



*Full length article*

# **Critical Factors Influencing Social Media Utilisation for the Survival and Growth of Rural SMMEs During the Covid-19 Crisis in KwaZulu-Natal: towards a Conceptual Model**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Pre-Covid-19 crisis, rural SMMEs faced challenges including insufficient infrastructure and internet connectivity, further exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis, with government lockdown measures leading to some South African rural SMMEs closing down temporarily, numerous permanently, with others declared technically insolvent. This study, investigated rural SMMEs growth and survival, focusing on factors affecting their use of social media as driver to ensure their continued existence during the Covid-19 crisis, enabling them to survive and grow in future crises. The study employed quantitative approach through using a questionnaire, personally administered to 374 rural SMMEs. A quantitative research design was employed to collect data from 374 SMMEs in rural KZN. The collected data was analysed by means of statistical social sciences software 27.0. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, factor analysis, and correlation analysis. Key findings include a positive relationship between social media awareness and government support as factors that affected rural SMMEs social media use for survival and growth, where  $r = 0.745$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). It was found that the environmental factors had a huge negative influence on rural SMMEs social media use as driving tool to survive and grow during Covid-19 crisis. These findings were used to design and propose a social media model, as a survival and growth driving tool for rural SMMEs during crises, such as the Covid-19 crisis within KwaZulu-Natal.

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of the study was to design and propose a social media model as a driving tool for rural KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) survival and growth during a disaster, such as the Covid-19 crisis, due to SMMEs facing economic turmoil caused by the outbreak and spread of the Covid-19 crisis. This resulted in a negative financial position for SMMEs, to the extent where some SMMEs opted to lay off their employees, while their revenues have dropped due to the reduction of sales since the governments of countries worldwide applied restrictions to close their economies. SMMEs survival and growth have suffered as a result, negatively influencing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in countries globally and their economic advancement has gradually declined. The lockdowns and restrictions imposed by governments of countries worldwide due to the Covid-19 crisis not only negatively influenced economies, it also severely impacted business sustainability. This suggests some rural SMMEs are technically insolvent (Telukdarie, Munsamy & Mohlala, 2020). Despite, the above-stated predicaments, SMMEs are regarded as the engine of economic development and act a catalyst to promote industrialisation in developing and developed countries and account over 90 percent of businesses. Thus, they make an immense contribution to the economic growth of countries, market growth and the entire standard of living, globally (Moise, Khoase & Ndayizigamiye, 2020; Muriithi, 2017; Turyakira, 2018; Legoabe, 2017; Afolayan & De la Harpe, 2020). In the context of South Africa (SA), SMMEs contribute approximately 34-38.8 percent of GDP for the country and thus, provide a chief contribution to job creation, estimated at 28-58 percent of the country's employment. It is also stated SMMEs in SA will contribute roughly 90 percent of new jobs and 60-80 percent of the country's GDP by 2030 (IFC, 2018; Kalidas, Magwentshu & Rajagopaul, 2020; SEDA, 2019; Wiid & Cant, 2021).

Based on the above economic turmoil, restrictions and lockdowns imposed by governments of countries worldwide, versus the expectations from SMMEs globally, in terms of economic growth, Prince (2019) suggests social media platforms use to connect businesses with potential customers during closed economies to market their products and services and promote their brands. Social media platforms are viewed as web-based technologies generated to distribute information to different customers for the businesses in a cost-effective manner, through decreasing staff time (Fraccastoro, Gabrielsson, & Pullins, 2021).

In this regard, social media can increase the degree of revenue enhancement, permitting organisations their productivity and performance. Social media platforms can assist SMME rescue in an economic recession, since Rambe, Matema and Madichie (2017) revealed 13 million South Africans use Facebook; 7,4 million are on Twitter; 8,26 million on YouTube; and 2,68 million are on Instagram. In addition, many users are accessing these platforms on mobile phones; thus, many people and customers are utilising social media platforms as a means of communication. 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 21<sup>st</sup> century to create job opportunities, reduce poverty and contribute to the country's economic growth. Despite the good intention of promoting SMMEs establishment in SA, the Covid-19 crisis has impacted negatively on SMME survival and growth (Nyawo, 2020; Sugandini, Effendi, & Istanto, 2020). This leads to the decrease of cash reserves of rural SMMEs, due to the decrease of sales and some SMMEs being technically insolvent; caused by lockdowns and restrictions imposed by governments of countries globally. It can be concluded SMMEs experienced a shortage of revenue to run their day-to-day operations. This has been exacerbated by the outbreak and spread of the Covid-19 crisis globally (Nyawo, 2020).

Budree, Fietkiewicz and Lins (2019) and Prince (2019) pointed out SMMEs do not make use of social media in SA. This lack of social media in use in the country by SMMEs added to the challenges these enterprises are faced with, regarding the uncontrollable Covid-19 crisis. This implies a lack of in-depth understanding of social media in SA by SMMEs. Therefore, due to these challenges, exacerbated in by the outbreak and uncontrollable spread of the Covid-19 global crisis; these industries are likely to find it hard to cope with the unforeseen challenges of global economic recession. This was evident in the study conducted by Zeidy (2020), which revealed SMMEs were subjected to threats posed by the Covid-19 crisis, resulting in many SMMEs shutting down, most experienced decreased turnover, while other SMMEs had not only lost their customers but were also subjected to reduced opportunities to meet new customers, with a drop in demand for products/ services and the subsequent lack of operational cash flow. These resulted in a negative impact on the financial position of rural SMMEs. Prince (2019) explained, there are rare entrepreneurs who utilise social media platforms with the intention to gain visibility, viability and sustainability to market their products and services. This supports, Lekhanya (2013:1) who asserted “emerging and developed economies are utilising social media for entertainment, socializing, and information gathering, instead of brand promotions and competitive differentiation”. None of these studies, however, indicated the critical importance of social media use as driver for the survival and growth of SMMEs in rural KZN during disasters, such as the Covid-19 crisis. Not much research has been undertaken concerning social media use as a driver and tool in accomplishing rural SMME survival and growth during situations such as the Covid-19 crisis in developing countries, with special reference to SA, in rural KZN. Therefore, this study intended to fill the knowledge gap through developing a social media use model as a driving tool for SMME survival and growth in rural KZN, in the time of crisis events, such as the Covid-19 crisis. Consequently, the general aim of the study is to examine the factors impacting social media use as a driving tool for SMME survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN. The study seeks to achieve the overall aim through addressing the following research objectives:

- i. To investigate the factors influencing the use of social media as driver for SMMEs survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN.
- ii. To design and develop a social media model as a driving tool that can be used by SMMEs to survive and grow during the Covid -19 crisis in rural KZN.

## **2. Literature Review**

This section discusses the factors influencing the use of social media for rural SMMEs survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis in KZN.

### **2.1 The factors influencing the use of social media for rural SMMEs survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis**

#### **2.1.1 Lack of technical skills**

According to the National Development Plan (NDP), small businesses in the services sector are adversely affected by skills shortages such as business IT capabilities, mostly in services such as accounting and sales. In 2008, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) also acknowledged the shortage of skills and limited number of entrepreneurs to create employment growth (SEDA, 2019). Therefore, SMMEs need appropriate digital capabilities for digital transformation and orientation as the basic business skills to adopt and use social media during crises. On the one hand, digital capability refers to the ability of businesses to create new products and processes. Lekhanya (2018) further revealed that 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 their growth.

