

**IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE SUSTAINABILITY OF
COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS: THE CASE OF VHEMBE FM AND MAKHADO
FM**

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Contents	
DECLARATION	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY	1
1.1. Introduction	1
1.2. Background to the Study	1
1.3. Problem statement	5
1.4. Rationale of the study	5
1.5. Aim of the study	6
1.6. Objectives of the study	6
1.7. Research Questions	6
1.8. Significance of the study	6
1.9. Chapter Outline	6
1.10. Conclusion	7
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ..	8
2.1 Introduction	8
2.2. Understanding Community Media	8
2.3. The Role of Community media during the COVID-19 pandemic	10
2.4. Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Community Media	14
2.5. Challenges Faced by Media Organisations during the COVID 19 pandemic	17
2.6. Declining Advertising and Media Sustainability during the Pandemic	18
2.7. Impact of COVID-19 on Newsgathering and Dissemination	20
2.8. Fake News, Misinformation and Disinformation	22
2.9. Coping Strategies of Community Media during COVID-19	25
2.10. Theoretical Framework	30
2.10.1 Media Development Theory	30
2.10.2. Media Sustainability Model	31
2.11. Conclusion	32
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	34
3.1. Research Paradigm	34
3.2. Research Design	34
3.3. Research Methods	35
3.4. Population and Sampling Procedures	35
3.4.1. Population	35

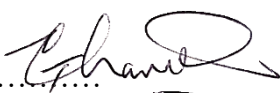
3.4.2. Sampling	36
3.5. Data collection methods.....	36
3.6. In-depth interviews	37
3.7. Document analysis	38
3.8. Data analysis.....	38
3.9. Ethical considerations.....	39
3.10. Conclusion	39
CHAPTER FOUR: DATA PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS	41
4.1. Introduction.....	41
4.2 CHALLENGES FACED BY COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC	41
4.2.1. Financial Constraints	42
4.2.2. Schedule and Workforce Challenges	44
4.2.3. Regulatory and Operational Limitations.....	46
4.2.4. Audience Engagement and Accessibility	48
4.2.5. Health and Wellness Challenges on Staff	51
4.2.6. Content Production Challenges	52
4.2.7. Technical and Infrastructure Challenges	53
4.3. IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE SELECTED RADIO STATIONS	54
REDUCED OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY	54
4.3.1. Financial Impact	54
4.3.2. Staffing and Workforce Impact.....	56
4.3.3. Regulatory and Policy Impact	57
4.3.4. Audience Engagement and Listenership Impact	59
4.3.5. Health and Well-Being Impact on Staff.....	60
4.3.6. Programming and Content Production Impact.....	63
4.4. COPING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY THE TWO COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS	65
4.4.1. Financial Survival Strategies	65
4.4.2. Flexible Staffing and Volunteer Support.....	67
4.4.3. Technological Innovations	68
4.4.4. Health and Wellness Initiatives	70
4.4.5. Audience Engagement and Community Support	72
4.4.6. Content Adaptation	73

4.4.7. Collaboration and Partnerships	75
4.5. Conclusion	77
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS.....	78
5.1. Introduction.....	78
5.2. FINDINGS RELATING TO CHALLENGES	78
5.3. FINDINGS ON COVID 19 AND ITS IMPACTS	83
5.4. FINDINGS RELATING TO COPING STRATEGIES	88
5.5. Conclusion	92
CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	93
6.1 Introduction.....	93
6.2. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	93
6.2.1. Difficulties that community radio stations in South Africa encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic	93
6.3.2. Determining how the COVID-19 pandemic affected certain community radio stations in South Africa	95
6.4. Findings Conclusions	99
6.5. Recommendations	100
6.6. Limitations of the study.....	100
6.7. Directions for future studies	101
6.8 Conclusion	101
References.....	102

DECLARATION

I, **Radzilani Tshifhiwa Stanley**, hereby declare that this dissertation titled “**Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Sustainability of Community Radio Station in South Africa: the Case of Vhembe FM and Makhado FM in the Limpopo Province**” is my original work and has not been submitted for a degree at any other university or institution. The document does not contain another person's writing unless expressly acknowledged and referenced accordingly.

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ABSTRACT

The study examines how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the viability of community media in South Africa. Focusing on Vhembe FM and Makhado FM in Limpopo's Vhembe District, it draws on media development and sustainability theories to analyse the negative impacts the pandemic has had on these local media organisations. The research sheds light on the challenges these community outlets face in maintaining their operations and the strategies they've implemented to tackle these issues. Community media are essential in addressing inequalities by providing a voice for marginalised groups and filling the information gaps often overlooked by mainstream media, which is vital for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 10, aimed at reducing inequalities both within countries and globally. A qualitative case study method was employed to conduct this research, gathering insights through detailed interviews and document reviews. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the findings, results, and recommendations were made.

Keywords: Community Radio, COVID-19, Media Development Theory, Media Sustainability Model.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

This chapter provides an in-depth look at the study in relation to existing literature, offering valuable insights into the main research focus. The problem statement highlights the challenges the researcher aims to address through this study, while the rationale explains the motivations for choosing this particular area of research. Additionally, the chapter clarifies the overall aim of the study, which represents the primary goal the researcher wants to achieve. It details specific objectives that outline the targets the research seeks to accomplish to meet that main aim. These objectives also shape the research questions the study plans to investigate. Furthermore, the importance of the study is examined, emphasising its potential impact on the current body of knowledge and the future of the field. The chapter includes a brief outline and summary that capture the key points discussed.

1.2. Background to the Study

Community media is crucial in fostering democracy, especially in South Africa, where it played a significant role in nation-building and reconciliation after apartheid. These media outlets give a voice to marginalised communities that often go unrepresented in mainstream media. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which first appeared in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, has had a profound impact on the media landscape, including community media. This global health crisis has led to major socio-economic shifts that have negatively affected various sectors, including media organisations. As noted by Camus (2020), the pandemic has brought about significant changes in journalism, altering both its operations and funding strategies. Additionally, it's worth noting that the media industry, especially print publications, has been facing challenges to survive due to external pressures, such as the growing prominence of digital media technologies (Chikova, 2016).

Scholars have historically shown little interest in community media and alternative media. This has led to slower theoretical development in community media studies than in actual practice, as Howley (2013) noted. However, in the early 21st century, community media has grown significantly as a subject of analysis within media and cultural studies. This has prompted scholars to explore issues such as media ownership concentration, cultural globalisation,

representational politics, and the public sphere, as highlighted by Fuller (2011). The limited number of studies on community media underscores the necessity of research in this area, aiming to contribute to the existing body of knowledge. This research is crucial for the sustainability of community media, which serves as a neutral platform for communication among marginalised communities that often receive minimal coverage from mainstream media outlets.

Santos and Mare (2021) pointed out that in South Africa, several print publications ceased operations, while the leading public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation, laid off more than 600 workers in 2021. The newspaper industry has been in free fall, and COVID-19 has worsened the rapid decline, painting a gloomy picture of its future (Pago, 2020). Radcliffe (2020) noted that since the pandemic outbreak, 36,000 journalists in the USA were laid off in the first six months of the pandemic, or had taken a pay cut, or at the very least, were furloughed and in their study which closely looked at Sub-Saharan Africa, Posetti, Bell and Brown (2020) highlighted that most of their respondents knew of drastic revenue losses during the COVID-19 period, where in some cases, revenue has plummeted by as much as 75 per cent owing to the grave implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Between March and August 2020, the journalism sector encountered major obstacles to its sustainability. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a drop in advertising revenue for numerous regional and community newspapers across Australia. This resulted in operational inefficiencies and the inability to sustain their printing operations. Furthermore, large digital platforms refusing to pay for content exacerbated the situation, leading to a broken business model for many newspapers. This situation was described as a series of unexpected and unprecedented challenges ("black swans") rather than a single crisis event.

It has become common to start any discussion of community media by acknowledging that it is often associated with a variety of related terms, such as "alternative," "citizen," "grassroots," "independent," and "radical." These terms are used to identify and analyse media created by individuals and groups outside the dominant media industries (Carpentier, Lie and Servaes 2003; Forde 2011; Howley 2005). Based on the principles of access to modern communication channels (such as print, broadcast, and digital media) and participation in media production and management, community media provides a platform for artists, activists, trade unionists, political dissidents, as well as racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities, and others whose voices,

interests, and perspectives are often marginalised in mainstream media discourse (Howley 2013).

Community media studies have been underdeveloped because scholars need to recognise the importance of community media in today's media culture (Howley, 2013). Most media and communication studies focus on major media organisations' institutions, texts, and audiences, while the significant cultural production associated with community media remains unnoticed and unexamined (Howley, 2013). Reader and Hatcher (2012) also argue that "community journalism" is neglected even though journalism is practised at the community level, likening it to the bottom of an iceberg.

Community media play a crucial role in promoting media democratisation by providing a platform for the public to discuss and debate important issues. They focus on giving resources and technical skills to express minority cultures and dissenting opinions, amplifying the voices of groups whose perspectives are often overlooked by mainstream media. By granting regular people access to communication channels, community media foster democratic communication by enabling multiple forms of communication within and between communities (Howley, 2013; Day, 2008).

During the Ebola outbreak in West Africa and throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, various studies have highlighted how impactful radio has been in shaping social behaviours to help reduce the spread of infectious diseases. Research conducted with nine radio stations across Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania found that radio programming significantly contributed to behavioural changes that helped limit virus transmission. This evidence underscores the important role radio plays as a key tool in improving public health outcomes during disease outbreaks.

A study by Orwenjo (2020) further established that most stations are either vernacular or community radio stations. Their audience is mainly homogenous, bound by ethnic, regional, or group interests. With this kind of penetration, "vernacular and community radio have become critically important tools for disseminating information on COVID-19" (Gross, Zheng and Liu et al., 2020). They have also promoted social and behavioural change within communities and demystify rumours, myths, and disinformation regarding the virus (Samuelsson et al., 2020). More of the information and clarification were distributed through community radio programs in the digitalised era (Scheepers, Venkitachalam and Gibbs 2004),

which makes the study significant as it covers the sustainability of community media. This is important because community media still plays substantial roles in marginalised communities that barely receive mainstream media attention and representation.

The first evidence of COVID-19's impact on media revenues and the news sector's viability has been provided by anecdotes from media industry representatives, newspaper articles, surveys, and research. These sources have revealed that the demand for quality news has increased almost everywhere worldwide, while commercial advertisers have visibly decreased their spending. This has deprived news media of significant revenues (World Economic Forum 2020; KPMG 2020; The Economist 2020). This has signalled that community media will need help to survive and compete with digital and commercial media. As a result, those who rely on community media will need help finding representation and accessing information.

A survey by DNR across six countries found that people increasingly turn to traditional news sources like television and spend more time on social media (Newman et al., 2020). However, news providers are struggling to make money from this increased attention. Many industries, such as trade and services, travel, and mobility, which used to be major advertisers, face financial difficulties, leading to a significant decrease in advertising revenues. According to the Euromedia Research Group (2020), in March 2020, during the first lockdown in Europe, media markets saw 30 to 50 per cent of advertising revenue disappear.

The text below highlights that journalism was considered an “essential or emergency service” in Southern Africa, and journalists were classified as “essential workers” (UNESCO: 2020). However, due to sources being reluctant to be interviewed, news gathering and verification of information for credibility were affected. To address this challenge, various measures were taken, including implementing flexible working arrangements, providing personal protective equipment for staff, distributing media products through digital channels, supplying data bundles and devices for staff, exploring alternative funding models, and using conferencing platforms to conduct interviews.

The emergency measures mentioned occurred within a context characterised by underdeveloped digital and telecommunications infrastructure, intermittent power cuts in South Africa and Zimbabwe, high data costs, limited access to personal computers, and economic recession (Santos and Mare, 2021). The COVID-19-induced changes in news work are interconnected with ongoing shifts in journalism practice and commercial priorities. Media

economics were also affected as advertisers reduced their marketing budgets due to the pandemic's impact on industries, leading to decreased revenue. This transformation necessitated investments in new technologies. Community media, especially community radio stations, encountered difficulties as they depended significantly on donations instead of advertising, highlighting their commitment to serving the community rather than pursuing profit. This research examines how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the viability of community radio stations in South Africa, focusing on Vhembe FM and Makhado FM in the Limpopo province as case studies.

1.3. Problem statement

The COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected all types of businesses, including those in the media sector. Economic difficulties were exacerbated by budget reductions, leading to a drop in both advertising income and donations. Community media, which depends heavily on these donations and advertising, faced significant challenges. Despite this, there have been few investigations into how the pandemic has influenced the sustainability of community media and the political economy of media, particularly in developing nations like South Africa (Baral, 2020; Krippahl, 2020; Bara et al., 2021). Consequently, this research aimed to explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sustainability of community radio stations in South Africa, providing insights into its impact on the political economy of community radio in the context of a developing country.

1.4. Rationale of the study

South Africa is inhabited by various communities that need representation in the media so their perspectives can be acknowledged. Community media plays a crucial role in amplifying the voices of the majority, often overlooked by mainstream media. The coronavirus pandemic had a profound effect on every sector of the economy, including distribution, production, and healthcare, creating significant challenges that had to be addressed. This research is important as it highlights the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on community media in South Africa, to identify necessary interventions to ensure the continuity of this vital sector.

1.5. Aim of the study

The research sought to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the sustainability of community radio stations in South Africa, focusing on Vhembe FM and Makhado FM as case studies.

1.6. Objectives of the study

- To identify challenges the selected community radio stations faced during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa.
- To evaluate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on specific community radio stations in South Africa.
- To establish coping strategies, selected community radio stations were employed during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.

1.7. Research Questions

- What impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have on the selected community radio stations in South Africa?
- What challenges did the selected community radio stations face during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa?
- How did the two selected community radio stations cope with the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic?

1.8. Significance of the study

The study could help community media better prepare for future crises or emergencies. Additionally, it could contribute to the existing literature on the impact of pandemics on business enterprises in general and media organisations in particular. The role of community media in reducing inequality is crucial. By providing a platform for marginalised voices, community media help address the information and representation gaps that mainstream media often overlook. This is essential for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 10, which focuses on reducing inequalities within and among countries.

1.9. Chapter Outline

This chapter presented a concise contextual overview and introduction to the research, highlighting its underlying motivation. The chapter also delineated the research issue, the

justification for the study, the goals, the research objectives, the questions guiding the research, and the importance of the study.

1.10. Conclusion

This chapter offered a contextual foundation for the research issue by illustrating how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the political economies of media across various regions globally and the related sustainability challenges they encountered. It detailed the study's objectives, the problem statement, research goals, research inquiries, the rationale of the study, and its importance. It highlighted that the pandemic's effects, along with pre-existing issues tied to the rise of digital media and external economic pressures, have posed significant questions regarding the future viability of community media in South Africa. This further emphasises the necessity for research that contributes to understanding vital for preserving the sustainability of such an essential institution for underrepresented communities in mainstream media. The upcoming chapter presents the literature pertinent to the study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a review of literature related to the research, aiming to identify existing knowledge gaps and highlight the necessity of the current study. The literature review was guided by the research objectives and questions, concentrating on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on community media and the strategies community media adopted to cope during a pandemic. This method helped establish the research problem and gain a deeper understanding of the study's focal points. Furthermore, the chapter explores theories and concepts that inform the research, particularly media and development theory, as well as the media sustainability model.

2.2. Understanding Community Media

Community radio is part of the broader group of channels known as 'community,' 'citizens,' 'radical,' or 'alternative' media (Dutta, 2011; Rodríguez, 2011). According to the study, community media are non-profit, owned by or accountable to the community they aim to serve, and are open to participation in program production and management by listeners (Fox, 2019; Buckley, 2011; Dutta, 2011; Rodríguez, 2011). Community media is understood differently from one country to another, but the term has similarities across various definitions. Hintz and Coyer (2010:275) argue that despite the varying definitions, the concept generally refers to self-organised, participatory, non-profit media that cater to local geographic communities or communities of interest.

The term "community media" refers to small media organisations or broadcasting projects on radio, television, and print that serve the needs of a specific geographical community (Parliament of South Africa, 2018:4). Scholars in this field (Howley, 2005; Jankowski, 2003; Rennie, 2006) define community media as media designed to enable individuals to share their stories and engage in the conversations necessary for their self-directed development as citizens. Buckley (2013:11) and Fairbairn (2009) agree that community media is centred on principles such as ownership, community participation, community service, and independence. In this case, the focus is on Vhembe FM, which caters specifically to the Vhembe community, and Makhado FM, which represents the community of interest.

The driving force behind operating community media is passion and a conviction that the media can change people's lives (Buckley, 2011). The sense of realisation by ordinary people to control and manage their development process is essential in community-initiated media forms. In other words, community media should be a site for the self-affirmation of grassroots people (Ayedun-Aluma, 2011). This means that community media should voice the developmental goals and inspiration of the people in Makhado and Vhembe. Dutta (2011) notes that a critical feature of community media is that its content must differ from mainstream media and advocate for social change. In this case, community media's role was to represent and advocate for marginalised community needs and preventative measures that speak to the local community.

The new Republic of South Africa, emerging from apartheid, established a commitment to community broadcasting with the passage of the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act of 1993 (Tacchi, 2002). Community broadcasting services are defined in the Broadcasting Act number 4 of 1999 as those that promote ownership and oversight by individuals from historically marginalised groups, operated by a non-profit organisation for non-commercial objectives, cater to a specific community, foster participation from community members or individuals linked to it in the selection and delivery of broadcast programs; and may receive funding through donations, grants, sponsorships, advertising, membership fees, or a combination of these sources (Tacchi, 2002). A significant challenge lies in funding, particularly for stations that serve communities facing severe economic underdevelopment. Another critical concern is community engagement—understanding what community radio can offer and how it can be managed transparently is recognised as an issue by all stakeholders involved in the community radio discourse in South Africa (Tleane, 2001).

In their research, Moyo (2010) and Jallof (2012) examined the media's role in development processes. They highlighted that community radio stations often serve as a vital link between the government and citizens, facilitating the delivery of essential services and the implementation of development initiatives. Additionally, Bosch (2003) and Manyozo (2011) emphasised the significance of effective communication at all levels for such developments to occur, underscoring the valuable role of community radio stations in engaging listeners in substantive discussions. This promotes transformation at various levels. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, community media was essential in supplying communities with vital information to remain safe and informed about the virus and the government's actions for those affected.

2.3. The Role of Community media during the COVID-19 pandemic

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the media played a key role in informing and entertaining the public (Jones, 2020). While mainstream outlets covered the global rise of the virus, local broadcasters focused on sharing essential information about government mandates and health precautions. Movie streaming services offered much-needed entertainment, but at the same time, certain fringe social media platforms spread conspiracy theories and false information regarding COVID-19 (Ephraim, 2020). Community media also proved essential, delivering COVID-19 updates in languages that local populations were comfortable with, which was affirmed by several researchers. Specifically, community radio stations were particularly effective at supporting their audiences with timely information during the crisis (Hugelius et al., 2016; North and Dearman, 2010). This approach significantly improved the understanding of the pandemic's seriousness among communities in Makhado and Vhembe, equipping them with accurate knowledge about the virus's spread.

Community radio stations across the globe have played a significant role in the development and advancement of the societies they serve, acting as a voice for marginalised groups. According to media scholars, this form of broadcasting provides communities with a platform to address the issues that directly impact them. Typically, community radio stations engage their listeners in developing program content and collecting stories and information from local sources to support their developmental objectives. Their primary motivation stems from the necessity to bridge the gaps in mainstream media, furnish information for political and cultural decision-making, and facilitate community participation in decision-making processes. Stations such as Makhado FM and Vhembe FM champion the interests of their communities, offering a platform for expressing concerns and participating in their respective communities' political and developmental processes.

