and only 22 (5.9 percent) strongly agreed with the statement.

A Chi-square test was conducted to establish whether rural SMMEs perceived the use of social media to be enjoyable during the Covid-19 crisis, for their survival and growth in KZN. For this variable, results indicate ($\chi^2=396.027$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), illustrating a strongly significant perception it was not enjoyable for rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis.

10.2.6 The Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMME use of social media to minimise product distribution costs

As depicted in figure 6, a significant number of respondents (234 or 62.6 percent) and 90 (24.1 percent) disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively, the Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMMEs to use social media to minimise product distribution costs. These findings are supported by a Chi-square test conducted to determine whether the Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMMEs to use social media to minimise product distribution costs.

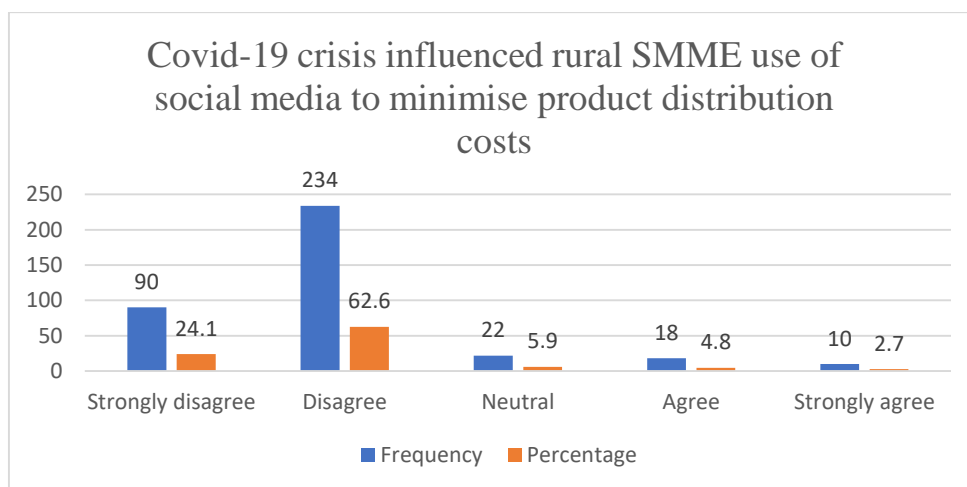


Figure 6: Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMMEs to use social media to minimise product distribution costs

The results show ($\chi^2 = 478.460$; $df = 4$; $P < 0,001$) for this variable, indicating the respondents viewed the Covid-19 crisis had no influence in minimising product distribution costs. However, a smaller number of respondents (22 or 5.9 percent) were neutral to the statement, while only 18 (4.8 percent) and 10 (2.7 percent) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement. A small number of respondents (figure 6) concurred with the findings of De Pandey and Pal (2020), who highlighted the outbreak and spread of the Covid-19 crisis compelled small businesses to use digital technologies, such as social media, due to physical distancing and global lockdowns, which minimised product distribution costs for SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis.

10.2.7 The Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMMEs to use social media to improve demand for their products and services

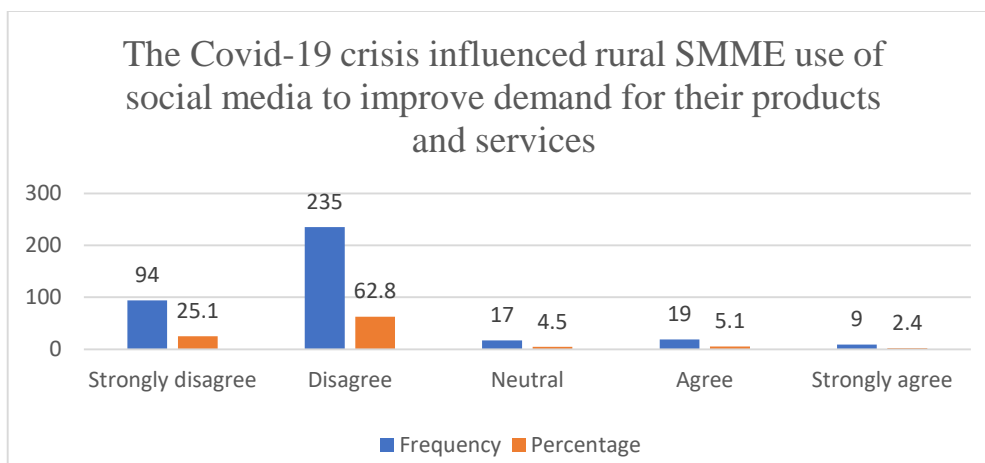


Figure 7: The Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMME use of social media to improve demand for their products and services