#### 2.1.2 Lack of managerial competencies

Researchers have a different view of managerial competencies, for example, Manxhari, Veliu, and Jashari (2017) perceived managerial competencies as the acquired knowledge, skills and behaviour that promote effectiveness and efficiency of managers in executing their duties and responsibilities. Rambe and Makhalemele (2015) added managerial competencies are the prime factors that promote the survival of a business. Arasti, Zandi & Bahmani (2014) stated the lack of managerial competencies will lead to business failure. In the same vein, Herrington, Kew and Kew (2014) highlighted SMMEs in SA fail due to a lack of managerial competences.

#### 2.1.3 Lack of financial skills

According to Agyei (2018) and Fatoki (2021), many SMME owners need financial management skills to be successful. This implies the success or failure of their enterprises is highly dependent on the availability of resources, including owner-manager financial skills. Such financial skills refer to the situation where owners can use their financial knowledge to make financial decisions to realise the survival and growth of their businesses. However, it is apparent there are insufficient financial skills amongst rural SMME owners and managers, which resulted in poor financial decisions (Agyei, 2018; Fatoki, 2021). The lack of financial skills amongst SMME owners / managers contributed negatively to the ability of rural SMMEs to create employment and stimulate economic advancement. Such inability to access finance from formal financial institutions, due to poor financial skills can lead to default risk for financial institutions. This will create bad financial records for rural SMMEs with these institutions; therefore, rural SMMEs will be unable to access finance from formal financial institutions. Agyei (2018) and Fatoki (2021) added, in line of the lack of financial skills by rural SMMEs owners / managers are regarded as a critical contributing factor in the lack of financial resources, which is the prime motivator for rural SMMEs to adopt and use social media as part of their marketing strategy during the Covid-19 crisis. However, financial resources are key resources that will dictate whether the rural SMMEs will use social media (Maduku et al., 2016; Itliong, 2020). Therefore, the only critical factor businesses consider when they intend to embark on innovation adoption, is the availability of financial resources, which is alleged as the fundamental aspect of the process of adoption and usage of social media technologies by rural SMMEs, for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis (Maduku et al., 2016; Itliong, 2020).

#### 2.1.4 Lack of social media awareness

Social media awareness is stated by Hew (2011) as the primary determining factor of informal scientific communication. This is echoed by Alencar (2016), who from the results of the research, significantly contributed to understanding the meaningful relationship between social media awareness and its adoption for informal scientific communication. Bugshan (2019) asserts awareness of social media has become a means of information diffusion and improvement, which follows on from Shen (2015), who concurred such awareness is an essential factor that influences the intention to continue to adopt web technology. These principals also apply to rural SMMEs; this means a lack of social awareness may be one of the problems contradicting the use of social media by rural SMMEs. This would distract rural SMMEs from adopting and using social media during disasters such as the Covid-19 crisis, with Shen (2015) and Effendi et al. (2020) having suggested social awareness is a critical factor motivating the business to adopt and use technology such as social media.

### 2.1.5 Lack of infrastructure

Poor infrastructure negatively impacts adoption and use of social media for the survival and growth of rural SMMEs, due to an inadequate supply of electricity. In support of this, it was reported there was a lack of electricity due to load-shedding in Senegal, which destructively affected economic growth, with special reference to the manufacturing and industrial sectors. SA is not excluded in this case, since the country is subjected to load-shedding on a frequent basis. Therefore, load-shedding and poor electricity supply are also regarded as a problem rural SMMEs are faced with in social media adoption, which negatively impacted their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis (Cissokho & Seck, 2013; Fatoki & Garwe, 2010).

Despite this, it was discovered SMMEs were subjected to a lack of infrastructure, which hindered them from adopting technology such as social media during the Covid-19 crisis (Scupola, 2003; Itliong, 2020). According to the BER (2016), one of the major challenges faced by small businesses is the lack of quality infrastructure, as this hinders their ability to develop and, ultimately, contributes to slow growth for many small businesses, which in most cases, leads to abandoning the business venture (BER, 2016).

### 2.1.6 Competitive environments

The studies conducted by some of researchers reveal that rural SMMEs experiencing a high intensity of competitive pressure, which may cause uncertainty among these enterprises, where the high intensity of competitive pressure could have been a constraining factor to adopt and use social media during the Covid-19 crisis. This will negatively impact the survival and growth of rural SMMEs (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Some researchers contended that 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, 2013).

### 2.1.7 Lack of internet connectivity

Internet connectivity is regarded as an integral part of socio-economic advancement and enhances productivity and the overall GDP of economies of countries worldwide. In addition, internet connectivity can connect remote populations to markets and create platforms for innovation (Dalberg, 2013; Madon, 2000). According to Guerriero (2015), internet connectivity can contribute to SMME growth that comprises firm profit and firm efficiency. SMMEs are in a position of making profits through internet connectivity, because they can use it to reduce costs and increase revenue through improved communication. Internet connectivity benefits SMME survival and growth through permitting these enterprises to market their products and services locally and internationally, since it removes distance between SMMEs and customers (Dalberg, 2013). It lowers communication and transaction costs and improves the availability and exchange of information, by reducing information asymmetries and enabling sellers and buyers to access markets at a cheaper cost. By using the internet to access the worldwide web, SMMEs can expand commercial connections with their customers (Clarke & Wallsten, 2006; Madon, 2000). Irrespective of the immense contribution of SMMEs to overall national growth through access to internet connectivity, the continent of Africa is experiencing a low rate of establishing new SMMEs.

### 2.1.8 Poor government support

Some studies revealed the governments of countries put policy measures in place to assist SMMEs at regional level, including deferred tax payment, reducing rent costs, waiving administrative fees, and subsidising research and development costs for SMMEs, as well as social insurance subsidies, subsidies for training and purchasing teleworking services, and additional funding to spur SMMEs loans, with these measures implemented to reduce the negative impact on SMME survival and growth due to the crisis created by the Covid-19 crisis (KPMG, 2020; Fairlie & Fossen, 2021). Irrespective of governments instituting fiscal, monetary, and administrative measures to counteract the negative impact of the Covid-19 crisis on SMME survival, SMMEs owners are confronted with the spread of Covid-19 crisis; however, SMMEs continued to experience a decline of their financial performance. The economic recession resulting from the Covid-19 crisis negatively impacted the day-to-day operations of SMMEs (Belitski et al., 2022; Graeber et al., 2021).

## 3. Theoretical framework for the study

The foundation of this study integrates three prominent frameworks: Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) Theory, Survival-Based Theory, and Firm Growth Theory.

### 3.1 Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) Theory

The DOI Theory by Everett Rogers explains how innovations spread within a social system over time, emphasizing innovation adoption among individuals and organizations (Rogers, 2003). DOI identifies five attributes influencing adoption, which are relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability (Rogers, 2003). This theory is relevant for understanding social media's adoption by SMMEs as it highlights how perceived benefits (for example, cost-effectiveness, wide reach) drive adoption and accounts for barriers like technological infrastructure and skills deficits prevalent in rural KwaZulu-Natal. DOI theory, therefore, caters for the use of social media drive as a tool by SMMEs, which would have contributed to their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis. According to DOI theory, IT is the key component that allows the innovation. This can, in turn, encourage technology use, in the form of social media drive, thus enabling SMMEs to survive and grow in this crisis (Ngibe & Lekhanya, 2020; Issa, Lucke & Bauernhansl, 2017).