Community radio in South Africa, particularly those that cater to black communities (i.e., the 'historically disadvantaged'), faces significant funding challenges and is often fighting for survival, as noted by Tacchi (2003). There is minimal government funding available for these services, typically in the form of initial support or funding for specific program initiatives, such as AIDS awareness, which makes ongoing core funding consistently problematic, according to Tacchi (2003). This situation is exacerbated by the challenges of volunteering in a nation that lacks sufficient welfare systems and has exceptionally high unemployment rates in the most disadvantaged communities, leading to a critical overall scenario, as mentioned by Tacchi

(2003). Makhado FM and Vhembe FM also represent the interests of previously disadvantaged black populations, as these regions predominantly consist of black community residents who may encounter similar funding obstacles, as referenced by the scholars above.

Community radio is vital for encouraging participatory health communication, especially among marginalised groups (Srivastava, 2020; Sharma and Kashyap, 2015; Tyali and Tomaselli, 2015; Medeossi, Stadler and Delany-Moretlwe, 2014). In Ghana, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ghana Community Radio Network (GCRN) teamed up with UNICEF to launch the Community Radio Facilitating Children's and Youth Wellbeing Amid COVID-19 (CR-CYW-COVID-19) initiative, which aimed to address community needs quickly (GCRN, 2020). This program was designed to empower local stakeholders through a participatory approach, enabling knowledge sharing to help tackle COVID-19 (GCRN, 2020). Rodríguez (2011) suggests that further investigation into the potential of community radio for fostering social change is necessary, highlighting an important area for future research. Furthermore, Fox (2019) emphasises the need for studies on community radio to critically examine the participatory nature and the possible outcomes to better understand both the strengths and limitations of this medium.

Community language radio plays a significant role in Australia's diverse multicultural landscape. It serves as a platform for creative expression and fosters vital social connections for community members, contributing to broader social cohesion (Forde et al., 2009; Kwong, 2012). With approximately 450 community radio stations spanning metropolitan, regional, and remote areas of Australia, 131 of these stations broadcast entirely or partially in languages other than English (National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council 2018). This provides listeners from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds an alternative to mainstream media, which, apart from the Special Broadcasting Service, has been criticised for its lack of diversity in representation and intended reach (Media Diversity Australia, 2020). Similarly, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) faces challenges in ensuring complete representation, while local community media effectively communicates with the target audience in their language, as seen with Vhembe FM and Makhado FM using Tshivenda, the local language for their audience.

Research on community language radio indicates that it plays a significant role in enhancing the quality of life for migrant communities. It helps preserve their language and cultural practices (Krause, 2020) while promoting social unity, integration, and local development

(Lewis 2008; Purkarthofer et al., 2008; Maina 2013). Additionally, it provides marginalised groups with a platform to express themselves and represent their interests (van Vuuren, 2006; Milan, 2017; Order, 2017). The medium also addresses mental health concerns by fostering feelings of belonging, pride, and self-worth (Milan, 2017; Forde et al., 2009; Order, 2017). Furthermore, it encourages creativity (Krause, 2020) and facilitates connections among listeners, presenters, and the broader community (Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, 2019; Forde et al., 2009; Krause, 2020; Meadows and Foxwell 2011; Oliveira, 2013; Order, 2017).

Despite its importance, there is limited information available on the effectiveness of community radio in promoting health information. While there is extensive literature on radio broadcasting, particularly commercial radio, focusing on its socioeconomic and political contributions such as race and identity (Bosch, 2018; Smith, 2021), service delivery (Day, Cornell, and Malherbe, 2021), religion (Haron, 2021; Tyali, 2021), economic development (Nkoala and Matsilele, 2021), democracy, and citizenship (Bosch, 2018; Chiumbu and Motsaathebe, 2021), only a small body of work has examined community radio. While helpful, the existing studies have primarily focused on community radio's utility as an alternative or counterhegemonic medium for populations on the margins of society (Onyenankeya and Salawu, 2022) and as an essential tool for information dissemination to rural women (Fombad and Jiyane, 2019), revealing significant gaps and leaving many questions unanswered. This highlights the significance of this study as it contributes to the existing literature on community media.

Cultural affinity plays a crucial role in the popularity of community radio. Listeners can relate to the radio presenters as they are members of the same community who understand and accurately represent the cultural nuances that resonate with the audience's own experiences (Mesquita et al., 2016). This cultural closeness fosters a stronger sense of connection and belonging among the listeners (Meadows, 2009; Meadows et al., 2005). According to Petersen, Fiske, and Schubert (2019), nurturing the psychological and social aspects of the local community underpins the audience's attachment to community radio. This is particularly significant for community radio stations that broadcast in indigenous languages, as it provides ethnic groups with the linguistic means to share their narratives, thereby challenging prevailing narratives and representations (Onyenankeya and Salawu, 2022).

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, radio in all its forms has played a crucial role in keeping listeners informed, entertained, and connected on a global scale (Genetu, 2020; Patel, 2020; Stokel-Walker, 2020). In addition to national broadcasters, local and community radio stations have proven to be reliable sources of accurate and timely information for their audiences, particularly in the developing world (Anon. 2020; Manning, 2020; McCarthy, 2020; Schwellnus, 2020). Community radio stations, in particular, have been instrumental in conveying information about COVID-19 to marginalised communities due to their direct access and influence (Ephraim, 2020). This is especially pertinent in countries such as South Africa, where inequality persists, and rural areas are often overlooked by mainstream media.

In March 2020, community radio stations in India and Bangladesh began broadcasting essential public health information in local dialects and languages. This approach aimed to reach rural and remote areas, providing access to crucial information for residents who might otherwise struggle to obtain it (Dowerah 2020; Kumar, 2020, Lal, 2020; Stokel-Walker, 2020). Similarly, local radio across the African continent has effectively communicated up-to-date information to people who may be illiterate or speak local languages (Anon. 2020; Genetu, 2020). Additionally, community radio has played a vital role in dispelling misinformation about COVID-19 (Anon. 2020; Ephraim, 2020; Mishra, 2020).

Extensive media coverage has revealed that initial communication about COVID-19 by government health authorities in Australia needed to have adequately met the diverse needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Wild et al. 2021). Wild et al. (2021) identified communication failures in three key areas: (1) translating and contextualising information, (2) collaborating with communities and leaders to test and circulate translations, and (3) using appropriate methods to distribute information, such as community language media and social media. To better provide timely and accurate information to multilingual communities during crises, ethnic broadcasters in Australia sought to be recognised as ‘essential services’ by the government, allowing them to continue working generally during mandated lockdowns (Anon, 2020). Furthermore, news articles have highlighted how radio stations offer social, personal, and emotional connections to listeners who may feel isolated during lockdowns (Anon 2020; McCarthy 2020; Patel 2020; Warner 2020).

The social connections and sense of companionship provided by radio (Meadows and Foxwell, 2011; Order 2017) have played a vital role in the context of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders. As members of migrant communities already present a higher risk of having feelings of

isolation and disconnectedness (Forde, Meadows and Foxwell, 2010), and these feelings may be intensified during pandemic lockdowns (Ammar et al., 2020; Brooks, Webster, Smith et al., 2020), it follows that the consistency of radio programmes and presenters may be of critical importance. Radio has indeed endeavoured to reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness amongst its listeners by continuing to broadcast where possible, providing its listeners with the opportunity to hear the voices of familiar presenters addressing them in their languages and thus helping listeners to feel connected to the presenter as well as the broader community.

2.4. Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Community Media

The pandemic has caused significant economic damage to newsrooms globally. According to a report by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), the financial crisis caused by COVID-19 was a top priority for most media industry employees. Three out of four respondents prioritised the continued operation of their publications during the pandemic (Mulcahey, 2020). Maintaining their public service mandate during such economically challenging times may be difficult for community media. The report further noted that about eight out of every ten respondents with knowledge about their media houses' financial standing reported at least a 50% reduction in revenue (ibid).

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about major economic difficulties globally, affecting numerous sectors, including the media industry. It has shaken up the business landscape, leading to declines in stock markets and the closure of many businesses, pushing the world economy close to a recession (Jamil and Appiah-Adjei, 2020; Powell, 2020). In addition to these challenges, media outlets are struggling to maintain their operations due to declining revenue brought on by the pandemic. The virus and the subsequent lockdowns in various countries have had a profound impact on the media, resulting in the shutdown of some outlets and reductions in staff salaries. The advertising sector, which is crucial for media companies, has faced particularly severe challenges as a result of the economic fallout (Rhodes, 2014). A specific example is Nzhelele FM in the Vhembe district, which halted its operations shortly after the lockdown began. This situation prompts an examination of how COVID-19 has affected community media and its future viability.

In many corporate organisations, advertising is often the first casualty of budget cuts during challenging times (Rajan, 2020). When businesses slowed down due to COVID-19, they reduced or completely halted their media advertising, significantly impacting the cash flow of

media houses. This had a detrimental effect on the financial stability of community media, as they heavily rely on donations and sponsorships for their operations. Some entities, including the government, needed help in settling payments for already commissioned advertisements (Walulya and Moges, 2022). For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic, the Kenyan government owed various media houses \$2.8 million (Chelagat, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional media outlets were notably vulnerable, facing substantial decreases in newspaper sales and advertising revenue due to prolonged lockdown measures. This led to some media houses restructuring their operations or closing down completely. For example, the Vision Group in Uganda, which is partly government-owned, halted the publication of three regional newspapers in local languages (Orumuri, Etop, and Rupiny) and laid off the staff associated with these publications (Muhindo, 2020). A privately owned weekly, The Observer, was also compelled to suspend its operations (Kigambo, 2020). Beyond these closures, media organisations have been forced to lay off staff and reduce salaries for the remaining workforce.

In Uganda, the New Vision has implemented salary cuts of up to 60% for its staff, while its competitor, the Daily Monitor, has also reduced staff salaries by up to 35% (Kyeyune, 2020). It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected media enterprises globally, particularly in Africa, with the transition to online platforms and declining newspaper sales posing financial challenges for many Organisations. Community media, reliant on volunteers, need more flexibility in applying salary reductions, especially in the face of competition for talent from commercial and public mainstream media. Some newspapers in Uganda were previously sustained by subsidies from media outlets such as the New Vision newspaper (Muhindo, 2020). In Uganda, fewer than 30% of newspapers and online publications are financially self-sustaining (Kigambo, 2020). The advent of COVID-19 has further exacerbated the already delicate financial situation for numerous media Organisations in Uganda and Ethiopia.

After the outbreak of the virus, many Southern African governments implemented strict measures to control its spread. These actions included nationwide lockdowns, both mandatory and voluntary quarantines, restrictions on travel, and social distancing protocols (SADC, 2020). Researchers (Mare, 2020; Olsen, Pickard, and Westlund, 2020; Pickard, 2020) argue that the pandemic has significantly impacted how news is produced, distributed, and consumed and the financial models supporting it. The adverse effects of COVID-19 on the financial

structures of modern journalism have created what some are calling an "existential crisis" for various news organisations (Olsen et al., 2020: 673). This situation is worsened by shifting patterns in how people consume news, the overwhelming control of online advertising by major platform companies, and a decline in traditional advertising revenues. As noted by Olsen et al., (2020, 674), "The COVID-19 pandemic is simultaneously crippling the advertising business that plays such a vital role in funding news production," which could jeopardise the ability of the news media to provide independent reporting (UNESCO, 2020).

In numerous countries, the decline in private advertising revenue has led media organisations to rely heavily on government advertising (Santos and Mare, 2021). Consequently, some media entities have become susceptible to "media barons" who exploit their acquisitions for political leverage, often to the detriment of public interest news coverage, including community media. Santos and Mare (2021) note that in South Africa, several print publications have ceased operations, and the South African Broadcasting Corporation laid off over 600 workers in 2021. It is crucial to emphasise that news work in Southern Africa is a formal, structured, and interactive practice, primarily conducted within material settings such as newsrooms and face-to-face interactions (Santos and Mare, 2021). However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted these established organisational and professional factors. Some newsrooms have endeavoured to modernise their operations by embracing mobile and digital-first strategies, with varying degrees of success.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, newsrooms in Southern Africa were compelled to adopt various adaptive strategies due to the changing environment. These strategies included implementing flexible working arrangements, providing personal protective equipment for staff, distributing media products through digital channels, offering data bundles and devices for staff, exploring alternative funding models, and using conferencing platforms to conduct interviews (Santos and Mare, 2021). For community media needing more financial support, staying competitive and sustainable seemed nearly unattainable. This posed a significant challenge for community media with constrained budgets, significantly as businesses and other institutions promptly reduced advertising and donation budgets, upon which community media heavily relied. These emergency measures occurred within a context marked by underdeveloped digital and telecommunications infrastructure, intermittent power cuts in South Africa and Zimbabwe, high data costs, limited access to personal computers, and an economic recession (Santos and Mare, 2021).

2.5. Challenges Faced by Media Organisations during the COVID 19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on the economic operations of various businesses, particularly in the media sector. Previous studies have underscored the severe crisis facing the conventional news media business model, which depends heavily on income from advertisers and readers. This crisis threatens not only the quality of journalism but also the diversity within the media landscape (Martens et al., 2018; The Cairncross Review, 2019; Parcu, 2019; Helberger, 2019). Recent findings from the European Union's Media Pluralism Monitor 2020 reveal a notable increase in the risks to the sustainability of media organisations in recent years. Additionally, revenues from print newspapers continued to decline across EU countries in 2018 and 2019 (Brogi and Carlini, 2020).

The first evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on media revenues and the news sector's viability has been provided by anecdotes from representatives of the media industry, newspaper articles, as well as surveys and research. They have revealed, on the one hand, that demand for quality news has increased almost everywhere in the world, while, on the other hand, commercial advertisers have visibly decreased their spending, thereby depriving news media of important revenues (World Economic Forum, 2020; KPMG, 2020; The Economist, 2020). The crisis may have a long-term effect on democracy because if media organisations other than government-funded ones are closed, the critical voice may be weakened. Community media will be the first and one that will suffer the most, with African countries relying heavily on them to continue being the voice of disadvantaged communities since mainstream media hardly cater to their needs.

Community media rely heavily on donations and sponsorship, which are often the first areas to face budget cuts during challenging economic times. This has resulted in a decline in the quality of news. For example, during the first month of worldwide lockdowns in March 2020, there was a 36% increase in the time spent watching news coverage, while the rise in newspaper readership was minimal (Statista, 2020).

To meet the heightened demand for news, journalists have been working longer hours, producing more articles, and reporting on key developments despite restrictions on movement. Journalistic activity was deemed essential and was not halted during the lockdown (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021). A survey conducted in six countries by DNR indicates a surge in

consumption of traditional news sources, such as television, and increased time spent on social media (Newman, 2020).

News providers grappled with the challenge of capitalising on the increased attention they were receiving. Several industries, such as trade and services, as well as travel and mobility, which were previously core advertisers, faced financial hardships, resulting in a significant drop in total advertising revenues. According to the Euromedia Research Group (2020), during the first European lockdown in March 2020, approximately 30 to 50 per cent of advertising revenue evaporated from the media markets. Globally, eMarketer estimated that total media ad spending decreased by 4.5% in 2020 (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021). Traditional media experienced a more substantial decline of 12.3%, while digital advertisement spending increased by 4.5% (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2021). The shift of advertising revenue towards digital platforms hit traditional media hardest, particularly community media, impacting their day-to-day operations.

In Africa, COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the livelihoods of numerous journalists. For instance, in Nigeria, journalists at Dandal Kura International, an independent radio network earning about \$100 per month, faced salary reductions, with a third of the radio's staff forced to stay at home with an 80% pay cut (Krippahl, 2020). In South Africa, several media houses were compelled to implement salary cuts, while others closed down completely (Krippahl, 2020). In Tanzania, Mwananchi Communications, the publisher of three newspapers, including The Citizen, Mwananchi, and Mwanasport, laid off 50 staff members in April 2020 at the peak of COVID-19. Meanwhile, in Kenya, 300 journalists lost their jobs, and others had to accept pay cuts as high as 50% in 2020, largely because of COVID-19 (Chelagat, 2020).

2.6. Declining Advertising and Media Sustainability during the Pandemic

The print media heavily relies on advertising as its primary source of income to sustain itself. The economic impact of COVID-19 has been particularly harsh, especially as the industry was already grappling with the decline in print media consumption. The reduction in advertising budgets by businesses during challenging times has further compounded the difficulties faced by print media. Lockdown and quarantine policies have been implemented to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus by minimising interactions among people. Various countries, including Indonesia, have enforced policies to suspend all activities, including those involving human press institutions such as print media.

The media, bolstered by advertising, is vital in promoting economic growth and social integration within society (Bara et al., 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected the advertising support necessary for the financial health and survival of community media organisations. An interview with the editor-in-chief of Mohganews reveals that numerous agencies and companies have halted their advertising activities, which has impacted the flow of information through media advertisements (Bara et al., 2021). The enforcement of government restrictions has had financial repercussions for print media, which has relied on face-to-face interactions for newspaper sales and billboard advertising (Bara et al., 2021). With individuals confined to their homes and maintaining social distancing, the industry experienced a drop in revenue. For instance, a representative from the Mandailing Natal Bureau noted in a discussion that the pandemic has caused the cost of advertising spaces in daily print media to decline from the usual Rp. 2,700,000 (Bara et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial effect on how people consume media and how much money is spent on advertising, largely shaped by government policies (Bara et al., 2021). Traditionally, print media attracts the most advertising dollars, followed by radio and television, with variations depending on social factors (Bara et al., 2021). Moreover, an interview with the editor-in-chief of Mohganews highlighted that advertising efforts in print by local companies and the district government in Mandailing Natal saw a decline during the pandemic, primarily due to public and institutional calls for social distancing.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on the media industry (Bara et al., 2021). Even prior to the pandemic, the sector was already struggling with falling advertising revenues as global tech giants began to dominate the digital advertising space (Bara et al., 2021). This situation has compelled media organisations to implement severe budget cuts, which in turn has affected the livelihoods of many employees, including journalists (Bara et al., 2021). In today's digital landscape, print media journalism faces the crucial challenge of ensuring the accuracy of information while quickly distributing it online. To remain viable, traditional media must build and maintain credibility by providing accurate and thoroughly verified content. This credibility is established through the professionalism of journalists who adhere to ethical guidelines and present information. Jarvis, referenced in Sugiya (2012), argued that the media industry, especially print media, needs to evolve and adjust its strategies to avoid being side-lined.

2.7. Impact of COVID-19 on Newsgathering and Dissemination

The media plays a crucial role in delivering information about pandemics and health risks, as highlighted by Denecke and Nejdil in 2009. The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the need for precise and verified news coverage. Moreover, the rise of misinformation and fake news on social media has increased the urgency for thorough fact-checking and reliable reporting, according to Mututwa and Matsilele in 2020. The various regulations and restrictions linked to the pandemic have complicated the media's ability to gather and verify information, which in turn affects the credibility of the news being reported. Throughout this period, the media has acted as a vital link between public officials, experts, and the general populace (Christians et al., in 2010; Perreault and Perreault in 2021). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and in line with World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines, news organisations have worked hard to maintain journalistic integrity and offer accurate updates to the public. Journalists have had to adapt to new standards and practices to ensure they deliver dependable information while upholding ethical considerations despite the pandemic's challenges.