As depicted in figure 7, a significant number of respondents (235 or 62.8 percent and 94 or 25.1 percent) disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively, the Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMMEs to use social media to improve demand for their products and services. These findings are supported by a Chi-square test conducted to determine whether the lack of demand for products and services due to the Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMMEs to use social media.

The results show ($\chi^2 = 492.203$; $df = 4$; $P < 0,001$) for this variable, indicating the respondents viewed the Covid-19 crisis as an epidemic crisis, which did not impact rural SMMEs to use social media to enhance demand for their products and services. However, a smaller number of respondents (17 or 4.5 percent) were neutral to the statement, while only 19 (5.1 percent) and nine (2.4 percent) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement.

The small number of respondents indicated in figure 7 concurred with findings of a study conducted by Mbatha (2022), who explored the benefits of social networking service (SNS) use to enhance work productivity in small tourism sector businesses, which revealed social media improved the work productivity of the tourism sector. Social media has transformed the way small businesses operate on a daily basis, with special reference to communication and marketing strategies.

10.2.8 The Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMMEs to adopt and use social media as a tool to reach more customers

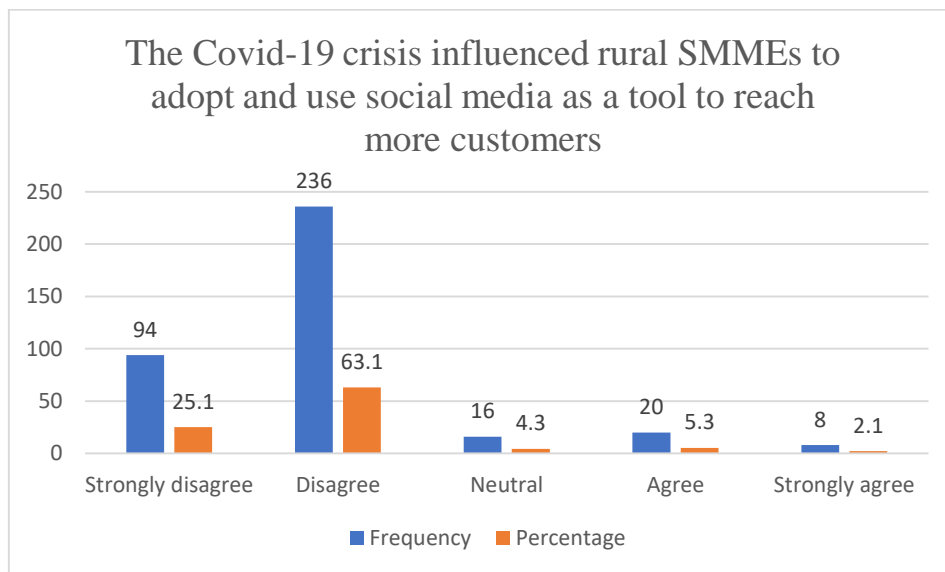


Figure 8: The Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMMEs to adopt and use social media as a tool to reach more customers

As depicted in figure 8 a significant number of respondents (236 or 63.1 percent and 94 or 25.1 percent) disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively, the Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMMEs to adopt and use social media as a tool to reach more customers. These findings are

supported by a Chi-square test conducted to determine whether the Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMMEs to adopt and use social media as a tool to reach more customers. The results show ($\chi^2 = 498.353$; $df = 4$; $P < 0,001$) for this variable, indicating respondents believed the Covid-19 crisis had no influence on rural SMMEs to adopt and use social media as a tool to reach more customers. However, a smaller number of respondents (16 or 4.3 percent) were neutral to the statement, while only 20 (5.3 percent) and eight (2.1 percent) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement. The small number of respondents in figure 8 supported the findings by Kietzmann (2011) and De *et al.* (2020), who contend business should have invested in the use of social media to reach more customers during the Covid-19 crisis, as their reputation would be enhanced, increasing sales, as well as survival, growth and sustainability in this crisis.