### 3.2 Survival-Based Theory

Survival based theory is considered one of the strategic management theories; it centres on the concept that a business enterprise needs to continuously adapt to its competitive environment in order to survive (Raduan et al., 2009). Survival-Based Theory posits that organizations prioritize strategies that ensure continuity during crises. According to this theory, SMMEs' decision-making during disruptions focuses on minimizing risks and optimizing limited resources (Orga et al., 2020). In addition, application of this theory is most suited in the field of corporate turnaround, in situations where organisations face challenges such as financial difficulties, failing products, and losing significant employees such as rural SMMEs. These are the real symptoms of an organisation that is not operating efficiently (Orga et al. 2020). Therefore, this theory could have been used to address the problems faced by rural SMMEs through promoting their use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis for their survival and growth since rural SMMEs were faced with negative financial position, some shut down their businesses and laid off their employees (Nyawo, 2020; Zeidy, 2020; Sugandini et al., 2020; Trawnih et al., 2021; Tlapana et al., 2020; Orga et al., 2020).

### 3.3 Firm Growth Theory

Firm Growth Theory explores how organizations achieve sustainable development by leveraging resources, innovation, and market opportunities. For SMMEs in rural KwaZulu-Natal, social media enabled for expansion into new markets through digital outreach and enhanced customer engagement and retention through interactive platforms (Perényi, 2010; Perényi & Selvarajah, 2008).

### 3.4 Linking the theories to the research objectives

Table 1 provides an overview of how various theoretical frameworks are applied to address the research objectives of this study. The study aims to examine the factors impacting social media use as a driving tool for SMME survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN in investigating the factors influencing the use of social media as driver for SMMEs survival and growth and to design and develop a social media model as a driving tool that can be used by SMMEs to survive and grow in rural KwaZulu-Natal. Each theoretical framework- Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) Theory, Survival-Based Theory, and Growth Theory- offers unique insights and approaches to understanding and addressing these objectives.

Table 1: Linking the theories to the research objectives

Research Objectives	Theoretical Frameworks	Link to Theory
<b>To investigate the factors influencing the use of social media as driver for SMMEs survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN.</b>	Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) Theory	DOI Theory elucidates the decision-making processes behind social media adoption, particularly in rural settings with unique socio-economic challenges. Identifies characteristics of innovations (for example, relative advantage of social media) that facilitate survival and growth.
	Survival-Based Theory	Survival-Based Theory identifies social media as a practical tool for mitigating the operational disruptions caused by the Covid - 19 crisis to ensure business continuity.
	Firm Growth Theory	Integrates social media strategies into broader business growth frameworks, addressing both objectives.
<b>To design and develop a social media model as a driving tool that can be used by SMMEs to survive and grow during the Covid -19 crisis in rural KZN.</b>	Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) Theory	DOI Theory ensures the model is user-friendly and addresses compatibility and observability, promoting widespread adoption among SMMEs through pinpointing critical adoption influencers.
	Survival-Based Theory	Contributing principles that inform the design of a survival-focused social media model.
	Growth Theory	Facilitates not just survival but also sustainable growth.

Source: Authors (2024)

### **3.5 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). The main study hypotheses are as follows:

Ho1: There is no positive relationship between social media awareness and government support as factors that affect the use of social media for rural SMMEs survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

Ha1: There is a positive relationship between social media awareness and government support as factors that affect the use of social media for rural SMMEs survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

## **4. Research Methodology**

The quantitative data was collected through a self-administered, 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, from 374 rural SMMEs owners /managers in Vryheid, Empangeni, Richards Bay, Newcastle, Ulundi, Dundee and Ixopo (ubuhlebezwe) areas of KZN, South Africa. The study employed convenience, purposive, and quota sampling techniques to identify and select respondents. 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. Purposive 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. The collected data were analysed with 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 and Factor Analysis, as well as Kaiser Maier Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's tests. The data were presented in tables (StatsSA, Quarterly Labour Force Survey, 2020; Singh & Masuku, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## **5. Results and Discussion**

This section encompassed of results and discussion for the study.

### **5.1 Results**

#### **Demographic Profile of Participants**

Table 1 reveals that sample size was skewed towards males who are 62.3 % (n=233 and 37.7% (n=141) were females. With regard to the different race groups of the participants, 98.4% (n=368) were African; 1.1% (n= 4) were coloured; 0.3% (n = 1) was white and 0,3% (n = 1) was Indian. Table 1 also depicts that many participants (284 or 75,9%) have the education qualifications at National Diploma and below. Most of the SMMEs (265 or 70.85%) have not survival for more than eight years. This may be derived from the fact that majority of rural SMMEs started their businesses with their own capital (341 or 91.2 %) due to the fact they were subjected to high unemployment and poverty rates (368 or 98.40 %). Most of respondents were unable to access capital from the banking institutions (31 or 8.3 %) and a considerable number of rural SMMEs (221 or 59.1%) operate within the services sector.



Table 2: Demographic profile of participants (N=374)

Parameter	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	233	62.3	62.3	62.3
Female	141	37.7	37.7	100.0
<b>Race</b>				
African	368	98.4	98.4	98.4
Coloured	4	1.1	1.1	99.5
Indian	1	0.3	0.3	99.7
White	1	0.3	0.3	100.0
<b>Education qualification</b>				
National Diploma	184	49.2	49.2	49.2
B Tech	80	21.4	21.4	70.6
Honours	8	2.1	2.1	72.7
Masters	1	0.3	0.3	73.0
PhD	1	0.3	0.3	73.3
Others	100	26.7	26.7	100.0
<b>Reasons for starting a business</b>				
Unemployment	219	58.6	58.6	58.6
Alleviation of Poverty	149	39.8	39.8	98.4
Extra Income	6	1.6	1.6	100.0
Others	54	14.4	14.4	100.0
<b>Years in existence</b>				
0-4 years	101	27.0	27.0	27.0
5-8 years	164	43.9	43.9	70.9
9-12 years	93	24.9	24.9	95.7
13-16 years	14	3.7	3.7	99.5
Older than 16 years	2	0.5	0.5	100.0
<b>Source of finance</b>				
Own Capital	341	91.2	91.2	91.2
Bank Loan	31	8.3	8.3	99.5
Others	2	0.5	0.5	100.0
<b>Nature of business</b>				
Financial	26	7.0	7.0	7.0
Manufacturing	20	5.3	5.3	12.3
Services	221	59.1	59.1	71.4
Mining	74	19.8	19.8	91.2
Others	33	8.8	8.8	100.0

**Kaiser -Meyer -Olkin Measure and Bartlett’s Test**

Table 3 depicts the level of adequacy and significance of the sample of this study.

Table 3: Kaiser -Meyer -Olkin Measure and Bartlett’s Test.

		Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity		
			Approx. Chi-Square	Df	Sig.
B13	Factors influencing the use of social media for rural SMMEs survival and growth during Covid-19 crisis	0.989	9629.259	210	0.000

Table 3 depicted that all the requirements and conditions have been realised to permit factor analysis, which summarised the results of the KMO and Bartlett's Test. This suggests a requirement greater than 0.500 KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy and less than 0.05 significance value for Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity (Levine, 2015). The results indicate all the themes are acceptable and significant in terms of a statistics point of view (Traynor & Andrews, 2015: 479). The test, moreover, depicts a 0.989 KMO measure of sampling adequacy, showing a very strong significant influence (<0.001) by the Covid-19 crisis impact on rural SMMEs use of social media for their survival and growth in KZN.

