



Full length article

Social Media Marketing and Survival Strategies for Rural SMMEs' Growth During and Beyond the Covid-19 Crisis in KwaZulu-Natal

Sabelo Mpungose ^{1*}, Lawrence Mpele Lekhanya ², Emem O. Anwana ³

¹ Entrepreneurial Studies and Management, Faculty of Management Sciences, Durban University of Technology, Durban, 4001, South Africa, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9724-4874>

² Entrepreneurial Studies and Management, Faculty of Management Sciences, Durban University of Technology, Durban, 4001, South Africa, E-mail: lawrence@dut.ac.za, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9104-963X>

³ Applied Law Department, Faculty of Management Sciences, Durban University of Technology, Durban, 4001, South Africa, E-mail: emema@dut.ac.za, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3209-721X>

*Corresponding e-mail: sabelo.mpungose@gmail.com

Article Info

Received: 29.05.2025

Accepted: 01.07.2025

Available online: 30.07.2025

Keywords:

Rural SMMEs, Covid-19 crisis and beyond, KwaZulu-Natal, Survival strategies, Business growth, Social media marketing strategies

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.59857/pine9106>

ABSTRACT

Rural SMMEs in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) are, generally, faced with limited access to markets, resources, and infrastructure; however, the Covid-19 crisis exacerbated existing rural SMME vulnerabilities, threatening their sustainability in KZN. As these small rural enterprises were unable to trade in-person during the pandemic and with mobile devices more frequently used for online activities during and after the crisis, an assessment was undertaken of SMME owner-manager perceptions of social media benefits for their businesses. The study was intent on gauging the advantages to rural SMMEs in using social media use through online trade or interaction with customers, as it not only contributes to their economic sustainability, the facilitation of digital transformation would also assist these enterprises to reach out to customers and diversify revenue streams. The investigation focused on whether social media marketing and survival strategies are effective as innovative tools for rural KZN SMME business growth during and beyond the crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. The research design employed was quantitative, with data collected from 374 SMMEs in rural KZN, by means of a closed-ended 5-point Likert scale questionnaire and analysed using the statistical package for social sciences software. Key findings include a positive connection linking rural SMME use of social media and increased product sales to ensure continuity and sustainability during the Covid-19 pandemic and future crises. The findings were used to develop and propose a framework for optimised social media marketing use and survival strategies for rural SMMEs in KZN.

1. Introduction

Sustainable business survival and growth challenges for rural Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) include limited access to markets, resources, and infrastructure, with these and other existing vulnerabilities

exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis that threatened business sustainability, globally, with specific reference to rural KZN, South Africa (SA) (Rotimi & Edewor 2018; Rahman *et al.* 2022). Although SMMEs were presented with unprecedented challenges globally, during and after the pandemic, as with other businesses worldwide, businesses are expected to embark on environmental analysis to develop growth strategies that will lead to their survival. This requires a business strategy to assist in enhancing competitive advantage and establish sector performance.

While growth is a necessity for businesses to survive in developing industries, continuous improvement through embracing a change and advancement process is required (Wheelen & Hunger 2012; Wickham 2016). In addition, because business survival refers to the capability of business enterprises, such as SMMEs, to continuously operate within a turbulent environment, irrespective of global crises, it must be regarded as the primary business objective (Agbolade 2014; Onwuka *et al.* 2017; Rotimi & Edewor 2018). Business enterprises thus need the capacity to structure and restructure themselves, thereby gaining a comprehensive understanding of the influence critical survival and growth factors have in sustaining their operations. These factors include culture, technology, uncertainty, and changes, as well as competitive market, leadership style, profitability, and productivity, in addition to sales turnover (Oginni & Adesanya 2013; Odumbaku *et al.* 2017; Rahman *et al.* 2022).

The global Covid-19 crisis placed rural SMMEs under financial distress, which weakened their survival, sales and revenues, due to the external turbulent environment (Pfeffer & Salancik 2015; Hillier & Ibrahimo 1993; Sugandini *et al.* 2020; Adam & Alarifi 2021); this distress indicated their potential inability to finance social media use during the Covid-19 crisis. Other researchers, additionally, suggest innovation practices are critical factors behind the survival and continuity of enterprises such as SMMEs. These practices support business survival, growth, and sustainability improvement for future business success, assisting SMMEs to achieve a competitive advantage; the foundation of their survival. This means, to survive during medical and economic emergencies, such as created by the Covid-19 pandemic, small businesses must employ innovation to manage their disrupted business and adapt to crisis-imposed threats and risks (O'Reilly III & Tushman 2011; Ortiz-Villajos 2014; Mason & Harrison 2015; Zeidy 2020).

Survival, moreover, results from achieving success in the encountered crisis imposed by the external environment (Dhochak & Sharma 2015). SMMEs could, therefore, employ innovative practices to potentially bring about positive results, for instance, technology adoption and social media platform use as driving tools during events such as the Covid-19 crisis. According to the literature reviewed, a knowledge gap was identified regarding rural SMME social media use in KZN during the Covid-19 crisis (Lekhanya & Mason 2014; Budree *et al.* 2019; Prince 2019). The gap was addressed in this study, along with the inadequate adoption of technologies such as social media and survival strategies among SMMEs, which caused sales and revenues to decline and compromised rural SMME business growth (Doz 2020; Kakumbi & Phiri 2022; Rahman *et al.* 2022).

The study objective was, therefore, to examine SMME owner/manager perceptions regarding how social media marketing and survival strategies could be optimised as innovative tools to drive rural SMME growth and resilience during and beyond the Covid-19 crisis in KZN. The following secondary objectives were included in the overall study aim:

- (i) To explore the degree of rural KZN SMME social media use as survival strategy in the Covid-19 created crisis.
- (ii) To assess how rural KZN SMMEs can use social media marketing strategies for improved sales performance and customer engagement beyond the Covid-19 crisis.
- (iii) To propose a framework for rural KZN SMMEs to optimally use social media marketing and survival strategies post-Covid-19 for business development.

2. Review of literature and development of hypotheses

2.1 Marketing and survival strategies using social media for rural SMME growth during and beyond Covid-19 crisis

2.1.1 Extent of survival strategy uses during Covid-19

The use of survival strategies by SMMEs relies on several factors, including business agility, operational marketing efficiency, innovation capability optimisation and a customer experience rethink, briefly discussed as follows:

2.1.1.1 Business agility

Agility is best described by the circumstances where business enterprises, including rural SMMEs, are prepared to achieve flexibility, accompanied by overall learning efficiency, in addition to the capability to continually adjust their positioning to gain optimally, despite economic turmoil such as a recession, resulting from disasters for instance the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (OECD 2020; Masago *et al.* 2020; Seyadi & Elali 2021: 32). Responsiveness is further dependent on the ability to swiftly and effectively react to fluctuating markets, with products and services made-to-order as driving force (Kumar & Motwani 1995). Therefore, enterprises must manage unexpected changes, survive unprecedented business environment threats, and benefit from changes by turning them into opportunities (Zhang & Sharifi 2000; Narasimhan *et al.* 2006).

Based on the above definition of agility and in the context of this study, SMMEs must be able to respond swiftly to turbulent business environments to meet external customer demands. In addition, they must be able to learn and transform the strengths of their business, to where business opportunities are best used to survive during crises (Seyadi & Elali 2021; Masago *et al.* 2020). Seyadi and Elali (2021) found a link, in both active and ambiguous conditions, between overall internal performance and enablers of operational agility. The authors further established a relationship between operational agility and market-related, overall performance when similar circumstances are present, which is significant. By implication, the drivers of agility are those situational factors that motivate a business to re-examine its existing strategy, understand the requirement for it to be agile, and deem agility as an approach preferred to attain sustainability, profitability and success in the business. SMMEs would, therefore, be in a position to survive a crisis such as Covid-19, providing they embark on business agility.

Masago *et al.* (2020), however, investigated and found numerous SMMEs in Kenya had been caught off guard by the Covid-19 crisis, with many employees laid off, reduced staff wages and new raw material sources, due to a declining demand for their products. Bartik *et al.* (2020) examined roughly 5 800 SMMEs, establishing many had become fragile financially, had to let employees go, shut their businesses, or find new strategies for operating.

As the OECD (2020) stated, both the supply (labour) and demand side (reduced demand leading to liquidity shortages) of SMMEs were affected by the Covid-19 induced crisis. The resulting negative effects obliged businesses to identify critical factors that would assist with attaining flexibility in day-to-day operations (OECD 2020; Seyadi & Elali 2021). Some researchers discovered innovation practices, total quality management (TQM), new social media technologies, and new human resource management practices all influence operational performance, which can improve the survival and competitive advantage of SMMEs. Therefore, rural SMMEs would be in a position to move towards the phase of realising capability and business agility during crises such as Covid-19 (Misiko 2014; Seyadi & Elali 2021; Rahman *et al.* 2022). Business agility in SMMEs requires setting survival business strategies in such a manner that responsiveness is aligned to the vision and mission statements of their businesses (Moore & Manring 2009; Rahman *et al.* 2022). Moreover, Doz (2020) suggested business agility can be enhanced by strategic business sensitivity, resource fluidity and collective management commitment (management unity), briefly discussed as follows:

Strategic business sensitivity: Business (strategic) sensitivity means enterprises are able to gain in-depth insight of turbulences during a crisis, for example the Covid-19 pandemic and accompanying economic turmoil. They need to, however, have had the strategic foresight to adopt social media technologies and use these to survive during the pandemic (Doz & Kosonen 2010; Arbussa *et al.* 2017; Doz 2020). This means that business sensitivity is fundamental to mitigate risks, by ensuring strategies regarding agility are effective and sustainable. Betta *et al.* (2019) concur with the above researchers, asserting SMMEs should put survival strategies in place to address customer pressure with immediate effect; this will also allow these enterprises to adjust to the economic turmoil in the wake of Covid-19 (Trawnih *et al.* 2021). Therefore, the agility approach towards survival during the pandemic required SMMEs to establish relationships with potential and existing customers to ensure trust and customer loyalty (Rahman *et al.* 2022). The customer relationship could be realised using social media as a means of customer communication. SMMEs would, subsequently, be able to market their products using social media, thereby increasing their revenues during crises (Nyawo 2020), when their strategic direction is customised to ensure agility in day-to-day operations, as this could provide the fundamental mechanisms for survival in turbulent business environments, caused by crises similar to that resulting from Covid-19 (Seyadi & Elali 2021; Rahman *et al.* 2022).