10.2.9 The Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMME use of social media to increase their revenue

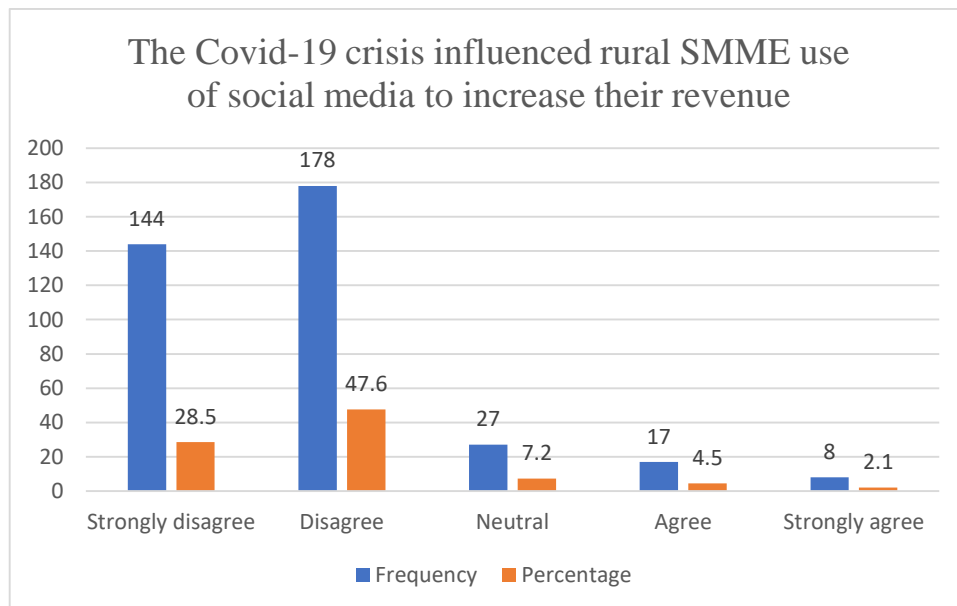


Figure 9: The Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMME use of social media to increase their revenue

As depicted in figure 9, a significant number of respondents (178 or 47.6. percent and 144 or 28.5 percent) disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively, the Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMMEs to use social media to increase their revenue. These findings are supported by a Chi-square test conducted to determine whether the Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMMEs to use social media to increase their revenue. The results show ($\chi^2 = 341.267$; $df = 4$; $P < 0,001$) for this variable, indicating the respondents viewed the Covid-19 crisis as an epidemic crisis, with no significant influence on rural SMMEs to use social media to increase their revenue. However, a smaller group of respondents (27 or 7.2 percent) were neutral to the statement, whilst only 17 (4.5 percent) and eight (2.1 percent) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement. The small number of respondents in figure 9 suggested that the Covid-19 crisis

had a positive and significant impact on strategic digital entrepreneurship, including digital marketing and encouraged the speed of adopting digital technology.

10.3 Discussion and interpretation of findings

The discussion and interpretation of findings were categorised into two phases, namely the perceptions of rural SMMEs owners / managers and the use of social media as tool to reach more customers by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis, which are briefly discussed below.

10.3.1 Perceptions of rural SMMEs owners / managers

According to Mosweunyane *et al.* (2019), SMME manager and owner perceptions are regarded as their attitudes towards adopting and accepting social media platforms during the Covid-19 crisis, to ensure their survival and growth in the subsequent economic recession. Studies conducted by Praveena and Thomas (2014), Shen (2015) and Matikiti *et al.* (2018) revealed the knowledge of technology and acceptability of IT are subject to manager perceptions. Previous researchers, however, highlighted when rural SMME managers/owners have a negative perception of adopting social media, particularly with economic constraints such as the Covid-19 crisis, this will decrease their chances to market their goods and services during restrictions imposed by governments of countries worldwide. Subsequently, this can disadvantage rural SMME to survive and grow during economic turmoil (Nyawo 2020; Zeidy 2020; Janssen and Van der Voort 2020; Kottika *et al.* 2020). The study findings support this, with 78 percent respondents that disagreed the use of social media was perceived useful by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis. The studies showed the PEOU in social media will motivate the businesses to use social media to improve job performance. This infers new technology users will gain the benefits of acquiring new knowledge, making it easier and more agreeable to use new technology such as social media (Najib and Fahma 2020). It is further emphasised that 'easy to use' is known as the degree to which an individual believes using a specific system would be effort free (Davis 1989; 1986). In other words, the user would find it is not complicated to use a new technology, such as social media, to improve his/her own job performance. However, a large number of respondents (81 percent) stated that the use of social media was not perceived easy by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis.

