

A SOCIAL MEDIA FRAMEWORK FOR ENHANCING SMMEs' PROFITABILITY DURING ADVERSE CRISES: A CASE STUDY OF RURAL KWAZULU-NATAL DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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Abstract

The Covid-19 crisis has significantly impacted Small, Medium, and Micro-sized Enterprises (SMMEs) worldwide, particularly in rural areas like KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. Social media has emerged as crucial tool for SMMEs to navigate through the crisis, fostering profitability and sustainability during the Covid-19 crisis. However, the effective utilization of social media among SMMEs in rural KZN remains a subject for concern. This research study investigated the critical factors influencing the use of social media for SMMEs' profitability during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN. The quantitative design was adopted, and data was collected from 374 rural SMMEs in KZN by a closed-ended 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. The study employed convenience, purposive, and quota sampling techniques. The data collected was analysed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) (version 27.0). Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, factor analysis and correlation analysis to identify critical factors influencing the use of social media for SMMEs' profitability and their impact on business sustainability during Covid-19 crisis. Rural SMMEs were found to have lack of technical skills, inadequate government regulations, lack of digital infrastructure and connectivity as well as subjected to resources constraints. Key findings include the bivariate correlation results show the relationship between the tested variables is significantly positive at 0.085** (sig. <0.001) level). Therefore, rejection of the null hypothesis allows the conclusion that availability of internet is related to the use of social media by rural SMMEs to interact with customers during the Covid-19 crisis for SMMEs profitability. These findings of this study enabled the design and proposal for implementation of social media framework as a management tool for rural SMMEs profitability to sustain their businesses in adversity crises such as Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN.

Keywords: Social Media, Rural SMMEs, Covid-19 Crisis, Critical Factors, KwaZulu-Natal, Growth, SMMEs Profitability.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 crisis has disturbed global economies and primarily changed business settings, posing major challenges for SMMEs worldwide profoundly affecting businesses, particularly SMMEs. In rural provinces like KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa, SMMEs faced distinctive obstacles exacerbated by limited resources, infrastructure, access to markets and support available to their urban counterparts, making them more vulnerable to economic shocks such as the Covid-19 crisis. However, amidst the crisis, social media has emerged as crucial tool for SMMEs to maintain customer engagement, expand market reach, and sustain

operations to drive profitability. The Covid-19 crisis's impact on SMMEs has been well-documented, with many facing severe disruptions due to lockdowns, supply chain interruptions, and reduced consumer spending (Rogan & Skinner, 2020). Social media platforms offer cost-effective marketing tools that can reach a broad audience, enabling businesses to maintain customer relationships and generate revenue despite physical restrictions (Alalwan et al., 2017). In the context of rural KwaZulu-Natal, SMMEs play a vital role in the local economy, providing employment and essential services. However, these businesses often face challenges such as limited access to digital infrastructure and technical skills, which can hinder their ability to leverage social media effectively. Understanding the factors that influence social media utilization in this context is crucial for developing strategies to support SMMEs and enhance their resilience in times of crisis. It is against this background this study aims to explore the critical factors influencing the utilization of social media by SMMEs in rural KZN for enhancing profitability during the Covid-19 crisis. Therefore, it is essential for rural SMMEs to foster business profitability in the face of adversity crises such as the Covid-19 crisis.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review of this study is discussed as follows.

3. DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND CONNECTIVITY

3.1 Conceptual framework

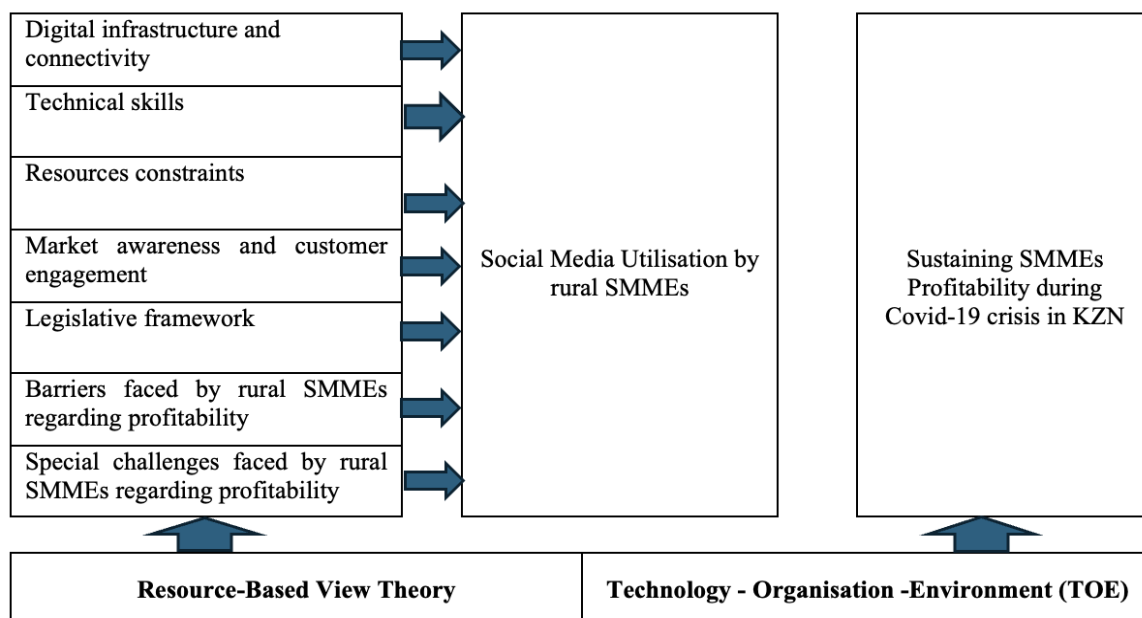


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Source: Authors (2024)

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) shows the relationship between critical factors influencing the use of social media by rural SMMEs for sustaining SMMEs' profitability during the Covid-19 crisis, where critical factors will act as the independent variables, while SMME profitability is the dependent variable. The framework is based on the review of literature on critical factors to enable practitioners, policymakers, SMMEs owners/managers and researchers to gain a complete perspective of social media utilisation by rural SMMEs and sustaining SMMEs Profitability of SMMEs during the Covid-19 in rural KZN.

3.2 Technology infrastructure

Mavimbela and Dube (2016) posit that rural SMMEs are faced with the slow pace of technology adoption and use, such as social media. The slow adoption pace has been attributed to poor infrastructure, lack of skills, and exorbitant cost of technology. By implication, rural SMMEs would have found it difficult to adopt and use social media for their profitability during the Covid-19 crisis, due to the slow pace of embracing technology, which emanated from the lack of access and inability to use technology (Mavimbela et al., 2016; Tendai, Nicole & Tafadzwa, 2018).

However, the previous researchers equally postulate the use of technology enhances SMMEs productivity and customer service, which means technology use by SMMEs, in the form of social media, would improve productivity and business sustainability. It is, therefore, crucial for rural SMMEs to embrace technology adoption to use social media to improve business performance during disasters such as the Covid-19 crisis, in terms of financial performance (Sitharam & Hoque, 2016; Tendai et al., 2018; Dubihlela & Sandada, 2014).

Obokoh and Goldman (2016) in study conducted in Nigeria revealed that there was a positive correlation between the status quo of infrastructure and the operational costs of rural SMMEs. It can be concluded, should the status quo of infrastructure deteriorate, the operational costs of rural SMMEs would increase. In turn, this may put rural SMMEs in financial distress, which can be detrimental for rural SMMEs to adopt and use technology such as new social media technologies, during the Covid-19 crisis, due to unaffordability to finance the use of social media.

3.3 Internet connectivity

Cariolle and Léon (2022: 8-9) argued that internet connectivity is a pre-requisite for the use of digital tools, therefore, lack of such connection is a barrier to their use and may also mirror a lack of information and communication technologies (ICT) infrastructure. This hinders rural SMMEs in social media adoption and use for business profitability, particularly during the Covid-19 crisis. In support of the study findings, the previous researchers pointed out that small businesses remain hindered by their lack of internet connectivity, despite great technological advancements globally. Without this technology, rural SMMEs may have found it difficult to survive during the Covid-19 crisis (Gqoboka, Anakpo & Mishi, 2022: 1395-1396), as they were unable to communicate with their customers for the purpose of marketing their products and services.

In addition, Guerriero (2015) maintained internet connectivity can contribute to rural SMMEs profitability, and it is essential for these enterprises to have access to internet connectivity, in order to adopt and use social media for their business resilience during disasters such as the Covid-19 crisis (Sugandini et al., 2020; Gqoboka et al., 2022). Moreover, Lekhanya (2014) emphasised that the high cost of infrastructure installation, exorbitant technology price, shortage of highly skilled workers and lack of management vision to adopt internet technology are the hindrances of rural SMMEs to adopt new modern technologies such as the social media in South Africa. This infers rural SMMEs were subject to lack of internet affordability by rural SMMEs to adopt and use social media during the Covid-19 crisis.

Thus, the availability of financial resources signifies the existence of financial support, in which businesses can decide to adopt and use social media technologies for marketing their products and services (Kim & Garrison, 2009 ; Sugandini et al., 2020; Potluri & Vajjhala, 2018). This was supported by the Broadband Commission (2014), which found that the internet is still too highly priced in a variety of developing countries and fixed- broadband prices seem to be negatively correlated to the economic development level of developing countries, making it difficult for them to use internet connectivity (ITU, 2014).

4. TECHNICAL SKILLS

Lekhanya (2018), whose study revealed SMME technical skills also create problems, even in developed countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), where approximately 36 percent smaller companies were found to experience a shortage of skilled staff. Thus, it can be deduced that SMMEs are in short supply of digital technology capabilities and orientation that can assist in the adoption and use of social media to increase market penetration and customer relationships, to improve sales that could give rise to increased SMMEs revenue during the economic disruptions caused by the Covid-19 crisis.