**Reliability Statistics**

**Table 4: Reliability Scores**

		N of items	Cronbach's Alpha
B13	Factors influencing the use of social media for rural SMMEs survival and growth during Covid-19 crisis	8	0.985

Table 4 depicts results from the reliability test conducted on all the designed questionnaire statements, which were categorised according to the research themes in line with the research aim. As shown in Table 4, the reliability scores of all the constructs of the questionnaire exceeded the 0.70 acceptable Cronbach’s alpha value. This implies these newly calculated Cronbach's Alpha values denote a degree of acceptance, with the reliable scoring for this part of the research in totality.

**Hypotheses Testing**

Ha1: There is a positive relationship between social media awareness and government support as factors that affected rural SMMEs social media use for survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

The bivariate correlation results show the relationship between the tested variables is significantly positive at 0.745\*\* (sig. <0.001) level. Therefore, rejection of the null hypothesis allows the conclusion that the level of social media awareness and government support are related and are factors that affected the use of social media for rural SMMEs survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

Thus, Ho1 rejected reveal a significant positive relationship between social media awareness and government support, indicating that these factors positively affect the use of social media for rural SMMEs' survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

### Descriptive analysis for the factors influencing the use of social media as driver for SMMEs survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN.

**Table 5: Descriptive analysis for the factors influencing SMMEs social media use for survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN.**

The researcher in this section sought to find out the factors influencing rural KZN SMME social media use for survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis. The descriptive results are indicated in table 5. A 5-Point Likert scale was used, with indicating strongly disagree, 1 for disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for neutral, 4 for agree and 5 for strongly agree:

	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 social media awareness affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.6176	1.20134
Lack of managerial competencies affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.5508	1.12792
Lack of financial resources affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.5989	1.19633
Lack of infrastructure affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.5856	1.18837
Lack of internet connectivity affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.6257	1.22485
Competitive environments influence rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.5668	1.20302
Poor government support affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	374	1.00	5.00	3.5668	1.18280
Valid N (listwise)	374				
Overall Mean and Std. Deviation scores				21.5241	7.0622

From the descriptive analysis as shown in the table 4, majority of the respondents agreed that internal and external factors shown in this table influence the use of social media by rural SMMEs with mean of 21.5241 and standard deviation of 7.0622. The respondents agreed that poor government support affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis with the mean of 3.5668 and standard deviation 1. 18280. The respondents have agreed that lack of internet connectivity affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis with mean of 3.6257 and standard deviation of 1.22485. With mean of 3.6176 and standard deviation of 1.20134, most of the respondents agreed that lack of social media awareness affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis. The respondents agreed with the statement that their organisations lack of financial resources, which affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis with mean of 3.5989 and a standard of 1. 19633. This resulted to notion that the lack of managerial competencies affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis with mean of 3.5508 and a standard deviation of 1. 12792. The respondents agreed that the lack of technical skills affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19

crisis with mean of 3.5455 and a standard deviation of 1.12339. The respondents agreed that competitive environments influence the use of social media during Covid-19 crisis with mean of 3.5668 and a standard deviation of 1.20302. Lastly, with mean of 3.5856 and standard deviation of 1.18837, majority of respondents agreed that lack of infrastructure affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis.

**The factors influencing the social media use for SMME survival and growth in rural KZN during the Covid-19 crisis.**

Table 6 below of correlation matrix shows how the study variables are associated regarding the strength and direction.

**Component matrix: factors influencing the social media use for SMME survival and growth in rural KZN during the Covid-19 crisis.**

Table 6: Component Matrix: factors influencing the social media use for SMME survival and growth in rural KZN during the Covid-19 crisis.

<b>Component Matrix<sup>a</sup></b>	
B13	Component 1
Lack of technical skills affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.883
Lack of social media awareness affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.893
Lack of managerial competencies affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.889
Lack of financial resources affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.884
Lack of infrastructure affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.876
Lack of internet connectivity affect rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.885
Competitive environments influence rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.854
Poor government support affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis	0.852
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 SMME survival and growth 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. The test whether the lack of social media awareness and lack of infrastructure affected rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis revealed the scores of 0.893 and 0.876 respectively for the statements. A strong positive significance of 0.884 was further established for the statement whether lack of financial resources affected rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis. This implies the lack of financial resources can expose rural SMMEs to lack of internet connectivity with a score of 0.885. The other variable pertaining to whether lack of managerial competencies affects rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis, a positive significance of 0.889 is depicted while the statement to test whether the competitive environments influence rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis recorded a score of 0.854. A figure of 0.854 is reflected

for respondents who agreed rural SMMEs were affected by poor government support, which impacted negatively on the adoption and usage by rural SMMEs during Covid-19 crisis. Therefore, this will negatively impact the economic growth of KZN and eventually, the economic growth of SA. This implies that SMMEs customers did not receive sufficient services during Covid-19 crisis.

**Correlation analysis for critical factors influencing rural SMMEs social media use for survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis**

Table 7 below of correlation matrix shows how the study variables are associated regarding the strength and direction (see **Appendix 1** for more details).

Table 7: Correlation Matrix (N=374)

		<b>13. 2</b>	<b>13.3</b>	<b>13.4</b>	<b>13.8</b>	<b>13.11</b>	<b>13.14</b>	<b>13.15</b>	<b>13.19</b>	<b>13.20</b>	<b>13.21</b>
Lack of social media: awareness <b>13.2</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	.799*	.805*	.733*	.735*	.764*	.756*	.775*	.756*	.750*
	Sig.(2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	374	374	374	374	374	374	374	374	374	374
Poor government support <b>13.11</b>	Pearson Correlation	.745*	.756*	.722*	.731*	1	.731*	.724*	.744*	.729*	.733*
	Sig.(2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	374	374	374	374	374	374	374	374	374	374

\*\* Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)

According to the correlation matrix depicted in table 7, it was noted that the data significantly supported the design and development of a strategic social media model. The correlation matrix reveals the variable lack social media awareness is significantly correlated with the lack of broadband internet (0.793,  $p < 0.001$ ), which is positive and highly correlated. This suggests the variable lack of social media awareness may be a critical influence for rural SMMEs to use social media during Covid-19 crisis. There was also a significant correlation between lack of financial resources and lack of broadband internet (0.766,  $p < 0.001$ ), which is positive and highly correlated. This implies that lack of financial resources is a significant influence for rural SMMEs to access broadband internet to use social media during Covid-19 crisis. Therefore, lack of financial resources influences rural SMMEs to use social media for business survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

**5.2 Discussion and Interpretation of Findings**

**The factors influencing the use of social media as driver for SMMEs survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis in rural KZN.**

**Lack of technical skills affect rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis.**

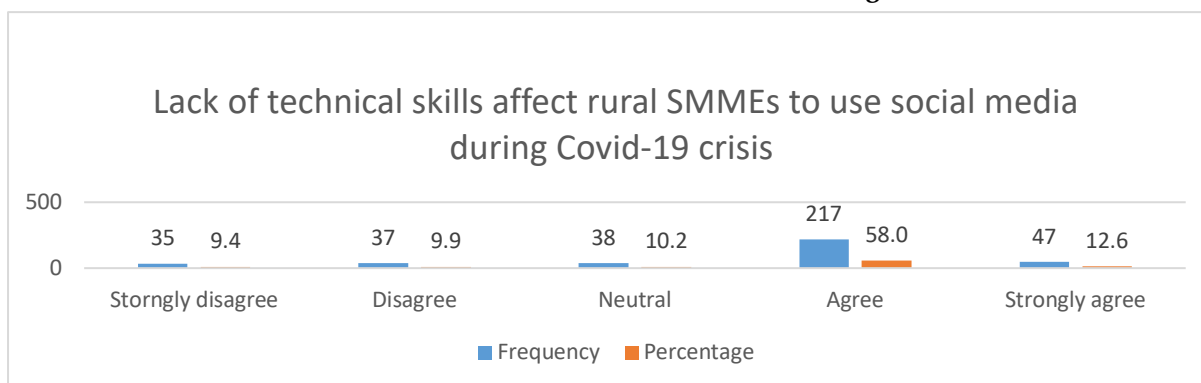


Figure 1: Lack of technical skills

As shown in figure 1, 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 SMME 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 SMME 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 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 & 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.