This is further supported by the empirical findings, where a significant number of respondents (296 or 79 percent) disagreed rural SMMEs trusted the use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. Further evidenced by a large respondent number (303 or 81 percent) that disagreed rural SMMEs perceived the use of social media as not risky during the Covid-19 crisis. This is contrary to Che Nawi *et al.* (2019), who argued perceived trust is expected to affect the adoption of social media as a business platform, with perceived trust expected to positively affect social media adoption. In addition, regarding the perceptions of respondents in terms of using social media during the Covid-19 crisis, a large number of respondents (301 or 81 percent) disagreed rural SMMEs perceived social media use as enjoyable during the Covid-19 crisis. These empirical findings were supported by literature, which indicates the knowledge of technology and acceptability of information technology (IT) are subject to manager perceptions, whereas rural SMME managers/owners hold a negative perception of adopting

social media during economic constraints such as the Covid-19 crisis. This will then decrease the chances of marketing their goods and services for SMME survival and growth (Janssen and Van der Voort 2020; Kottika *et al.* 2020; Matikiti *et al.* 2018). Thus, these negative attitudes can disadvantage rural SMME to survive and grow during economic turmoil. This suggests management of rural SMMEs were subjected to constraints in terms of social media adoption and use. Hence, according to this study, the key summary of findings can be termed as management perception constraints led to business failure, in terms of adopting and using social media for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

10.3.2 The use of social media as tool to reach more customers by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis

Mazzanti *et al.* (2020) are among many studies conducted regarding the Covid-19 crisis, where it was confirmed, businesses are faced by an economic recession resulting from the Covid-19 crisis, where some SMMEs were subjected to severe financial distress, while rural SMMEs were compelled to temporarily close, and others have become insolvent (Gray 2020; Kornelius *et al.* 2020). The literature supports the findings, which shows a considerable number of respondents (87 percent) disagreed the Covid-19 crisis has influenced rural SMMEs to use social media in minimising product distribution costs. In addition, some researchers argued rural SMMEs were negatively impacted by the Covid-19 crisis, with some declared technically insolvent due to the economic distress (Karacsony 2020; Kornelius *et al.* 2020). This implies the Covid-19 crisis caused harm, as it reduced the chances of rural SMME survival and growth (Okuwhere and Tafamel 2022). These points are supported by the study findings, with a significant number of respondents (88 percent) that disagreed the Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMMEs to use social media to improve demand for their products and services.

This means rural SMMEs could experience challenges to their survival and growth because they were unable to use social media to enhance demand for their products and services. Thus, rural SMMEs may become technically insolvent due to the economic distress caused by the Covid-19 crisis (Karacsony *et al.* 2020). Moreover, a significant number of respondents (88 percent) disagreed the Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMMEs to adapt and use social media as a tool to reach more customers. The literature confirmed these businesses should invest in the use of social media to reach more customers during a crisis, such as Covid-19, for reputation, increasing sales, as well as survival, growth and sustainability (Kietzmann 2011; De *et al.* 2020). This correlates with 76 percent respondents that disagreed the Covid-19 crisis influenced rural SMME social media use to increase their revenue. Mbatha (2020), in this regard, stated rural SMMEs could have used social media during the Covid-19 crisis to improve productivity, had they been in possession of working capital to adopt and use social media during the crisis. Thus, rural SMME operations were, therefore, unable to be managed efficiently and effectively due to the negative impact of environmental factors, such as the Covid-19 crisis. In summary, it can be deduced rural SMMEs were exposed to environmental factor constraints, associated with the failure to use social media in relation to rural SMME survival and growth in KZN during the Covid-19 crisis.

11. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions are categorised into conclusions of research hypotheses and the study as well as the theory used in this study, which are briefly discussed below.