According to Lekhanya (2018), these technical skills are critical in aiding rural SMMEs to work towards profitability and explore new opportunities in developing economies, with special reference to SA, Nigeria, Kenya, and Malaysia. Rural SMMEs, therefore, require technical skills that enable these enterprise owners-managers to deal with the intricacies of the technology-related adoption process, which is considered a fundamental for coping with innovation practices in order to survive during the Covid-19 crisis. In addition, the previous experience of information systems by rural SMMEs can have a direct influence, in such a manner that it can facilitate the adoption and usage of social media by rural SMMEs (Lippert & Forman, 2005; Kaun & Chau, 2001).

Thus, this factor could perhaps have been critical in driving social media adoption and usage by SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis. Furthermore, Lekhanya (2018), who further revealed technical skills for rural SMMEs are problematic, even in developed countries such as the UK, where it was found approximately 36 percent smaller companies experienced skilled staff shortages, which had a bearing on adopting and use of social media for their business performance.

5. RESOURCES CONSTRAINTS

Availability of financial resources signifies the existence of financial support, in which businesses can decide to adopt and use social media technologies for marketing their products and services (Kim & Garrison, 2009; Sugandini et al., 2020; Potluri & Vajjhala, 2018). The only critical factor businesses consider when they embark on the adoption of innovation, is the availability of financial resources, which is alleged as the fundamental aspect of the process of adoption and use of social media technologies for their survival in times of crisis (Maduku et al., 2016; To & Ngai, 2006; Itliong, 2020).

This situation was also labelled as “business slack”, which exemplifies the need for numerous resources owned by business enterprises such as financial, technical, and human resources. Essentially, the critical resource factor that plays a crucial role in social media technology adoption and use relates to finances (Karjaluoto & Huhtamäki, 2010; Itliong, 2020).

A study by Ismail (2013) concurred, stating the accumulation of adequate capital by businesses is regarded as a fundamental step in the adoption and use of social media technologies by the business enterprises. Overall, the availability of financial resources within SMMEs is a fundamental step that would assist their social media adoption and use for their profitability (Sugandini et al., 2020; Papadopoulos et al., 2020; Itliong, 2020; Chang et al., 2020).

SMMEs faced a problem of financial resources to adopt and use social media during the Covid-19 crisis. Financial resources are key resources that will dictate whether rural SMMEs will use social media as cited by Maduku et al. (2016), To and Ngai (2006) and Itliong (2020).

Therefore, the only critical factor businesses considered when they intend to embark on the adoption of new innovation, such as use of social media technologies, is whether there are financial resources available, which is alleged as the fundamental aspect of the adoption process and use of social media technologies by SMMEs for business profitability during the Covid-19 and subsequent economic crises (Maduku et al., 2016; To & Ngai, 2006; Itliong, 2020).

Rural SMMEs are faced with the challenge of financial constraint, which perpetually affects their social media adoption and use as a new innovation technology to market their products and services for business performance during Covid-19 crisis in developing countries. Eniola and Ektebang (2015) added that rural SMMEs generally faced financial restraints, which restrict their current advertising tools such as social media, because the product and service promotion is based on social media adoption and use by means of their financial position during the Covid-19 crisis. Rural SMMEs have more low-income customers, which contributes to the lack of affordability to adopt and fully use social media for growth during events such as the Covid-19 crisis. The availability of reliable internet is crucial for social media utilization.

During the Covid-19 crisis, rural SMMEs in South Africa faced significant internet connectivity issues, which severely limited their ability to engage with customers and promote their products online. The lack of internet access hinders not only marketing efforts but also customer service and overall business operations (Enwereji, 2022; Mahlaule et al., 2024).

6. MARKET AWARENESS AND CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

6.1 Customer satisfaction

Research by Budree, Fietkiewicz and Lins (2019) and Prince (2019), pointed out that the lack of social media use by rural SMMEs in SA could also be due to the lack of customer satisfaction. In addition, some researchers highlighted the adoption of new technology has a positive correlation between intention to adopt and use technology and the pressure from customers (Ghobakhloo & Tang, 2015; Maduku et al., 2016; Matikiti et al., 2018).

6.2 Large market scope

The businesses with a larger market scope are more inclined to adopt new technologies than those with a limited market scope that tend to have a lower probability of adoption (Zhu, Kraemer & Xu, 2003). In contrast, other scholars have found no correlation for market scope in relation to its influence on new technology adoption and usage (Yeboah-Boateng & Essandoh, 2014; Alshamaila, 2015; Boumediene & Kawalek, 2008).

6.3 Rural SMMEs use social media for customer engagement during Covid -19 crisis

Goi (2014) and Jordan (2018), which pointed out that business enterprises adopted and used social media platforms to communicate with existing and potential customers, intent on creating relationships to forge future loyalty. In this regard, Kakumbi and Phiri (2022) highlighted the adoption and usage of social media amongst rural SMMEs is low, whereas the use of social media by rural SMMEs has a huge impact on the growth of these small enterprises.

However, studies by Rodriguez, Ajjan and Peterson (2014) and Moghavvemi (2015), revealed the use of Facebook improves sales and customer relationships, which create customer loyalty to the business. The most popular social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, with customers spending much time in their use to share similar interests with their customers, as well as positive or negative service experiences regarding the business' services and products (Valos et al., 2016; Kumar et al., 2016).

7. LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

7.1 Government regulations

Rangwetsi et al. (2021) argued that government support through legislation is one of the environmental factors that influence technology adoption in the TOE framework. Regulations established by the Government can motivate and prevent businesses.

The laws and regulations may be the main stumbling blocks, due to the compliance and administrative burdens imposed by Acts and regulations, which impeded rural SMMEs from having sufficient funds to adopt social media technologies during the Covid-19 crisis. This has special reference to the growth and development of rural SMMEs in KZN (Sugandini et al., 2020; Thomas & Luvhengo, 2020).

8. THE SPECIAL BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES FACED BY RURAL SMMEs REGARDING PROFITABILITY IN RURAL PLACES DURING COVID-19 CRISIS

SMMEs face several barriers to adopting social media, including limited technical skills, financial constraints, inadequate infrastructure and lack of market awareness. In rural areas, these barriers are exacerbated by additional challenges such as poor internet connectivity and limited access to digital tools (Mhlongo & Daya, 2023). Thus, the understanding these barriers is crucial for developing strategies to enhance social media utilisation among SMMEs. Rural SMMEs encounter unique challenges that hinder their profitability. These include geographic isolation, lower population density, and limited access to markets. Furthermore, rural businesses often struggle with lower levels of digital literacy and fewer opportunities for digital training (Chigada & Madzinga, 2021; Mhlongo & Daya, 2023; Akpan et al., 2021).

9. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

9.1 Resource-based view (RBV) theory

The Resource-Based View (RBV) posits that firms are successful if they can mobilize and leverage their internal and external resources effectively. This theory emphasizes the importance of understanding and managing the firm's resources to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Adam & Alarifi, 2021).

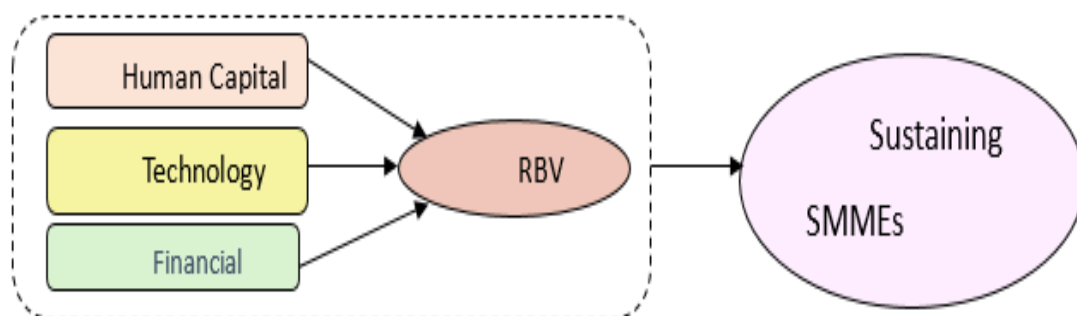


Figure 2: Resource-Based View Theory

Source: Authors (2024)

Figure 2 depicted that the study drew on RBV to analyze how SMMEs in rural KZN leverage available resources such as human capital, technology, and financial resources to drive profitability of SMMEs in rural economies during the Covid-19 crisis. The RBV was useful in this study for understanding how rural SMMEs leverage resources to address the challenges regarding profitability during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN (Adam et al., 2021). However, RBV was useful for understanding how rural SMMEs leverage resources, it did not fully capture the external factors affecting SMMEs, such as government policies and market conditions. To address this, the study complemented and supplemented RBV by applying Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) theory in this study (Adam et al., 2021) as follows:

9.2 TOE Theory

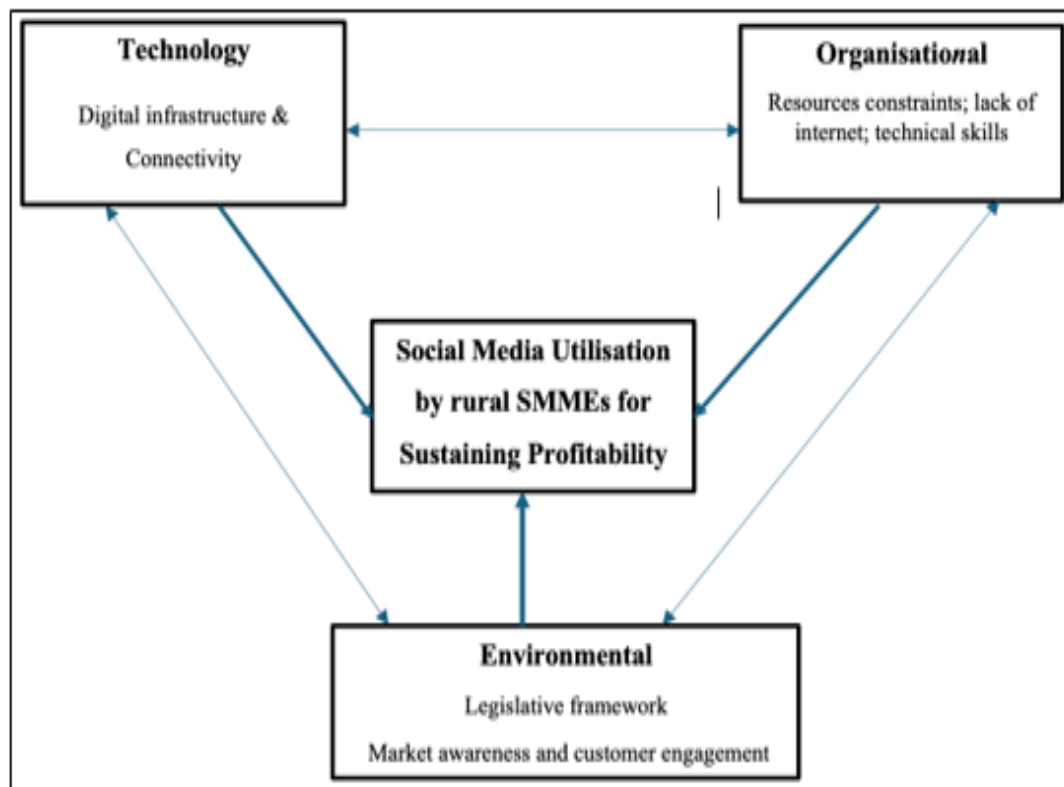


Figure 3: Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) Theory

Source: Developed by researchers (2024)

Figure 3 indicates that TOE theory was the best suited to deal more effectively with businesses confronted with uncertainty of business environment since it caters for the technological context, organisational context and environment context (Trawnih et al., 2021; Qalati et al., 2021). This theory catered all the critical factors such as digital infrastructure and connectivity, resources constraints, technical skills, market forces and legislative framework influenced the use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis.

Thus, many researchers used TOE theory in their studies as a lens to study adoption and use of new technology such as social media platforms (Baker, 2012; Oliveira & Martins, 2011; Jere & Ngidi, 2020). However, the profitability of rural SMMEs will heavily be dependent on technological context, organisational context, and environmental context which the rural SMMEs are operating to them (Qalati et al., 2021).

Hence, the TOE framework is considered a more complete model to study IT adoption at firm level (Oliveira et al., 2011), which complemented and supplemented the weakness of RBV as cited section 10.1 above.

9.3 Linking theories to research study and their suitability to the study

Table 1: Linking the theories to the research objectives

Research objective	Resource-Based View Theory (RBV)	Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) Theory	Suitability to the study
1. To investigate the critical factors influencing the use of social media for SMMEs' profitability during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN	Identify resources (For example, skills, financial capacity) influencing social media utilisation.	Assess technological readiness, organizational factors, and environmental influences.	RBV: Suitable for understanding the internal capabilities and resources that enable effective social media utilization. TOE: Suitable for a comprehensive analysis of external and internal factors influencing social media adoption.
2. To examine the impact of these factors on social media adoption and business performance	Analyze how these resources impact rural SMMEs profitability.	Examine the impact of these factors on social media adoption and business performance.	

Source: Authors (2024)

10. SUMMARY FOR 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) as follows:

Ho: There is no positive significant relationship between internet availability and social media utilization for sustaining the profitability of rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis.

Ha: There is a positive significant relationship between internet availability and social media utilization for sustaining the profitability of rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis.

11. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the potential benefits of social media for SMMEs, the effective utilisation of social media in rural KZN remains a concern that need to be investigated. Some factors, such as the limited digital infrastructure, technological literacy gaps and resources constraints pose challenges to rural SMMEs in leveraging social media for profitability. However, the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the vulnerabilities of SMMEs, particularly in rural areas where access to resources and support is limited. For SMMEs in rural KwaZulu-Natal, the crisis has exacerbated existing challenges and introduced new ones, making it difficult to sustain operations and profitability. Social media presents a potential solution by offering a platform for marketing, customer engagement and revenue generation.

However, the adoption and effective utilization of social media by SMMEs in rural KZN are influenced by various factors that need to be identified and understood. Notwithstanding the potential benefits, many SMMEs in rural areas struggle to adopt social media due to factors

such as lack of digital skills, limited access to technology, and insufficient external support (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Additionally, the perceived benefits of social media and the extent to which these benefits translate into improved business performance are not well-understood. There is a need to investigate these critical factors to develop targeted interventions that can enhance social media utilization and profitability for SMMEs in rural KZN during crises like Covid-19 crisis. The Resource-Based View (RBV) theory and the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework provide valuable lenses for examining these factors. The RBV theory posits that a firm's internal resources and capabilities are crucial for gaining a competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). In contrast, the TOE framework emphasizes the influence of technological, organizational, and environmental contexts on technology adoption (Tornatzky & Fleischer, 1990). It is, therefore, vital to investigate the critical factors influencing social media use among rural SMMEs during Covid-19 crisis to inform policy interventions, capacity building programmes and support mechanisms tailored to rural SMMEs needs.

12. AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to explore the critical factors influencing the use of social media for the profitability of SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KwaZulu-Natal. The study further examines the impact of these factors on social media adoption and business performance and recommends a social media framework as a management tool for sustaining SMMEs' profitability during adverse crises such as Covid-19 crisis.

13. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study intends to achieve the purpose of the study by addressing the following secondary objectives.

- To investigate the critical factors influencing the use of social media for SMMEs' profitability during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN.
- To examine the impact of these factors on social media adoption and business performance.
- To recommend the social media framework as management tool for SMMEs profitability to sustain their businesses in adversity crises such as Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN.

14. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

14.1 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 provide insights into the social media strategies adopted by rural SMMEs for their survival and grow during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN. The research design was descriptive and cross sectional in nature (Singh & Masuku, 2014).

14.2 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 (StatsSA, Quarterly Labour Force Survey, 2020).

14.3 Sampling Strategy and Sample Size

According to the StatsSA, Quarterly Labour Force Survey (2020), there are 414 070 SMMEs in the province of KZN. Singh & Masuku (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 using social media during the Covid-19 crisis (Etikan et al., 2016; Babbie, 2020; Patton, 2015).

14.4 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, the collected quantitative data was in accordance with the research objectives with the purpose to address the study hypotheses.

14.5 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 was 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 (Creswell, 2009; Cresswell & Creswell, 2018).

14.6 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).

15. RESULTS

This section provides the discussion and interpretation of empirical findings as follows:

15.1 Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesis testing of the study is presented as follows.

Ha1: There is a positive significant relationship between internet availability and social media utilization for the profitability of rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis.

The bivariate correlation results show the relationship between the tested variables is significantly positive at 0.085** (sig. <0.001) level. Therefore, rejection of the null hypothesis allows the conclusion that availability of internet is related to the use of social media by rural SMMEs to interact with customers during the Covid-19 crisis for their profitability.

15.2 Descriptive analysis for the Critical Factors Influencing Social Media Utilisation for SMMEs Profitability During the Covid-19 Crisis in Rural KwaZulu-Natal

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Lack of technical skills affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.5455	1.12339
Lack of internet connectivity affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.6257	1.22485
Lack of technology infrastructure affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.6631	1.22480
Customer satisfaction influences rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.5267	1.15690
Large market scope influence rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.5241	1.16849

Lack of availability of internet affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.6444	1.18718
Lack of affordability of internet affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.5722	1.21160
Inadequate government regulations affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.5963	1.18755
Rural SMMEs can use social media to interact with customers in future pandemics	374	1.00	5.00	4.0615	0.88112
Valid N (listwise)	374				
Overall Mean and Std. Deviation scores				32.7595	10.36588

From the descriptive analysis as shown in the table 2, majority of the respondents agreed the the critical factors influencing social media utilisation for SMMEs profitability during the Covid-19 crisis have the influence on the use of social media by rural SMMEs during Covid-19 crisis in KZN with mean 32.7595 and standard deviation of 10.36588. Most respondents agreed with the statement that lack of technical skills affected rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis with mean of 3.5455 and standard deviation of 1.12339.

In addition, larger number of respondents agreed that lack of internet connectivity affected rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis with mean of 3.6257 and standard deviation of 1.22485. However, respondents agreed that lack of technology infrastructure affected rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis with mean of 3.6631 and with a standard deviation of 1.22480.

The respondents agreed that lack of technology infrastructure has an impact on customer satisfaction due to lack of social media use by rural SMMEs during Covid-19 crisis with mean 3.5267 and standard deviation of 1.15690. With mean of 3.5241 and standard deviation of 1.16849, most of the respondents agreed that large market scope influenced rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis. The respondents agreed with the statement that lack of affordability of internet affected rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis with mean of 3.5722 and a standard of 1.21160.

This resulted to notion that most rural SMMEs agreed that inadequate government regulations affected them to use social media during Covid-19 crisis with mean of 3.5963 and a standard deviation of 1.18755, while most of respondents suggested that rural SMMEs can use social media to interact with customers in future pandemics with mean of 4.0615 and standard deviation of 0.88112.