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 survival and growth.

**Lack of social media awareness affected rural SMME use social media during Covid-19 crisis**

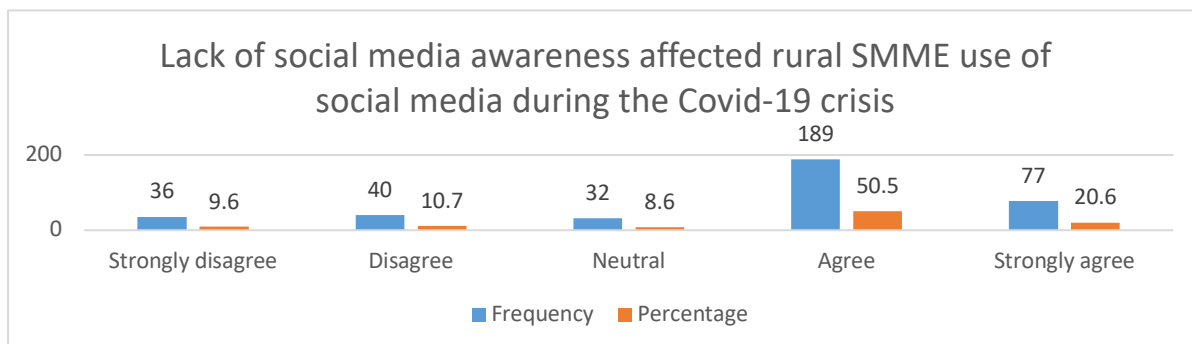


Figure 2: Lack of social media awareness

As depicted in figure 2, a significant number of respondents (189 or 50.5 percent and 77 or 20.6 percent) agreed and strongly agreed, respectively, rural SMMEs experienced lack of social awareness with regard to social media use during the Covid-19 crisis. These findings are supported by a Chi-square test, conducted to establish whether social media awareness affected the use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. The results indicate ( $\chi^2 = 235.225$ ;  $df = 4$ ;  $P < 0,001$ ) for this variable, which shows a strong significant effect by the lack of social media awareness on rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. A smaller number of respondents (32 or 8.6 percent) were neutral to the statement, while 40 (10.7 percent) disagreed, with 36 (9.6 percent) respondents that strongly disagreed. It seems this finding suggests rural SMMEs experienced a lack of social awareness on the use of social media, which affected their use of it during the Covid-19 crisis.

These findings are in accordance with Oyekan and Kamiyo (2008), whose research emphasised a lack of social awareness is regarded as one of the problems that contradicted the use of social media. This implies SMMEs found it difficult to use social media to communicate with their customers during the Covid-19 crisis, with Hew (2011) highlighting social media awareness is the primary determinant of informal scientific communication. Thus, this finding concurred with the finding of Lekhanya (2013), which revealed South African rural KZN SMMEs are dawdling, with regard to adopting and using social media to improve their businesses, through interacting with existing and potential customers. This would impede rural SMMEs from adopting and using social media during disasters such as the Covid-19 crisis, with Shen (2015) and Effendi et al. (2020) having suggested social awareness is a critical factor motivating the business to adopt and use technology such as social media.

**Lack of managerial competencies affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis**

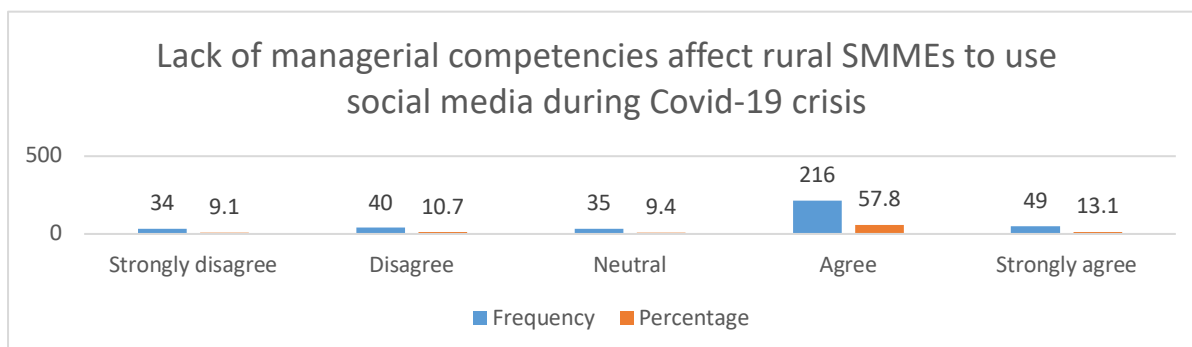


Figure 3: Lack of managerial competencies

As shown in figure 3, a significant number of respondents (216 or 57.7. percent) and 49 (13.1 percent) agreed and strongly agreed, respectively, the lack of managerial competencies affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. These findings are supported by a Chi-square test, conducted to determine whether the lack of managerial competencies had an influence on rural SMME use of social media. The results show ( $\chi^2 = 335.064$ ;  $df = 4$ ;  $P < 0,001$ ) for this variable, indicating this notion is valid and has a strong significance in this regard. However, a smaller number of respondents (35 or 9.4 percent) were neutral to the statement, while 34 (9.1 percent) and 40 (10.7 percent) disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement. These findings are supported by previous research that stated when management is reluctant to embrace the digital age, in return, this could have led to the failure of SMMEs to survive and grow during the Covid-19 crisis. SMMEs, including those in rural places, will be hindered to survive and grow when they are unable to align their business and technology strategy (Arham et al., 2013).

Thus, management competencies are critical to influence and motivate staff to adopt social marketing, through providing vision and cognitive support to members of the business (Li et al., 2016). By inference, the lack of managerial competencies by rural SMMEs would have been a hindrance in the use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. Rambe and Makhalemele (2015) added managerial competencies are the prime factors that promote the survival of a business and lack of these competencies will lead to business failure (Arasti et al., 2014). In the same vein, Herrington, Kew and Kew (2014) emphasised SMMEs in SA fail due to a lack of managerial competencies, which could have been detrimental to the survival and growth of rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis.