11.1 Conclusions on research hypotheses

This section provides a detailed overview of the conclusions made in terms of the hypotheses set for this research study, which categorised and presented as the null hypothesis (Ho) and alternative hypothesis (Ha).

Ha1: There is a relationship between the level of trust in social media and its usefulness and the influence on the perception of rural SMME owners / managers to use social media for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

The results of the bivariate correlation show the relationship between the tested variables is significantly positive at 673** (sig. <0.001) level. Therefore, rejection of the null hypothesis allows the conclusion that the level of trust in social media and its usefulness are related and influences the perception of rural SMME owners/ managers to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis.

Ha2: There is a relationship between minimising product distribution costs and increasing revenue and the impact of Covid-19 on rural SMME use of social media for their survival and growth.

The results of the bivariate correlation show the relationship between the tested variables is significantly positive at 559** (sig. <0.001) level. Therefore, rejection of the null hypothesis allows the conclusion that minimising distribution costs and increasing revenue are related and is an impact of Covid-19 on rural SMME use of social media for their survival and growth.

11.2 Conclusions on the variables matched with theory

This section explores significant of the theory associated with SMME social media use in rural KZN, for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis. This theory is also incorporated with the empirical findings of this research study.

11.2.1 Conclusions on the variables matched with TAM theory

Davis (1989), in the context of TAM theory, stated when users are subjected to new technology, the judgment on how and when to use it is influenced by several factors, such as PEOU, being enjoyable, risky, as well as its usefulness, and trust to use a new technology platform, including social media (Ahamat Ali and Hamid 2017). As highlighted in the empirical findings of the study, perceptions of rural SMMEs regarding social media PEOU, whether it is enjoyable, has risk attached, can be trusted and usefulness were, therefore, identified as critical factors in the adoption and use of social media by rural SMMEs, for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis. Ahamat *et al.* (2021) revealed once social media is adopted and used, SMMEs would perceive the ease of use, its enjoyability, not being risky, as well as its usefulness, in addition to trust in using a new technology platform, for example social media, for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis. Therefore, the empirical findings posit these

factors have a significantly strong positive relationship with each other and the adoption and use of social media by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis, for them to survive and grow.

11.3 Conclusions of the study

This section briefly discussed the conclusions of perceptions of rural SMMEs owners /managers regarding to adopt as well as the use of social media as tool to reach more customers by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis as follows:

11.3.1 Perceptions of SMMEs owners / managers

It is concluded the perception of SMME owners and managers is a major contributing factor regarding their attitude in adopting and use of social media for rural SMME survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis. With regard to cognitive behaviour, negative behavioural responses depicted negative perceptions towards adopting and using social media to survive and grow in the economic turmoil caused by the Covid-19 crisis. It is, therefore, concluded rural SMMEs were faced with management perception constraints, which led to business failure to adopt and use social media for survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

11.3.2 The use of social media as tool to reach more customers by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis

The study concludes rural SMMEs were constrained to operate efficiently and effectively due to being subjected to the negative impact of environmental factors, such as the Covid-19 crisis. Thus, it can be deduced and concluded rural SMMEs were exposed to environmental factor constraints, in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, associated with the use of social media failure in relation to rural SMME survival and growth in KZN during the Covid-19 crisis.

12. IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this study entail issues related to theoretical implications, networking with more customers and sustainable implications and managerial implications.

12.1 Theoretical implications

As indicated in problem statement that the positive perceptions for SMMEs owners/managers to use social media is critical and negative perception can exacerbate the chances of rural SMMEs decrease the chances of SMMEs to adopt and use social media in economic constraints such as the Covid-19 crisis (Praveena and Thomas, 2014; Shen 2015; Matikiti *et al.* 2018; Ahamat Ali and Hamid 2017; Al-Adwan *et al.* 2020).

Therefore, implication of using social could depend on cognitive response of rural SMMEs owners /managers based on their experience. Thus, rural SMMEs managerial competencies would determine the adoption and usage of social media to reduce their business failure during the Covid-19 crisis for their survival and growth (Alalwan *et al.* 2018; Bodziany *et al.* 2021).