Recent research on COVID-19 indicates that pandemics like COVID-19 have had an impact on how the New York Times frames news stories (Fatima, 2020). Traditional journalism practices had to evolve, affecting both the quality and ethical considerations of reporting (Matsilele, Tshuma and Msimanga, 2022). As a result of the pandemic, editorial meetings, where journalists present their stories to the editor, were discontinued. A senior reporter at the Chronicle noted that the Organisation reduced the number of journalists physically working from the newsroom (Matsilele et al., 2022). Additionally, the sports, entertainment, and features desk were instructed to work from home, while news reporters were assigned rotating on-duty schedules (Matsilele et al., 2022).

In response to the pandemic in South Africa, the government enforced restrictions that permitted only essential workers, including those in the media, to move around for work (De Villiers, Cerbone and Van Zijl, 2020). These restrictions also significantly impacted the media's operations, as gatherings were no longer allowed, and the public was prohibited from meeting with others. Consequently, news gathering by the media was disrupted, and government officials' media briefings were conducted remotely, with limited opportunities for the media to ask questions. This situation had a direct impact on the credibility of the media. It's important to note that the media plays a crucial role in presenting news in a way that

resonates with the audience. The news carries substantial influence and leaves a lasting impression that what is being presented is accurate (Castillo, Mendoza, and Poblete, 2011).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Arena Holdings, publisher of Business Day, Sowetan, Sunday Times, and Times Live, had to adapt its journalism practices (Matsilele et al., 2022). According to one of the editors interviewed, working from home became the most significant change brought about by the lockdown. This adjustment required staff to embrace virtual meetings, video conferences, and remote teamwork. Additionally, reporters, videographers, and photographers had to prioritise health and safety by using personal protective equipment and following hygiene guidelines to prevent the spread of the coronavirus (Matsilele et al., 2022). The pandemic prompted a shift in journalism practices due to social distancing protocols, making it difficult for journalists to interact with sources in person. This gave rise to a trend known as "armchair journalism," where reporters increasingly relied on second-hand information without first-hand assessment of the situations they were covering. Consequently, this type of journalism was perceived as lacking depth and comprehensive analysis (Matsilele et al., 2022).

The role of mass media, including community radio, has become increasingly vital in global health promotion strategies (Thomas et al., 2018; Wilkinson, 2016). However, due to various restrictions, the media encounter challenges in effectively verifying news, gathering information, and questioning health officials or political leaders. Research indicates that the media plays a pivotal role in achieving public health outcomes, such as public education, changing attitudes, and influencing health behaviour (Ahmad and Murad, 2020; Mheidly and Fares, 2020; Wakefield, Loken, Hornik, 2010), ultimately contributing to social sustainability (De Las Heras-Pedrosa, Rando-Cueto, Jambrino-Maldonado, 2020). Nonetheless, the inability of the media to gather credible news can pave the way for misinformation, potentially leading to panic and social instability.

Moreover, in addition to raising awareness about public health risks, the media, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, can play a pivotal role in mobilising public response during a public health crisis, such as a pandemic (Adebisi, Rabe and Lucero-Prisno, 2021; Ajilore, Atakiti, Onyenakeya, 2017; Olaoye and Onyenakeya, 2023). Additionally, the media has proven to be effective in countering disinformation, dispelling myths, and addressing misconceptions that often hinder the acceptance of health messages (Ajilore et al., 2018).

2.8. Fake News, Misinformation and Disinformation

Credibility is a vital aspect of media because it influences how people perceive and understand reality. The COVID-19 pandemic made it challenging to gather and confirm news, which allowed citizen journalism to flourish and spread unverified information. According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), the proliferation of fake news is linked to the rise of social media, which disrupts the production and sharing of quality news due to the absence of traditional gatekeeping. The media play a crucial role in combating fake news and misinformation surrounding COVID-19 by offering accurate, reliable information about the virus, including its symptoms, causes, and prevention methods (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2022). However, as more citizens engage with journalism, community media have become increasingly important in keeping rural areas informed and promoting stability and health education during the pandemic while addressing misinformation.

The prevalence of fake news and misinformation on social media is a significant concern. Social media platforms have made it exceptionally easy to disseminate deceptive and manipulative information. According to Gottfried and Shearer (2016), as cited in Pennycook and Rand (2019), social media has emerged as a major source of misinformation. Community media plays a crucial role in combating fake news by offering accurate information and updates that directly impact the communities they serve. The devastating impact of COVID-19, its global reach, plummeting oil prices, stock market instability, the widespread cancellation of political, sports, and business events, flight cancellations, restricted travel, and government directives to mitigate the virus have stirred widespread panic among populations (Sadhna and Hawaldar, 2020; Mejia, Ticona, Rodriguez-Alarcon et al., 2020).

The media serves as a crucial tool in quelling tension and unease among citizens, especially in diverse and unequal societies like South Africa. Access to accurate, credible information is paramount, which highlights the significance of community media in areas that mainstream media often neglects. During the pandemic, it is imperative for both social and traditional media to provide trustworthy information. The nature of news significantly influences public perceptions, shaping their beliefs and thoughts. Therefore, it is essential for the media to deliver accurate and truthful information as it greatly impacts the community (Mustafaraj and Metaxas, 2017; Zubiaga, Aker, Bontcheva et al., 2018).

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic took centre stage in the news, with nearly every media outlet focusing on related coverage. Regular updates on infection rates, fatalities, active cases, and recoveries have given the public a sense of hope that efforts to save lives are ongoing and that anxiety can be alleviated (Mejia et al., 2020; Pandey, 2020). However, it's important to acknowledge that not all news reports are reliable (Ruchansky, Seo, Liu, 2017; Zubiaga et al., 2018). This highlights the media's crucial responsibility to foster understanding and security in communities of all types. The trustworthiness of news often hinges on the discussions taking place within a community (Mustafaraj and Metaxas, 2017). Therefore, community media must consistently provide accurate updates about the pandemic to keep the public well-informed. Furthermore, it's vital to remain vigilant against fake news, which is a purposeful act of misinformation (Aldwairi and Alwahedi, 2018; Mosinzova, Fabian, Ermakova et al., 2019).

The community plays an essential role in how news is received and understood, with active and trustworthy local media being key in keeping people informed about issues that impact them, like the effects of COVID-19. This community includes various social networks, groups, and friendships (Guille, Hacid, Favre, et al., 2013; Ruchansky et al., 2017). Unlike print media, which tends to have verified and evidence-based information, online platforms can disseminate news much more quickly, but often without proper verification, leading to a proliferation of misinformation. The rise of fake news on social media has also impacted community media, which often struggles with sourcing to confirm information, resulting in unverified news stories and a loss of credibility among local media outlets.

Several elements influence the reliability of news. Credible news relies heavily on trustworthy sources for the collection of data, facts, and statistics (Castillo et al., 2011; Nguyen, Nguyen, and Thai, 2012; Wang, 2017). The courage of journalists and the efficacy of the media platform are vital in accurately conveying information. As audiences tend to prefer credible news in their media consumption (Yuan, 2011), social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp have a significant effect on their viewers (Boukes and Vliegenthart, 2017). Consequently, reliable media organisations need to engage more actively on social media to fight against the spread of fake news; while commercial and public media have been more proactive in this regard, community media has not kept pace. Moreover, using content from press conferences as a direct communication tool with the public on social networks is an area that hasn't been fully exploited. In light of the rise of fake news, the National Police has released guidelines aimed at preventing the public from falling for misinformation, outlining

key examples of false news dissemination (Fernandez-Torres, Almansa-Martinez, and Chamizo-Sanchez 2021). Interestingly, in South Africa, there were discussions about the use of sensationalism in news reporting as a strategy to combat fake news, along with proposals to monitor social media activities.

The media plays a vital role in shaping public discourse and addressing important issues. It is essential to keep the public informed about various matters that impact the country. When reporting, the media should strive for impartiality and accuracy, as this promotes transparency and holds parties accountable (Woldemaryam, 2020). Community media is particularly crucial for rural areas, where residents rely on it for news about local issues that may not receive attention from larger public and private media outlets. Maintaining the credibility of these community media sources is important, as they are often the main avenue for information in these regions. For instance, in Australia, many community and regional newspapers have either stopped printing or transitioned to online formats. In Hong Kong, media entrepreneur Jimmy Lay encouraged people to subscribe to Apple Daily to help it survive during times of intense political pressure and the ongoing pandemic (Trappel, 2020).

According to a report released by UNESCO in April 2020, COVID-19 misinformation has a severe impact on global medical understanding and societal well-being. The report introduced the term "disinfodemic" to describe the heightened level of toxicity and fatality associated with this specific type of misinformation. The consequences of the "disinfodemic" are far-reaching, potentially leading to fatal outcomes as individuals are misled and unable to adopt scientifically proven preventive measures, resulting in complacency or reliance on false remedies (UNESCO, 2020). During times of crisis, the credibility of media, especially community media, is crucial. Community media serve as a vital communication platform for underrepresented communities, highlighting the need to sustain their credibility beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. This sustenance is essential to ensure democratic representation and the inclusion of diverse voices in the public sphere.

The political economy theory is embraced by those who are sceptical of how traditional news outlets cover the coronavirus, often favouring supportive, nationalistic, and patriotic tones in their reporting. This includes backing government actions and urging the public to follow 'stay at home' directives (Deuze, 2020). This theory also suggests a broader media reluctance to properly address the (increasing) societal disparities amplified by the shift to online communication (in education, work, and social life). There's an expectation for people to wait

at home until the economy restarts while they still have financial obligations like mortgage, electricity, car, and media payments (Deuze, 2020). On the other hand, the global expansion and professionalisation of journalism, facilitated by international media companies and the networks of multinational corporations, expose us to a wide array of perspectives and information sources (Deuze, 2020).

Interestingly, the political economy-inspired critiques of journalism often expect news workers to be dispassionate, to report the facts objectively (without corporate or political influence), and to serve the public – ignoring the difficult dual role reporters fulfil as both observers and participants in this pandemic, experiencing trauma, frustration, and heartbreak as much as covering it (Deuze, 2020). The political economy is part of the reason media get lost in the financial implications of things and can potentially lose their credibility, especially because their objectivity and accuracy of information are affected by who controls the economy. During the pandemic lockdown and the economic challenges faced by the global market with companies reducing their marketing, advertising budget, and donation or sponsorships, community media found it difficult to survive as they rely heavily on donations and sponsorship for sustainability. This compromised their credibility during such financial difficulties where advertising and donation revenue is being reduced.

2.9. Coping Strategies of Community Media during COVID-19

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, community media, like other organisations, faced significant challenges and had to develop coping strategies to survive. This literature review aims to examine studies by various scholars on the coping strategies employed by different media entities. Research shows that COVID-19 has fundamentally changed how news is produced, distributed, and consumed (Lee, 2021). News Organisations struggled to cover the health crisis during the lockdown (Kim, 2020), leading to changes in their operational processes and the implementation of teleworking (Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés, 2020). This was a common challenge across the media industry, including Community media. Additionally, studies indicate that newsrooms allocated most of their resources to covering the health emergency and encountered various difficulties due to the situation (Casero-Ripollés, 2021).

During the crisis, digital technology played a pivotal role by facilitating virtual social connections and teleworking opportunities (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021). The pandemic resulted in the closure or downsizing of news Organisations that struggled to cope with the economic

slowdown, jeopardising their continuity at a time when journalism is critical in combatting misinformation (Alam et al., 2020). Additionally, the funding model for community media was affected, leading to the closure of community radio stations like Nzhelele FM during COVID-19. This underscores the importance of documenting the coping strategies utilised by those who successfully navigated the economic challenges posed by the pandemic.

The widespread sharing of content on social media (Park, Biddix, and Park, 2021), often without proper oversight, has resulted in an uptick in the battle against misinformation (Silva-Rodríguez, 2021). In response, community media in the remote rural areas of South Africa have played a crucial role in providing accurate and credible information. The repercussions of the pandemic have also affected the business model of many Spanish news outlets, with a decrease in advertising revenue (Corredor-Lanas et al., 2021). Donations, which are relied upon by community media, were among the first to be cut as companies sought ways to navigate economic challenges. Community media have not been exempted from this crisis, and they have been instrumental in areas that receive minimal or no coverage from mainstream media. Funding models that depend on donations and have little reliance on advertising require innovation and technological transformation to continue providing communities with credible information, especially as misinformation continues to proliferate.

Additionally, studies have demonstrated that the pandemic led to an increased demand for news in both traditional and digital media as people sought reliable information to alleviate anxiety and better comprehend the situation (García-Avilés et al., 2024). This presented an opportunity for alternative media, such as community outlets, to disseminate information to underserved communities with limited media access. As a result, journalism gained heightened significance in society. However, despite the growing importance of journalistic content to audiences, it did not always translate to direct financial benefits for the media outlets, leading to a decline in their primary revenue sources (Casero-Ripollés, 2021). This financial strain has had a direct impact on the sustainability of media Organisations, creating a paradox in an unprecedented crisis (Casero-Ripollés, 2021). Yet, previous crises have shown that such events can foster innovation and the adoption of new practices (García-Avilés et al., 2024). The effects of COVID-19 have extended beyond the health crisis and have presented social and economic challenges for journalism, paving the way for new approaches and transformations (Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). This was exacerbated by rapid technological advancements that have enabled instant and continuous access to information, intensifying competition. However,

community media outlets continue to play critical roles in areas that receive minimal media coverage.

Studies also show that the pandemic highlighted the necessity for citizens everywhere to be able to access and act on accurate information from pluralistic and diverse media sources (McKew, 2020). According to studies during a crisis, “news becomes a ‘need to have’ service for those who previously perceived it as a ‘nice to have’ service”, and in the US, many publishers tend to drop their paywalls, leading to de-commodification of news coverage of the virus (Olsen and Westlund, 2020). Along with the challenges presented by the spread of mis and disinformation, demand for truthful and comprehensive reporting grew significantly. Community media are the most trusted media outlets that communities rely heavily on for accurate, trustworthy information, especially in rural areas where community media is the only means of communication that represents their direct interest.

Research indicates that there was a significant increase in mobile app and news website traffic worldwide. Media consumption saw a dramatic rise, particularly in traditional and online TV on pay-per-view platforms (Túñez-López et al., 2020). This surge created an opportunity for social media platforms in community media to supply information and generate revenue through advertising opportunities, capitalising on the increased traffic without limited space. It also allowed them to target younger audiences who are most active in the online social media space. The pandemic highlighted the importance of accurate and reliable information when lives are at risk. Studies revealed that in many countries, audiences turned to trusted brands and had greater confidence in the media in general (Newman, 2021). Community media plays a crucial role in rural South African communities where inequality still exists, and access to accurate information is a privilege; it has become the most trusted form of communication in rural South Africa.

Research indicates that innovation in journalism generally benefits news organisations and their audiences (García-Avilés et al., 2018a) and has the potential to enhance individuals' lives by steering clear of merely embracing new technologies for the sake of it (Küng, 2017). Nevertheless, some experts have voiced concerns about the increasing focus on innovation, urging a more thoughtful consideration of what change truly means and warning against adopting technology without discernment (Peters and Carlson, 2019). Pavlik (2013: 183) describes journalism innovation as the pursuit of fresh methods in media practices and formats while upholding a dedication to quality and ethical principles. This perspective asserts that true

innovation in journalism involves more than just using the latest technology or continuing to employ outdated innovative products that no longer offer significant value (García-Avilés et al., 2024). For instance, radio stations like 947 FM have evolved by establishing YouTube channels, and community radio stations can similarly leverage these platforms to reach a broader audience, particularly the younger demographic. This approach can also generate opportunities for reviews and foster greater audience engagement.

Innovation in journalism, as defined by Dogruel (2013), requires demonstrated economic or social impact. Factors contributing to journalism innovation, as identified by Steensen (2009), include editorial autonomy, professional culture, management role, technology relevance, and individual input. The sustainability of community media relies on innovation to enhance accessibility and revenue, allowing for the delivery of accurate information in the face of widespread misinformation in citizen journalism. Embracing technology, such as community radio, will expand the audience, particularly among tech-savvy youth, for the distribution of public service information and advocacy in historically disadvantaged rural areas of South Africa (Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés, 2020).

Research on news innovation highlights the potential it offers organisations to enhance their operations, engage with audiences more effectively, and add value to their services (Belair-Gagnon and Steinke, 2020). For instance, the use of platforms like Zoom and Teams has allowed news organisations to connect with various leaders for expert interviews, which helps in fighting misinformation and boosting the credibility of the media. Additionally, many radio stations have started using voice notes on WhatsApp during broadcasts to interact with listeners. According to studies, embracing innovation can lead news organisations toward sustainability and help them expand their role in public service by launching new services and solutions (Bruns, 2014). Community media, especially YouTube channels, are becoming increasingly important for generating essential revenue, particularly when traditional income sources like advertising are dwindling. Newsrooms are also adopting new technologies to improve their internal processes (Kosterich and Weber, 2019) and enhance collaborative editorial work (Carson and Farhall, 2018), which ultimately leads to better creative outcomes (Malmelin and Virta, 2016). Furthermore, collaborative initiatives, where community radio stations pool resources and share content, as demonstrated by Energy FM and Choice FM, further emphasise this teamwork-driven model.

Recent studies highlight how crucial it is for organisations to foster integration, as it enhances coordination and collaboration among news professionals (Westlund, Krumsvik, and Lewis, 2020). Moreover, technological advancements enable journalistic teams that are spread out across different locations to undertake creative projects (Koivula, Villi, and Sivunen, 2020). According to Perreault and Perreault (2021), a comprehensive understanding of communication processes is linked to being aware of the production environment. During crises, like natural disasters or pandemics, journalists find themselves in a setting where their work both impacts and is impacted by external factors. This scenario also relates to new journalistic methods, including data journalism, social media, and predictive journalism, which can present challenges for traditional journalists who may not have sufficient resources in these situations (García-Avilés et al., 2024).

Numerous media organisations worldwide are taking proactive measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic and cater to the information needs of their audiences through innovative approaches (Perreault and Perreault, 2021). This proactive and innovative approach is essential for their economic and physical survival, particularly given the challenge of acquiring consistent and clear information (Perreault and Perreault, 2021). For example, local media in the US has emerged as a primary source of COVID-19 news (Pew Research Center, 2020), prompting local outlets to find ways to support their communities, especially those historically marginalised groups disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Wenzell and Crittenden, 2021). A similar role was observed in community media in rural South Africa, where they provided tailored statistics to communities instead of relying solely on national statistics, thereby helping to minimise panic and misinformation. Studies on daily journalism practices suggest that there is increasing evidence that the crisis has changed the routines of journalists, requiring them to quickly adapt to new schedules, master remote production tools, experiment with new content formats, and take on new responsibilities that were not part of their daily lives before the pandemic (Trifonova Price, and Antonova, 2024).

Digital capabilities expanded to meet audience needs and respond to demand. Researchers agree that the changes to journalism practice brought about by the pandemic are likely to endure beyond a temporary readjustment (Trifonova Price and Antonova, 2024). Studies show that innovative practices have often involved combining resources, increasing cooperation between media organisations (both new and legacy) and citizens, and drawing on each other's ideas and experiences to sustain survival and serve the needs of communities worldwide (Trifonova Price

and Antonova, 2024). Community media operations and programming allow for flexibility in community participation, which builds a sense of ownership and transparency, thus gaining the trust of the public. Community media is regarded as the most trusted communication tool amongst communities in times of crisis, and it is vital for its sustainability. However, innovative practices and flexibility are overshadowed by the challenges and limited resources faced by journalism before the COVID-19 pandemic. The health crisis served as a reminder that these problems are real and have been undermining the journalism process in various ways (Perreault and Perreault, 2021).