Resource fluidity: Resource fluidity allows business enterprises to properly allocate their resources, in order to adjust and adapt to instability. This can be realised by using available resources to attract customers through social media adoption, which would result in business sustainability and competitiveness. The reallocation of available resources would further assist SMMEs to earn new business opportunities to survive during unstable times, such as the Covid-19 crisis (Morton *et al.* 2018; Doz 2020).

Collective management commitment (Management unity): In the context of this study, management unity comprises those situations where SMME owners are decisive in decision-making, without hindrance of business politics (Doz & Kosonen 2010). Owners, in this regard, must be able to share values with the business and create internal, cultural and business ethics, allowing for more flexibility towards re-engineering business models that SMME owners can embrace to improve business survival (Lewis *et al.* 2014). By inference, employees would earn mutual respect and be inspired to become more creative and innovative in seeking new business models. Bock *et al.* (2012) emphasised the critical aspects of strategic business agility would be useless without resource fluidity and management unity. Business enterprises must thus institute effective and dynamic

resource allocation processes, in order to benefit in full from effective resource use, and efficient and economical social media use in times of health and economic crises, with the Covid-19 pandemic as example.

2.1.1.2 Operational marketing efficiency

Efficiency depends on resource allocation across alternative uses and is achieved when marginal productivity per unit price is equal across all resources that contribute to the firms' outputs (Rahman *et al.* 2022). Businesses such as rural SMMEs spend many financial and non-financial resources on activities related to marketing, promotion and distribution, in order to increase their revenue in economic recessions such as caused by the Covid-19 crisis (Moore 2002; Keh *et al.* 2006; Rahman *et al.* 2022). Rahman *et al.* (2022) and Naidoo (2010) added businesses must implement actionable marketing plans that attract prospective customers, while retaining existing customers through their dynamic capability in times of global crises, when rural SMMEs have to use their resources efficiently (Borders & Lester 2020; Sheth 2020; Rahman *et al.* 2022).

This suggests the Covid-19 crisis and economic recession were a revelation to help SMMEs understand the need to integrate their marketing activities with new technology innovations such as social media (Yi 2020; Prohorovs 2020). In other words, rural SMME owners are expected to respond to market demands and customer pressure by adopting and using social media in sales operations; marketing operational efficiency is thus one survival strategy SMMEs may use in crisis situations (Ashworth 2012; White *et al.* 2020; Rahman *et al.* 2022).

2.1.1.3 Innovation capability optimisation

Innovation capability refers to business enterprises' ability to continuously design new or modified products and services, including introducing new techniques in response to unstable business environments (Cefis & Marsili 2012; Rahman *et al.* 2022). Nevertheless, the innovation capability of SMMEs depends on their resources, size and business environment; in this regard, they require dynamic capability to respond to global crises, customer pressure and market demands (Jeng & Pak 2016; Eggers 2020). In addition, SMMEs must constantly use innovation practices such as social media technologies, as a preventative measure (Gajda *et al.* 2017; Rahman *et al.* 2022). Necessary for survival by rural SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis, this is known as 'innovation capability. The optimisation of innovation capability deals with innovative thinking by businesses to, for instance, adopt social media technologies that will create an innovative culture (Rhee & Stephens 2020). Thus, this will assist business enterprises to provide a survival strategy to enhance business competitiveness, thereby enabling survival in global crises, such as caused by Covid-19. Overall, rural SMMEs had to embark on innovation capability optimisation through adopting and using social media to survive during the Covid-19 crisis (Cankurtaran & Beverland 2020; Rahman *et al.* 2022).

2.1.1.4 Customer experience rethink

The concept of customer experience elucidates the emotional part in creating memorable experiences of business products and services offered by an enterprise (Kotler *et al.* 2017; Hanna & Wozniak 2001; Rahman *et al.* 2022). In the context of the Covid-19 crisis, rural SMMEs were confronted with the challenge to find solutions that would address their needs, such as how to motivate customers to access their products and services (Beraha & Đuričin 2020; Rahman *et al.* 2022). Such small businesses must develop innovative-based cultures with a dynamic capability to adopt digital technologies. These would include social media, and location-based mobile applications, in order to provide an interactive business environment between themselves and consumers, enabling products and services marketing to increase revenues for survival during instabilities (Zhou & Li 2010;

Parise *et al.* 2016; Homburg *et al.* 2017; Bolton *et al.* 2018; Rahman *et al.* 2022). In conclusion, rural SMMEs in these crises must respond to customer pressure and customer purchase experiences through social media adoption and use as a survival strategy, ensuring customer interaction with their products and services, for their sustained business continuity.

2.2 How social media marketing strategies influence sales performance and customer engagement for rural SMME survival and growth

Goi (2014) and Jordan (2018) highlighted the adoption and use by business enterprises of social media platforms for customer communication, whether with existing or potential clients, creates relationships to forge future loyalty. Kakumbi and Phiri (2022) confirmed low social media adoption among rural SMMEs, whereas it can hugely impact their growth. Ghanem and Hamid (2020) added social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and LinkedIn, are most popular with SMMEs, and have become the main business enablers for these small enterprises to increase their revenue to survive and grow. Aronica *et al.* (2021) revealed SMMEs have a higher tendency of using social media for targets that are strategic, for example, marketing and receiving feedback from customers on services and products. Therefore, rural SMME knowledge regarding how social media ought to be used for advertising is a crucial business strategy in influencing retail trade. Some different social media platform types rural SMMEs can use as business growth strategy for their survival are briefly discussed:

Facebook: A study by Moghavvemi and Salleh (2014) revealed Facebook use has a strong positive impact on SMME performance, both financial and non-financial; insofar as it produces increased transactions as well as volume in sales, along with added enquiries, and improved customer numbers. In addition, the cost of advertising is reduced, customer relations enhanced and information accessibility improved, with direct information access enabled, which customers did not have previously. In a related study in SA, Khan and Karodia (2013) established 51% SMMEs not only agreed Facebook was effective as a marketing channel, 70% further agreed to its usefulness for public relations. A further 62% indicated its usefulness in marketing, with agreement by 43% of it being advantageous in customer relations. The role of social media in SMME growth strategies is highlighted by these factors.

Tlapanana and Dike (2020) additionally emphasised Facebook has 16 million users in SA and is a valuable marketing tool to communicate with potential and existing customers; SMMEs can use Facebook to reach targeted customers and improve their brand awareness. Therefore, Facebook can be used by rural SMMEs as a marketing tool to communicate with existing and to attract new customers, in order to increase sales during crises, in addition to improving brand awareness and creating customer loyalty. One reason for the high active Facebook user numbers, is that user registration is open to anyone at least 13 years of age (Robertson & Kee 2017). The use of this platform offers product advertising and a blog post link for online shoppers regarding the industry or enterprise (Assimakopoulos *et al.* 2017).

Twitter: This social media platform, according to Tlapanana and Dike (2020), permits low cost, direct interaction between businesses and customers, which yields valuable results when its use is correct and constant in conveying business messages to different customers, with 269.6 million users worldwide. Through Twitter, businesses can distinguish their brands globally to intended customers (Tlapanana & Dike 2020). In this regard, SMMEs should use such platforms in reaching out to customers to market their business, gaining immediate

product or services feedback during crises. While Dickey and Lewis (2010) concluded SMMEs appear to experience difficulties with social media use due to inadequate essential resources, Grewal *et al.* (2013) reported some businesses are, nonetheless, without fundamental knowledge concerning the potential social media use benefits, for instance Twitter, and their application for connecting with customers. Tlapana and Dike (2020), in addition, indicated use of tools for social media marketing can also be promotional. However, rural SMME lack of technical skills and knowledge, these small enterprises could not employ social media platforms to communicate with customers, whether prospective or existing, to increase sales during the Covid-19 crisis.

Instagram: A social networking service (SNS) launched in 2010 as a photo-sharing app, Instagram had more than one billion active monthly users globally in 2019, and ranks as the fourth most frequented website, allowing photos and videos to be filtered, and posted to diverse sites. This, simultaneously, provides an opportunity for SMMEs to keep up with social trends and knowledge regarding consumer likes and dislikes (Tlapana & Dike 2020). As Kwayu *et al.* (2018), explain, information on competitor feedback influences social media strategies. However, consistency is a prerequisite in social media marketing, while it is also time-consuming, making it essential that rural SMMEs use efforts and strategy in social media marketing effectively through a SNS, in order to survive during a crisis.

WhatsApp: In SA, notwithstanding the introduction of several social apps (for example, Facebook and Twitter), very few of these apps have been adopted as extensively as WhatsApp, with 15 million subscribers; in comparison to Facebook, with subscriber numbers at nine million (TruTower.com 2014). A Google search statistics compilation from SA for the year 2011 shows, at that time, WhatsApp.com was, seen as the site most 'googled' and downloaded in SA (The Star 2011). In 2009 the app was introduced into the market, and in less than five years, it had reached half a billion active users, an accomplishment deemed remarkable. This rapid diffusion suggests SMMEs could use this business opportunity for connecting with potential and current customers in product and services marketing at the time of crises such as that created by the global Covid-19 pandemic.