15.3 Correlation analysis for key factors influencing rural SMMEs social media use for SMMEs' profitability during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN

Table 3 below of correlation matrix shows how the study variables are associated regarding the strength and direction.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix (N=374)

		Internet availability	Social media utilisation
Internet availability	Pearson Correlation	1	0.085**
	Sig.(2-tailed)	0.000	0.000
	N	374	374
use social media to interact with customers in future pandemics (social media utilisation)	Pearson Correlation	0.085**	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	0.000	0.000
	N	374	374
** Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)			

According to the correlation matrix depicted in table 3, it was noted that the data significantly supported the design and development of the social media framework for SMMEs profitability to sustain their businesses in adversity crises such as Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN as a management tool for their profitability during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN. The correlation matrix reveals the variable internet availability is significantly correlated with the use social media to interact with customers in future pandemics (social media utilisation) (0.085**, $p < 0.001$), which is positive and highly correlated. This suggests the variable internet availability may be a critical influence for the use social media to interact with customers in future pandemics (social media utilisation) by rural SMMEs for the profitability during Covid-19 crisis. According to hypotheses that were developed in this study as outlined in section 11 above. Analysis of Pearson correlation shown a positive significant relationship between internet availability and social media utilization for the profitability of rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis, where $r = 0.085^{**}$; $p < 0.001$ is shown in table 3. The more the rural SMMEs have an access internet due to its availability, the more rural SMMEs can use social media to interact with customers in future pandemics (social media utilisation). Therefore, H_{a1} is accepted.

15.4 Component matrix: factors that influenced rural KZN SMMEs social media use for profitability during the Covid-19 crisis

Table 4: Component Matrix^a

	Component 1
Lack of technical skills affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.883
Lack of internet connectivity affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.885
Lack of technology infrastructure affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.893
Customer satisfaction influence rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.847
Lack of availability of internet affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.876
Lack of affordability of internet affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.882
Inadequate government regulations affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.856
Large market scope influence rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.862
Rural SMMEs can use social media to interact with customers during Covid-19 crisis	0.862
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.	
a. 1 components extracted.	

A component test was conducted on the statement regarding the factors influencing social media use for SMMEs profitability in rural KZN during the Covid-19 crisis. Respondents indicated to some of the category components tested that reflect positive significance and others show negative significance.

A component test was performed on the statement regarding whether lack of broadband internet affected rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis, and a strong positive significance of 0.894 was determined. The test whether the lack of technology infrastructure affected rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis revealed a score of 0.893.

The statement to test whether lack of internet connectivity affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis recorded a score of 0.885. This infers that the lack of internet connectivity had a negative impact on a rural SMMEs to adopt and use social media during Covid-19 crisis.

This is line with the component tests conducted to establish whether lack of internet affordability to use social media affected rural SMME use of social media during Covid-19 crisis, with recorded score of 0.882. This denotes some rural SMMEs were unable to use social media due to the lack of financial resources to secure internet services during the Covid-19 crisis.

The variable pertaining to whether a lack of technical skills affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis, recorded a positive significance of 0.883, while the other variable to test the component whether lack of internet availability affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis, a score of 0.876 is recorded.

This was in line with the test conducted regarding whether lack of infrastructure affected rural SMME social media use during the Covid-19 crisis, where a strong positive significance was recorded with a score of 0.876.

Concerning the statement whether large market scope influenced rural SMME social media use during the Covid-19 crisis, a positive significance of 0.862 is shown. The respondents were also of the opinion that inadequate government regulations affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis, where test conducted recorded a score of 0.856. This score had a relationship with the statement that customer satisfaction influenced rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis, with a strong positive of 0.847 recorded.

16. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that enhancing social media skills (technical skills), highlighting the benefits of social media, and providing external support can significantly improve the utilization of social media by SMMEs, thereby increasing their profitability during Covid-19 crisis.

16.1 Factors influencing the use of social media for rural SMMEs profitability during covid-19 crisis

16.1.1 Lack of technology infrastructure affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis

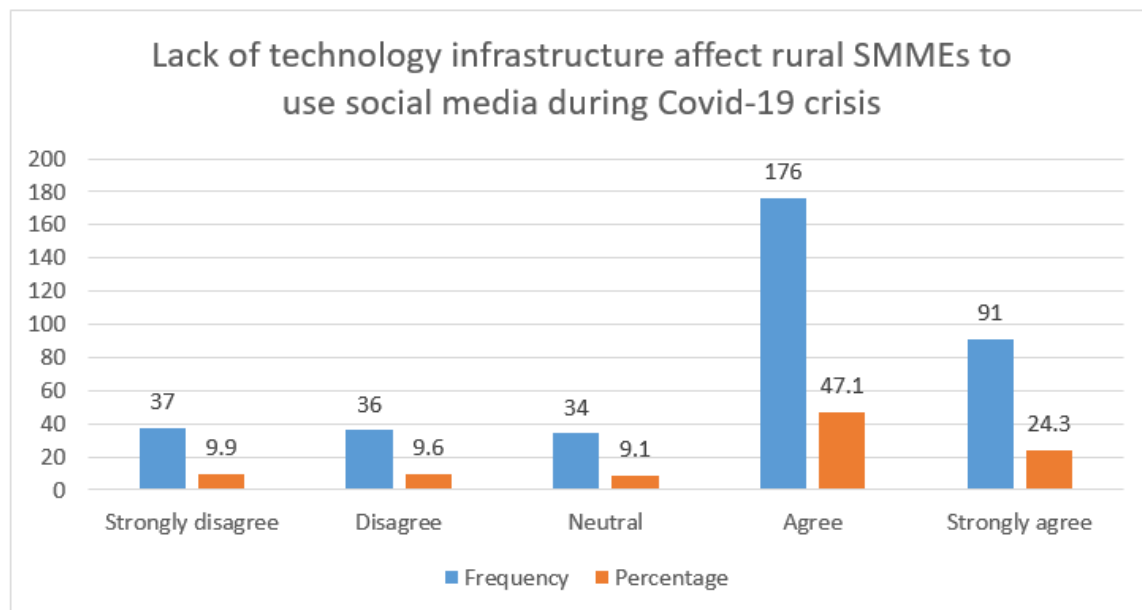


Figure 4: Lack of technology infrastructure

The majority respondents (176 or 47.1 percent) indicated their agreement, as illustrated in figure 4, with 91 (24.3 percent) that indicated they strongly agreed the lack of technology infrastructure affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. Fewer respondents (34 or 9.1 percent) were neutral, while 36 (9.6 percent) disagreed and 37 (9.9 percent) respondents indicated strong disagreement with the statement. A Chi-square test was conducted to ascertain whether lack of technology infrastructure affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. The results for this variable show ($\chi^2 = 201.909$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), signalling the use of social media by rural SMMEs in KZN is strong and significantly impacted by lack of technology infrastructure during the Covid-19 crisis. This suggests the government needs to support rural SMMEs by proving technology infrastructure in order to promote social media adoption and usage for their survival and growth. This finding supports Mavimbela and Dube (2016), who posit rural SMMEs are faced with the slow pace of technology adoption and use, such as social media. The slow adoption pace has been attributed to poor infrastructure, lack of skills, and exorbitant cost of technology. By implication, rural SMMEs would have found it difficult to adopt and use social media to survive and grow during the Covid-19 crisis, due to the slow pace of embracing technology, which emanated from the lack of access and inability to use technology (Mavimbela et al., 2016; Tendai et al., 2018). However, the previous researchers equally postulate the use of technology enhances SMMEs productivity and customer service, which means technology use by SMMEs,

in the form of social media, would improve productivity and growth. It is, therefore, crucial for rural SMMEs to embrace technology adoption to use social media to improve performance during disasters such as the Covid-19 crisis, in terms of financial performance (Sitharam et al., 2016; Tendai et al., 2018; Dubihlela et al., 2014).

16.1.2 Lack of internet connectivity affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis

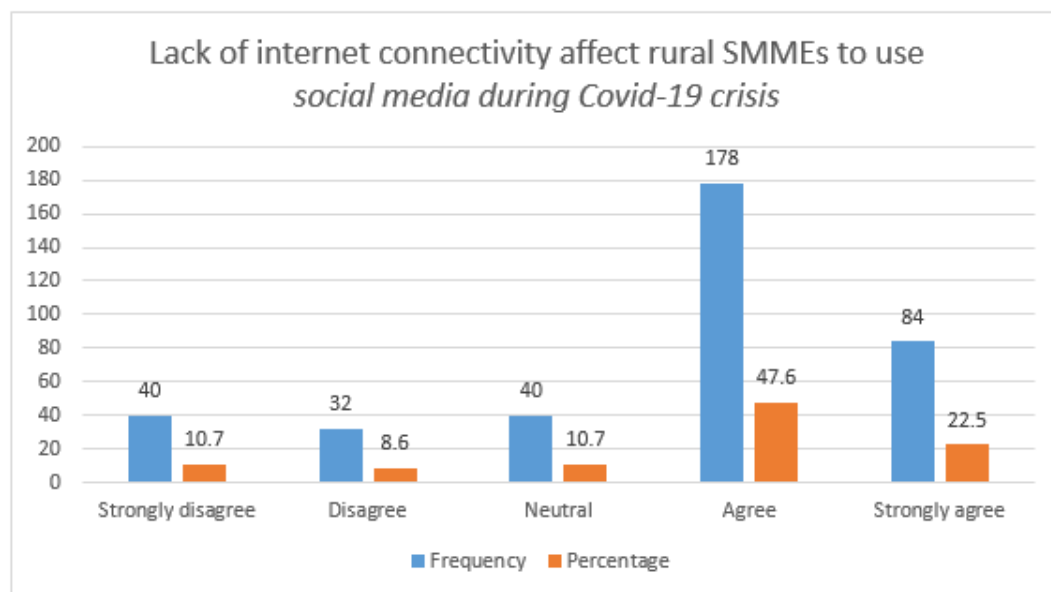


Figure 5: Lack of internet connectivity

As depicted in figure 5, a significant number of respondents (178 or 47.6 percent and 84 or 22.5 percent) respectively agreed and strongly agreed the lack of internet connectivity affected rural SMMEs use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. Fewer respondents (40 or 10.7 percent) were neutral, while 32 (8.6 percent) disagreed and a further 40 (10.7 percent) respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. A Chi-square test was conducted to establish whether the findings were valid. The results show ($\chi^2 = 200.385$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$) for this variable, indicating a very strong significant effect on the lack of internet connectivity for rural SMMEs to use social media; thus, they were unable to sustain the businesses profitability during the Covid-19 crisis. Respondent agreement indicates the lack of internet connectivity prevented SMMEs from adopting and using social media during this crisis. In line with these findings, Cariolle and Léon (2022: 8-9) argued internet connectivity is a pre-requisite for the use of digital tools; therefore, lack of such connection is a barrier to their use and may also mirror a lack of ICT infrastructure. This hinders rural SMMEs in social media adoption and use for survival and growth, particularly during the Covid-19 crisis. In support of the study findings, the previous researchers pointed out small businesses remain hindered by their lack of internet connectivity, despite great technological advancements globally. Without this technology, rural SMMEs may have found it difficult to survive during the Covid-19 crisis