Research indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the media industry's shift to digital platforms due to decreasing offline media revenues (Dralega and Napakol, 2022). While the internet was once seen as a threat to traditional media, it is now seen as essential for its survival (Ha and Fang, 2012). Traditional media organisations have adapted by investing in digital platforms to support journalists and media personnel working remotely during the lockdown (Mugisha, 2020). For example, in South Africa, online audiences have increased by up to 76%, while print media sales have declined (Dralega and Napakol, 2022). Establishing home studios for community media, such as community radio, presents financial challenges, but journalists can record segments for news reports and utilise online platforms to attract local advertisers and generate revenue.

2.10. Theoretical Framework

2.10.1 Media Development Theory

The media and development theory aims to elucidate the normative behaviours of the press in developing countries (Asamah, 2011). Okunna (1999) formulated this theory to mirror the predominant use of media for developmental objectives in developing nations. A fundamental tenet of this theory is the call for a departure from the hands-off approach of the press, which characterises the libertarian theory of the press. In the context of the development media theory, the press is not viewed as a fourth estate of the realm (Odhiambo, 1991); instead, the journalist is considered both a professional and a civil servant. Community Media serves as a liberated Media institution whose commitment is to address developmental issues affecting Rural-community or marginised communities which barely receive mainstream media coverage. Ng'wanakilala (1981) argued that the development media theory offers greater potential for the liberation of the masses than a libertarian press. According to his perspective, if a government is committed to the welfare of its people, public ownership and control of the media would be

the most conducive path for progress. Similarly, Oneko (1996) contended that "commercial newspapers primarily focus on profit-making and are unlikely to cater to small linguistic groups by publishing newspapers. The government will need to intervene to address this gap" (Mytton, 1983). Community media offer community participation in the operational and development of such institutions through the Annual General Meetings, in which the community members are invited as the custodians of the Community Radio to give inputs into the direction of the media institution, and the staff and volunteers are of the same communities it represents.

Public ownership in community media means that the public in a community is represented by its community media and has the right to participate in its management and development. According to McQuail (1984), development media theory suggests that the media should collaborate with the government to support national development programs and give priority to national culture and language. Community media plays a crucial role by reporting on social development programs aimed at the local community it represents and by promoting the culture and language of those communities. For example, Vhembe FM and Makhado primarily use Tshivenda as their mode of communication to cater to Tshivenda-speaking people and promote the culture through language, music, and other activities.

The media should be prepared to relinquish its freedom if the nation's interest, as defined by its leaders, necessitates it. Collective interest should take precedence over individual ones, and the state should have the authority to limit, censor, control, own, or operate the media as it deems necessary in the interest of the nation. During COVID-19, the media had to prioritise national interests over their own, adhering to restrictions that may have constrained their freedom for the greater good of the nation. The theory in this study underscores the significance of community media in a developing country like South Africa in the post-apartheid era and the democratic responsibility it bears as the voice of the voiceless, even in the challenging period of the pandemic. This theory enhances our comprehension of how media organisations can maintain competitiveness during difficult times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring adaptability to sustain competitiveness while fulfilling their mandate of community service through information sharing and representation.

2.10.2. Media Sustainability Model

According to Brundtland, Khalid, Agnelli et al. (1987: 08), "sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future

generations to meet their own needs." Community media should be developed in a way that addresses the current community needs and those of future generations. The technological advancements adopted by the media should be integral to the future of community media, enabling them to thrive, compete, and stay relevant to their community.

The concept of sustainability is integral to the corporate landscape, encompassing the principle of a triple bottom line. This refers to evaluating a company's social, environmental, and financial performance, all crucial to sustainable development (Cooper, 2002). Community media must strive to fulfil the basic needs of all individuals and provide opportunities for economic and social advancement. Sustainable development also entails the ability of development projects to sustain themselves organisationally and financially. An initiative is deemed sustainable if, in addition to environmental protection and opportunity creation, it can maintain its activities and generate its own financial resources once donor contributions cease (Bread for the World, 1993).

Community media should strive to become self-sustainable, capable of generating revenue to sustain their operations even in challenging times when donations and sponsorships are scarce. The Media Sustainability model, a relevant theory to this study, focuses on the media's ability to remain viable during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This model also sheds light on the significance of a sustainable political economy for community media to ensure their long-term success and development. During the pandemic, community media faced operational challenges due to government-imposed restrictions in South Africa. Additionally, the global economic impact of the pandemic led to a decrease in advertising and donations, which are crucial for the sustainability of community media, further jeopardising their operations.

2.11. Conclusion

This section offered a summary of prior research concerning how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected community media. It explored the historical context and key roles of community media, as well as the challenges to its sustainability brought about by the pandemic and potential strategies for fostering sustainability. The review also pointed out areas where research is lacking. Furthermore, it analysed the theoretical framework used in the study, which included the media development theory and the Media Sustainability Model, highlighting their importance. The following section will delve into the research design and methodology, covering aspects like research methods, participant population, sampling procedures, data

collection techniques, data analysis, and the ethical considerations taken into account in the study.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Paradigm

The study underpinned the interpretive research paradigm, which views reality as socially constructed and emphasizes understanding the subjective meanings individuals attach to their experiences (Creswell, 2013). Similar to positivism, interpretivism has its historical roots in anthropology. However, it is in opposition to positivism, so is sometimes known as anti-positivism (Flick, 2014). In line with the study, which seeks to understand participants' experiences with regard to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on community radio stations in the case of Vhembe FM and Makhado FM in Vhembe district, it may vary based on their individual experiences. In this case, the study seeks to gain an understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic according to individual experiences of the two station's staff, volunteers and management.

Interpretivism argues that truth and knowledge are subjective, as well as culturally and historically situated, based on people's experiences and their understanding of them (Ryan, 2018). Researchers can never be completely separate from their own values and beliefs, so these will inevitably inform the way in which they collect, interpret and analyse data (Ryan, 2018). Interpretivism has its origins in the 18th century with the philosopher Giambattista Vico, who opposed Descartes, arguing that there is a distinction between the natural and social world and more importantly, that social organisation and social experiences form our perceptions of reality and truth (Costelloe, 2016).

3.2. Research Design

The research employed a qualitative case study design, which seeks to understand social or human issues by utilising various methodological traditions (Isaacs, 2014). This method focuses on creating a complete and detailed overview, analysing language, sharing insights from participants, and conducting the research in real-world settings. Qualitative research relies on observing and interpreting how people perceive different events, offering a glimpse into their thoughts within a natural context (Khan, 2014; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Neuman, 2011). By using a qualitative case study, researchers can delve into a phenomenon within its context and draw on multiple data sources, allowing for a richer understanding of the topic from various viewpoints (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

The existing literature on case study research is often viewed as "basic and limited" (Yin, 1994) when compared to experimental or quasi-experimental approaches. Unlike these methods, case studies do not necessitate a minimum number of cases or random selection. For this particular project, a descriptive case study was employed to explore in detail how the COVID-19 pandemic affected community media. Descriptive case studies require the researcher to establish a descriptive theory from the outset to avoid potential complications later (Yin, 1993). This approach encourages the formulation of hypotheses regarding cause-and-effect relationships and allows for an in-depth analysis of the specific case being examined. The process of selecting cases and defining the unit of analysis follows procedures similar to those of other case study types (Yin, 1994). A descriptive case study is appropriate for this research, as it enables a thorough presentation of the data collected, leading to a deeper understanding and more reliable findings.

3.3. Research Methods

The study employs qualitative research methods, a holistic approach centred on discovery. Qualitative research is described as an unfolding model that occurs in a natural setting, allowing the researcher to develop a detailed understanding through direct involvement in the experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2016). A key characteristic of qualitative research is the investigation of social phenomena from the participant's viewpoint. This type of research is best suited for analysing content rather than numerical data. The study focuses on exploratory content data, investigating the impact, challenges, and strategies employed during the COVID-19 pandemic on the survival of community media.

3.4. Population and Sampling Procedures

3.4.1. Population

The population is the entire group we need to gather information from (Banerjee and Chaudhury, 2016). Scholars also describe the population as a complete set of characteristics. In this study, the population refers to all community radio stations in the Vhembe district. The goal is to gain an understanding of the events during the pandemic, as well as the challenges, impacts, and interventions implemented to overcome them (Abutabenjeh and Jaradat, 2018).

3.4.2. Sampling

Sampling is a method used to select units (e.g., individuals, organisations) from a population of interest. This process allows us to draw conclusions about the entire population based on the study of the sample (Williams, 2002). The sample in this study consists of two community radio stations, Vhembe FM and Makhado FM, located in the Vhembe region. The sample is divided based on the responsibilities within the organisation, distinguishing between staff members and management, as their challenges vary depending on their roles. The participants in the study are representatives from the management and staff levels. The management group includes a station manager from Vhembe FM and Makhado FM, a content manager, and a marketing manager, while the staff group consists of presenters, news readers, and producers from both Vhembe FM and Makhado FM.

The staff members provided detailed insights into the impact of COVID-19 on their daily operations, particularly in creating and sharing content for the Makhado and Vhembe communities. The group included two managers from Makhado FM and Vhembe FM, one marketing representative from each station, two presenters from each station, two news reporters from each station, and one producer from each station, totalling 14 staff members, with seven from each station. The management team discussed the pandemic's financial and operational impacts, while the producers, presenters, and news reporters shared information on how COVID-19 has affected content creation, news gathering, interviews, and fact verification.

3.5. Data collection methods

The research involved conducting in-depth interviews with selected members from two community radio stations, Vhembe FM and Makhado FM. These interviews allowed participants to provide detailed responses, ensuring the accuracy and relevance of the collected data. The sample included two managers, one marketing representative, two presenters, two news reporters, and one producer from each station, totalling 14 participants (seven from each station). The data collection process encountered several challenges, particularly regarding participant accessibility. Many individuals involved in the study had left the stations for better opportunities, which complicated efforts to reach them. Additionally, scheduling appointments required careful communication regarding the interview's purpose and assurances about the participants' rights, which are upheld by the ethical standards to which researchers are

committed. Moreover, the logistical aspects of data collection involved travel costs for in-person meetings, further complicated by the likelihood of appointment cancellations. This process demands both patience and dedication, as well as effective interviewing skills, to encourage participants to share their insights and experiences freely and voluntarily.

3.6. In-depth interviews

In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research method that focuses on conducting detailed individual interviews with a select number of participants to gain insight into their views regarding a particular concept, program, or situation (Neale and Boyce, 2006). For example, the researcher held interviews with participants, staff, and other stakeholders to assess how COVID-19 affected the productivity, credibility, and sustainability of community media. These interviews often help provide context to other types of data, such as outcome measurements, creating a fuller picture of what happened in the program and the reasons behind it (Neale and Boyce, 2006). For instance, if there is evidence of an uptick in youth visiting a clinic, in-depth interviews might uncover that a young person mentioned their visit was influenced by a new sign promoting extended hours specifically for youth. Furthermore, talking to a clinic staff member could shed light on how welcoming the clinic is for younger visitors.

In-depth interviews are the preferred data collection method when the researcher aims to gain a better in-depth understanding of participants' unique perspectives rather than a generalised understanding of a phenomenon. An in-depth interview is often described as a form of conversation (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). However, there are some obvious differences between normal conversation and in-depth interviews - their objectives and the roles of researcher and participant are quite different (Kvale, 1996; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). In reality, although a good in-depth interview appears naturalistic, it bears little resemblance to everyday conversation. The first key feature of the in-depth interview is that it is intended to combine structure with flexibility. The in-depth format also permits the researcher to explore fully all the factors that underpin participants' answers: reasons, feelings, opinions, and beliefs (Legard, Keegan, and Ward, 2003). This furnishes the explanatory evidence that is an important element of qualitative research. The interview is generative in the sense that new knowledge or thoughts are likely, at some stage, to be created. The extent to which this is so may vary depending on the research questions, but the participants will likely, at some point, direct themselves or be directed by the researcher (Legard et al., 2003).

The data collection process was complex as the researcher faced many challenges, especially with the accessibility of the participants, particularly those who may no longer work at the stations; as the study, focus is past COVID-19 pandemic events, staff and volunteers of community radio stations moved on to other opportunities. The other challenge was to convince and set appointments with the participants, which required careful explanation of what the interviews were about, what they were for, and their rights as participants, which were protected by the ethical code that a researcher must comply with. The data collection process comes with the cost implications of having to travel to meet with participants, which run deep considering the appointment's possibility of cancellation. This process requires patience and dedication, with respect to the participants and interview skills, to open up the participant's will to share their knowledge and experience freely and voluntarily.

3.7. Document analysis

The researcher carried out a thorough analysis of various documents, such as policy papers, program schedules, public financial statements, and articles or interviews relating to sustainability issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal was to gain a complete understanding of how the pandemic affected community radio stations. This included looking at changes in policy regulations, both internal and from ICASA, that might have been introduced during this time. By reviewing program schedules, the researcher aimed to uncover how the pandemic influenced scheduling and its subsequent effects on the productivity and sustainability of community radio stations. Furthermore, looking into the financial records offered an important understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the sustainability of community media.

3.8. Data analysis

The in-depth interviews were conducted in a relaxed setting to encourage participants to share their thoughts openly. These interviews could take place either online or in person, utilising platforms like Microsoft Teams, depending on the participants' availability. Each session lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. In addition to the interviews, document analysis was conducted, which included reviewing ICASA policy, internal policy changes, program schedules, and financial records. This approach offered a well-rounded view of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected community media. Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the information

gathered from the interviews and document analysis. This method helps to identify, analyse, and report key themes within the data, as described by (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Qualitative data analysis involves thoroughly describing, classifying, and connecting various phenomena to the concepts developed by the researcher. The first step is to clearly define the phenomena being investigated. The researcher must also interpret and explain the data effectively. This makes it necessary to create a conceptual framework and organise the data accordingly. After that, it is possible to develop and relate different concepts (Dey, 1993). The process of data analysis is crucial in qualitative research and has a significant impact on the results of each study (Flick, 2014). To gather data, participants were interviewed, and their responses were categorised based on their roles within the organisation—management, production, presentation, or news reporting. This categorisation facilitated a more accurate analysis, allowing for a deeper understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected community media at various levels and influenced the organisation's ability to serve its target audience.

3.9. Ethical considerations

This study involves human subjects and adheres to all ethical considerations, including confidentiality, privacy, consent, voluntary participation, and the acknowledgement of third-party materials. The data presented is based on facts to ensure accuracy and uphold the quality, ethics, and credibility of the research and other sources. The research strictly follows all necessary and authorised ethical procedures and academic research regulations.

3.10. Conclusion

This research utilised a qualitative case study approach to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected community radio stations within the Vhembe district. Through methods like in-depth interviews and document analysis, the study sought to gain a thorough understanding of the challenges these stations encountered and the strategies they adopted during the pandemic. The descriptive style of the case study allowed for an in-depth look at the specific impacts on both management and staff, shedding light on issues such as financial sustainability, content creation, and overall operations.

The research underscored the significance of employing qualitative methods to capture the nuanced experiences of individuals in their natural contexts, providing a comprehensive

understanding of the phenomenon. Thematic analysis facilitated the identification and interpretation of patterns within the data, leading to a deeper understanding of the complex impact of the pandemic. The research process was carefully guided by ethical considerations to ensure the integrity and credibility of the findings. Overall, the study emphasises the resilience and adaptability of community media in the face of unprecedented challenges, highlighting the crucial role these stations play in disseminating information and maintaining community cohesion during crises.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the research methodology employed in this study. This chapter presents data gathered through in-depth interviews with purposively selected employees of Makhado FM and Vhembe FM community radio stations, which are the focus of this study. The interviews were conducted with station managers, marketing managers, producers, presenters, and news readers to gain insights into the challenges faced by the two stations during the COVID-19 pandemic from July 5th, 2024, to September 15th, 2024, at the preferred locations of the participants. Telephonic interviews were conducted with participants who were not available for the in-person interviews. An interview guide was used to direct the responses within the scope of the study objectives. A voice recorder was also used, and consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews commenced. Themes are developed to address the study's objectives, and the data are presented according to those themes as a guide to the study.

These objectives are:

- To identify challenges the selected community radio stations faced during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa.
- To evaluate how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the chosen community radio stations in South Africa.
- To establish coping strategies employed by selected community radio stations during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.

Findings pertaining to each of these findings are presented in greater detail below.

4.2 CHALLENGES FACED BY COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Research objective 1 sought **“To identify challenges faced by the selected community radio stations during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa”**.

Findings from the study reveal that Makhado FM and Vhembe FM faced several challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include financial constraints, scheduling and

workforce issues, regulatory and operational limitations, audience engagement and accessibility difficulties, health and wellness challenges, content production challenges, and technical and infrastructure challenges. The pandemic instigated significant changes in media operations and audience engagement, as evidenced by the collected data.

4.2.1. Financial Constraints

One major challenge faced by Makhado FM and Vhembe FM relates to financial constraints. With businesses closed and essential services being the only ones operating, most businesses saw little value in continuing to invest in marketing or advertising due to the uncertain future. This was due to a lack of clarity on when the pandemic would end and what the "new normal" would look like.

The major issue was the loss of income, which significantly impacted their revenue streams. The decline in income was directly linked to business closures during the pandemic, resulting in reduced sponsorship and advertising opportunities. The quotations below highlight how funding became an obstacle in the operations of the two community radio stations.

The challenges we encountered stemmed from the community radio stations' dependence on advertisements for financial backing. With most businesses closed, advertising came to a halt, and the absence of events to promote compounded our financial struggles. The reduction in advertisements resulted in decreased revenue, while the closure of businesses also affected donations, further straining our finances (Participant 11 Makhado FM).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous businesses closed, resulting in reduced advertising and financial backing for the station. With these businesses shut down, there was no demand for advertising or show sponsorship. These businesses were facing financial challenges and were unable to advertise, impacting the station's advertising revenue (Participant 14 Vhembe FM).

Participant 1, who is from Vhembe FM, believes that the pandemic has presented a challenge of increased expenses for community media without a corresponding increase in station revenue. Furthermore, they expressed concern that if the lockdown persisted, the station would struggle to cover its expenses, including salaries.

There was no money coming in for community radio stations at the time. The pandemic lockdown dragged on, leading to increased expenses without any revenue. If it had continued for much longer, many of us would have been at risk of not getting paid at all (Participant 1 Vhembe FM).

Similarly, Participant 7 from Makhado FM highlighted how their radio station's financial situation deteriorated due to the pandemic:

*Our financial stability was greatly affected by the pandemic. We struggled to operate as usual due to the increased expenses and decreased income. We had to continue paying staff, including presenters and cleaning and gardening personnel, and cover the costs of transmitter services. Our financial situation changed from positive to negative as we spent more than we earned. Our income decreased while our expenses rose, creating a challenging financial situation for us **(Participant 7 Makhado FM)**.*

Although most broadcasters were badly affected by the pandemic finance-wise, community radio stations were more affected because, unlike commercial radio stations or public service radio stations, which have alternative sources of funding, community radio stations heavily depend on advertising and sponsorship to cover their operational expenses. This sentiment was expressed by some of the participants and their views are expressed below:

*The pandemic presented a financial challenge for us as a community radio station. We do not have a large budget and mainly rely on advertising to cover our daily operational expenses and staff payments **(Participant 3 Vhembe FM)**.*

*Community media outlets have suffered from government funding due to their dependence on sponsorships and advertising for financial support **(Participant 8 Makhado FM)**.*

One participant even acknowledged the management team for keeping the station operational during the financial challenges posed by the pandemic. They believed that the team might have had to use personal funds to ensure continuous broadcasting. This highlights the financial precarity of community radio stations.