The WhatsApp marketing tool can, in addition, be used by rural SMMEs for business promotion, user interaction with text and media files exchanges, and by requesting early platform access, the rich interface can be employed (Stone & Logan 2018). Furthermore, the WhatsApp Business app enables enterprises of all industries, whether small, medium or large-scale, to remain connected to customers and enlarge their base of operations, through effective use of the app and promotion of the business, regardless where users are located (Dar *et al.* 2017).

YouTube: The second largest search engine, following Google, YouTube is also the website with the third most visitors, as well as the biggest of the websites that create and share video content globally. YouTube attracts a huge audience as this digital ICT platform is free where membership is concerned, as well as for content uploading, and/or viewing (Chu & Kamal 2013; Göbel *et al.* 2017; Gupta *et al.* 2018). With monthly WhatsApp users averaging 1.5 billion, of these, two-thirds are aged, while every minute there are more than 400 hours of video uploaded, daily viewed video content is at a billion hours, where mobile devices are used to view more than half the YouTube files uploaded (Chu & Kamal 2013; Göbel *et al.* 2017; Gupta *et al.* 2018). Rural SMMEs can, therefore, capitalise on the popularity of YouTube as valuable marketing tool for their products and services, to improve their sales during crises.

Organisations and brands are provided an ICT platform by YouTube that is interactive, which allows the sharing with consumers of video content, both new and existing. Businesses are also assisted by a personalised brand YouTube channel to create the online presence of their brand, as well as providing a platform where all the video content can be viewed at leisure. Analytics aids in observing the video content deemed most effective (Hamari *et al.* 2016; Minocha 2009; Carroll & Romano 2010; Duffett *et al.* 2019). SMME brands would thus be promoted to customers; thereby encouraging customer loyalty during crises, for example, the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to the literature reviewed, it can be concluded rural SMMEs lacked innovation adoption practices, thus negatively impacting the increase of sales and social media use, particularly in rural KZN, where social media adoption and usage lagged at the time of crisis created by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, there is a need for rural SMMEs to consider adopting and using survival and growth strategies to sustain their businesses during this type of disaster (Rahman *et al.* 2022; Baadjie & Manyaga 2023; Lekhanya & Mason 2014; Kakumbi & Phiri 2022).

2.3 Theoretical framework for the study

The foundation of this study integrates two prominent theories, which are the **Technological, Organizational, and Environmental (TOE) Framework** and Firm Growth Theory. The TOE framework posits those three critical contexts—technological, organisational, and environmental dimensions—influence technology adoption within organizations such as rural SMMEs, which offers insights into how rural SMMEs can optimise social media strategies (Tornatzky & Fleischer 1990; Qalati *et al.* 2021; Ahmad *et al.* 2018). The three critical contexts of TOE theory are briefly discussed as follows:

Technological context refers to the characteristics of the technology itself, such as ease of use, compatibility, and perceived benefits. Social media platforms provide accessible and versatile tools for marketing, which rural SMMEs can leverage to improve customer engagement. Whereas the organisational context includes organisational readiness, such as resources, skills, and management support, training initiatives and leadership commitment are essential for effective social media adoption in rural SMMEs (Mataruka & Muzurura 2023; Classen *et al.* 2021; Matikiti *et al.* 2018; Baker 2012).

Environmental context involves external factors like market conditions, competition, and regulatory policies. In rural areas, connectivity and customer access significantly affect the success in social media marketing adoption. The TOE framework aligns well with the study objectives as it comprehensively addresses the multidimensional aspects that impact rural SMME adoption of social media (Mataruka *et al.* 2023). By linking technological, organisational, and environmental factors to the study objectives, this framework provides a robust foundation for analysing and optimising social media marketing strategies.

Firm Growth Theory (FGT), conceptualised by Penrose in 1959, highlights the interplay between internal resource utilisation and external opportunities for firm expansion. Nonetheless, growth is not solely dictated by market demand but by how effectively firms adapt, innovate, and optimise resources (Penrose 2009). SMMEs face unique constraints, particularly in rural contexts, where resources such as digital infrastructure and technical skills are limited (Lekhanya 2018). The theory of firm growth emphasises that leveraging affordable and accessible tools, such as social media, can bridge these gaps, enabling firms to achieve growth even during

crises (Barbero *et al.* 2011). This theory aligns with research objective 2, regarding assessing the effect strategies in social media marketing have on sales performance and customer engagement, emphasising its role in achieving sustained growth.

2.4 Summary for Development of Research Hypotheses

There are two types of hypotheses, namely the null (Ho) and the alternative (Ha) hypothesis. Ho means no actual relationship exists between variables (Ho and Ha). Therefore, the study will either retain or reject a null hypothesis in favour of an alternative hypothesis (Ha). Ha is a statement that suggests a potential outcome the researcher may expect and would be established only when a Ho hypothesis is rejected (Mourougan & Sethuraman 2017). Thus, based on the literature review gap, the hypotheses proposed to address this gap are as follows:

Ho1: There is no positive relationship between the use of social media and increasing product sales by rural SMMEs to survive and grow at the time of the Covid-19 crisis and in future pandemics.

Ha1: There is a positive relationship between the use of social media and increasing product sales by rural SMMEs to survive and grow at the time of the Covid-19 crisis and in future pandemics.

Ho2: There is no positive relationship between social media use by rural SMMEs and improving customer engagement for business continuity and sustainability at the time of the Covid-19 crisis and during future pandemics.

Ha2: There is a positive relationship between use by rural SMMEs and improving customer engagement for business continuity and sustainability at the time of the Covid-19 crisis and during future pandemics.

Ho3: There is no positive relationship between rural SMME social media use and their adoption of innovative survival strategies for business continuity and sustainability at the time of the Covid-19 crisis and future pandemics.

Ha3: There is a positive relationship between rural SMME social media use and their adoption of innovative survival strategies for business continuity and sustainability at the time of the Covid-19 crisis and future pandemics.

2.5 Conceptual Model

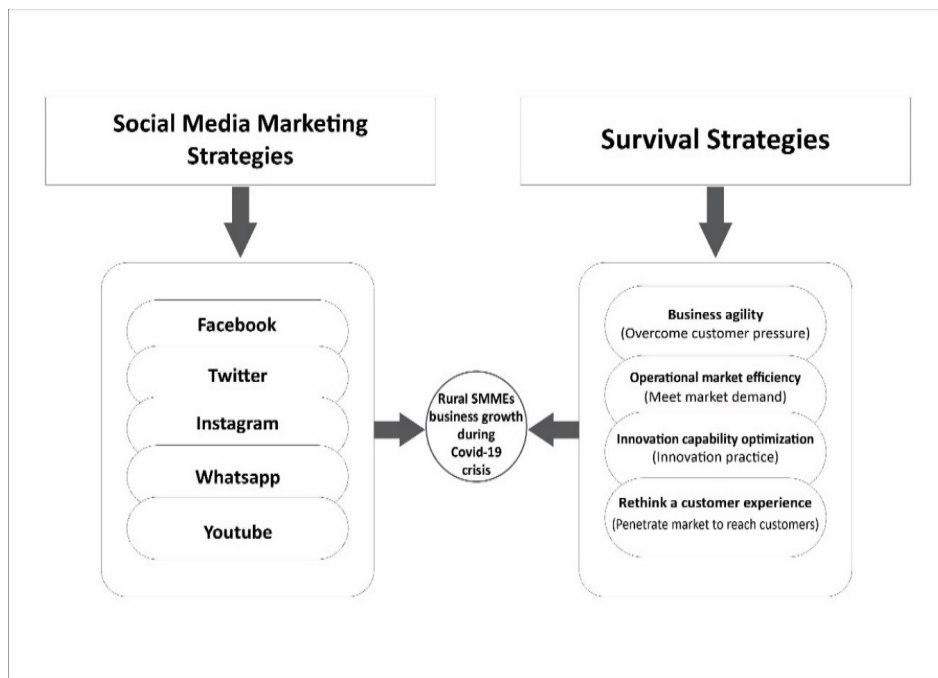


Figure 1: Conceptual model for the study

Source: Researchers' Conceptual Model (2025)

3. Research methodology

3.1 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, with the study testing and accepting or rejecting the hypotheses (Creswell & Creswell 2017). A quantitative method was used to provide insights into the strategies rural KZN SMMEs adopted, using social media for the continued sustainability and development of their businesses at the time of the Covid-19 crisis. In nature, the research design was descriptive and cross sectional (Singh & Masuku 2014).

3.2 Target population

As indicated by the Quarterly Labour Force Survey produced by StatsSA (2020), 166 331 SMMEs operate in the KZN Metro, with 247 740 SMMEs in the KZN non-Metros, thus a total of 414 070 SMMEs in the province. However, this study focussed on larger rural populations to obtain an adequate number of SMME owners/managers as participants, situated in geographical areas such as Amajuba District Municipality, Zululand Municipality District, and King Cetshwayo District Municipality (StatsSA 2020).

3.3 Sampling Strategy and Sample Size

There are 414 070 SMMEs in the province of KZN (StatsSA 2020). To calculate the sample size for this study, Singh and Masuku (2014) and Remler and Van Ryzin (2021) state the following formula can be used:

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

The above formula was, therefore, used to determine the exact sample size; namely $n = 0.9604/0025 = 384$ 1600, in other words, the entire sample size equates to 384 KZN SMME owners/managers, with whom the survey was conducted. The use of a convenience sampling method was pivotal to this study, as participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate (Creswell *et al.* 2017), through completing a closed-ended questionnaire. To obtain the desired sample, quota sampling was used, while it was also used due to time and financial constraints. Purposive sampling further enabled selection of rural SMMEs owners /managers in rural KZN, assumed to have experience and influence of adopting and using social media during the Covid-19 crisis (Etikan *et al.* 2016; Babbie 2020). Collection of the quantitative data was achieved by means of a questionnaire that was self-administered, comprising a 5-point Likert scale response range, administered to 374 rural SMMEs of the following areas: Vryheid, Empangeni, Richards Bay, and Newcastle, as well as Ulundi, Dundee and Ixopo (ubuhlebezwe) in KZN. The collected quantitative data aligned with the research objectives, with the purpose to address the study hypotheses.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis uses descriptive and statistical inferential statistics to represent the data. In this study, 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, Factor Analysis, Kaiser Maier Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's tests. The data were presented in tables and graphs.