(Gqoboka et al., 2022: 1395-1396), as they were unable to communicate with their customers for the purpose of marketing their products and services. In addition, Guerriero (2015) maintained internet connectivity can contribute to rural SMMEs profitability, and it is essential for these enterprises to have access to internet connectivity, in order to adopt and use social media for business resilience during disasters such as the Covid-19 crisis (Sugandini et al., 2020; Gqoboka et al., 2022).

16.1.3 Lack of technical skills affect rural SMMEs use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis

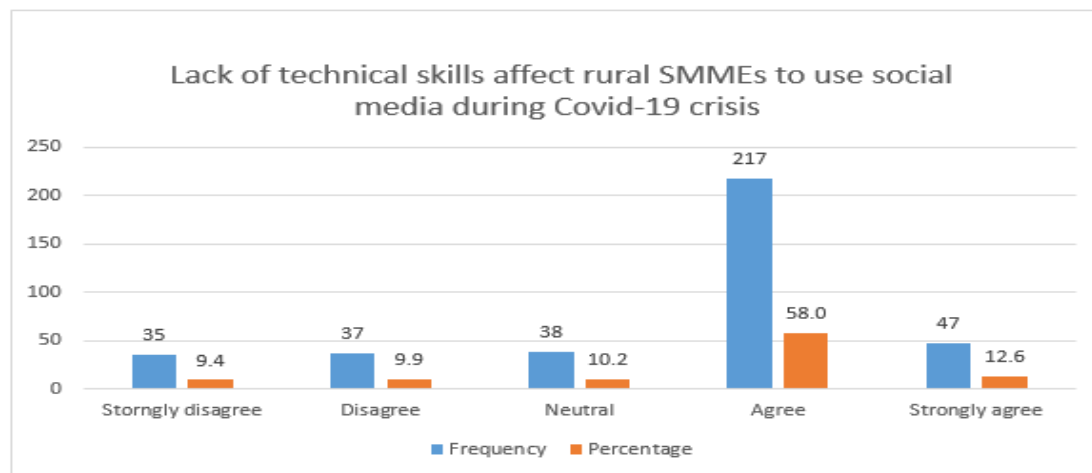


Figure 6: Lack of technical skills

As shown in figure 6, many respondents agreed (217 or 58.0 percent) and 47 (12.6 percent) respondents further strongly agreed there was a lack of technical skills, which affected rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis. A small number of the respondents were neutral (38 or 10.2 percent), while 37 (9.9 percent) disagreed with the statement and 35 (9.4 percent) strongly disagreed with the statement. This finding concurs with Lekhanya (2018), whose study revealed SMMEs technical skills also create problems, even in developed countries such as the UK, where approximately 36 percent smaller companies were found to experience a shortage of skilled staff. Thus, it can be deduced SMMEs are in short supply of digital technology capabilities and orientation that can assist in the adoption and use of social media to increase market penetration and customer relationships, to improve sales that could give rise to increased SMMEs revenue during the economic disruptions caused by the Covid-19 crisis. According to Lekhanya (2018), these technical skills are critical in aiding rural SMMEs to work towards growth and explore new opportunities in developing economies, with special reference to SA, Nigeria, Kenya, and Malaysia. Rural SMMEs, therefore, require technical skills that enable these enterprise owners-managers to deal with the intricacies of the technology-related adoption process, which is considered a fundamental for coping with innovation practices in order to survive and grow during the Covid-19 crisis. In addition, the previous experience of information systems by rural SMMEs can have a direct influence, in

such a manner that it can facilitate the adoption and usage of social media by rural SMMEs (Lippert et al., 2005; Kaun et al., 2001). Thus, this factor could perhaps have been critical in driving social media adoption and usage by SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis. To ascertain whether the lack of technical skills affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis, a Chi-square test was conducted. The results for this variable show ($\chi^2 = 339.048$, $df = 4$; $p < 0.001$), which indicates a strong significant impact by the lack of technical skills on rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. These findings are in line with Lekhanya (2018), who further revealed technical skills for rural SMMEs are problematic, even in developed countries such as the UK, where it was found approximately 36 percent smaller companies experienced skilled staff shortages, which had a bearing on adopting and use of social media for their profitability.

16.1.4 Lack of internet availability affected rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis

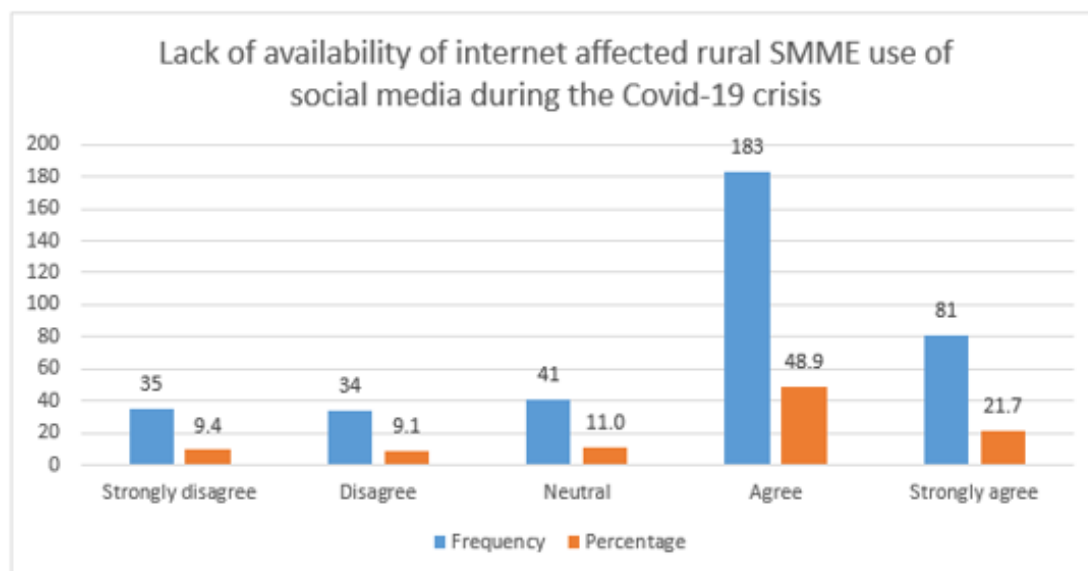


Figure 7: Lack of availability of internet

Availability of financial resources signifies the existence of financial support, in which businesses can decide to adopt and use social media technologies for marketing their products and services (Kim et al., 2009; Sugandini et al., 2020; Potluri et al., 2018). It is illustrated by figure 7 that the majority respondents (183 or 48.9 percent) agreed and 81 (21.7 percent) further strongly agreed the lack of internet availability affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. In addition, 41 (11.9 percent) respondents remained neutral, with 34 (9.1 percent) respondents that disagreed and 35 (9.4 percent) that indicated they strongly disagreed with the statement. These findings were supported by a Chi-square test performed to ascertain whether rural SMMEs social media use was affected by lack of internet availability during the

Covid-19 crisis. The results for this variable indicate ($\chi^2 = 251.733$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), which shows a lack of internet availability affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. This was supported by the Broadband Commission (2014), which found the internet is still too highly priced in a variety of developing countries and fixed- broadband prices seem to be negatively correlated to the economic development level of developing countries, making it difficult for them to use internet connectivity (ITU, 2014). Consequently, in light of figure 7, non-availability and / or partial internet connectivity can be an obstacle for rural SMMEs to adopt and use social media for business profitability during disasters such as the Covid-19 crisis (Sugandini et al., 2020; Gqoboka et al., 2022).