*Financial sustainability was badly affected. I have to give credit management because, if the financial burden were on me, I would have given up and written letters to the staff saying that I could not continue because the situation was dire. I believe that they sacrificed their own money to keep the station running, which most of us would not have been able to do **(Participant 4 Vhembe FM)**.*

The uncertainty surrounding customer spending also resulted in a decline in sponsorship and advertising, as businesses lacked the assurance that their advertisements would lead to improved financial prospects. This was particularly evident due to the regulatory travel limitations implemented during the pandemic to curb the spread of the virus. A participant from Vhembe FM explained this by saying:

Obtaining funding was a major hurdle during that time. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly lowered revenue for numerous businesses, leading to shutdowns and a general sense of uncertainty regarding expenditures. Additionally, travel restrictions added to the challenges faced (Participant 9 Vhembe FM).

This sentiment was echoed by a statement from one of the participants, who indicated an expectation of an immediate increase in customer buying power once an advertisement is played. However, this contradicted reality, leading the advertiser to express their financial difficulties as the reasons for withdrawing their advertisements. This had financial implications on the ability of the community media to generate enough revenue to cover their overhead expenses, which include operational costs such as salaries and Transmission fees, just to name a few.

The pandemic made it difficult for business owners to understand the impact of advertising. Some expected immediate results when their adverts aired on the radio, leading to a reduction in advertising. When we communicated with business owners, they expressed that they were also struggling and unable to invest in advertising at the moment (Participant 10 Makhado FM).

The quotations above underscore the necessity for community media to broaden their revenue streams beyond advertising, donations, and sponsorships. Exploring alternative means of income generation and optimising existing sources is essential to build resilience against future challenges. Both Vhembe FM and Makhado FM acknowledged that the closure of business operations led to a decline in financial support from businesses in terms of advertising, donations, and sponsorship. Vhembe FM's response revealed that limitations in travel had affected consumer buying patterns, while Makhado FM's response indicated that some of the businesses, they previously advertised for were struggling due to the lockdown. This limited their source of revenue to sustain the operation, delivering local news, and financial obligations to keep the stations fully operational with continuous representation of the marginalised communities they represent.

4.2.2. Schedule and Workforce Challenges

The scheduling and workforce challenges stemmed from economic changes, restrictions, and transport regulations. These factors posed difficulties for community media workers and volunteers in commuting between home and work, impacting the content they could produce. Consequently, there was an adjustment in their schedule and work plan.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we encountered several challenges. One major issue was staff absenteeism due to the lockdown, resulting in other staff members having to work overtime. The specific challenge I faced was working overtime and not getting enough rest. Since I lived close to the station, I was always on call to fill in for anyone who might not make it to work. We have about seven shows a day, so if three presenters were unavailable, I had to fill in for them, leaving me with very little time to rest **(Participant 3 Vhembe FM).**

The statement above points to scheduling and workforce management challenges arising from staff absenteeism due to regulations. Consequently, other staff members have had to work overtime, leading to increased workloads and inadequate rest for those covering for absent colleagues. This has placed additional strain on those with easy access to the station and additional expenses for overtime payment at a period in which they were seeking to reduce cost as they have limited revenue as advertisers have reduced their marketing and advertising. This also had implications on the quality of content in the show as the ones covering may not necessarily be prepared for the show and are tired from their previous shows.

As a result, adjustments were made to the programming and scheduling to limit the spread of the virus. This, in turn, affected the working hours of the staff and volunteers, presenting another challenge that they had to adapt to maintain operational sustainability.

Our programming and scheduling were affected due to the need to limit the risk of spreading the virus. For instance, instead of reading the news for six hours straight, I had to be the sole newsreader for the entire day. This was done to ensure that each newsreader had enough time to rest and protect themselves from the virus **(Participant 5 Vhembe FM).**

We faced a manpower shortage, which led to adjustments in our programs. We had to be flexible and adapt to the challenges we encountered. For example, our presenters typically worked for 3 hours. Still, due to unforeseen circumstances, such as a colleague being unable to come in due to COVID-19, we had to request them to work extended shifts of 6 or 9 hours **(Participant 7 Makhado FM).**

As part of our efforts to reduce the risk of infection at the community radio station, access to the studio is currently limited to one person at a time. This had an implication on the structure of shows with co-presenters breaking the conversational element within the content which opens up for audience participation. Consequently, interviews were conducted remotely via telephone to prevent the spread of the virus. Participants stated that:

Our main challenge was that we could no longer share the studio like we usually do when working. Previously, we had three news readers per day. However, due to the pandemic, we were forced to reduce this to one news reader per day to minimise the

*risk of spreading the virus. Each newsreader was assigned a week to work (**Participant 10 Makhado FM**).*

*Scheduling was challenging because we had to limit the number of people allowed in the studio then. This meant that anyone working with the presenter had to do so remotely, as the producer could not be in the studio. Producing content took a lot more time than usual, and we had to make convincing arguments for why someone needed to be in the studio for an interview or to be part of the show (**Participant 13 Makhado FM**).*

Despite having permits for essential workers, the community radio workforce still struggled with travelling, as private transportation was lacking, public transport had curfews, and roadblocks were a regular occurrence at the time. Limited access to the studio presented a challenge for the community media.

*There was not much to say, but transportation was limited to specific times, which often caused people to arrive late for work. However, as community media workers, we had permits that allowed us to travel. At work, our focus shifted to reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic (**Participant 8 Makhado FM**).*

*Scheduling was challenging because we had to limit the number of people allowed in the studio then. This meant that anyone working with the presenter had to do so remotely, as the producer could not be in the studio. Producing content took a lot more time than usual, and we had to make convincing arguments for why someone needed to be in the studio for an interview or to be part of the show (**Participant 13 Makhado FM**).*

The challenges mentioned above required adjustments to the schedule and workforce to limit the spread of the virus and ensure continuous broadcasting. This includes some individuals working extended hours to cover for colleagues affected by transport issues. Additionally, both stations faced limitations on the number of people allowed in the studio at a given time, posing challenges in transitioning to remote work, particularly for news readers and producers. The absenteeism due to transportation regulations and limitations on the number of staff allowed in the studio affected the diversity in personnel and content creativity in terms of execution.

4.2.3. Regulatory and Operational Limitations

The study revealed several regulatory and operational limitations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Regulations and restrictions accompanying the adjustment posed a significant challenge for community radio broadcasters, particularly in terms of wearing masks while carrying out their broadcasting duties. This has impacted the station's daily operations, making it difficult for broadcasters to provide their audience with high-quality content that informs,

educates, and entertains. Specifically, transport regulations pose a dilemma for volunteers and workers who heavily depend on public transport. The restricted number of passengers permitted on public transport and the enforced curfew on travel times hampers the mobility of community radio volunteers and staff, making it difficult for them to commute to work and gather information to create content or stories for broadcast. These sentiments are echoed in the statements below:

I encountered a particular challenge with transportation and finances. Taxis were only permitted to carry a maximum of seven people, and since I lived far away, drivers were reluctant to make the trip with only seven passengers due to the potential loss of income. As a presenter, this situation made it hard for me to find transportation to work (Participant 4 Vhembe FM).

...the specific challenge was the need to travel up and down for work. We had to carry our press cards and permits at all times to show the police if we were stopped. Once, while working a late-night show, I encountered the police and had to convincingly explain that I was coming from a show, as there was a curfew in place, which meant we were not allowed to travel at that time of night. This was challenging because I was used to having the freedom to move around, and now I had to explain myself. Some law enforcement officials did not fully understand the regulations, and as a result, we had staff members who were turned back because the officials they encountered on the road did not understand the rules. Another problem we faced was slow transportation, and not all staff members were working, which significantly impacted us (Participant 13 Makhado FM).

The mandatory requirement to wear masks presented challenges for broadcasters, particularly when they had to wear masks in the studio. This posed difficulties for vocal projection while on air. Additionally, the responsibility of sanitising studio equipment before and after use also proved to be challenging. These challenges have implications for the show's quality with vocal projection, which may lead to misinterpretation of what the presenter might have said. This means that the accuracy and credibility of the station may be affected. Some even had to interrupt their work to sanitise equipment that they had already started using.

I had to walk from home to the studio while wearing a mask, and even in the studio, I had to continue wearing a mask. Additionally, when someone who was broadcasting before me left the studio, they had to sanitise the equipment, and I also had to sanitise because I would be using the same chair, microphone, and headsets (Participant 1 Vhembe FM).

Only one individual at a time was allowed access to the studio, and it was mandatory to sanitise the studio equipment before starting work. This was difficult because sometimes you could get engrossed in your work and forget to sanitise everything, only remembering to do it later, which was hard to maintain (Participant 10 Makhado FM).

The above quotation emphasises the inconvenience of constantly wearing masks, even during studio broadcasts. Furthermore, there was the added task of regularly sanitising equipment, which could be easily overlooked in the rush of the show. This was crucial for reducing the spread of the virus. When individuals switched in the studio, it was mandatory to ensure that all equipment was properly sanitised before studio operations could commence.

The Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) released general notice 238 of 2020 in Government Gazette No: 43207 on April 6, 2020. This notice addresses the ICT National Disaster regulations and includes changes related to the extension of spectrum licensing. The "Information and Communications Technology (ICT) COVID-19 National Disaster Regulations" underwent its sixth and final amendment, which was published on August 31, 2021, in Government Gazette No. 45069. This amendment extended the temporary radio frequency spectrum licenses that were initially granted to certain Individual Electronic Communications Network Service (IECNS) and Individual Electronic Communications Services (IECS) license holders in April 2020, pushing their expiration date to November 30, 2021.

The amendment relieved community radio stations, allowing them to continue serving their audience without the pressure of meeting compliance requirements for licensing renewal during the difficult times of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a crucial adaptation period, as limited movement and activities were in place to ensure local content delivery and compliance with other regulations may have been affected at the time.

The transport regulations presented challenges, particularly for those working late-night shows, particularly dealing with curfew and having limited movement regardless of having permits due to the reliance on public transport, which was highly regulated. Both Makhado FM and Vhembe FM indicated that they faced difficulties adapting to the new studio regulations implemented by the stations, particularly regarding working alone in the studio and taking responsibility for sanitising the equipment.

4.2.4. Audience Engagement and Accessibility

Audience engagement and accessibility play a vital role in community media, particularly during their annual general meetings, which are required for community media organisations. These meetings are designed to encourage the target audience to actively participate in shaping

the direction of the media, which is intended to serve their interests. The COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges for community media in fostering connections between the stations and their audience, as gatherings were restricted. Consequently, community media workers and volunteers experienced a loss of connection, making it challenging to maintain engagement with their communities and fulfil their participatory role. Community engagement and audience participation are significant in community radio.

Community radio stations in South Africa are required by the Independent Communication Authority of South Africa (ICASA) to hold annual general meetings to maintain their compliance. However, the pandemic created obstacles, as gatherings were banned, causing events and activities to be cancelled. This made it difficult to fulfil the essential requirements for community engagement and participation.

Holding events like our Annual General Meetings (AGM meetings) also became challenging. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, reaching out to the community for these meetings resulted in low turnout. As a result, we experienced a disconnect from our community, making it difficult to maintain our usual level of engagement (Participant 13 Makhado FM).

ICASA, as part of its amendment to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic environment, exempted community radio stations from hosting regular annual general meetings (AGM), easing some pressure away from community radio stations. The inability of community radio stations to hold the annual general meetings meant that the participatory role of community media to exercise their ownership role was affected, and they were unable to infuse recommendations and ideas to better the quality of service they receive from their local community radio stations.

Section (9) of the ICASA stipulated that:

The suspension of the requirement for community broadcasting service licensees to hold any community meetings or AGMs and be required to submit proof of holding the meetings is lifted. Where it is not possible for a community broadcasting service licensee to hold a community meeting or AGM, such licensee must submit proof to the Authority before twenty-one (21) days of the date specified in its constitutive documents for holding the community meetings or AGMs, where applicable (ICASA Notice 238 of 2020, page 9).

Community engagement presented a challenge, resulting in the cancellation of numerous outdoor activities traditionally held annually to engage with the audience. Additionally, roadshows and other gatherings were prohibited at that time due to restrictions on gatherings.

The engagement was challenging. For example, during Mandela Day, we usually go outside to broadcast, but at that time, it was impossible due to everyone's fear of the pandemic, and no one wanted to risk their lives. Engagement and interactions are crucial for community radio stations, as we are here to support and serve our community. This meant that we could not engage with the community as we would have liked (Participant 4 Vhembe FM).

Look, sometimes we need to engage with our audience in person. This includes road shows, collecting stories, and attending events. However, we could not go to these places due to the restrictions. This had a significant impact on our ability to connect with people. We were limited to online and radio communication, which affected our ability to promote our brand. Engaging with people face-to-face allows us to create a more personal connection and tell stories in a richer way. There's a different feel and texture to in-person interaction compared to online communication. When telling a story, the nuances can be missed over the phone, but they are more pronounced when interacting face-to-face (Participant 7 Makhado FM).

The quote above highlights the challenges of maintaining engagement through outdoor broadcasting, such as roadshows and national celebration events, due to the prohibition of gatherings to combat the spread of the pandemic. This has affected their marketing and promotional strategies in connecting with their audience as community-oriented radio stations.

Community radio stations have implemented measures to combat the spread of the virus by cancelling visits to the studio. This decision has impacted audience engagement, as many listeners enjoyed visiting the station to meet their favourite presenters. Consequently, some audience members feel excluded from their beloved stations. This created a distance between the station and the audience, causing a strain in the relationship when they were unable to interact with their favourite presenters in person, which might have been a contributing factor in the drop in listenership.

The station's engagement was significantly affected because the listeners used to enjoy coming to the station to engage with the presenters in person, which was no longer possible (Participant 3 Vhembe FM).

We pride ourselves on being a very friendly radio station. However, it was challenging for some of our listeners when they could not visit their favourite presenters on a particular day (Participant 9 Vhembe FM).

The responses from Vhembe FM reveal that the station prides itself on being a community-oriented station that previously welcomed frequent visits from its audience. However, due to regulations, these visits were restricted, negatively impacting the relationship between the

station and its audience. The audience was accustomed to visiting their favourite presenters at the station, and the limitations affected this interaction.

4.2.5. Health and Wellness Challenges on Staff

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted essential workers, especially front-line workers. Media practitioners also faced challenges as they provided regular updates on the latest deaths and infections, often risking their own lives to keep the public informed. Community media workers were deeply affected but continued to serve their communities, all while worrying about their health and the well-being of their families. They needed to receive support to maintain their productivity.

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected the mental health of volunteers and employees at community radio stations. The isolation from co-workers and the constant worry about the virus took a serious emotional toll, which negatively impacted their overall mental well-being. Participants had this to say:

At one point, I felt like resigning because of the toll it took on me mentally. The constant remote communication and the depressing task of reporting case and death numbers made me wonder about the personal impact on me or my family. It really sapped my passion during that time (Participant 4 Vhembe FM).

Some of our staff members have experienced the loss of their loved ones, creating a hectic and emotionally challenging situation (Participant 6 Makhado FM).

The pandemic was painful and demoralising because we no longer had the chance to engage with each other as colleagues. Instead of being able to greet and then move to the studio or boardroom together, we were left alone. This made it feel like we were isolated at work, and it even made us fear contact with each other as colleagues (Participant 10 Makhado FM).

To be honest, morale was pretty low. The loss of family members and the constant fear of contracting the virus had everyone feeling depressed. We were all hesitant to go out, and if we did, we made sure to take precautions. Hearing about the experiences of people who had the virus, especially witnessing my aunt's struggle, was extremely distressing (Participant 9 Vhembe FM).

The above statements indicate that the pandemic took a toll on the morale of volunteers and community workers, especially in cases where some of the colleagues experienced the loss of their loved ones and did not have an opportunity to engage with colleagues about how they felt.

In addition, the pandemic eroded trust among staff since it was difficult to tell whether a person was infected with COVID. Thus:

*It affected us in a tough way because I could not trust the person who was coming out of the studio. I could not trust the staff, the cleaners, or the security - basically, everyone. So everywhere that I was touching, everywhere that I was sitting, I had to make sure that I was safe. It brought trust issues (**Participant 13 Makhado FM**).*

The above statements demonstrate how the pandemic was linked to mental health risks, emphasising the need for community radio stations to establish systems to address this challenge, indicating issues of trust brought by not knowing if you may be infected from work. These affected the trust and relationship amongst colleagues due to the fear of contracting the virus, and the lack of communication or interaction resulted in limited opportunities to brainstorm and enhance the creativity amongst community media staff and volunteers.

4.2.6. Content Production Challenges

The study findings highlighted a challenge concerning content production for community media due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is attributed to the increased difficulty in ensuring the credibility of breaking news stories, particularly during times of restricted movement and prohibited gatherings. Additionally, the shift to online conferences has granted organisers complete control and limited the number of questions that can be asked.

Content production was significantly impacted by the restricted access to information caused by the pandemic and the associated regulations. This limited access led to a challenge in content creation, as most of the produced content revolved around pandemic-related topics. This affected the effective representation of communities that rely on community media for access to information and representation, with most stories going untold or told with limited information due to limited movement and media access to local community stories. The views of the participants are expressed below:

*During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was working as a news reader. I noticed many changes in programming because there were no longer specific presenters for current affairs or entertainment shows. Every broadcaster was focused on COVID-19 news and ready to report the latest updates anytime (**Participant 1 Vhembe FM**).*

*The shift in content was quite drastic. COVID-19 dominated almost every aspect of our discussions. Despite our efforts to diversify topics, the conversation always gravitated back to the pandemic. Our content underwent significant changes, impacting our ability to execute programs that relied on listener engagement (**Participant 7 Makhado FM**).*

The statements underscore the importance of presenters maintaining flexibility in their broadcasts, being prepared to step in for a colleague and reporting on a wide range of topics, including COVID-19 pandemic-related news. This is essential as community radio stations play a vital role in raising awareness and disseminating verified information during the pandemic.

Furthermore, the lack of access to information posed a challenge for content production and maintaining the program's identity. The pandemic news consistently found its way into the content of every show. Thus:

We encountered difficulty sourcing content and stories for our productions due to the lack of activities around the country. This limited the content and stories available, as there were fewer opportunities for exposure to events that would generate stories (Participant 2 Vhembe FM).

Content creation posed challenges, particularly for live studio interviews, which had to be conducted over the phone, resulting in increased costs for the station. This significantly impacted the focus and format of our programming. We had to substitute live interviews with phone interviews, which incurred additional costs for the station and reduced the duration of each interview (Participant 14 Vhembe FM).

The challenges in producing content were particularly pronounced for shows that rely on audience interaction, especially when obtaining up-to-date local breaking news. A participant working for Makhado FM explained thus:

The challenge we encountered was the limited availability of reliable local news information. Due to regulations and restrictions, engaging the audience was difficult as people were primarily indoors with restricted movement. Furthermore, the scarcity of sources made content production challenging, particularly for local news, and verifying the credibility of stories was also problematic (Participant 12 Makhado FM).

The quote highlights the challenge of maintaining content focus considering the pandemic's influence on program content and limited audience engagement. Both stations encountered difficulties accessing information for content production, which has implications for the credibility of news and information.

4.2.7. Technical and Infrastructure Challenges

The closure of businesses resulted in limited services, making it challenging to address technical and infrastructure issues in the studio under COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. These limitations could lead to extended radio silence, contradicting media protocols and best

practices for live radio broadcasts. This can also affect listenership which can amount to a significant drop and their selling power to advertiser who actually buy the audience attention from community media. Below are some of the responses from the participants:

Despite the ongoing challenges, such as explaining to service providers about the impact of COVID-19, we had to continue paying for essential services like transmission fees. For instance, we rented space in a private facility to operate our transmission point, and the monthly fees had to be paid throughout the pandemic (Participant 7 Makhado FM).