3.5 Reliability and Validity

Content validity was carried out on the data collection instrument through using seasoned experts who provided views on validity of the measurement tool. Validity was also ensured by piloting the questionnaire to 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 permitted 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 Cronbach's coefficient alpha at 0.70, was used to measure internal consistency. Internal consistency estimated reliability by grouping questions in the questionnaire that measured the same concept (Taber 2018: 1279; Nawi *et al.* 2020).

4. Presentation of results

4.1 Demographic Participant Profile

Table 1 shows more male respondents, at 62.3 % (n=233), with females at 37.7% (n=141). Regarding the race groups of the participant, 98.4% (n=368) indicated as African; 1.1% (n= 4) as Coloured; 0.3% (n = 1) as White, and 0,3% (n = 1) as Indian. Furthermore, the table also indicates educational qualifications at National Diploma level and below for many participants (284 or 75,9%). A large number SMME owners-managers (265 or 70.85%) they had survived for eight years or less, which could be as a result of the majority rural SMMEs having used their own capital to start their businesses (341 or 91.2 %), as they experienced high unemployment and rates of poverty (368 or 98.40 %). In addition, it was not possible for some respondents to access capital through banking institutions (31 or 8.3 %) and many rural SMMEs (221 or 59.1%) indicated their operations can be classified as within the services sector.

Table 1: Demographic profile of participants (N=374)

Parameter	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Valid (%)	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender					
Male	233	62.3	62.3		62.3
Female	141	37.7	37.7		100.0
Race					
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
Education qualification					
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
Reasons for starting a business					
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
Years in existence					
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
Source of finance					
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
Nature of business					
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

4.2 Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure and Bartlett's Test

Table 2 shows the adequacy level and the study's sample significance.

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett’s test of Sphericity scores

Item		Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity		
			Approx. Chi-Square	Df	Sig.
B18	The use of social media marketing and survival strategies for rural SMME business growth during and beyond the Covid-19 crisis	0.965	3219.852	55	0.000

Table 2 shows all requirements and conditions were realised to allow factor analysis, where the KMO and Bartlett's Test results were summarised. The requirement for the KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy must thus be greater than 0.500 while a less than 0.05 Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity significance value (Levine 2015). All the themes were shown to be acceptable from the results and a statistics viewpoint shows they are also significant (Traynor & Andrews 2015: 479). The KMO value is at 0.957, which is greater than 0.8, thus indicating the sampling was sufficient and for the data, the analysis was appropriate. A highly significant result from the Bartlett’s test of Sphericity at $p < 0.001$, reflects significant correlations between at least some variables in the correlation matrix (Shrestha 2021). In this study, the test value is 3219.852, with a less than 0.001 associated degree of significance. Hence, the hypotheses that the correlation matrixes are the identity matrixes, are rejected. By implication, the survival strategies and social media marketing strategies were not adopted and used as business growth strategies by rural KZN SMMEs during the Covid-19 crisis for their business continuity and sustainability.

4.3 Reliability statistics

Table 3 illustrates the reliability statistics tested at more than 0.70 using Cronbach’s Alpha.

Table 3: Reliability test scores

		N of items	Cronbach's Alpha
B18	The use of social media marketing and survival strategies for rural SMMEs business growth during and beyond the Covid-19 crisis	11	0.952

Table 3 shows the reliability test results conducted on all the questionnaire statements the researcher designed, grouped according to stated research themes, aligned with the research aim. The table illustrates the reliability scores of all questionnaire constructs that exceeded the 0.70 acceptable Cronbach’s alpha value. By implication, these Cronbach's Alpha values that were newly calculated indicate acceptance for this entire part of the research with the reliable scoring. Where a questionnaire measures the same concept, reliability is estimated through internal consistency by grouping questions (Taber 2018: 1279; Nawi *et al.* 2020).

4.4 Hypotheses testing

The hypotheses set for this research study were categorised and presented as the null (Ho) and alternative (Ha) hypotheses.

Ha1: There is a positive relationship between the use of social media and increasing product sales by rural SMMEs for survival and growth during Covid-19 crisis and future pandemics.

The bivariate correlation results show the relationship between the tested variables is significantly positive at 0.581** (sig. <0.001) level. Therefore, rejection of the null hypothesis (Ho1) allows the conclusion that there is a positive relationship between the use of social media and increasing product sales by rural SMMEs for survival and growth during Covid-19 crisis future pandemics.

Ha2: There is a positive relationship between use by rural SMMEs and improving customer engagement for business continuity and sustainability at the time of the Covid-19 crisis and during future pandemics.

Ha3: There is a positive relationship between rural SMME social media use and their adoption of innovative survival strategies for business continuity and sustainability at the time of the Covid-19 crisis and future pandemics.

4.5 Descriptive analysis for social media marketing and survival strategies for rural SMME growth during and beyond the Covid-19 crisis

In this section, the researcher sought to determine which factors influence social media use by rural KZN SMMEs for their sustained business continuity and development at the time of the Covid-19 crisis. Table 4 presents the descriptive results. A 5-Point Likert scale was used, with the response scale range from 1 indicating strongly disagree, 2 disagree, and 3 neutral, to 4 showing agree and 5 strongly agree:

Table 4: Descriptive analysis for rural SMME social media marketing and survival strategies for business growth during and beyond Covid-19 crisis

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Rural SMMEs can use social media to overcome customer pressure during a pandemic	374	1.00	5.00	3.9759	0.86762
Rural SMMEs can use social media to meet market demand during a pandemic	374	1.00	5.00	4.0401	0.85770
Rural SMMEs can use social media as an innovative practice during a pandemic	374	1.00	5.00	4.0214	0.83783
Rural SMMEs can use social media to penetrate the market to reach customer during a pandemic	374	1.00	5.00	4.0802	0.90810
Rural SMMEs can use Facebook for their survival and growth in future pandemics	374	1.00	5.00	4.0722	0.88637
Rural SMMEs can use Twitter for their survival and growth in future pandemics	374	1.00	5.00	4.0053	0.83488
Rural SMMEs can use WhatsApp for their survival and growth in future pandemics	374	1.00	5.00	4.1791	0.88326
Rural SMMEs can use Instagram for their survival and growth in future pandemics	374	1.00	5.00	4.0160	0.89068

Rural SMMEs can use YouTube for their survival and growth in future pandemics	374	1.00	5.00	4.0187	0.86466
Valid N (listwise)	374				
Overall Mean and Std. Deviation scores				36.4089	7.8311

According to the descriptive analysis (Table 4), agreement was indicated by the majority respondents that strategies for social media marketing and survival were not used for rural SMME business growth; with a mean of 36.4089 and standard deviation of 7.8311.

4.6 Social Media Marketing and Survival Strategies for Rural SMME Growth during and beyond Covid-19

Table 5: Component matrix: Social Media Marketing and Survival Strategies for Rural SMME growth during and beyond the Covid-19 crisis

Component Matrix ^a	
	Component 1
Rural SMMEs can use social media to overcome customer pressure during a pandemic	0.787
Rural SMMEs can use social media to meet market demand during a pandemic	0.790
Rural SMMEs can use social media as an innovative practice during a pandemic	0.765
Rural SMMEs can use social media to penetrate the market to reach customer during a pandemic	0.828
Rural SMMEs can use social media to increase sales of product during a pandemic	0.843
Rural SMMEs can use Facebook for their survival and growth in future pandemics	0.840
Rural SMMEs can use Twitter for their survival and growth in future pandemics	0.858
Rural SMMEs can use WhatsApp for their survival and growth in future pandemics	0.841
Rural SMMEs can use Instagram for their survival and growth in future pandemics	0.835
Rural SMMEs can use YouTube for their survival and growth in future pandemics	0.833
Rural SMMEs can use social media to interact with customers in future pandemics	0.821
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.	
a. 1 components extracted.	

A component test was conducted on the statements related to rural SMME social media marketing and survival strategy use for business development at the time of and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic induced crisis. The respondents indicated to only one category of component, with all components tested reflecting a positive significance. On the statement to ascertain whether rural SMMEs can use Twitter for their survival and growth in future pandemics, a strong positive significance of 0.858 is shown. This means respondents felt rural SMMEs in KZN could use Twitter for their sustained business continuity and development in future pandemics.

The other variable that depicted a strong positive significance concerning whether rural SMMEs can use WhatsApp for their survival and growth in future pandemics, showed 0.841 for the component test. Regarding rural SMME use of Facebook to increase product sales for their sustained development and business continuity in future pandemics, a component test conducted indicated a 0.840 score. With regard to the variable whether

rural SMMEs can reach customers during a pandemic by using social media to penetrate the market, a positive significance of 0.828 is shown, whereas the other variables to ascertain whether rural SMMEs can use Instagram and YouTube for their survival and growth in future pandemics, showed a figure of 0.835 and 0.833, respectively. With regard to whether rural SMMEs can use social media to interact with customers in future pandemics, the respondents were in agreement, as depicted by the significance of a 0.821 score.