**Lack of financial resources affected rural SMME use social media during Covid-19 crisis**

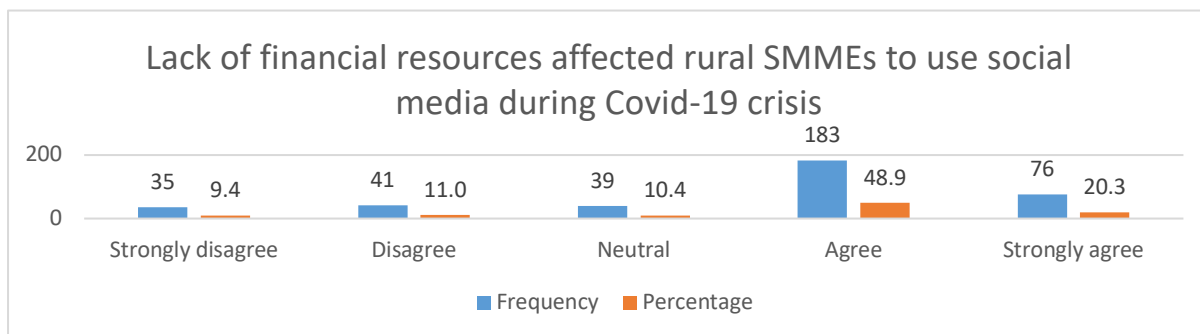


Figure 4: Lack of financial resources

A considerable number of respondents (183 or 48.9 percent) are shown to have agreed, with an additional 76 (20.3 percent) that strongly agreed the lack of financial resources affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. A small number of respondents were neutral (39 or 10.4 percent), while 35 (9.4 percent) disagreed and four (11.0 percent) disagreed with the statement, as depicted in figure 4. To ascertain whether the lack of financial resources affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis, a Chi-square test was conducted. The results for this variable indicate ( $\chi^2 = 210.118$ ;  $df = 4$ ;  $P < 0.001$ ), signalling a strong significant impact on rural SMME by the lack of financial resource, thus, their use of social media during Covid-19 was affected. This infers many respondents suggested rural SMMEs had difficulties with financial resources, preventing them to adopt and use social media during this crisis. However, financial resources are key resources that will dictate whether the rural SMME will use social media (Maduku et al. 2016; Itliong 2020). Therefore, the only critical factor businesses consider when they intend to embark on innovation adoption, is the



availability of financial resources, which is alleged as the fundamental aspect of the process of adoption and usage of social media technologies by rural SMMEs, for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis (Maduku et al. 2016; Itliong 2020). Agyei (2018) and Fatoki (2021) added, in line with this finding, the lack of financial skills by rural SMME owners and managers serves as a critical contributing factor in the lack of financial resources, which is the prime motivator for rural SMMEs to adopt and use social media as part of their marketing strategy during the Covid-19 crisis.

**Lack of infrastructure affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis.**

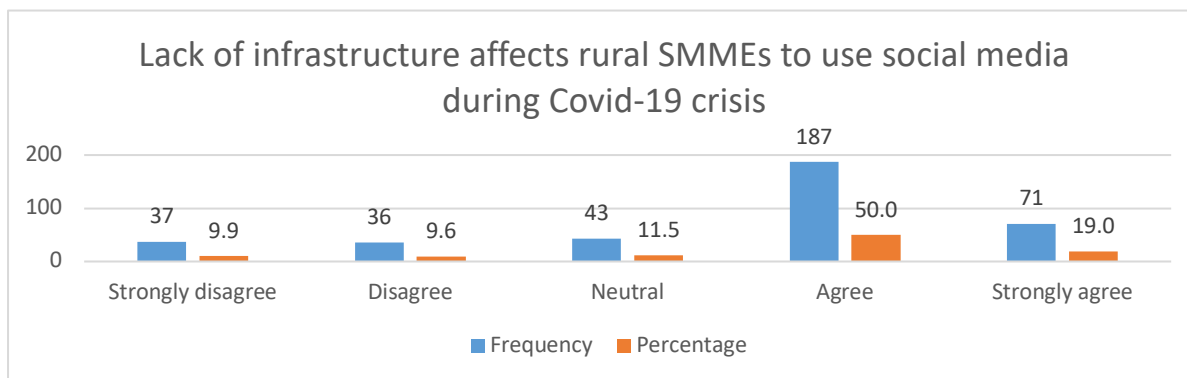


Figure 5: Lack of infrastructure

A considerable number of respondents (187 or 50.0 percent) are shown to have agreed, with an additional 71 (19.0 percent) that agreed lack of infrastructure affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. A small number of respondents were neutral (43 or 11.5 percent), while 37 (9.9 percent) disagreed and 36 (9.5 percent) disagreed with the statement, as depicted in figure 5. To ascertain whether lack of infrastructure affected rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis, a Chi-square test was conducted. The results for this variable indicate ( $\chi^2 = 221.241$ ;  $df = 4$ ;  $P < 0.001$ ), signalling a strong significant impact on rural SMME by the lack of infrastructure, thus, their use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis was affected. This infers most respondents suggested rural SMMEs had a problem with the lack of infrastructure, as this hindered them to adopt and use social media during the Covid-19 crisis.

These findings are in line with the study conducted by Obokoh and Goldman (2016), in on the performance of rural SMMEs the context of Nigeria, which revealed 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 the case of this finding, illustrated in figure 5, it was found infrastructure was lacking, which equates to poor infrastructure for rural SMMEs. 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. A study by Nene (2021: 20-21) supports this finding, stating rural SMMEs are subjected to business failure due to the lack of managerial competencies, with these competencies regarded as key internal factors that contribute to business failure or success.

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

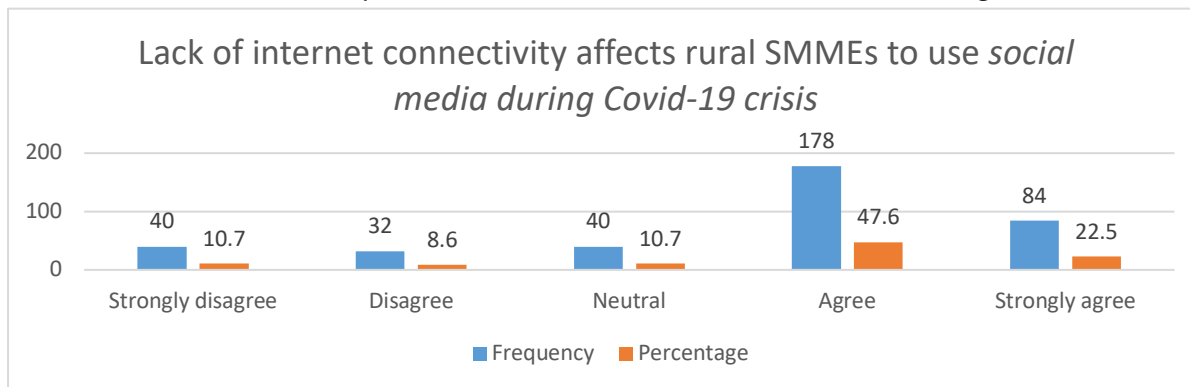


Figure 6. Lack of internet connectivity

As depicted in figure 6, 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 SMME 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 survival and growth of the businesses 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, Anakpo & Mishi, 2022), 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 SMME growth, and it is essential for these enterprises to have access to internet connectivity, in order to adopt and use social media for survival and growth during disasters such as the Covid-19 crisis (Sugandini et al. 2020; Gqoboka et al., 2022).