There was a time when we faced a challenge with presenters dropping out. We considered merging stations, as we have presenters from Makhado and various corners of Vhembe. We wanted to propose a collaboration with other stations, suggesting that some of our presenters could broadcast at stations closer to them. However, we realised this plan would not work well, as some stations did not reach certain areas due to transmitter limitations (Participant 13 Makhado FM).

The quotation highlights the importance of enhancing the Makhado FM community radio station's infrastructure. Currently, the station uses a rented facility to house its transmission equipment and needs to upgrade its transmission reach to establish partnerships with other community radio stations. This infrastructure challenge has hindered the station's ability to maintain consistent broadcasting, especially during the pandemic, while limiting their options for collaborations with other stations.

4.3. IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE SELECTED RADIO STATIONS

The study aimed to “**explore how the COVID-19 pandemic affected certain community radio stations in South Africa**”. Findings showed that the pandemic led to various challenges for these stations, including diminished operational efficiency, financial difficulties, changes in regulations and policies, impacts on programming, and effects on the health and well-being of staff. These factors played a significant role in affecting the overall functioning of the community radio stations, which are discussed in further detail below.

REDUCED OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY

4.3.1. Financial Impact

The two community radio stations encountered different financial difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic, directly impacting their ability to fulfil their public service obligations

of educating, informing, and entertaining their respective communities. The quotations below illustrate this.

The pandemic presented a financial challenge for us as a community radio station. We do not have a large budget and mainly rely on advertising to cover our daily operational expenses and staff payments. This resulted in situations where staff members had to accept only half of their payment during times when the station was unable to generate revenue (Participant 3 Vhembe FM).

Despite the ongoing challenges, such as explaining to service providers about the impact of COVID-19, we had to continue paying for essential services like transmission fees. For instance, we rented space in a private facility to operate our transmission point, and the monthly fees had to be paid throughout the pandemic. Overall, our income decreased while our expenses rose, creating a challenging financial situation for us (Participant 7 Makhado FM).

The above remarks revealed the inability of the two community radio stations to keep up with operational expenses, which led to some staff members having to accept pay cuts. This meant that those who were affected by the transport ban which required them to take two taxies to work faced increased travel expenses which may affect their availability to work as they would be looking for other means to make money, and the pay cut affecting their ability to afford to rely on the passion for broadcasting keeping them interested which lead to Community media losing talent to Commercial radio, and Public radio stations with larger budgets.

The financial constraints also had implications on content production, resulting in some adjustments, including converting live interviews to telephonic interviews and reducing interview durations to cut expenses. This meant that the audience was left with more unanswered questions due to limited interaction time with guests and audiences. The quotations below illustrate this:

The pandemic has impacted our daily operations, resulting in additional expenses. The shift to new content production measures, such as remote interviews instead of live interviews, has increased phone bills (Participant 13 Makhado FM).

Conducting lengthy interviews on a talk show proved to be costly for a community radio station with limited financial support and reduced advertising revenue. Additionally, the station faced additional expenses related to conducting interviews over the phone, posing a further financial challenge, especially during the period of reduced revenue caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, interviews that typically lasted 30 minutes were now restricted to just 10 minutes, hampering our ability to gather comprehensive content as we rushed to cut costs. Moreover, certain features, such as birthday surprise calls, were discontinued to save on expenses (Participant 14 Vhembe FM).

The aforementioned statements suggest that the two stations incurred higher expenses during the pandemic as a result of implementing remote working and remote interviews. This led to an increase in their telephone bills, indicating rising expenses alongside a decline in revenue. This indirectly impacted the quality of content and credibility of the station, which may affect their audience interest and maintain or increase their listenership.

4.3.2. Staffing and Workforce Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the staff and workforce of two community radio stations, affecting their ability to broadcast and produce content for their target audiences.

Some individuals faced salary reductions due to funding shortages, even though they were putting in extra hours to compensate for the lack of staff. As a result, their increased workload did not translate into higher wages, impacting their productivity and leaving them with insufficient time to create quality content. This could not have happened at the wrong time when the public had more questions as COVID-19 was an Unknown enemy, and the public needed information to stay safe and protect themselves, including their loved ones; this meant Community media had a crucial role to play, but limited resources. The quotations below are illustrative:

*The specific challenge I faced was working overtime and not getting enough rest. Since I lived close to the station, I was always on call to fill in for anyone who might not make it to work. We have about seven shows a day, so if three presenters were unavailable, I had to fill in for them, leaving me with little time to rest. The pandemic presented a financial challenge for us as a community radio station. We don't have a large budget and mainly rely on advertising to cover our daily operational expenses and staff payments. This resulted in situations where staff members had to accept only half of their payment when the station could not generate revenue **(Participant 3 Vhembe FM)**.*

*The pandemic had a significant impact on community radio stations. Our work hours were reduced, which resulted in lower salaries at the end of the month. This meant we were working fewer hours than before the Covid-19 pandemic. The specific challenge we faced as community radio news readers was that the payment was not enough for us to survive on, so we had to rely on extra income. However, we struggled to find time and opportunities to earn that extra income because our movement was limited at the time **(Participant 5 Vhembe FM)**.*

*There was a shift in the first few weeks due to two presenters pulling out from their jobs. It was difficult to find replacements, so we had to extend working hours for the person who was working at the time **(Participant 13 Makhado FM)**.*

Based on the responses, it is evident that the impact varied depending on the circumstances at the station. Some individuals had to work extended hours despite taking a pay cut, while others were compelled to work reduced hours, resulting in lower salaries. The common impact was the loss of income for all those affected. For instance, the departure of some staff and volunteers from Makhado FM had a negative effect on the station's operations, as some of them could not be replaced.

4.3.3. Regulatory and Policy Impact

The daily operations of the community radio stations were also negatively affected by regulations and policies aimed at addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These measures were implemented to ensure that the radio stations could continue their broadcasting mandate as community radio stations. This had implications for staff members who rely on public transport, which affected the daily operations and content production as the restriction limited their access to local news and news verification, negatively impacting the radio station's credibility and quality of content and shows.

The regulations implemented during the lockdown and restrictions period significantly impacted community radio stations, leading to high staff absenteeism or late arrival. These led to long hours for those who were available, meaning they had insufficient rest and recovery, affecting their creativity and ability to prepare quality content for their broadcast. These responses emphasise and reinforce these sentiments.

I encountered a particular challenge with transportation and finances. Taxis were only permitted to carry a minimum of seven people, and since I lived far away, drivers were reluctant to make the trip with only seven passengers due to the potential loss of income. This situation made it hard for me, as a presenter, to find transportation to get to work (Participant 4 Vhembe FM).

While the news team did not face any regulatory issues thanks to our travel permits, the transport regulations did have a significant impact on us. These regulations included specific travel times, making it challenging for us to arrive at work punctually (Participant 8 Makhado FM).

The two stations faced regulatory obstacles due to pandemic transportation regulations, which limited taxi passengers and made long-distance trips challenging. Additionally, the travel curfew hindered investigations during curfew hours, affecting the credibility of their news as

verification was usually limited to remote investigation, which can lead to distorted information that cannot be easily verified remotely.

The curfew enforcement also extended to the public, restricting their travel and outdoor activities. This presented challenges for community radio staff in producing content, as verifying news stories during the curfew became difficult. Consequently, this made it tough for community media to maintain their credibility.

*One of the logistical challenges we encountered was related to our community engagement efforts, where our presenters relied on local transport, particularly taxis. Due to the restricted operating hours for taxis during the crisis, we faced limitations in reaching and covering stories in our local communities. Despite being classified as essential workers, our ability to move around was constrained, as we heavily relied on public transport (**Participant 7 Makhado FM**).*

*The restrictions had a significant impact on us. Our movements were limited, preventing us from covering breaking stories elsewhere due to the regulations imposed by the Curfew. People were also uneasy about meeting in person, so we had to conduct everything over the phone (**Participant 13 Makhado FM**).*

The statement, as mentioned earlier, underscores the difficulties faced by community radio volunteers and staff who rely on public transport. These difficulties make it challenging to verify stories, particularly regarding local content. Furthermore, the public has shown a willingness to engage with the media during the pandemic, necessitating adjustments in investigative methods to facilitate remote engagement with sources.

The pandemic affected shows with co-hosts as scheduling became challenging. To minimise the spread of the virus, only one volunteer or staff member (presenter) was permitted in the studio at a time. Consequently, shows that typically featured co-hosts had to be presented by a single host, potentially impacting the overall quality, standard, and atmosphere of the show.

*After finishing their work in the studio, individuals were required to leave to allow the next person to work alone and limit the spread of the pandemic. We also received assistance in the form of donated sanitisers from private stakeholders (**Participant 3 Vhembe FM**).*

*The regulatory hurdles mandated that only one person could host a show, as opposed to the previous practice of having co-hosts. This posed challenges for the remaining hosts, who were accustomed to working with a co-host. Additionally, the regulations required the producer to be off-site, meaning the presenter had to take on production responsibilities. This change could be difficult for the solo host (**Participant 10 Makhado FM**).*

The statement above emphasises the challenge of verifying stories for community radio volunteers and staff who rely on public transport, especially regarding local content. Additionally, it acknowledges the public's receptiveness to engaging with the media during the pandemic, prompting the need for adjustments in investigative measures to facilitate remote engagement with sources.

Due to non-operational buses, individuals had to find alternative transportation, incurring additional costs for the stations. These regulations also caused absenteeism and late arrival at work, impacting travel for local story verification and limiting transportation access for local content production. Restrictions on studio capacity also affected the quality and structure of some shows, especially those with co-host setups.

4.3.4. Audience Engagement and Listenership Impact

Community engagement plays a vital role in community media by facilitating active participation in content creation and fostering a sense of ownership and representation. Participants will discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected community engagement for radio stations, shedding light on its impact on community media.

The comments from both stations indicate differing opinions on the impact of the pandemic on listenership numbers. Some believe there was a decrease in listenership, while others argue that there was an increase. Below are the remarks from those who believed there was a drop in the listenership numbers:

*As a community radio station, our listeners come for local content. However, since there was a shift to reporting more about national content related to the pandemic, some people easily lost interest, decreasing our audience numbers. This means they would rather watch TV or movies than listen to the radio (**Participant 2 Vhembe FM**).*

*The drop in listenership numbers could be attributed to many people going through difficult times. When they listened to the radio, the reports about the COVID-19 pandemic and the latest statistics reminded them of their pain (**Participant 11 Makhado FM**).*

There was a surge in listenership numbers for those who departed due to the restrictions that confined them indoors during the lockdown. Their growing interest in learning more about the pandemic, which was still poorly understood then, also played a role in this increase. Here are some responses from those who observed an uptick in listenership numbers.

The numbers appeared unusual but increased because many stayed home. It's important to note that plenty of individuals were not commuting to work; they were staying at home. We noticed a trend where the numbers rose, which would have been positive if not for COVID-19 (Participant 7 Makhado FM).

We saw an increase in listenership as everyone wanted to stay informed, both young and old, as they were confined to their homes due to movement restrictions. They wanted to be informed about what Covid-19 is all about, how they can stay safe, and how it can be treated (Participant 8 Makhado FM).

Some participants believed the decrease in listeners was linked to their loyalty to specific radio broadcasters. When these broadcasters left, it might have led to a loss of interest because their favourite broadcaster was no longer on the air.

I had to acknowledge that the numbers had dropped. When certain presenters or staff members leave the station, some listeners tune in specifically for them. If those presenters are not there, we are losing listenership (Participant 13 Makhado FM).

The quotes above reveal a discrepancy regarding how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced audience listenership. Some people think that the number of listeners dropped because of a limited selection of content. On the other hand, some argue that community radio stations experienced a rise in listeners who were looking for trustworthy news about the pandemic. The limited access to information affected content diversity, which audiences looked for, and it meant that the news being broadcast had limited credibility, which may affect the listenership negatively and those loyal to specific presenters who might have left the station. The audience being confined to their homes and lack of understanding of the pandemic had an impact on listenership, and they sought information on how to stay safe and protected as new information was broadcast daily about the virus. Furthermore, the departure of certain presenters may have played a role in changing listener loyalty.

4.3.5. Health and Well-Being Impact on Staff

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the health and mental well-being of the staff, leading to feelings of isolation and depression. This situation disrupted team-building efforts and damaged the trust among colleagues, as they grew more cautious about the risk of spreading infections.

The pandemic hurt the morale of the staff and volunteers. We could not meet and brainstorm solutions, so team-building activities and opportunities to get to know each other and discuss issues were no longer available (Participant 3 Vhembe FM).

*The pandemic was painful and demoralising because we no longer had the chance to engage with each other as colleagues. Instead of being able to greet and then move to the studio or boardroom together, we were left alone. This made it feel like we were isolated at work, and it even made us fear contact with each other as colleagues. We worried about the possibility of a colleague having the virus, but we continued working because the radio had to fulfil its mandate (**Participant 10 Makhado FM**).*

The above quotations highlight the impact that COVID-19 had on health and well-being, affecting the morale of the volunteers and staff. The lack of team engagement left the workplace isolated, which dropped their confidence and morale, which affected the quality of the production as knowledge sharing was limited to remote communication especially now with the limited number of accesses to the studio. Meaning that the producer had little to no opportunity to discuss and brainstorm content with whoever going on air affecting the quality of the show and content delivery.

The dedicated staff and volunteers experienced profound personal sacrifice during each interaction, knowing they risked their health and potentially endangered their family members. This heightened awareness of risk influenced their behaviour on air and in public while carrying out their duties.

*The pandemic had a significant impact on all broadcasters, as it caused feelings of depression and pressure. Regardless of the desire to work, the stress was omnipresent. Just imagine taking a taxi to work without knowing if someone in the taxi has the virus. Arriving at work without knowing if your colleagues are infected can be demoralise and make you not want to work (**Participant 1 Vhembe FM**).*

*Some individuals clearly showed signs of being emotionally impacted by the fear of contracting COVID-19, especially since the origins and nature of the virus were initially unknown. This created a concern among those who had to go out to work, as they were at risk of being exposed to the virus. There were noticeable differences in how people coped with the situation, with some displaying resilience while others exhibited signs of significant distress (**Participant 8 Makhado FM**).*

The above quotations illustrate that there was fear of the virus spreading while travelling to work and colleagues being infected, which may spread it amongst each other at work as they were at risk by exposing themselves. This affected the level of trust and teamwork, which is essential in broadcasting as it is a more interactive industry that relies on knowledge sharing and participation. It felt like a self-sacrifice.

The staff faced significant pressure, with one member considering resigning due to the mental toll of the pandemic. Their departure would have added to the workload for the remaining staff and volunteers, particularly with others grieving the loss of loved ones among their colleagues.

At one point, I felt like resigning because of the toll it took on me mentally. The constant remote communication and the depressing task of reporting case and death numbers made me wonder about the personal impact on me or my family. It really sapped my passion during that time (Participant 4 Vhembe FM).

Some of our staff members have experienced the loss of their loved ones, creating a hectic and emotionally challenging situation (Participant 6 Makhado FM).

To be honest, morale was pretty low. The loss of family members and the constant fear of contracting the virus had everyone feeling depressed. We were all hesitant to go out, and if we did, we made sure to take precautions. Hearing about the experiences of people who had the virus, especially witnessing my aunt's struggle, was extremely distressing (Participant 9 Vhembe FM).

The responses highlight the mental distress experienced by community radio station volunteers and staff due to the normalisation of death and the loss of family members among colleagues. Despite being surrounded by death, they persevered in coming to work and providing hope to their audience.

Staff and volunteers experiencing symptoms of the virus had to stay home until they recovered. This meant that others had to cover their shifts. With limited staffing at the time, it was challenging, and some had to work overtime to fill in for their colleagues.

This meant there would be times when some people would not feel well and would need to stay home until they felt better. We were responsible for ensuring that if we had flu symptoms, we would remain at home and only return to work once we were better (Participant 5 Vhembe FM).

Maintaining trust among the staff presented its challenges. Mental health is a significant yet often unspoken issue within black communities. For a community media entity based in an area where emotions and fears are rarely expressed, the responsibility of being a beacon of hope to their listeners while navigating the challenges brought by the pandemic can lead to feeling emotionally drained and lonely, ultimately impacting confidence.

4.3.6. Programming and Content Production Impact

The programming and content production industries were significantly affected by the pandemic. Each program had to integrate COVID-19-related topics into their content, even if their primary focus differed. This included shows with specific themes such as sports, music, and morning and afternoon drive-time shows. This affected the diversity in content as audiences sought diverse content for various reasons, which means that the entertainment part of radio was constantly interrupted by COVID-19 news updates. The impact was evident in the responses from the participants.

*The COVID-19 pandemic heavily impacted the programming schedule. Shows that used to have specific themes or styles had to start reporting on pandemic news. This meant that shows were no longer solely dedicated to other types of news or content. The presenters would interrupt their regular programming to report on the latest COVID-19 updates or to alert people about important safety information (**Participant 1 Vhembe FM**)*

*There was a notable shift in content, especially in the sports department. The sports show was no longer broadcast daily since there were no sports activities then, and the news department was unavailable as usual (**Participant 3 Vhembe FM**)*

Their attempts to incorporate diversity into the content being produced at the time always appeared futile, as it consistently reverted to the same topic when listeners called in to share their experiences. This sentiment is illustrated in the quotations below:

*The shift in content was quite drastic. COVID-19 dominated almost every aspect of our discussions. Despite our efforts to diversify topics, the conversation always gravitated back to the pandemic. Our content underwent significant changes, impacting our ability to execute programs that relied on listener engagement. It seemed that no matter the topic we introduced, it circled back to the overarching theme of COVID-19. Nevertheless, we continued to broadcast our content, acknowledging that listeners may have adapted their engagement based on their experiences (**Participant 7 Makhado FM**).*

*A significant shift was evident when programs such as "The Drive," which traditionally centred on events and social conversations, needed to incorporate updates regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. This change aimed to ensure that they also contributed to keeping their listeners informed about key COVID-19 developments, including regulations and safety measures. This marked a departure from their standard content offerings (**Participant 8 Makhado FM**)*

The pandemic has significantly influenced content diversification, with audience engagement consistently revolving around COVID-19-related topics, even when the content was originally

focused on other subjects. It became evident that community radio stations predominantly featured pandemic-related content to raise awareness and educate their audience about the virus and ongoing news developments; this affected the entertainment role.

The belief that the pandemic caused a shift in content production and programming was shared by Participant 12 from Makhado FM, who explained that:

*The program initially ran for three hours, but we had to change it to two hours due to the scarcity of stories to meet the challenge (**Participant 4 Vhembe FM**).*

*The music programs were significantly reduced, with most content focusing on news related to the COVID-19 pandemic. As there was limited information about Covid-19 initially, it was important to provide more informative content to prevent the spread of misleading information and unproven theories. Community radio had to serve as a reliable source of information to counter misinformation (**Participant 12 Makhado FM**).*

The text underscores the necessity of adapting content in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. It highlights challenges in accessing information, rescheduling musical shows, and a shift in focus for community radio stations. As a result, covering and producing local breaking stories has become more challenging, according to the participants.

The following comments emphasise how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected both content creation and the process of verifying stories.