The statement whether rural SMMEs can use social media to meet market demand during a pandemic elicited a strong positive significance of 0.7.90. A score of 0.787 is reflected for the statement relating to whether social media can be used by rural SMMEs to overcome customer pressure during a pandemic. The last variable, on the statement whether rural SMMEs can use social media as an innovative practice during a pandemic, reflects a figure of 0.765. All variables tested were based on statements regarding rural SMME social media marketing and survival strategy use for sustained business continuity during and beyond the Covid-19 crisis, where these reflected a very strong significance towards the use of social media marketing and survival strategies for rural SMME business growth. This means they strongly believed social media marketing and survival strategies can promote rural SMME business growth, while also enhancing the sustainability of rural SMMEs during future pandemics. Furthermore, the component test revealed rural KZN SMMEs see social media marketing and survival strategies as an optimising tool for their business growth during and beyond the crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. Discussion and interpretation of findings

5.1 Rural SMME use of social media marketing and survival strategies for business continuity and development during and beyond Covid-19

5.1.1 Extent of rural KZN SMME social media use as survival strategy at the time of the pandemic

The below figures depict the study findings regarding social media use during the pandemic: to overcome rural SMME customer pressure (Fig. 2), to meet market demand (Fig. 3), as an innovative practice (Fig. 4), and to penetrate the market to reach customers (Fig. 5), as well as increase product sales (Fig. 6).

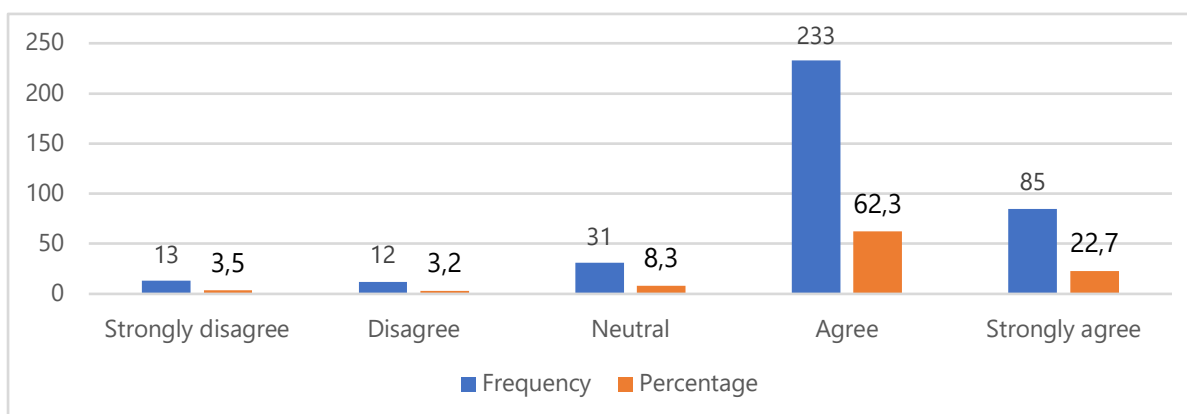


Figure 2: Rural SMMEs can use social media to overcome customer pressure during a pandemic

Figure 2 illustrates the majority respondents (233 or 62.3%) agreed and 85 (22.7%) strongly agreed, whereas 31 (8.3%) respondents remained neutral with the statement. A small number of respondents (12 or 3.2%) disagreed with the statement, while 13 (3.5%) respondents strongly disagreed. To determine whether rural SMMEs can use social media to overcome pressure from customers during a pandemic, a Chi-square test was conducted,

with the results for this variable indicating ($\chi^2 = 465.412$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), which in this regard, shows rural SMMEs can use social media.

This finding is supported by Hutton and Eldridge (2019) who proposed SMMEs should embrace strategic agility, which includes improving information systems and advanced production technologies to ensure innovation occurs speedily and customers have more power in business enterprises such as SMMEs, in order to enhance their business growth.

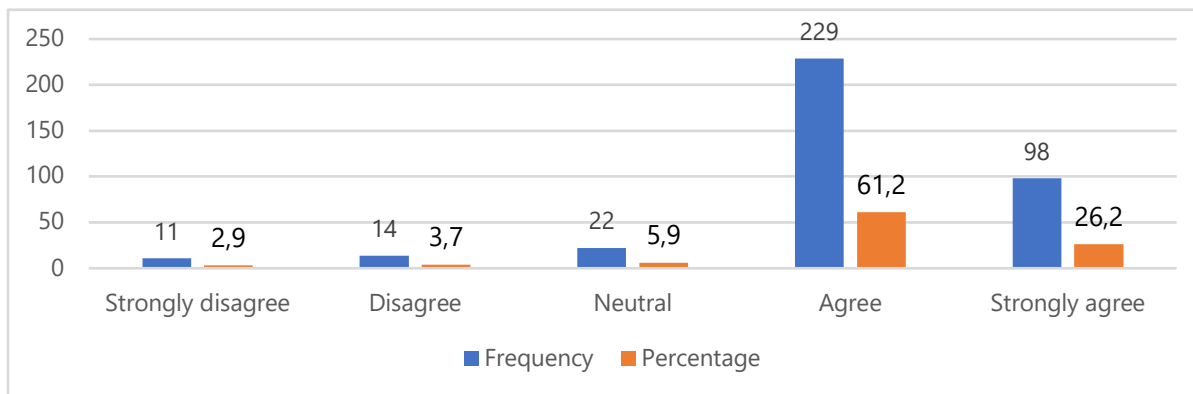


Figure 3: Rural SMMEs can use social media to meet market demand during a pandemic

Figure 3 portrays that a large number of respondents (229 or 61.2%) agreed, with 98 (26.2%) that strongly agreed, while 22 (5.9%) respondents remained neutral with the statement. Additionally, relatively few respondents (14 or 3.7%) disagreed with the statement, while 11 (2.9%) respondents strongly disagreed. To establish whether rural SMMEs can use social media to meet market demand during a pandemic a Chi-square test was conducted. The results for this variable show ($\chi^2 = 466.187$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$); this shows social media use by rural SMMEs can potentially meet market demand during a pandemic.

Several authors confirmed SMMEs must put actionable marketing plans in place, thereby applying their dynamic capability in attracting prospective and retaining existing customers in global crises, for example the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to increase their revenues in the economic recession caused by the pandemic (Moore 2002; Keh *et al.* 2006; Naidoo 2010; Rahman *et al.* 2022).

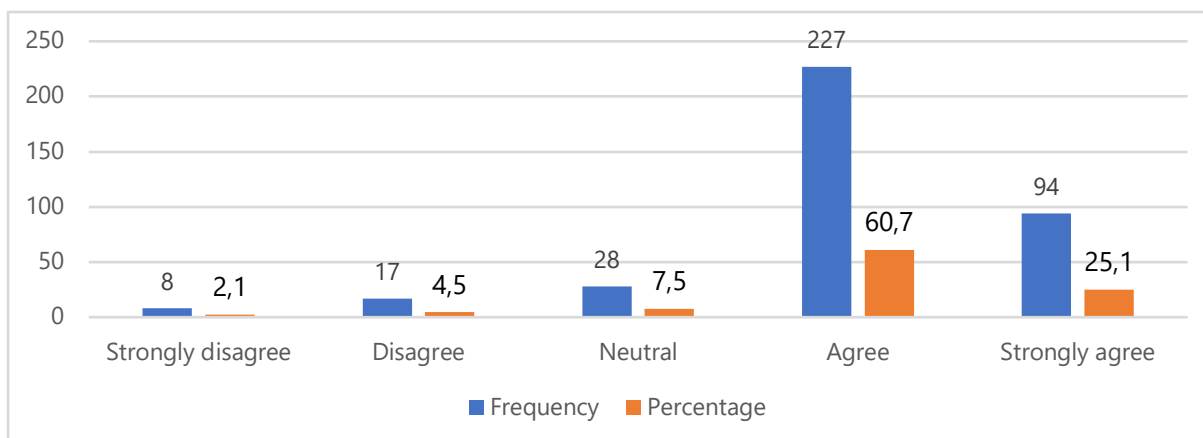


Figure 4: Rural SMMEs can use social media as an innovative practice during a pandemic

Figure 4 shows a larger number of respondents (227 or 60.7%) agreed, with 94 (25.1 percent) indicating strong agreement with the statement, while 28 (7.5%) respondents remained neutral. Additionally, a limited respondent number (17 or 4.5%) disagreed with the statement, with strong disagreement indicated by eight (2.1%) respondents. To determine whether rural SMMEs can use social media during a pandemic as an innovative practice a Chi-square test was conducted. The results for this variable indicate ($\chi^2 = 448.219$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), suggesting rural SMMEs can use social media as an innovative practice during a pandemic.

This infers rural SMMEs should embark on innovation practices during situations such as the Covid-19 crisis and any future pandemic, to survive and grow (Rahman *et al.* 2022). Rural SMMEs must develop innovative capability, which infers the ability to continuously design new or modified products and services, including introducing new techniques, in response to turbulent business environments (Rahman *et al.* 2022; Cefis & Marsili 2012).

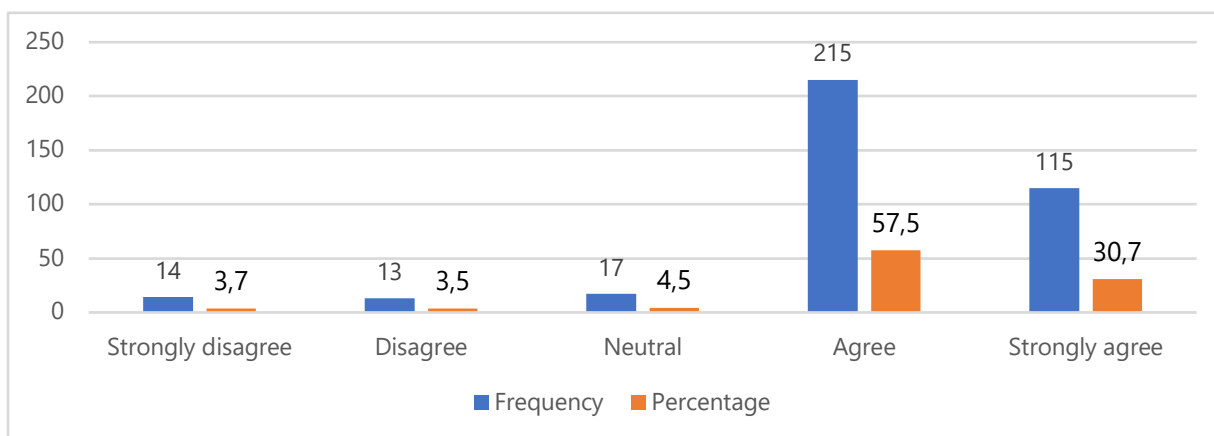


Figure 5: Rural SMMEs can use social media to penetrate the market to reach customers during a pandemic

Figure 5 illustrates agreement with the statement indicated by the majority respondents (215 or 57.5%), and strong agreement indicated by 115 (30.7%), while 17 (4.5%) respondents remained neutral. A small number of respondents (13 or 3.5%), furthermore, disagreed, whereas 14 (3.7%) strongly disagreed with the statement. In establishing whether rural SMMEs can use social media to penetrate the market to reach customers during a pandemic a Chi-square test was conducted. For this variable, the results indicate ($\chi^2 = 429.529$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), which shows rural SMMEs can use social media in this way.