12.2 Networking with more customers and sustainable implications

In the context of rural SMMEs networking with more customers and sustaining their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis through using social media, this study was useful for rural SMMEs that adopt and use social media as a tool to communicate with more customers, which help them to increase marketing their products and services, which would result to increase in sales and revenues for their survival and growth in this crisis. By adopting social media instead of traditional marketing tools, rural SMMEs can save human and financial resources while reaching more existing and potential customers without traveling, which saves rural SMMEs owners /managers critical time for financial resources and other key activities.

12.3 Managerial implications

The study findings revealed that was implication of an inadequate understanding by rural SMMEs due to the lack of social awareness, which resulted to the negative perception for rural SMMEs to adopt and use social media use during the Covid-19 crisis. This infers that, the government should educate rural SMMEs on the importance of using social media as part of marketing the business of rural SMMEs.

This implies government must provide training to rural SMMEs in order to inform them regarding the use of social media. In addition, there should be workshops organised for rural SMMEs and communities, in order to emphasise the importance, survival and growth of rural SMMEs, as well as how communities and the country as a whole, could derive benefits from the growth of SMMEs.

This would result to the rural SMMEs to develop positive perception to adopt and use social media the Covid-19 crisis for their survival and growth. Moreover, this could assist the country to move towards realisation of the NDP goals of creating 90 percent new jobs by 2030.

13. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that suggest the critical measures that can be used to improve the situations during the turbulent environment on tough times such as Covid-19 crisis in KZN were discussed below.

13.1 Strategy implementation to reduce management perceptions constraints led to business failure regarding rural SMMEs survival and growth during Covid-19 crisis

The perception of SMMEs owners and managers was found to be a deciding factor for rural SMMEs to adopt social media use during the Covid-19 crisis. Rural SMMEs owners/ managers with a positive attitude towards adopting and using social media, this was regarded a major contribution regarding adopting and using social media for rural SMMEs survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis. The cognitive behaviour of rural SMMEs in this study in terms of perceived as useful, ease to use, trust, enjoyable and not risky to use social media by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis, through the use of TAM indicated it was successfully used to create an in-depth understanding of their influence for rural SMME social media use during

the Covid-19 crisis. The responses of SMME owners and managers in rural KZN were termed as negative behavioural responses, with regard to their perceptions to adopt and use social media to survive and grow in the economic turmoil caused by the Covid-19 crisis. Rural SMMEs were faced with management perception constraints, which led to business failure in adopting and use of social media for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis. This has created opportunities for rural SMMEs to consider strategy implementation to reduce management perception constraints. These rural enterprises need to gain social media awareness in terms of use benefits. They also need to develop technical and managerial competencies to use social media. This could have created a conducive environment for rural SMMEs to perceive social media use as useful, easy to use, trustworthy, enjoyable and not risky to use during the Covid-19 crisis. This implies should rural SMMEs possess digital orientated skills and managerial competencies, it could have exposed them to social media use, which would allow rural SMMEs to develop a positive attitude towards adopting and using social media during the Covid-19 crisis, for their survival and growth.

13.2 The social media use as a tool to reach more customers by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis

Furthermore, the process where rural SMMEs interact with customers could provide opportunities for rural SMMEs to increase sales through marketing their products and services, thereby improving rural SMME revenue to promote their survival and growth during Covid-19 crisis. Nevertheless, government support is regarded as critical for rural SMMEs to assist and guide them to cope in a turbulent business environment, in order to improve their day-to-day operations during crises such as Covid-19, for their continued survival and growth.

14. LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This survey did not focus to other provinces in South Africa and confined to certain rural areas in KZN not in entire KZN and South Africa. This implies that the results of this study cannot be generalised to the South African SMMEs, due to vast geographical areas in South Africa as well as critical survival and growth of SMMEs beyond Covid-19 crisis and empirical findings of this study, further research needs to include risk factors, Thus, the further research title that can be further investigated can be “*Understanding SMMEs owners’ perceptions of social media adoption for survival and growth during Covid-19 crisis and Beyond in South Africa: A Risk-Based Approach*”.

15. CONCLUSION

This study shared the perceptions of rural SMMEs owners and managers pertaining adoption and usage of social media for survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN. This study suggested that rural owners and managers perceptions played a crucial role is using social media during this crisis. By developing comprehensive insight of using social media rural SMME owners/ managers and adopt and use social media in economic constraints such as the Covid-19 crisis and enhance their survival and growth chances in KZN.

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