**Competitive environments influenced rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis.**

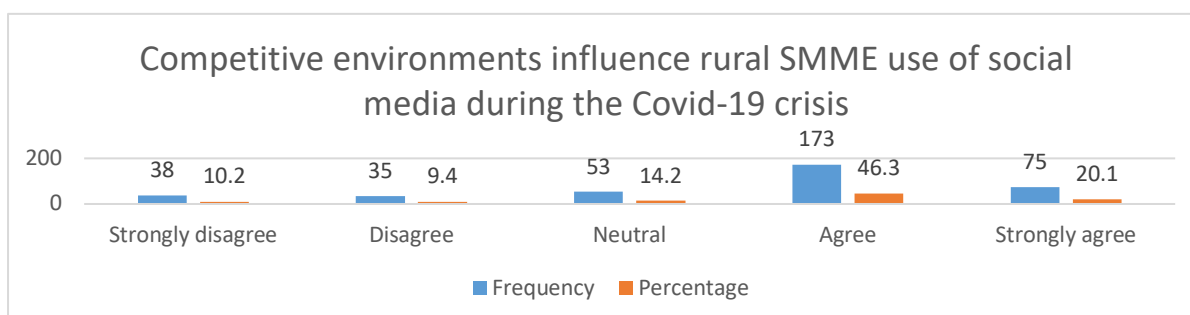


Figure 7: Competitive environments

Many respondents (173 or 46.3 percent) agreed, as depicted in figure 7, with 75 (20.1 percent) that indicated they strongly agreed competitive environments influenced rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis. A small number of respondents (53 or 14.2 percent) were neutral, while only 35 (9.4 percent) disagreed and 38 (10.2 percent) respondents indicated strong disagreement with the statement. A Chi-square test was conducted to ascertain whether competitive environments influenced rural SMME use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. The results for this variable show ( $\chi^2 = 174.556$ ;  $df = 4$ ;  $P < 0,001$ ), signalling the use of social media by rural SMMEs in KZN as strong and significantly impacted by the influence of competitive environments, in their use of social media during the Covid-19 crisis. This suggests competitive environments influenced rural SMME social media use during the Covid-19 crisis.

This finding was in accordance with the finding regarding rural SMMEs experiencing a high intensity of competitive pressure that caused uncertainty among these enterprises, where the high intensity of competitive pressure could have been a constraining factor to adopt and use social media during the Covid-19 crisis. This will negatively impact the survival and growth of rural SMMEs (McKinsey & Company, 2020). This finding was also in line with previous study findings that proposed a positive correlation between competitive pressure and purpose to adopt social media drive; where social media can assist rural SMMEs to advance their competitive advantage and boost their financial position for survival and growth (Ahani et al., 2017).

**Poor government support affected rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis**

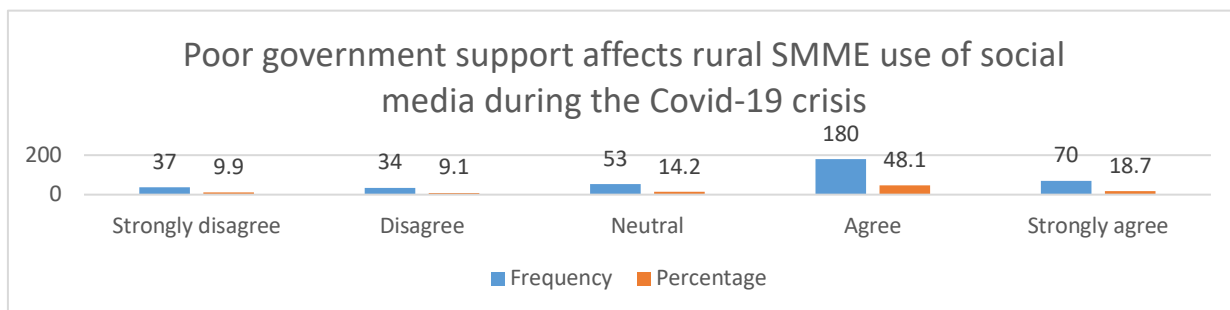


Figure 8: Poor government support

The majority respondents (180 or 48.1 percent) showed they agreed, as illustrated in figure 8, with 70 (18.7 percent) respondents that strongly agreed poor government support affected rural SMMEs to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis. Fewer respondents (53 or 14.2 percent) were neutral, while only 37 (9.9 percent) disagreed and 34 (9.1 percent) respondents indicated strong disagreement with the statement. A Chi-square test was conducted to ascertain whether poor government support affected rural SMMEs to use 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 is strong and significantly impacted by poor government support having affected rural SMMEs in KZN to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis. This suggests most respondents agreed rural SMMEs were not supported by government to use social media during the Covid-19 crisis. In line with fewer respondents indicating disagreement, some studies revealed the governments of countries put policy measures in place to assist SMMEs at regional level, including deferred tax payment, reducing rent costs, waiving administrative fees, and subsidising research and development costs for SMMEs, as well as social insurance subsidies, subsidies for training and purchasing teleworking services, and additional funding to spur SMMEs

loans, with these measures implemented to reduce the negative impact on SMME survival and growth due to the crisis created by the Covid-19 crisis (KPMG, 2020; Fairlie & Fossen, 2021). Irrespective of governments instituting fiscal, monetary, and administrative measures to counteract the negative impact of the Covid-19 crisis on SMME survival, SMMEs owners are confronted with the spread of Covid-19 crisis; however, SMMEs continued to experience a decline of their financial performance. The economic recession resulting from the Covid-19 crisis negatively impacted the day-to-day operations of SMMEs (Belitski et al., 2022; Graeber et al., 2021).

## **6. Implications**

The implications below are categorised into the theoretical implications and practical, and managerial implications.

### **Theoretical implications**

The primary study was mainly focused on contributing to the body of knowledge by designing and proposing a social media model as a driving tool that can be used by SMMEs in rural KZN to survive and grow during the Covid-19 crisis. 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 survival and growth. 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 rural SMMEs should understand theories for their survival and growth determinants for development of an innovative, creative and favourable culture to survive and grow in times of crisis. A greater awareness in terms of the environmental factors that affect rural SMMEs in KZN was of significance to their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis. In turn, these factors have a great potential in contributing towards economic growth of KZN and eventually, SA. This implies that rural SMMEs need to invest in adopting and implementing business growth theories for the purpose of innovation. This would counteract the threats of environmental factors that threatened their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

### **Practical and managerial implications**

Rural SMMEs could have survived and grown during the Covid-19 crisis, to revive economies of countries faced with economic turmoil caused by the Covid-19 crisis. In addition, rural SMMEs have the potential to make a huge contribution towards reviving and transforming the economies of countries during post-Covid-19 crisis. Rural SMMEs also significantly contribute towards GDP, reduce the high unemployment rate, as well as poverty, and promote sustainability of livelihoods in rural communities, while also addressing social ills such as inequalities. Against this background, the study intended to embark on the analyses of potential means, considered in enhancing and improving the survival and growth of rural SMMEs, through using social media as a driving tool for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis. The empirical findings, rooted on rural SMME survival and growth, revealed these enterprises can enhance their survival and growth through acquiring suitable management competence and technical skills, as well as exposure to social media awareness and adapting to dynamic business environmental business. Investing in technology and technical skills is a prerequisite for rural SMME owners and managers to cope with technological advancement, in order to survive and sustain themselves in turbulence caused by ever-changing business environmental factors and economic turmoil resulting from the Covid-19 crisis. This will necessitate rural SMMEs to adapt to these dynamic, world-wide business environments, through moving from the traditional marketing strategies to innovative strategies

that are technologically orientated, such as social media marketing strategies. This would allow rural SMMEs to reach many customers and attract more prospective customers, even when faced with situations such as the Covid-19 crisis. Thus, social media marketing strategies could have assisted and guided their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

## **7. Recommendations**

This subsection provides the key recommendations in accordance with empirical findings and conclusions.