This suggests, for SMMEs to market their products and services, they should develop an innovation-oriented culture, thus increasing their revenues for survival and growth in future pandemics (Parise *et al.* 2016; Homburg *et al.* 2017; Bolton *et al.* 2018; Rahman *et al.* 2022).

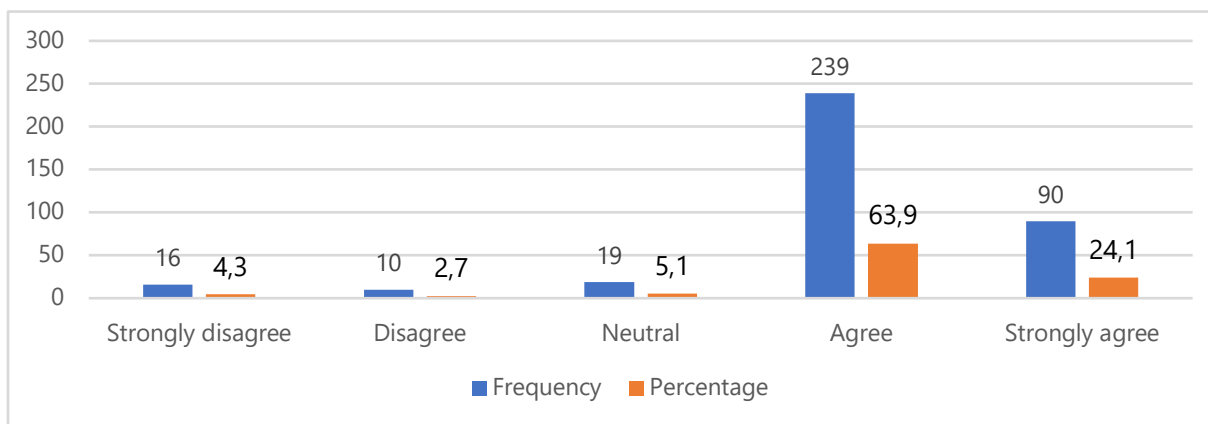


Figure 6: Rural SMMEs can use social media to increase product sales during a pandemic

Figure 6 indicates many respondents (239 or 63.9%) agreed and 90 (24.1%) strongly agreed, however, 19 (5.1%) respondents indicated neutral with the statement. Furthermore, few respondents (10 or 2.7%) disagreed with the statement, while 16 (4.3%) respondents strongly disagreed. To determine whether rural SMMEs can use social media to increase product sales during a pandemic, a Chi-square test was conducted, with results for this variable indicating ($\chi^2 = 507.524$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), thereby suggesting rural SMME social media use could increase product sales during a pandemic.

This finding is in line the view that marketing operational efficiency is one of the survival strategies rural SMMEs may use in crisis situations to increase their product sales (Ashworth 2012; White *et al.* 2020; Rahman *et al.* 2022).

5.2 Social media marketing strategies for sales performance and customer engagement for rural SMME survival and growth

The responses to SMME use of social media platforms and networks as sales performance and customer engagement improvement strategies examined in this study are illustrated below: these include Facebook (Fig. 7), Twitter (Fig 8), WhatsApp (Fig. 9), and Instagram (Fig. 10), as well as YouTube, (Fig. 11), to interact with customers (Fig. 12); results are detailed as follows:

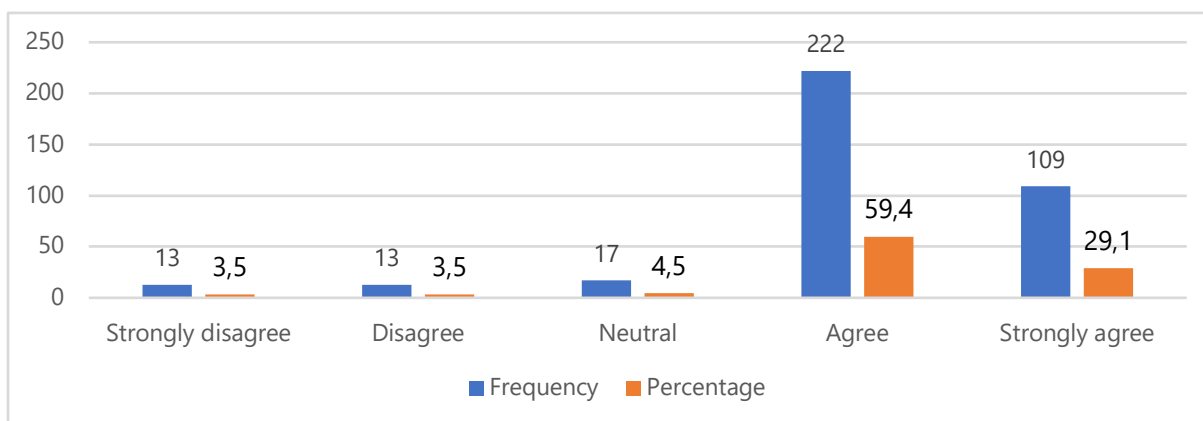


Figure 7: Rural SMMEs can use Facebook for their survival and growth in future pandemics

Figure 7 shows more than half the respondents (222 or 59.4%) agreed Facebook could be used as a growth strategy, 109 (29.1%) strongly agreed, 17 (4.5%) remained neutral, and a small number (13 or 3.5%) disagreed, while strong disagreement was indicated with the statement by 13 (3.5%) respondents. A Chi-square test was conducted to establish whether rural SMMEs can use Facebook for their survival and growth in future pandemics; results for this variable indicate ($\chi^2 = 452.096$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), therefore, rural SMMEs can use Facebook as a future pandemic strategy for survival and growth.

These findings are in line with recent research, such as the study conducted by Tlapana and Dike (2020), which found SMMEs can use Facebook to reach targeted customers and improve their brand awareness of the SMMEs. According to Statista (2023), the Facebook social media platform, which is the core platform for social media giant Meta, currently has more than 2.9 billion monthly active users. This implies Facebook can be used by rural SMMEs as a marketing tool to communicate with existing and attract new customers, thereby increasing their sales during a crisis, such as that caused by Covid-19, for their business continuity and sustainability in this economic turmoil.

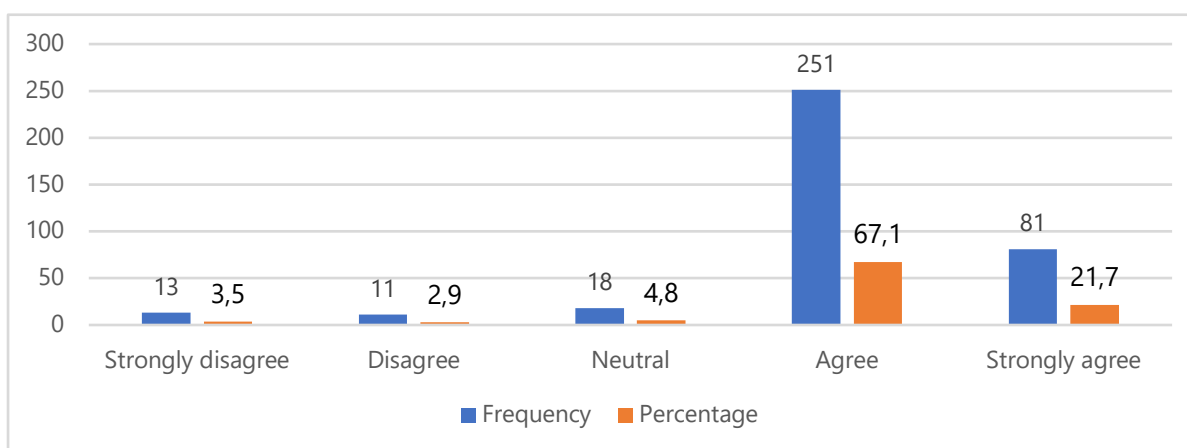


Figure 8: Rural SMMEs can use Twitter for their survival and growth in future pandemics

Figure 8 reveals the majority respondents (251 or 67.1%) agreed, 81 (21.7%) strongly agreed, 18 (4.8%) remained neutral, while a small number (11 or 2.9%) disagreed, and 13 (3.5%) respondents strongly disagreed Twitter could be used as a growth strategy. To establish whether rural SMMEs can use Twitter for their survival and growth in future pandemics, a Chi-square test was conducted; for this variable, results indicate ($\chi^2 = 464.182$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), suggesting rural SMMEs can use Twitter as a survival and growth strategy in a future pandemic.

These findings are supported by Tlapana and Dike (2020), who explain Twitter is a SNS that conveys business messages to different customers. In this regard, rural SMMEs should use this type of platform to reach out to customers in promoting their business, which would have allowed instant feedback regarding products or services at the time of the Covid-19 crisis and enable rural SMME business continuity and development in future pandemics.