16.1.5 Lack of internet affordability affected rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis

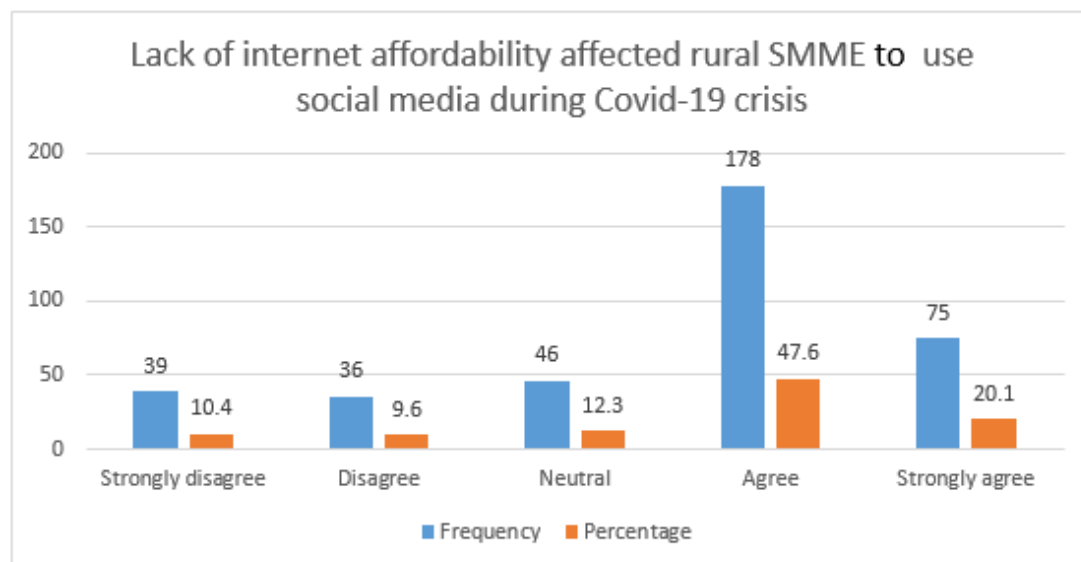


Figure 8: Lack of internet affordability

It is depicted by figure 8 that the majority respondents (178 or 47.6 percent) agreed and 75 (20.1 percent) further strongly agreed that lack of affordability of internet affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis. Furthermore, 46 (12.3 percent) respondents remained neutral, with 36 (9.6 percent) respondents that disagreed and thirty-nine (10.4 percent) that indicated they strongly disagreed with the statement. These findings were supported by a Chi-square test that was performed to ascertain whether rural SMMEs to use social media are affected by lack of affordability of internet during Covid-19 crisis. The results for this variable indicate that ($\chi^2 = 190.733$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), which shows a lack of affordability of internet affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis. This implies that most of the respondents had a view that the rural SMMEs were subjected to the lack of affordability of internet to use social media during Covid-19 crisis. This finding was supported by the finding of Lekhanya (2014) who emphasised that the high cost of infrastructure installation, exorbitant technology price, shortage of highly skilled workers and

lack of management vision to adopt internet technology are the hindrances of rural SMMEs to adopt new modern technologies such as the social media in South Africa. This infers rural SMMEs were subject to internet affordability by rural SMMEs to adopt and use social media during the Covid-19 crisis.

16.1.6 Customer satisfaction influenced rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis

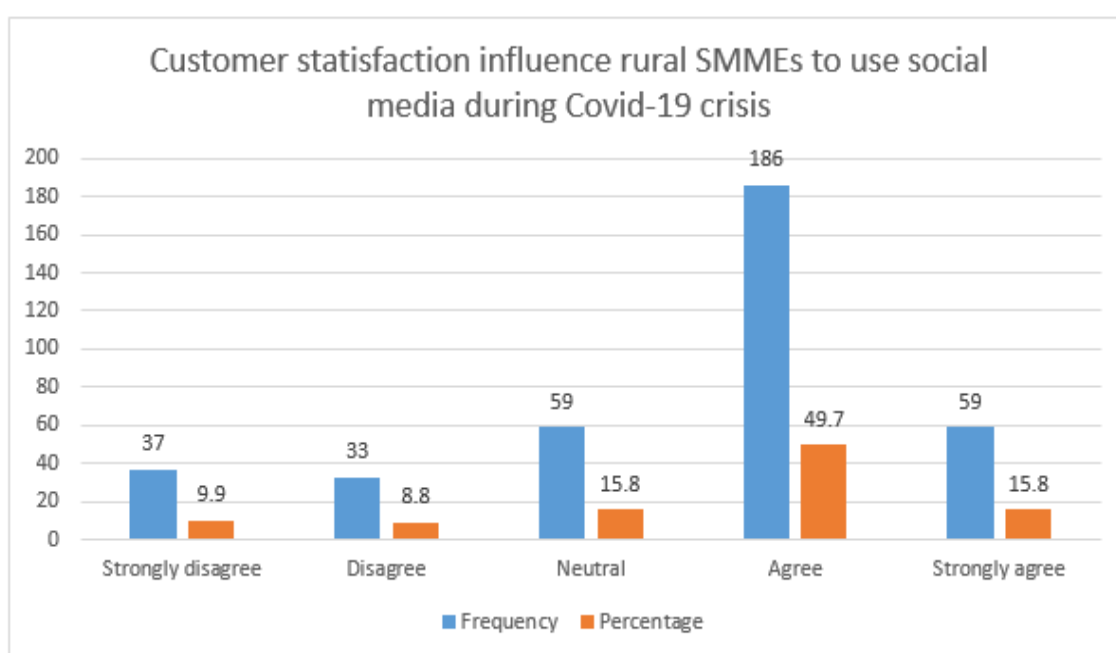


Figure 9: Customer satisfaction influenced rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis

The majority respondents (186 or 49.7 percent) indicated they agreed, as shown in figure 9, with 59 (15.8 percent) that indicated they strongly agreed customer satisfaction influenced rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis. Fewer respondents (59 or 15.8 percent) were neutral, while only 37 (9.9 percent) disagreed and 33 (8.8 percent) respondents indicated strong disagreement with the statement. A Chi-square test was conducted to ascertain whether customer satisfaction influenced rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis.

The results for this variable show ($\chi^2 = 214.449$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), signalling the use of social media by rural SMMEs in KZN is strong and significantly impacted by customer satisfaction during the Covid-19 crisis. Research by Budree et al. (2019) and Prince (2019) support the findings, pointing out the lack of social media use by rural SMMEs in SA could also be due to the lack of customer satisfaction.

In addition, some researchers highlighted the adoption of new technology has a positive correlation between intention to adopt and use technology and the pressure from customers (Ghobakhloo et al., 2015; Maduku et al., 2016; Matikiti et al., 2018).

16.1.7 Large market scope influenced rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis

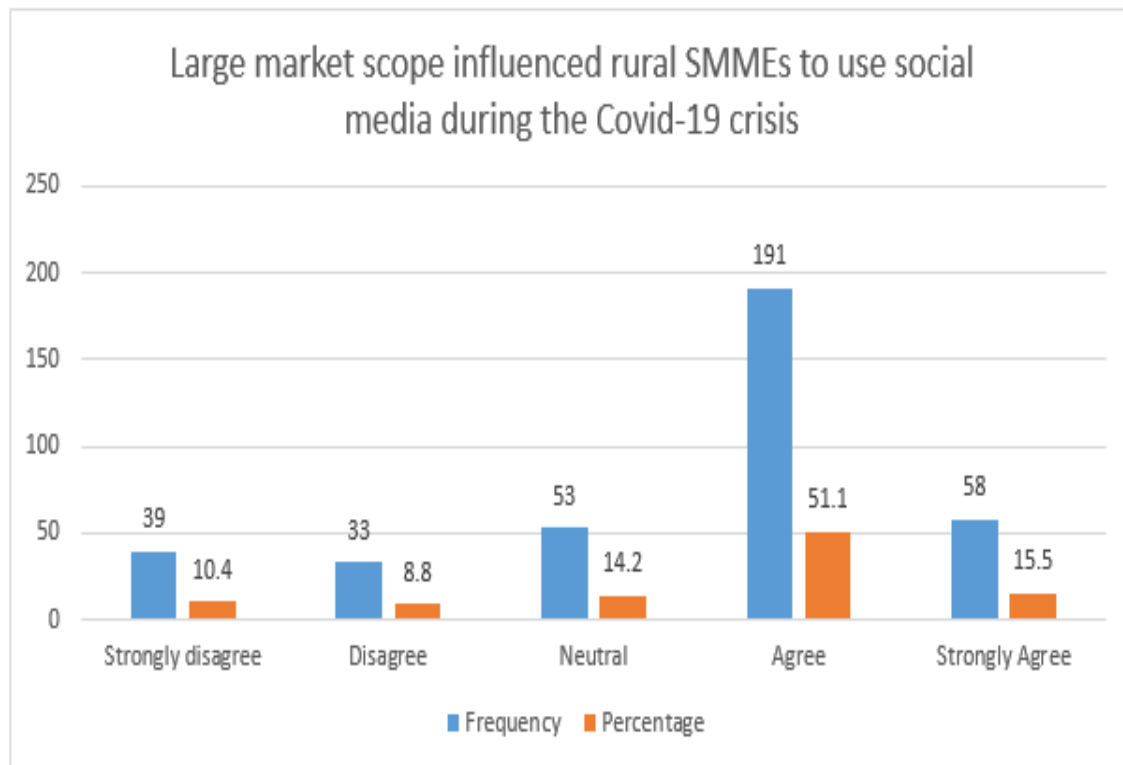


Figure 10: Large market scope

As figure 10 shows, many respondents (191 or 51.1 percent) agreed and 58 (15.5 percent) further strongly agreed large market scope influenced rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis. Furthermore, 53 (14.2 percent) respondents took a neutral position to the statement, with 33 (8.8 percent) that disagreed, while 39 (10.4 percent) strongly disagreed with the statement.

A Chi-square test was conducted to determine whether large market scope influenced rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis. The results for this variable indicate ($\chi^2 = 231.134$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), signalling large market scope significantly influenced rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis.

These findings concur with prior studies that it can, in general, be contended businesses with a larger market scope are more inclined to adopt new technologies than those with a limited market scope that tend to have a lower probability of adoption (Zhu et al., 2003).

In contrast, other scholars have found no correlation for market scope in relation to its influence on new technology adoption and usage (Yeboah-Boateng et al., 2014; Alshamaila, 2013; Ramdani et al., 2009; Boumediene et al., 2008).