*The pandemic had a significant impact on our work. We could not go out and find stories or attend gatherings to gather information. Instead, we had to rely on events we saw on social media and other media platforms. This meant we had to verify the stories by phone to our reliable sources to confirm the facts. This also affects the credibility of the pandemic. Verifying stories through investigation was difficult, and I relied on sources, hoping that the news would be as accurate as possible (**Participant 10 Makhado FM**).*

*During the COVID-19 lockdown, accessing breaking news was challenging, leading to the dissemination of unverified information from unreliable sources. This significantly impacted the credibility of the news (**Participant 14 Vhembe FM**).*

The statements above highlight the challenge posed by the lack of access to stories and the reliance on other platforms for news. This dependence required individuals to verify the validity of stories through trusted sources to ensure the credibility of their reporting. As a result, breaking local stories became a challenge, and the potential negative impact on credibility was recognised at a time when reliable information was crucial.

There were different views from the perspective shared above, viewing it as an opportunity that offered growth and exploring other means of content production to diversify the content.

I view it as a positive experience for us; we experienced growth during that time. We encountered no challenges in strictly adhering to programming, particularly about Vhembe. We made numerous adjustments during that period. It was crucial for our programming to focus on providing updates about the events occurring within our district. Our team members were deployed to different locations, where they would report on the happenings in the surrounding communities if they were residents (Participant 9 Vhembe FM).

The views from participants revealed that although some at Vhembe FM perceived the pandemic as an opportunity, others regarded it as a setback to content production. There was a consensus that the pandemic affected content production, particularly in terms of information verification, which, in turn, impacted the credibility of news reporting and the diversity of content. Consequently, COVID-19 pandemic-related content was incorporated into every show to educate and raise awareness to mitigate the spread of the pandemic.

4.4. COPING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY THE TWO COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS

The third research objective was “**To establish coping strategies selected community radio stations employ during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.**”

4.4.1. Financial Survival Strategies

Financial stability is crucial for the sustainability of community radio stations. To address financial challenges, radio stations often apply for funding from organisations such as the MDDA as part of their economic strategies.

The following are the financial strategies implemented by each station to address the financial challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

We applied for funds from MDDA, and they assisted us twice by providing funds to pay our volunteers (Participant 6 Makhado FM).

We received a relief grant from MDDA, which helped us cover our transportation fees and provided equipment for recording while working from home. I would say that during the difficult financial period, the MDDA grant helped to relieve our situation (Participant 10 Makhado FM).

The above quotations illustrate that Makhado FM utilised a grant funding opportunity from the MDDA, which assisted them in covering their operational costs and alleviated their financial constraints. This reduced the financial constraints that the two radio stations had as it helped to cover expenses as revenue sources were reduced by the pandemic, which stabilised the financial sustainability of the community radio stations.

The MDDA funding provided crucial relief from financial pressure, allowing the radio station to maintain its operations by ICASA regulations and invest in equipment for remote broadcasting to support staff working from home. This approach aimed to attract local businesses needing advertising by providing them with reduced rates, which was perceived as a better alternative to receiving no funds. The statements below are illustrative of this:

As a result, the marketing department decided to reduce the advertising rates to attract new advertisers and cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic (Participant 2 Vhembe FM).

During the pandemic, we organised competitions for businesses to pitch themselves in 30 seconds. Winners received a 50% discount on their next advertising campaign, while we also tailored special packages with a 65% reduced rate for operational businesses. Despite the challenging circumstances, this strategy attracted over 30 advertisers in the first two months (Participant 9 Vhembe FM).

These quotations demonstrate that Vhembe FM's competition and discount initiative proved profitable for their clients, as it improved advertisement uptake by taking advantage of existing operational businesses at the time. These measures ensure that they maintain a mutual relationship with operational businesses, which would make it easier to recover from the devastating impact of COVID-19 on their financial revenues.

One of the stations used social media marketing to increase revenue. This involved providing a cost-effective advertising platform and the ability to track engagement each time someone interacts with the content shared on their social media platforms. This provided community radio stations unlimited advertising space, which can be utilised even after the pandemic when business operations return to the new normal, providing an opportunity to compete with other institutions through digital marketing.

We implemented social media marketing to improve our financial situation, which proved very beneficial. This method offers a more affordable way for the community radio station to advertise. It involves creating marketing content that showcases the

product or service, which can be viewed multiple times and shared (Participant 13 Makhado FM).

This approach allows for simpler measurement of its effectiveness as a marketing tool and for collecting feedback. It does not require the same investment as traditional radio advertising, often involving studio recording and hiring voice-over artists. Makhado FM managed to stay afloat with grant funding from MDDA and by effectively using social media for marketing and income generation. In contrast, Vhembe FM employed competitive strategies and discounts to attract advertisers from their area's limited pool of businesses.

4.4.2. Flexible Staffing and Volunteer Support

During the pandemic, community radio stations had to adapt their staffing and volunteer support to remain productive despite the challenges faced by media practitioners due to regulations and movement restrictions. The statements below are illustrative:

The implemented strategy allowed producers to work from home on certain days and come to the office on others, using a pass for essential work-related travel. For example, if I worked five days one week, it would be reduced to three days the next week and two days the following week, depending on the circumstances for each week (Participant 2 Vhembe FM).

The strategy we employed was that if the news department was not available and there was breaking news, the presenter at the time would have to report on it and provide updates (Participant 3 Vhembe FM).

Our approach was to stay consistently informed by keeping up with the latest developments, whether we were at work or home (Participant 8 Makhado FM).

This means that the presenter needed to be flexible enough to transition to any content easily to execute the report, following the guide of the content without feeling out of place while stepping into the shoes of their fellow colleague. This required significant personal and recovery time to ensure availability for long working hours while staying fresh enough to entertain and inform audiences, affecting family time being driven by a passion for broadcasting.

Amid the pandemic, remote location reporting proved crucial for staying informed about local news. This method enabled us to leverage the expertise and insights of colleagues who could not be physically present in the studio, thus enhancing our ability to report on developing stories.

*To provide sports updates, the presenter chooses to reach out to athletes at their homes instead of having them come to the station, which helps minimise the risk of spreading the virus. Additionally, staff members who are nearby are always on standby to step in for anyone who might be absent due to illness or other reasons (**Participant 3, Vhembe FM**).*

In the current digital age, it is essential to have a team of adaptable staff who can effectively utilise available technology and equipment for remote reporting. This ensures our audiences are consistently informed and educated on the latest news and developments.

*We faced challenges with transportation, so we had to record the news bulletin from home and send it to be played during the news slot (**Participant 10 Makhado FM**).*

On the positive side, this situation forced us to find new ways to continue broadcasting even when our staff could not be in the studio. For example, in the news department, we had to start recording and reporting stories remotely, even from home, instead of coming into the studio (**Participant 11 Makhado FM**).

Amid the pandemic, adapting staff schedules to maintain seamless broadcasting was crucial. Both radio stations successfully achieved this by employing flexible staff who could cover for others when necessary and provide real-time updates on various topics or news on air. Travel permits also streamlined travel challenges and remote broadcasting enhanced the flexibility of both staff and volunteers.

4.4.3. Technological Innovations

Innovative technology is essential for media organisations to stay flexible and responsive. Community media outlets also face the necessity to evolve to thrive and ensure their long-term viability. The following are some of the technological advancements that two community radio stations have adopted to adjust to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and to maintain their sustainability.

Social media has played a crucial role in enabling the creation of content and maintaining the operation of community radio and media broadcasting. This has been particularly important in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictions and lockdowns, which have required innovative approaches and the adoption of new technologies.

*Most of our programs were conducted virtually. We broadcasted them on social media platforms like Facebook and TikTok because the audience could not attend in person. We also utilised audio streaming to help people stay connected, so they did not lose touch with us (**Participant 6 Makhado FM**).*

*We implemented social media marketing to improve our financial situation, which proved very beneficial. Despite facing challenges with sponsors, we persisted. We continued our broadcasts while leveraging social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube (**Participant 13 Makhado FM**).*

The quotes above show that the initiative introduced by Makhado FM is leveraging social media and streaming platforms to stay connected with their tech-savvy audience. This also meant that they could introduce themselves to new audiences who may necessarily be their regular audience, which includes youth audiences who are more technologically advanced.

The news department has been operating remotely, using WhatsApp to enable news readers to record their bulletins. The presenter then plays these recordings during the headlines to inform the audience. Social media platforms like WhatsApp have become essential to the production team and are used to share news updates within WhatsApp groups. This enabled the two stations to stay updated with the latest news regarding the pandemic as COVID-19 was a new challenge which the global world was learning as we continue to find ways to go back to the new normal.

*The news department had to implement a new working arrangement in response to the pandemic, necessitating news staff to utilise our online platforms. Consequently, news readers recorded news from their homes and shared it through our WhatsApp group for the presenter to broadcast. Our strategy involved leveraging an online platform to gather news and information, allowing our listeners to share their experiences through the same platform. As a result of the pandemic, we devised a reporting strategy using an online platform, enabling news readers to submit their recordings to the WhatsApp group for playback by the presenter. (**Participant 11 Makhado FM**).*

*To address these challenges, we implemented measures such as having some staff work from home and sharing news through our online platforms via recorded broadcasts. (**Participant 12 Makhado FM**).*

The quotes above highlight the technological innovations the two radio stations implemented for broadcasting. These include social media marketing and content sharing through various platforms, enabling remote work from home. This ensured the sustainability of the stations despite the challenges posed by the pandemic. It also demonstrates the potential for leveraging technological innovation to maintain continuous broadcasting and audience engagement during global crises, even in the future.

4.4.4. Health and Wellness Initiatives

The community radio stations selected for this study implemented their regulations in response to the national crisis declared by the pandemic. This involved closing their doors to physical community visits and ensuring that protective equipment was readily available at every entrance of the stations. These measures were to the health department's guidelines, which included mandatory wearing of masks and regular hand sanitisation. The statements below are instructive:

*The station provided protective measures and equipment such as masks, sanitisers, and soaps. Physical access to the station was restricted, so interviews had to be conducted over the phone to prevent the spread of the virus. Only scheduled individuals were allowed to enter the station. Security personnel were stationed at the station to handle emergencies, and only authorised personnel were granted access. Sanitisers and masks were available at the entrance, and everyone entering the office or station was required to sanitise their hands and wear a mask (**Participant 5 Vhembe FM**).*

*We had what we called a Covid-19 register. All visitors were supposed to be screened. We screened almost everyone who was there through forms and temperature scans. We used temperature monitors and encouraged people to sanitise when entering our premises (**Participant 6 Makhado FM**).*

This demonstrates that the two community radio stations have taken proactive measures by implementing temperature checks for anyone entering the studio, providing protective equipment such as masks and sanitisers at all entry points, and enforcing regular sanitisation and mask-wearing protocols. This reduced the chances of infections, which meant that staff and volunteers would remain safe from the spread, limiting the chances while having the ability to keep the studio virus-free for the next presenter.

These participants also shared the same view on the implemented protective health and wellness initiatives:

*No one was allowed to enter the studio without a mask. There were sanitiser stations at all entrances, and after an hour, the presenter was allowed to go out and sanitise. When not speaking on air, the door could be opened, but the door had to be closed once on air. No one who was not supposed to be in the studio was allowed inside (**Participant 11 Makhado FM**).*

*We announced on the radio that we no longer accept visitors. Despite this, we have all the necessary protective equipment at every entry point, including temperature scanners, masks, and sanitisers (**Participant 13 Makhado FM**).*

The above quotation emphasises that only staff and volunteers were permitted access to the station, with visiting being prohibited. Additionally, it was announced during a broadcast that visits to the studio were no longer allowed, resulting in a loss of engagement with their audience.

The studio also underwent weekly fumigation to minimise the presence of any viruses. These measures were taken to prioritise the safety and well-being of the individuals who regularly used the studio for broadcasting to the audience.

*Additionally, they arranged for fumigation services to clean the studio weekly. In the studio, only one person was allowed to work at a time. After finishing their work, they had to sanitise the machines and other equipment before leaving (**Participant 10 Makhado FM**).*

The staff and volunteers were tasked with maintaining a safe and secure work environment to promote their health and well-being. This included sanitising studio equipment before and after use and ensuring that only one presenter was allowed in the studio at a time to provide ample working space.

*To ensure safety, we scheduled shows back-to-back to reduce contact between presenters. This meant allowing one presenter to leave ten minutes before the next one arrived. These measures allowed us to strictly adhere to the regulations and ensure workplace safety (**Participant 7 Makhado FM**).*

The stations also felt that it was important for their staff and volunteers to be offered psychological health assistance and an environment where they felt safe. They should be able to share their experiences and receive emotional support from their work family.

*Recognising the psychological toll of these challenges, we also sought the support of faith leaders and pastors to encourage and guide our team members. We understood that seeking professional help from psychologists or pastors was crucial in addressing these psychological challenges. Additionally, we arranged for a presenter from a national radio station to speak to our team, offering motivation and moral support during these difficult times (**Participant 7 Makhado FM**).*

*I believe that when we work in an environment where we feel like family, it's important to communicate openly and emotionally support each other. For instance, if someone at the office is unwell, it can impact everyone's well-being. That's why we encourage open dialogue and provide access to professionals for those who need it. Our goal is to create a space where everyone feels comfortable seeking help, especially for those who have experienced the loss of a family member (**Participant 9 Vhembe FM**).*

The views above indicate the acknowledgement by both stations of the importance of mental health. This recognition led to initiatives that allow volunteers and staff to share their thoughts and receive emotional support from professionals and colleagues. They realised the significance of fostering a family-like environment where mutual support could be found.

4.4.5. Audience Engagement and Community Support

The following strategies and initiatives have been implemented to ensure community engagement and support from the audience while still following regulations and social distancing measures.

The presenter used the social media pages to stay connected with their audience, engaging them on those platforms through Facebook and WhatsApp voice notes as part of the initiative to remain engaging with the audience.

However, because we trusted our listeners, they could listen to us and do the right thing. My Facebook page was very active, which helped us to keep in contact and engage with our listeners through daily updates on the latest news regarding the pandemic. This was important because there were no gatherings then, so we had to keep them updated daily through the content on air (Participant 4 Vhembe FM).

Certain audience members wanted to visit the studio and engage with the presenters in person. However, due to constraints at the time, the only available means of interaction were through phone calls and online platforms (Participant 10 Makhado FM).

These online engagements provided an opportunity for innovation and the introduction of new segments, which increased engagement with their audiences. This gave an opportunity to the audience and presenters to maintain engagement which were educational for both on how to survive, and keep the stations updated with the latest local news with the audiences becoming more participatory in shaping the content of the shows. The following responses evidenced this:

In addition, we introduced a segment called "Makhado FM Corner," where presenters could ask questions related to COVID-19. Producers then sought individuals who could provide answers to those questions. This initiative became very popular as we received more questions from our listeners. This approach proved to be very advantageous for us (Participant 13 Makhado FM).

During that time, we tried to engage with the audience as much as possible by sharing COVID-19 awareness content to ensure their safety. We did this through social media platforms, even though we could not physically interact with them. We also used

WhatsApp voice notes for engagement while adhering to social distancing measures (Participant 14 Vhembe FM).

Section (12) “Where a community broadcasting service licensee holds any community meetings or AGMs by its constitutive document, where applicable, it shall submit a detailed plan to the Authority twenty-one (21) days before such planned meetings or AGMs, advising on the following:(a) Adherence with COVID-19 health protocols, directions and regulations as prescribed in terms of the Disaster Management Act; (b) The platform for convening such community meeting or AGM (i.e. virtual or physical); and (c) A list of the registered members who have confirmed attendance to such community meeting or AGM.” (ICASA general notice 238, 2020).

This section allows for online or virtual meetings to be submitted as evidence, including the invites, acceptance of the invite, and confirmation of intent to attend such a meeting from the audience, where possible. ICASA acknowledges the importance of innovative community media in meeting community engagement requirements whenever possible.

4.4.6. Content Adaptation

Amid the complexities brought about by the pandemic, the two community radio stations needed to adapt their content to ensure uninterrupted broadcast of public service information. They fostered strong relationships with community leaders, political figures, health professionals, and other stakeholders to remain updated and verify information. This collaborative effort, which included working closely with law enforcement officials to confirm breaking news, aimed to uphold the credibility of the community radio broadcasts.

The strategy I used involved maintaining strong relationships with my sources and contacts, including leaders in the community and government. This made things easier as I could rely on them for news and content verification through phone calls, staying updated despite limitations on gathering local information (Participant 4 Vhembe FM).

Certainly! Our initiative involved creating dedicated radio shows and interviewing healthcare professionals to educate our audience about COVID-19. We aimed to provide comprehensive information about the symptoms, preventive measures, and government regulations related to the pandemic. Given the widespread confusion and misinformation, our approach included collaborating with diverse experts to explain complex terms like social distancing and emphasise the necessary actions for the public. Through these efforts, we strived to disseminate accurate information and guidance to our audience (Participant 7 Makhado FM).

The above responses highlight the significance of community radio stations fostering strong relationships with government institutions and health professionals. This is essential to guarantee the creation of informative content containing accurate and credible information.

Given the proliferation of misinformation, it is imperative for community radio to serve as a trustworthy source of information, including conducting interviews with health professionals and government institutions to provide credible information.

During the pandemic, it was crucial to broadcast verified, credible information. Community radio worked tirelessly to combat fake news. Below are the remarks state:

*There was no huge shift in our focus, but we had to prioritise reporting on the pandemic updates. Besides that, our focus remained on keeping people informed about the news of the time, which mainly revolved around the pandemic updates. During the pandemic, we were not only inconvenienced, but it also motivated us to improve our investigative and credibility assessment skills to verify stories. We did this to provide our listeners with credible information, especially regarding the virus, to ensure that we give them the necessary education and knowledge to protect themselves and others. Our goal is to serve the community, so it is important to supply them with facts rather than rumours. We provided information on measures to protect themselves, how to behave when going outside, and the distance they must maintain (**Participant 5 Vhembe FM**).*

The above quotation highlights the importance of verifying the story before broadcasting. Community radio stations played a crucial role in creating awareness and educating people about the protective measures available while also debunking any rumours circulating about the pandemic.

Non-news programs had to quickly adapt to the environment to share the latest information about breaking stories, which typically involved ongoing developments and changing statistics and variants of the virus.

*Due to the pandemic, even non-news shows had to adjust their schedules and format to provide updates on COVID-19, ensuring that listeners were well-informed about the latest protective measures and guidelines. To stay well-informed about the pandemic, we needed to engage in ongoing research from various reputable media sources and the Department of Health. We also took the initiative to invite health professionals to the station to provide the public with comprehensive and educational information about the pandemic (**Participant 8 Makhado FM**).*

*In response to the absence of live sports, we adapted our sports shows by creating content that focused on past sports events and delved into sports history to keep our listeners engaged. This adjustment was necessary due to the lack of current sports events to report on. We also implemented interactive content related to the challenges of the pandemic, allowing listeners to share their experiences and tips for preventing the spread of the virus. This engagement took place through our online platforms and live streaming (**Participant 11 Makhado FM**).*

This means the producers and presenters must stay updated with the latest information to share and maintain good relations with the health department and other stakeholders. This will help them gain insight into the development and implications for the public.

Community media is now included in the National Disaster regulations, which have been amended to specify content regulations. These regulations allow community media to publish up to 45% of content on multiple sites beyond the original source, increasing its reach and visibility. Section (7) “Programme syndication must not exceed forty-five per cent (45%) per week of a broadcasting service licensee’s programming.” This provision grants reputable publishers and broadcasters’ access to information about the pandemic. It aims to keep people informed and educated by raising awareness about protective measures tested and approved by the health department and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

4.4.7. Collaboration and Partnerships

The research participants indicated no formal collaborations or partnerships were established among community radio stations. The only form of cooperation observed was sharing information, stories, and experiences related to managing the pandemic and sharing the latest updates among staff and volunteers. While community radio stations did share a feed to broadcast the State of the Nation address by the president to their audiences, this was done as a formal endeavour but did not qualify as a collaborative partnership.