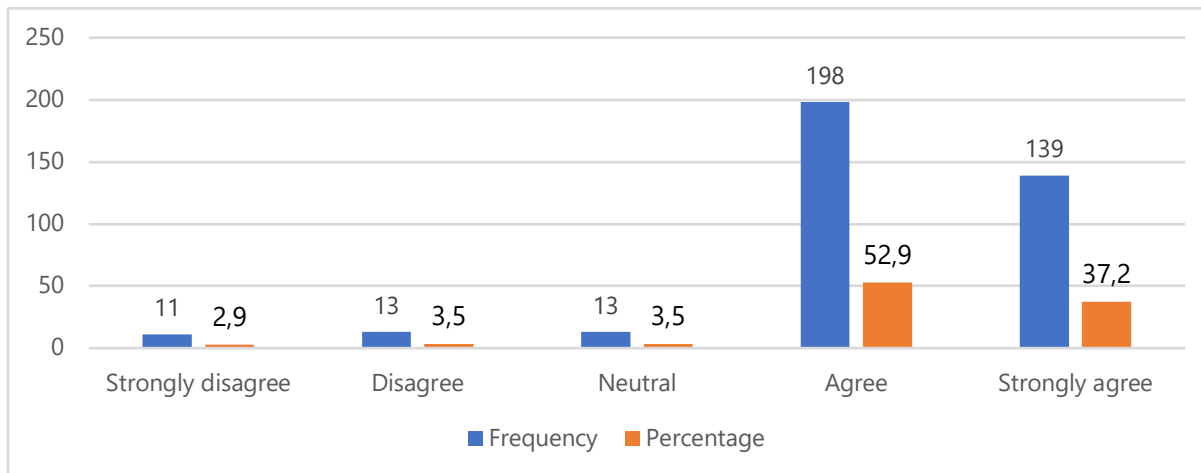


Figure 9: Rural SMMEs can use WhatsApp for their survival and growth in future pandemics

Figure 9 depicts many respondents (198 or 52.9%) agreed, 139 (37.2%) strongly agreed, 13 (4.8%) remained neutral, with a small number of respondents (13 or 3.5%) that disagreed, whereas 11 (2.9%) respondents strongly disagreed WhatsApp could be used as a growth strategy. To determine whether rural SMMEs can use WhatsApp to survive and grow in future pandemics, a Chi-square test was conducted; results for this variable indicate ($\chi^2 = 414.556$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), therefore, rural SMMEs can use WhatsApp as a survival and growth strategy in a future pandemic.

These findings correspond with other scholars, who indicated enterprises were enabled through WhatsApp to maintain contact with customers and increase their operational base, through effective use of the app and promotion of the business, notwithstanding where the users live (Dar *et al.* 2017). This suggests rural SMMEs can use WhatsApp for their survival and growth in future pandemics. Statista (2023) shows the social networks considered most popular globally, according to the number of active monthly users, where WhatsApp is widely received and in 2022, was used by 1.26 billion global consumers and companies.

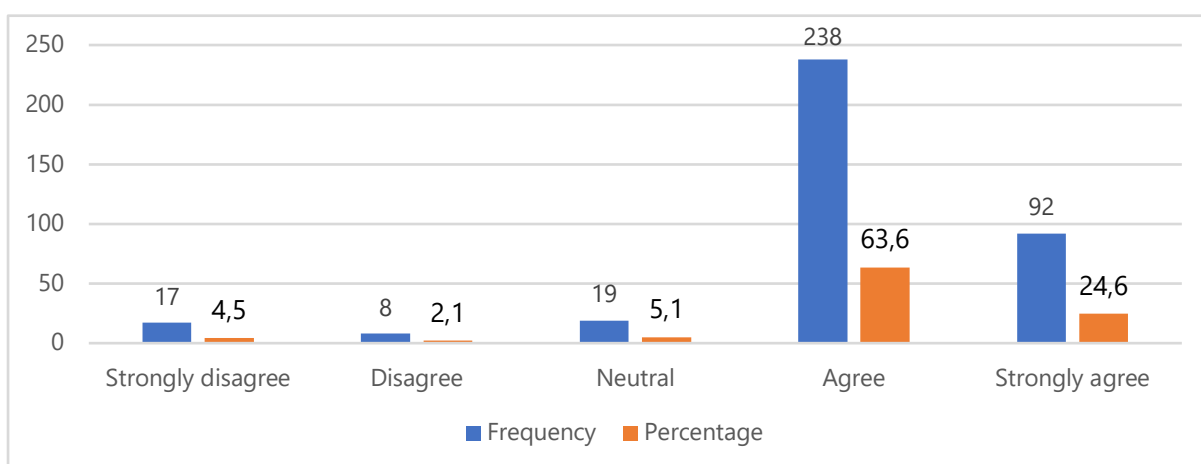


Figure 10: Rural SMMEs can use Instagram for their survival and growth in future pandemics

Figure 10 indicates the majority respondents (238 or 63.6%) agreed, 92 (24.6%) strongly agreed, 19 (5.1 percent) indicated neutral to the statement and a few (eight or 2.1%) disagreed, whereas 17 (4.5%) respondents strongly disagreed Instagram could be used as a growth strategy. To discover whether rural SMMEs can use Instagram for their survival and growth in future pandemics a Chi-square test was conducted; results for this variable indicate ($\chi^2 = 505.973$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), which signals rural SMMEs can use Instagram in a future pandemic as a strategy for survival and growth.

These findings are supported by studies that pointed out Instagram is a SNS that provides users a means and place to filter, and post photos and videos on various sites, including Instagram, allowing SMMEs to pursue and present consumer taste and preference social trends and information (Tlapana & Dike 2020). In 2021, active monthly Instagram users totalled 1.21 billion, as indicated by Statista (2023), with Instagram considered the fourth most popular social media platform in the world, where user numbers are concerned. This infers Instagram can allow rural SMMEs to provide customers with services and products according to their needs, thereby creating customer loyalty to sustain their survival and growth in future pandemics.

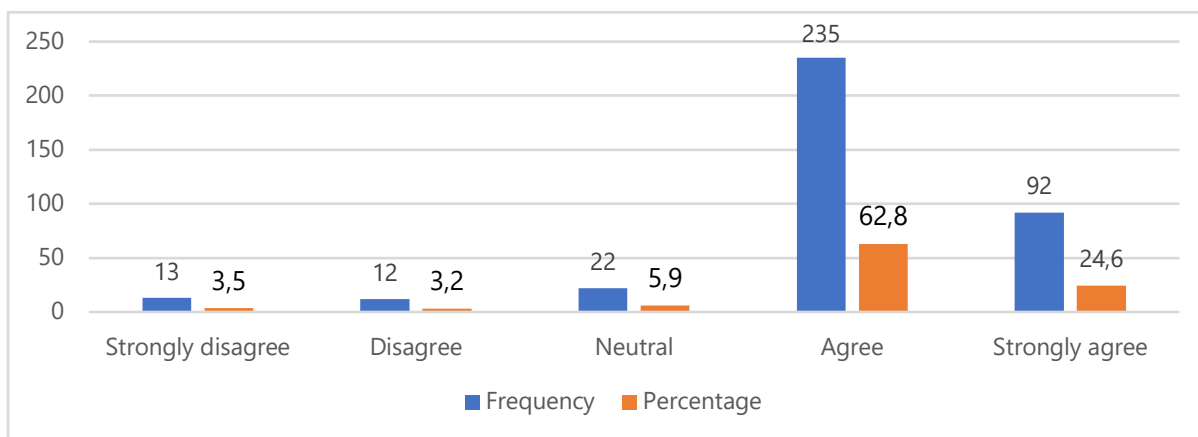


Figure 11: Rural SMMEs can use YouTube for their survival and growth in future pandemics

Figure 11 shows the majority respondents (235 or 62.8%) agreed, with 92 (24.6%) that strongly agreed, whereas 22 (5.9%) respondents indicated neutral to the statement. Furthermore, a few respondents (12 or 3.2%) disagreed, while 13 (3.5%) respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. To ascertain whether rural SMMEs can use YouTube for their survival and growth in future pandemics, a Chi-square test was conducted. For this variable, the results indicate ($\chi^2 = 488.112$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), which suggests rural SMMEs can use YouTube as a survival and growth strategy in a future pandemic.

These findings are in accordance with prior studies, which suggest SMMEs can use YouTube to market their products and services, since YouTube is accessible to 1.5 billion monthly users (Göbel *et al.* 2017; Gupta *et al.* 2018). The social media platform added YouTube Shorts in 2021, launched globally in June of that year; by February 2023, daily views of YouTube Shorts exceeded 50 billion (Statista 2023). Thus, it may be concluded YouTube can be a valuable marketing tool rural SMMEs can utilise to not only market their products and services but also improve their sales during a crisis, thereby forging business survival and growth in future pandemics.

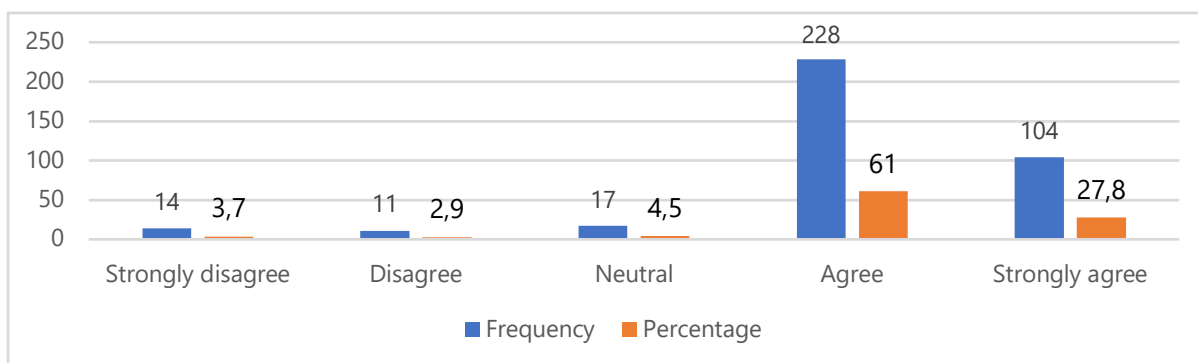


Figure 12: Rural SMMEs can use social media to interact with customers in future pandemics

Figure 12 presents results showing the majority respondents (228 or 61.1%) agreed, 104 (27.8%) strongly agreed, 17 (4.5%) remained neutral, and a small number (11 or 2.9%) disagreed, whereas 14 (3.7%) respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. To determine whether rural SMMEs can use social media to interact with customers in future pandemics, a Chi-square test was conducted, with results for this variable reflecting ($\chi^2 = 473.674$; $df = 4$; $P < 0.001$), therefore, rural SMMEs can use social media in future pandemics to interact with customers.