### **7.1 Strategies adapting and reducing environmental factors constraints for rural SMMEs survival and growth**

#### **Internal factors**

According to empirical findings of this study, the financial resources, technical skills, managerial competencies, and social media awareness, along with internet connectivity, were found to be the major internal factors that had a critical impact on rural SMME ability to adopt and use social media during the Covid-19 crisis, for their survival and growth. It is, therefore, recommended rural SMMEs should conduct analyses, in terms of establishing their strengths and weaknesses, in relation to their operational internal business environment; this will allow them to devise business strategies that address their weaknesses and sustain the strengths in the ever-changing business environment. The government can provide training to rural SMMEs to equip them with critical skills such as managerial, technical and financial skills and competencies, to advance their business operations. It is, therefore, recommended rural SMME owners / managers embrace the digital age, since not doing so can lead to the business failure of SMMEs to survive and grow during disasters such as the Covid-19 crisis.

#### **External factors**

Government support, lack of infrastructure, and competitive environments, as well as the effects from the Covid-19 crisis, were identified as chief external factors by this research study and shown to affect rural SMMEs, in terms of adopting and using social media during the Covid-19 crisis. Therefore, it is recommended rural SMMEs acquire in-depth insight of the effect of a turbulent business environment on their operations and develop strategic business mechanisms to adapt to the changing business environment, due to rapid technological changes, in order to ensure customer satisfaction during economic crises such as that caused by the Covid-19 crisis. In addition, the empirical findings show rural SMMEs experienced government support, which were unable to support their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis. It is against this background, the recommendation is made for government to provide a legal governance framework to promote a culture of innovation and technology adoption, thus creating a conducive environment for rural SMME survival and growth during crises such as the Covid-19 crisis. Rural SMMEs may devise the most suitable remedial approaches to re-engineer their business operations. The social media model provided above could be used to conceptualise the best approaches for their survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis.

## Framework Foundations

**Diffusion of innovation (DOI) Theory:** Provides a framework to examine the motivations and barriers influencing social media adoption among rural SMMEs .

**Survival-Based Theory:** Provides a lens to explore the short term strategies employed by rural SMMEs to maintain resilience during the Covid-19 crisis.

**Firm Growth Theory:** Examines the strategic role of social media adoption in fostering sustained business growth .

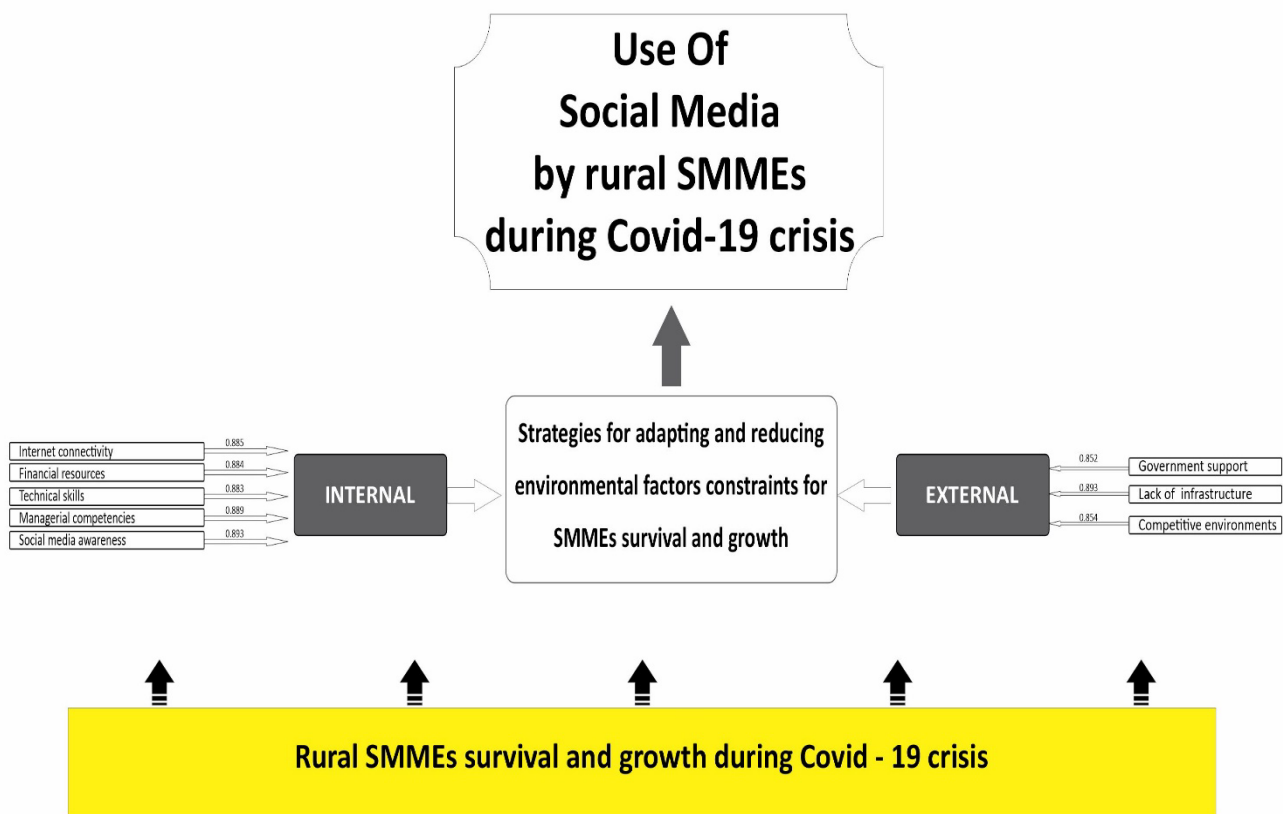


Figure 8. A proposed social media model as a driving tool for rural SMMEs in KwaZulu- Natal to survive and grow during Covid–19 crisis.

## 8. Conclusions

This study emphasised the probabilities in rural SMMEs survival and growth during the Covid-19 crisis, where they were faced with economic turmoil during this crisis in rural places in KZN.

The key critical factors influencing the use of social media by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis were discussed, since it is anticipated rural SMMEs can play a crucial role in addressing various socio-economic challenges in rural communities. Through the increasing rates of unemployment and poverty, as well as inequality and economic turmoil, worsened by uncontrollable crises in SA (Covid-19, electricity outages, lack of infrastructure or its collapse due to non-maintenance), adapting to the everchanging environment by rural SMMEs can make a critical difference. Furthermore, a conducive environment is required in achieving the survival and growth of rural SMMEs during Covid-19 crisis, which should, in return, assist and guide rural SMMEs to gain a competitive advantage to withstand turbulences caused by the everchanging business environment and the outbreak and uncontrollable spread of the global Covid-19 virus. SA was not excluded in this case. The ever-changing business environment in SA poses a threat to rural SMMEs regarding their survival and growth, which compelled them to forge competitive advantage through continuously embarking on re-engineering their business management strategies, to successfully cope with a turbulent business environment and economic turmoil caused by the Covid-19 crisis for rural SMMEs survival and growth.

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