16.1.8 Rural SMMEs can use social media to interact with customers in future pandemics

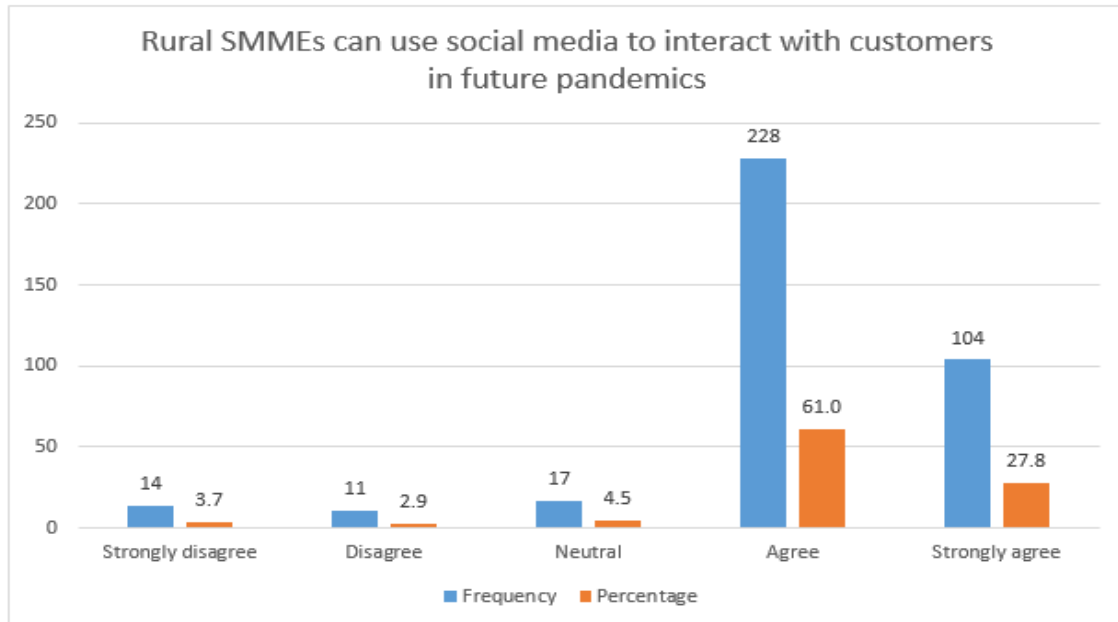


Figure 11: Rural SMMEs can use social media to interact with customers in future pandemics

Figure 11 presents results showing the majority respondents (228 or 61.1 percent) agreed, with 104 (27.8 percent) that strongly agreed to the statement, while 17 (4.5 percent) respondents remained neutral to the statement. Additionally, a small number of respondents (11 or 2.9 percent) disagreed with the statement, whereas 14 (3.7 percent) respondents strongly disagreed with the statement.

A Chi-square test was conducted to ascertain whether rural SMMEs can use social media to interact with customers in future pandemics. The results for this variable indicate ($\chi^2 = 473.674$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), which implies rural SMMEs can use social media to interact with customers in future pandemics.

These findings are supported by studies conducted by Goi (2014) and Jordan (2018), which pointed out business enterprises adopted and used social media platforms to communicate with existing and potential customers, intent on creating relationships to forge future loyalty.

In this regard, Kakumbi et al. (2022) highlighted the adoption and usage of social media amongst rural SMMEs is low, whereas the use of social media by rural SMMEs has a huge impact on the growth of these small enterprises.

However, studies by Rodriguez et al. (2014) and Moghavvemi (2015), revealed the use of Facebook improves sales and customer relationships, which create customer loyalty to the business.

The most popular social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, with customers spending much time in their use to share similar interests with their customers, as well as positive or negative service experiences regarding the business' services and products (Valos et al., 2016; Kumar et al., 2016).

16.1.9 Inadequate government regulations affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis

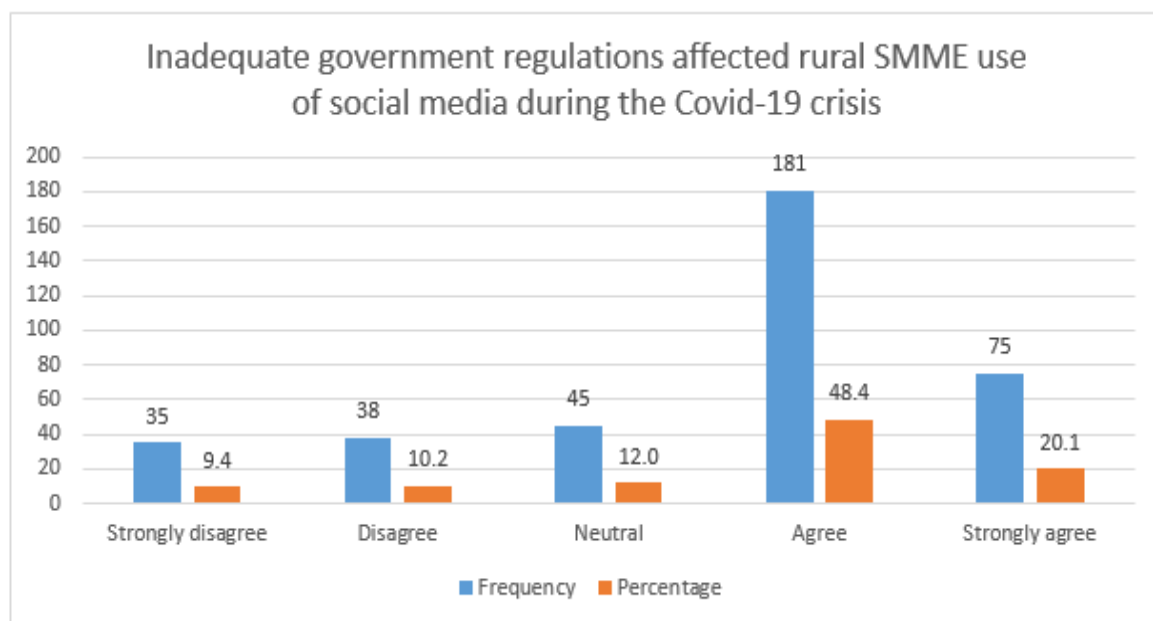


Figure 12: Inadequate government regulations

Figure 12 indicates that most respondents (181 or 48.1 percent) agreed and 75 (20.1 percent) further strongly agreed inadequate government regulations affected rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis. Moreover, 45 (12.0 percent) respondents remained neutral, with 38 (10.2 percent) respondents that disagreed with the statement and 35 (9.4 percent) that indicated strong disagreement.

A Chi-square test was conducted to ascertain whether inadequate government regulations affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. The results for this variable indicate ($\chi^2 = 198.754$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), which signals inadequate government regulations affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. In line with these findings, Seethamraju (2015) and Rangwetsi et al. (2021) argued government support through legislation is one of the environmental factors that influence technology adoption in the TOE framework.

Regulations established by the Government can motivate and prevent businesses from adopting technological innovations, such as the social media drive. In conclusion, as illustrated by the findings shown in figure 12, laws and regulations may be the main stumbling blocks, due to the compliance and administrative burdens imposed by Acts and regulations, which impeded

rural SMMEs from having sufficient funds to adopt social media technologies during the Covid-19 crisis. This has special reference to the growth and development of rural SMMEs in KZN (Sugandini et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2020).

17. CONTRIBUTIONS

17.1 Theoretical contributions

The findings of this study support and extend the RBV and TOE frameworks. By identifying the critical factors influencing social media utilization, this study contributes to the existing literature on digital transformation and strategic management in several ways:

- **Enhancing RBV:** The study reinforces the RBV by demonstrating how social media, as a valuable and rare resource, can contribute to SMMEs' competitive advantage and profitability during crises. It underscores the importance of leveraging SMMEs resources for sustained business performance.
- **Extending TOE Framework:** By applying the TOE framework, the study highlights the significance of technological, organizational, and environmental factors in social media adoption. It provides empirical evidence on how these factors interact to influence digital adoption in a crisis context, extending the applicability of the TOE framework to SMMEs in rural settings.
- **Crisis Management:** The study contributes to the emerging literature on crisis management by illustrating the role of social media in enhancing business resilience. It shows that social media can be a management tool for maintaining operations and customer engagement during economic disruptions such as the Covid-19 crisis.

17.2 Practical contributions: contributions for rural SMMEs on how to enhance their social media strategies. This is practical for practitioners, in which the study underscores the need for practitioners to be in cognisance with what this study suggests such as that the study offers several actionable insights:

- **Digital Literacy and Training:** SMMEs should invest in training programmes to enhance digital literacy and social media skills among their workforces. This can improve their ability to leverage social media for marketing and customer engagement during the Covid-19 crisis for rural SMMEs profitability.
- **Resource Allocation:** Rural owners /managers should allocate adequate resources, including time and budget, to social media activities. Investing in the right tools and technologies that can enhance social media effectiveness in order to make profit during the Covid-19 crisis.
- **Strategic Integration:** Social media should be integrated into the overall business strategy. Rural SMMEs should develop comprehensive social media plans that align with their business goals and market needs in order for sustainability of their business during Covid-19 crisis.

17.3 Policy contributions: suggestions for policymakers to support digital transformation among rural SMMEs. Policymakers play a crucial role in supporting SMMEs' digital transformation.

The study suggests several policy contributions:

- **Incentives for Digital Adoption:** Governments should provide financial incentives, such as subsidies or tax breaks, to encourage SMMEs to adopt digital technologies. These incentives can help offset the costs associated with social media utilization.
- **Support Programmes:** Developing targeted support programmes, such as digital training workshops and advisory services, can help SMMEs in rural areas overcome barriers to social media adoption.
- **Regulatory Frameworks:** Creating a supportive regulatory environment that promotes innovation and digital adoption is essential. Policymakers should work to reduce regulatory burdens and provide clear guidelines for rural SMMEs.