6. Implications

6.1 Theoretical implications

The primary study was mainly focused on contributing to the body of knowledge, by proposing a framework for optimising social media marketing and survival strategy use for rural KZN SMME business continuity and development during and beyond the Covid-19 crisis. The literature review and empirical research findings confirmed SMMEs, globally, are confronted with different challenges that hinder their competitive advantage and, in turn, their survival and growth. This could, eventually, impede their contribution to reducing the high unemployment rate, as well as inequalities, including reducing opportunities for rural SMMEs to sustain livelihoods in rural communities.

Rural KZN SMMEs could use the proposed social media marketing and survival strategies at the time of the Covid-19 crisis and beyond, which makes it crucial for rural SMMEs to note these and other relevant strategies and theories that deal with innovation, survival and growth, to assist and guide them in overcoming different challenges in their turbulent business environment. These strategies can also enable rural SMMEs to better comprehend survival and growth determinants and to develop an innovative, creative and favourable culture in times of crisis for business continuity and development. As SMME survival and growth are critical globally, including SA, considering their substantial potential to sustain and grow economies, developing new theories and conceptual frameworks reflect the need of rural SMMEs to invest in adopting and implementing business growth theories for the purpose of innovation. This would counteract the threats of environmental factors to their survival and growth in future pandemics and crises.

6.2 Practical implications

Rural SMMEs could have survived and grown during the Covid-19 crisis and in future pandemics, to revive economies of countries faced with economic turmoil caused by the crisis. In addition, rural SMMEs have the potential to make a huge contribution towards reviving and transforming the economies of countries post-Covid-

19. 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 survival and growth driving tool at the time of the Covid-19 crisis. The empirical findings, rooted in rural SMME survival and growth, revealed these enterprises can enhance their survival and growth through utilising suitable social media marketing and survival strategies, as well as adapting to dynamic environmental business.

7. Recommendations

7.1 Implement social media as survival strategy for reducing rural SMME business failure

Rural SMMEs worldwide, including SA, with special reference to rural KZN, were supposed to consider environmental analysis to develop survival strategies leading to their survival at the time of the Covid-19 crisis, since these small enterprises were already shown as unable to survive for more than five years, and the pandemic worsening the entire situation. Such survival strategies could benefit rural SMMEs, enhancing their competitive advantage and establishing their performance within their sectors during the Covid-19 crisis. Thus, to ensure rural SMME survival in developing industries continuous improvement through embracing a change and advancement process is required.

Rural SMMEs must, therefore, embrace and embark on innovation in order to survive during emergencies such as the Covid-19 crisis, where rural SMMEs were financially distressed, with the external turbulent environment weakening their survival, sales and revenues. Rural SMMEs were compelled to consider innovativeness in implementing survival strategies to reduce business failure. Business survival is, nevertheless, a prerequisite for any rural SMME, therefore, implementing the following strategies would have ensured their survival during and beyond the Covid 19 crisis, as previously discussed: business agility, operational market efficiency, rethinking the customer experience, as well as innovation capability optimisation.

7.2 Implement social media marketing strategies to reduce rural SMME business failure

The rural SMMEs suggested social media platform use was crucial for their business growth, where social media is used to communicate with existing and potential customers, creating relationships to forge future loyalty. It is, consequently, recommended rural SMMEs should implement social media marketing strategies to reduce business failure; this would have allowed them to achieve sustainable business continuity during the Covid-19 crisis. It is also strongly recommended rural SMMEs use Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube, as well as Instagram, at the time of disasters such as Covid-19 and future pandemics, to ensure survival and growth.

7.3 Proposed framework to optimise use of social media marketing and survival strategies for rural SMME business growth during the Covid-19 crisis and beyond in KZN

The main study purpose was to design and propose a framework for optimised use of social media marketing and survival strategies for rural SMME business growth, due to the inadequate adoption of social media and survival strategies among SMMEs, which caused sales and revenues to decline and compromised rural SMMEs business growth. A framework was, therefore, developed in relation to the social media marketing and survival strategies based on the literature reviewed and findings, as portrayed in Figure 13 below.

Framework Foundations

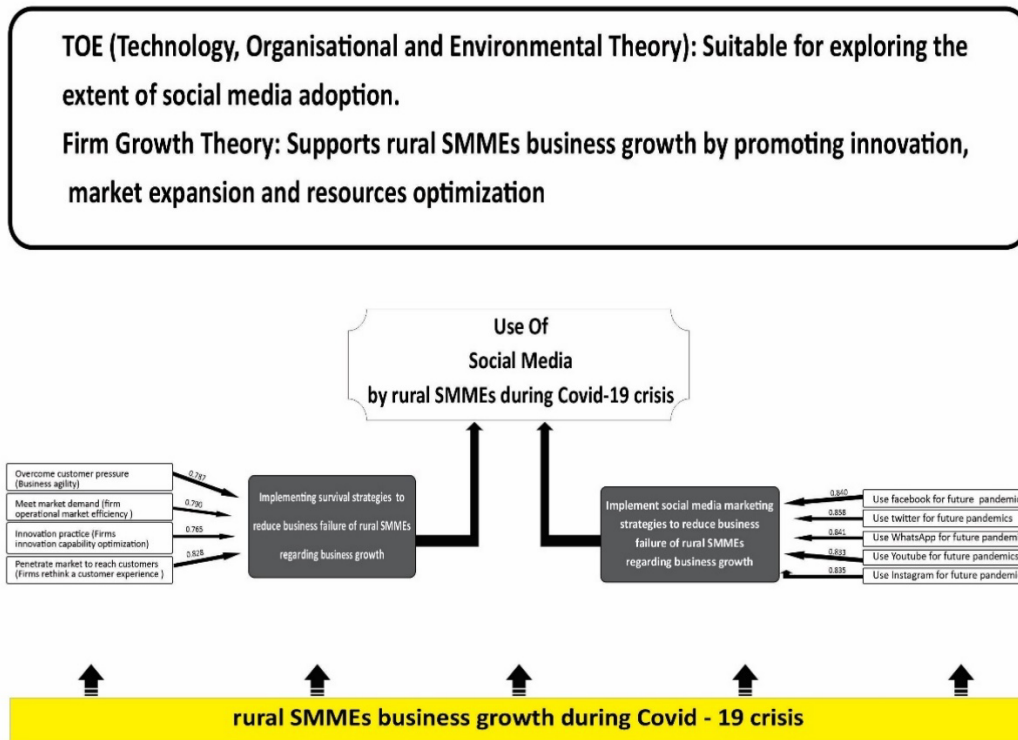


Figure 13: Proposed optimised social media marketing and survival strategy use framework
 Source: Researchers (2025)

Figure 13, overall, suggests rural SMMEs can achieve business growth by first embarking on establishing the threats and opportunities posed by dynamic business environment factors and thus apply survival strategies in order to cope with the Covid-19 crisis, as well as social media marketing strategies for their circumstances, and in their specific sectors. As a business performance tool, to provide a foundation on which suitable business remedial strategies can be built, the proposed framework of optimised social media marketing and survival strategy use for rural SMME business development, would be able to deal with, for example, the economic recession caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Rural SMMEs would thus be able to access their potential and existing customers, to improve their financial performance to sustain their businesses in this crisis. The proposed framework combines the TOE and FGT, with the TOE shown as suitable to investigate the adoption extent of social media, through examining the internal and external factors regarding rural SMME employment of social media marketing and survival strategies at the time of and beyond the Covid-19 crisis.

8. Conclusions

The study findings, indicating social media as a driving strategy for rural KZN SMME survival and growth at the time of the Covid-19 crisis, concluded survival strategies were critical in leading to social media use by rural SMME for their sustained continuity and development at the time of the Covid-19 and future crises. The study determined rural SMMEs need to be familiar with different survival strategy types to use social media as

innovative practice in addressing the difficulties rural SMMEs face to overcome customer needs and meet market demand, in addition to penetrating the market to reach more customers. It can, therefore, be concluded rural SMME growth strategies are crucial in leading these rural enterprises to use social media for their business continuity and sustainability, during the Covid-19 and future pandemics.

The study further established rural SMMEs need to be familiar with the benefits of using social platforms and their contributions to business success, to enhance rural SMME business continuity and development during disasters and the crises they create. In conclusion, social media represents a strategic tool for rural SMMEs in KZN to survive and thrive beyond the Covid-19 crisis. By embracing survival and growth strategies and addressing key challenges, rural SMMEs can build resilience, expand market reach, and contribute to economic development in their communities, to not perish in the five years after their establishment and survive, as well grow.

The limitations entailed this study only being conducted in certain rural KZN areas, with other rural areas in KZN and in SA not covered, due to this study being cross-sectional in nature. Should the study scope be extended to the entire KZN and other rural areas in SA, the researcher would have obtained more SMME manager/ owner views in other rural areas. This means the study results and findings cannot be generalised to other rural areas. The study findings revealed rural SMMEs were subjected to many risks impacting their growth, profitability, and sustainability, which resulted in being termed as technically insolvent - and they are supposed to thrive post-Covid-19. Thus, a future study can focus comparative studies on social media adoption between urban and rural SMMEs during and beyond the Covid-19 crisis.

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