18. RECOMMENDATIONS

This section provides the chief recommendations in accordance with the empirical findings.

18.1 Innovative Strategies Promoting Digital Infrastructure and Connectivity

- **Develop Public-Private Partnerships:** Collaborate with private companies to enhance digital infrastructure in rural areas. This can include building more cell towers and expanding broadband access.
- **Subsidies and Incentives:** Provide subsidies for SMMEs to access high-speed internet and digital tools, reducing the cost barrier for adopting technology.
- **Community Wi-Fi Hotspots:** Establish free or low-cost community Wi-Fi hotspots to ensure that even the small businesses can stay connected.

18.2 Strategy for Promoting the Development of Technical Skills

- **Training Programmes:** Implement ongoing training programmes focused on social media marketing, digital literacy, and e-commerce. Utilize online courses, webinars, and in-person workshops to capacitate the SMMEs.
- **Collaboration with Educational Institutions and other organisations:** Partner with universities and colleges to offer courses and certifications tailored to the needs of rural SMMEs, emphasizing practical, hands-on learning. Policymakers, government agencies, business support organizations, and community stakeholders must collaborate to develop tailored interventions, capacity-building programmes, and enabling environments conducive to rural SMMEs' success in the digital era.
- **Mentorship Programmes:** Create mentorship programmes where experienced business owners and digital marketers can provide guidance and support to SMMEs in rural areas.

18.3 Strategies Reducing Resource Constraints

- **Financial Support:** Facilitate access to financial resources through grants, low-interest loans, and micro-financing options specifically designed for SMMEs.
- **Cost-Effective Tools:** Promote the use of free or low-cost social media tools and platforms that can help rural SMMEs manage their online presence without significant financial investment.
- **Shared Services:** Encourage the formation of cooperatives or shared service models where SMMEs can share digital marketing resources and expertise.

18.4 Improving Market Awareness and Customer Engagement

- **Workshops and Seminars:** Organize regular workshops and seminars on market research, customer engagement strategies, and effective use of social media for marketing products and services of SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis.
- **Support for Content Creation:** Provide resources and training on creating compelling social media content, including visual storytelling, video marketing, and interactive posts for the sustaining of SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis.
- **Customer Feedback Systems:** Implement systems for gathering and analyzing customer feedback to help rural SMMEs better understand and respond to their market needs during the Covid-19 crisis.

18.5 Implementing an Effective Legislative Framework

- **Supportive Policies:** Develop policies that support the digital transformation of SMMEs, including tax incentives for digital investments and simplified regulatory requirements for online businesses.
- **Regulatory Framework:** Ensure that the regulatory framework facilitates smooth digital transactions and protects both businesses and consumers in the digital marketplace.
- **Infrastructure Investment:** Prioritize investments in digital infrastructure as part of national and regional development plans to ensure sustainable and inclusive growth of SMMEs for sustaining their profitability.

19. PROPOSED SOCIAL MEDIA FRAMEWORK

The main purpose of this research study was to design and propose a social media framework as a management tool for sustaining SMMEs profitability, due to resources constraints and inadequate government regulations resulted to the slow social media adoption rate of rural SMMEs in rural KZN during the Covid-19 crisis.

A social media framework as a management tool for sustaining SMMEs profitability during Covid-19 crisis was, therefore, developed based on the literature reviewed and empirical findings, as portrayed in Figure 13 below.

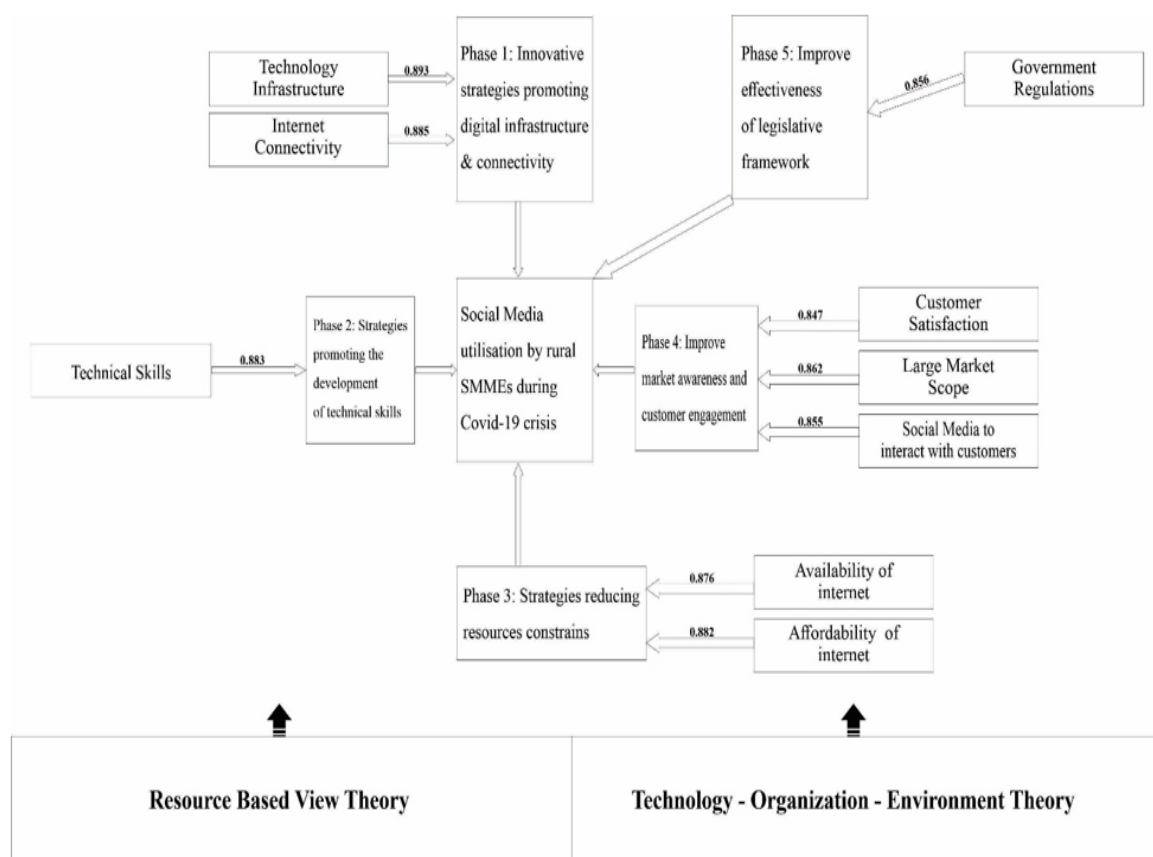


Figure 13: A proposed five-stage social media framework as a management tool for rural SMMEs profitability to sustain their businesses in crises such as Covid-19 crisis in rural KwaZulu-Natal

Source: Authors (2024)

The literature review and empirical research study findings confirmed SMMEs, globally, are confronted with different challenges that hinder their competitive advantage and, in turn, their profitability. This can eventually hinder their contribution to reducing the high unemployment rate, as well as inequalities, including reducing opportunities for rural SMMEs to sustain livelihoods in rural communities.

The five-stage social media framework was developed to address the research problem, which investigated social media use and adoption as a management tool for sustaining SMMEs profitability in rural KZN. The proposed social media framework as a management tool that can be used by SMMEs in rural KZN to make profit to sustain their businesses during the Covid-19 crisis. Overall, the collaboration of five-phases of designed and developed social media framework as a management tool is recommended as the most suitable remedial approach for rural SMMEs for the sustenance of business profitability during the Covid-19 crisis.

20. CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to develop a social media framework aimed at enhancing the profitability of Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) during adverse crises, with a specific focus on rural areas in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) during the Covid-19 crisis. Drawing from a quantitative, cross-sectional analysis, the research investigated the critical factors influencing the use of social media by rural SMMEs, examined the impact of these factors on social media adoption and business performance, and proposed a strategic social media framework as a management tool to support SMME profitability during crises like Covid-19 crisis. The findings of this study reveal that several key factors significantly influence the adoption and effective utilisation of social media among rural SMMEs. These include technological literacy and digital skills, access to technological and financial resources, market awareness, and the enabling legislative and stakeholder support environment. When these factors are strategically addressed, social media can become a powerful lever for improving visibility, customer engagement, market reach, and ultimately, profitability especially during periods of crises like the Covid-19 crisis.

However, the scope of this study was geographically limited to select rural areas in KZN. As such, the results cannot be generalised to all rural regions in KZN or other provinces in South Africa. This geographical and methodological limitation suggests the need for further research that expands the contextual scope of the study. Future investigations should consider incorporating a qualitative approach to complement and enrich the quantitative findings. In-depth qualitative insights could uncover nuanced understandings of how rural SMMEs across various South African provinces perceive, adopt, and benefit from social media platforms in times of crisis and recovery. Despite these limitations, this study contributes valuable empirical evidence and practical recommendations for policymakers, development agencies, and SMME support organisations.

It underscores the importance of targeted digital literacy programmes, infrastructural support, and inclusive digital policy frameworks that enable rural entrepreneurs to effectively integrate social media into their business strategies. The proposed social media framework serves as a strategic tool that, when adapted to context-specific needs, can promote resilience, sustainability, and profitability among rural SMMEs during and beyond periods of economic disruption. In conclusion, the effective use of social media holds transformative potential for rural SMMEs in KwaZulu-Natal. If harnessed strategically through addressing key barriers and leveraging supportive ecosystems, the social media can facilitate sustainable growth and position these enterprises to thrive in the face of future crises.

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