*There was little formal collaboration among other community radio stations. Perhaps only the sharing of information and stories between broadcasters from different stations, but no formal arrangements were in place (**Participant 1 Vhembe FM**).*

*Collaboration was limited, perhaps only once or twice, when sharing the feed. Local community radio stations would typically access the president's national address by sharing the feed (**Participant 2 Vhembe FM**).*

*Information sharing extended to creating groups, allowing broadcasters from different stations in the Vhembe area to share stories and updates on WhatsApp. We used to share information on how each station dealt with the situation, which helped us find ways to cope with the pandemic and maintain broadcasting for the community (**Participant 10 Makhado FM**).*

One participant suggested collaborating with stations to implement a simulcast, enabling a shared broadcast between stations A and B to address staff absenteeism. Another participant

from the same station mentioned that an attempt was made, but it failed because the transmission range was too short to reach the other station's audiences.

The lack of collaboration between community radio stations meant they could not share expertise or resources, leading to lower efficiency and limited skills transfer. However, Makhado FM collaborated with other stations through simulcasting to overcome staffing shortages.

*During the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic, we actively pursued collaborative efforts with other radio stations to engage in simulcast broadcasting. This innovative approach allowed us to overcome the presenter's shortage by leveraging multiple stations' resources. By teaming up with other broadcasters, station A could transmit from its facility while connecting with station B, effectively reaching two distinct audiences. Additionally, these partnerships provided valuable insights and perspectives from different regions, enabling us to share diverse viewpoints and gather ground-level feedback. These initiatives proved to be instrumental in addressing our challenges during that time **(Participant 7 Makhado FM)**.*

While the quotation above indicates that there was still some form of collaboration taking place between community radio stations, this collaboration was far more limited compared to what was happening before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following remarks indicate an attempt by the station to collaborate with other stations, but infrastructure limitations prevented this from happening as the transmitter was not able to reach its target audiences due to its limited range. The shared remarks are as follows:

*We wanted to propose a collaboration with other stations, suggesting that some of our presenters could broadcast at stations closer to them. However, we realised this plan would not work well, as some stations did not reach certain areas due to transmitter limitations **(Participant 13 Makhado FM)**.*

The quotations underscore the significance of infrastructure development and technological advancement in community radio stations to enable collaborative initiatives. Infrastructure challenges have impeded collaboration, making it essential to establish official agreements with full support from station management. Despite these challenges, staff and volunteers have shown flexibility in working with other broadcasters to share information and stories.

4.5. Conclusion

This chapter shared insights from interviews with the staff, volunteers, and management at Makhado FM and Vhembe. It focused on the various challenges these community radio stations encountered, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the strategies they implemented to navigate this difficult period. The challenges highlighted include financial difficulties, issues related to staffing and the workforce, difficulties in engaging with the audience, regulatory hurdles, accessibility problems, health and wellness concerns, as well as technical and infrastructural obstacles. The research also uncovered several adverse effects on the stations, including financial strain, regulatory complications, diminished audience interaction, health impacts, and challenges in programming and content production. Furthermore, the study outlined the coping mechanisms employed by the stations, which involved financial sustainability tactics, flexibility among staff and volunteers, technological advancements, enhanced community engagement, content modifications, and establishing collaborations and partnerships. The following chapter delves into these findings, leveraging existing literature and theoretical perspectives to offer a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by these two community radio stations during the pandemic.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1. Introduction

The previous chapter presented, interpreted, and analysed data collected through in-depth interviews with purposively selected staff members of the two community radio stations under study, Makhado FM and Vhembe FM. This chapter discusses the study's findings to provide deeper insights into the challenges faced by the two community radio stations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reviewed literature and the theoretical framework are incorporated in this chapter as lenses to illuminate the study findings. The media sustainability model and media development theory are used in this chapter to explain study findings concerning sustainability challenges of the radio stations under study during the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion of findings is organised according to the research objectives, which speak to challenges faced by the two community radio stations during the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of the pandemic on the sustainability of these community radio stations, lastly, the coping strategies employed to survive the pandemic.

5.2. FINDINGS RELATING TO CHALLENGES

The research findings revealed that financial constraints posed a significant challenge for the two community radio stations. This was primarily due to reduced or lost advertising revenue as most businesses had closed, leading to a decrease in marketing investment. The uncertainty surrounding the pandemic's duration and its impact on future business operations further undermined Makhado FM's and Vhembe FM's financial stability. Both stations experienced increasing expenses alongside declining revenue, prompting concerns about operational costs, including staff salaries. According to the Euromedia Research Group (2020), European media markets witnessed a 30 to 50 per cent disappearance in advertising revenue during the initial lockdown in March 2020. Posetti et al. (2020) highlighted that most respondents experienced drastic revenue losses during the COVID-19 period, with revenue plummeting by as much as 75 per cent in some cases. In many corporate organisations, advertising is often the first casualty of budget cuts during challenging times (Rajan, 2020). Community media was in a financial crisis as the drop in advertising and marketing investment from businesses meant a drop in their revenue stream, including donations and sponsorships.

Advertising income collapsed—in some instances down by 50–75%, partly because of companies reducing their advertising budgets and social media’s dominance of online advertising (Trifonova-Price and Antonova, 2024: 121).

Government regulations presented challenges in adjusting to new operations. Transportation was limited to only seven passengers, and a curfew was imposed, restricting free movement. In response to the viral outbreak, many governments in Southern Africa implemented strict measures, such as national lockdowns, mandatory and voluntary quarantines, travel restrictions, and social distancing (SADC, 2020). Limited access to news and information was flagged as one of the constraints faced by journalists during COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns (Chari and Mabokela, 2022). In a study conducted by Chari and Mabokela (2022), one of the participants shared a similar experience with law enforcement official, stating that:

The curfew made it difficult for us to chase stories and arrange interviews. The time limits negatively impacted the quality of the stories covered. The police would, at times, stop and interrogate us (Chari and Mabokela, 2022: 11).

Studies on daily journalism practices suggest that the crisis changed the routines of journalists, requiring them to quickly adapt to new schedules, master remote production tools, experiment with new content formats, and take on new responsibilities that were not part of their daily lives before the pandemic (Trifonova-Price and Antonova, 2024). The new regulations caused scheduling and staffing challenges for the two community radio stations, leading to increased absenteeism and a manpower shortage. This forced the remaining staff to work longer hours without sufficient rest. Studies also shared similar views of schedule changes, which were adapted to the time and are in line with the findings of the respondents who saw the new department being subjected to a weekly schedule and remotely working through records to report on the latest news. Matsilele et al. (2022) stated that:

The sports, entertainment, and features desk were instructed to work from home, while news reporters were assigned rotating on-duty schedules (Matsilele et al., 2022: 275).

This led to news readers scheduling a weekly rotation to comply with pandemic regulations and health safety measures in place. Journalism was considered an “essential or emergency service” in Southern Africa, and journalists were classified as “essential workers” (UNESCO: 2020). Law enforcement officials also faced difficulties in determining who qualified as essential workers. The study's findings show that staff or volunteers scheduled to work during the night shift struggled with transport and had to explain to law enforcement officials, who

sometimes did not understand or misinterpreted the law regarding essential workers. This aligns with a UNESCO study which indicated that:

In fact, journalism is indeed an essential service, and journalists are to be considered as essential workers, stressed Ms Santana Afonso (UNESCO, 2020 4th Webinar series).

The COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges for community radio stations in engaging their audience while adhering to health-protective measures. Annual general meetings (AGMs) are a requirement for community radio station license renewal, but pandemic restrictions on gatherings made holding these meetings impractical. In response, ICASA made amendments on April 6th, 2020, exempting community media from AGM requirements. Additionally, Bosch (2003) and Manyozo (2011) emphasised the significance of effective communication at all levels for such developments to occur, underscoring the valuable role of community radio stations in engaging listeners in substantive discussions. However, this exemption posed a challenge for community radio stations as their usual audience interactions through outdoor broadcasting activities were cancelled to prevent the spread of the virus. It was noted that:

The suspension in sub-regulation (9) will automatically cease upon the expiry of the National State of Disaster. (11) Community broadcasting service licensees that were due to hold any meetings or AGMs with their respective communities during the period of the National State of Disaster, and it was not possible for them to hold the community meetings or AGMs, must hold such community meetings or AGMs within three (3) months after the expiry of the National State of Disaster (ICT Covid-19 National Disaster regulations General Notice 661 of 2021: 09).

Research indicates that the media plays a pivotal role in achieving public health outcomes, such as public education, changing attitudes, and influencing health behaviour, ultimately contributing to social sustainability. Foundational principles of community media, including ownership, community participation, service to the community, and independence, are stressed by Buckley (2013:11) and Fairbairn (2009). Rodríguez (2011) advocates for further research into the untapped potential of community radio in the realm of social change communication, presenting an area for exploration. Additionally, "studies into community radio must critically challenge and interrogate the participatory and alternative outcomes to reveal the medium's potential, as well as its limitations" (Fox, 2019). It is understood that journalism is an activity based on "contact with sources of information", meaning that COVID-19 pandemic requirements for social isolation constitute a big obstacle to ethical news gathering (Massarani

et al., 2021). In this case, the findings show limited resources for audience engagement during a global pandemic and financial crisis.

This was also supported by Chari and Mabokela (2022), who indicated that:

While the implementation of national lockdowns was justified on the grounds of the public interest, their restrictions on mobility dealt a big blow to ethical journalism, whose essence is hinged on access to credible information and news sources (Chari and Mabokela, 2022: 2).

According to some scholars (Mare, 2020; Olsen et al., 2020; Pickard, 2020), the pandemic has had a significant impact on news production, distribution, consumption, and business models. The COVID-19 pandemic posed a major challenge for two community radio stations. Movement restrictions and regulations made gathering and verifying local news stories difficult. Relying on government or health officials' press conferences limited the scope of questions and impacted news reporting and audience engagement. The widespread sharing of content on social media (Park et al., 2021), often without proper oversight, has led to an increase in the battle against misinformation (Silva-Rodríguez, 2021). Content diversity suffered as the dominance of COVID-19-related topics increased due to limited access to information and the absence of public events. Conducting interviews became more challenging, with time constraints and high production costs due to revenue decline. Trifonova-Price and Antonova (2024) assert that:

In relation to daily journalism practice, there is emerging evidence that the crisis changed the routines of journalists who had to quickly adapt to new schedules, master remote production tools, experiment with new formats for generating content, and adopt new responsibilities that were not part of their daily lives before the pandemic (Trifonova-Price and Antonova, 2024: 124).

Financial limitations restricted the ability to engage in thorough discussions and deepen the understanding of the issues at hand. Community radio stations, recognised as reliable sources of information, encountered challenges in obtaining accurate data in an environment where misinformation proliferated. Research has shown that media significantly influences public health outcomes, including awareness, shifts in attitudes, and changes in health behaviours (Ahmad and Murad, 2020; Mheidly and Fares, 2020; Wakefield et al., 2010), ultimately fostering social sustainability (De Las Heras-Pedrosa et al., 2020). The media plays an essential part in conveying information regarding pandemics and associated health risks (Denecke and

Nejdl, 2009). However, they frequently do not clarify the specific health risks associated with pandemics.

Moreover, journalists, videographers, and photographers had to prioritise their health and safety by using personal protective equipment and adhering to hygiene protocols to curb the spread of the coronavirus (Matsilele et al., 2022). This research highlighted the health challenges faced by the staff and volunteers of two community radio stations. The situation was further complicated by the loss of loved ones among the staff and the anxiety surrounding potential infections, fostering a climate of distrust and isolation that led to depression—a significant mental health issue, especially in rural South Africa, where mental health discussions are often lacking. The fears and uncertainties surrounding the virus, coupled with the anxiety and stress resulting from lockdowns and social distancing, intensified mental health struggles across various segments of society (Su et al., 2021). Su et al. emphasise that:

During a worldwide crisis, mental health challenges can significantly impact both individual and public well-being. These issues can lead to a range of serious outcomes, including anxiety, distress, depression, and even thoughts of suicide or actual suicide (Su et al., 2021: 2).

The anxiety and fear stemming from misinformation related to COVID-19 may have lasting effects on individuals' mental health, extending beyond the media cycles surrounding the pandemic (Su et al., 2021). Staff and volunteers at community radio stations regularly exposed to such misleading information developed a heightened fear of interacting with others, driven by concerns about infection and the potential loss of loved ones. A survey conducted by the US Census Bureau noted that over 42% of respondents displayed symptoms of depression and increased anxiety in December 2020, marking an 11% rise compared to the previous year (Su et al., 2021). The findings from the study echoed the sentiments of participants, who reported experiencing mental health struggles, feelings of isolation, fears of illness, and grieving over lost loved ones. This highlights a gap in media research, as most studies fail to address the specific challenges faced by media professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, accessing technical support was challenging, which made it difficult to address any technical issues that arose. Community radio stations faced challenges with limited transmitter range and lack of internet infrastructure, which restricted their audience reach, especially in rural areas. Digital technology played a crucial role in facilitating virtual social connections and teleworking opportunities during the crisis (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021).

Efforts to reduce absenteeism were hindered by transmission range limitations, leading to difficulties in collaborative efforts. The pandemic highlighted the infrastructure and technology obstacles faced by community media, particularly community radio stations with limited resources and financial support. The study findings confirm the infrastructure and technological challenges they faced during the pandemic while adapting to the new media practice for remote working. Scholars share the sentiment of a need to improve infrastructure and technological access to adapt to the new reality posed by the pandemic and future challenges.

It has been a new modality of what can be labelled as remote journalism, which now presents the opportunity to address their needs in infrastructure, services, tools and responsibilities to assess their momentum and permanence as an alternative way of producing audio-visual information ([Vaz-Álvarez](#) and [Fieiras-Ceide](#), 2020: 14).

Another issue is that bad Internet connectivity made telephone and virtual interviews unbearable (Chari and Mabokela, 2022: 11).

The above quotation demonstrates the infrastructure challenges that community media faced during the pandemic, which contributed to the difficulties of the sustainable public service that they serve. The bad internet connection made things challenging during interviews, particularly with remote work plans that had been put in place to remain operational, which affected the quality of the content production.

5.3. FINDINGS ON COVID 19 AND ITS IMPACTS

Both Vhembe FM and Makhado FM faced financial constraints that impacted their ability to cover operational costs and fulfil their public service obligations. Olsen et al. (2020, 674) point out:

The COVID-19 pandemic is severely impacting the advertising industry, which is crucial for supporting news production.

This situation weakens the capacity of the news media to provide unbiased reporting (UNESCO, 2020). A decline in revenue, primarily caused by decreased financial backing from businesses due to lower advertising, donations, and sponsorship cuts, forced organisations to make financial changes. As a result, many had to reduce salaries for staff or volunteers and adjust production efforts to cut costs. Alade and Sanusi (2022: 121) pointed out that:

Journalists indicated that their working allowances were insufficient to meet the increased expenses (e.g., buying large amounts of data, commuting in private taxis) incurred while discharging their duties (Alade and Sanusi, 2022: 121).

The above quotation supports the findings of this study in which one of the participants stated that they relied on buses for transport since they stayed far away and at the time, regulations suspended bus operations, which meant they had to use taxis which are expensive, and they would not travel a long distance, which contributed the absenteeism and late comings. Community media, reliant on volunteers, requires more flexibility in implementing salary reductions, especially in the face of competition for talent from commercial and public mainstream media. Previously, some newspapers in Uganda were sustained by subsidies from media outlets like the New Vision newspaper (Muhindo, 2020). Some staff or volunteers had their salaries cut in half despite working long hours. Additionally, Makhado FM struggled to maintain payments for transmission fees and the facility housing their transmitter, which was located on private property. The two stations needed to adjust their content production costs due to the limitations of conducting interviews. With the shift to telephonic interviews, their telephone bills increased, potentially impacting the quality of their content. Additionally, remote operations incurred extra costs as they had to find alternative recording devices to ensure high-quality sound. Kyeyune, quoted in Dralega and Napakol (2022, 5), states that:

In Uganda, the New Vision cut staff salaries by up to 60%. Its competitor, the Daily Monitor, also reduced staff salaries by up to 35% (Kyeyune quoted in Dralega and Napakol, 2022: 5).

The impact of regulations and policies on Vhembe FM and Makhado FM has notably disrupted their daily functions and content creation, especially when it comes to local news coverage. The field of traditional journalism has seen considerable shifts, influencing both the quality of reporting and ethical practices (Matsilele et al., 2022). It is important to acknowledge that not all news is reliable (Ruchansky et al., 2017; Zubiaga et al., 2018), highlighting the crucial role of media in fostering understanding and security within communities, regardless of their circumstances. Transport restrictions, such as curfews and limits on passengers, have created difficulties for the volunteers and staff of these community radio stations in getting to work on time. Additionally, Ali (2020) noted that during the pandemic, online platforms emerged as significant sources of misinformation, showcasing how digital media could hinder efforts to manage the COVID-19 crisis (Chari and Ufuoma, 2021). These regulations have placed a heavy burden on those who travel long distances and mainly depend on buses, forcing them to

find alternative means of transport or limiting their access to verified information. Chari and Ufuoma (2020) point out that:

Implementation of non-pharmaceutical interventions to curb the pandemic, such as staying at home, working from home, social isolation, social distancing and restrictions on travel, have increased the use of social media by journalists who cannot access their traditional sources of news (Chari and Ufuoma, 2020: 308).

The regulations and restrictions on content production significantly limited volunteers and staff from accessing information and engaging with the community for news gatherings. This affected the credibility of the community radio station, particularly when attempting to investigate stories during the curfew period. The regulations also challenged the operational policy of the two radio stations, as they prohibited live interviews and restricted studio access to only one person. As a result, remote engagement became necessary, affecting the quality of content and the ability to engage with audiences and guests effectively. Additionally, the regulations led to the suspension of co-hosting, disrupting the engaging content of the shows. This meant that whoever was scheduled for the show had to take on the responsibility alone, with the co-host assisting remotely and the producer. The research findings reveal that the pandemic significantly impacted programming and content production, particularly in terms of the themes of the shows. This resulted in the integration of COVID-19 pandemic-related news into all programming and content production. Dutta (2011) emphasises that community media must offer content distinct from mainstream media and advocate for social change. The widespread sharing of content on social media (Park et al., 2021), often without proper oversight, has intensified the battle against misinformation (Silva-Rodríguez, 2021).

Park et al. (2021) points out that:

Social media platforms play a vital role in quickly disseminating research, which can also help reduce misinformation. Additionally, they offer valuable perspectives on public discussions (Park et al., 2021: 2).

Similarly, SANEF (2020) contend that:

Radio listenership, and along with that radio news audience, seems robust, though measurement problems prevented precise tracking. Using ad spending as a proxy, radio might have suffered a slight decline in 2021 to TV's benefit (SANEF, 2020: 6).

The changes in listenership were complex and largely shaped by public interest, particularly related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Both radio stations acknowledged that their limited content

diversity may have played a role in the decline of their audience numbers. Media outlets are considered vital tools for combating misinformation and fake news regarding COVID-19 by delivering accurate and factual details about the virus, its symptoms, causes, and ways to prevent infection (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2022). Furthermore, research has shown that the pandemic spurred a greater appetite for news across both traditional and digital platforms as people looked for trustworthy information to help ease their anxiety and better understand the evolving situation (García-Avilés et al., 2024). Interestingly, while some respondents reported a decline in internship opportunities due to a lack of content variety, others saw an increase driven by the demand for credible and reliable information. Additionally, the pandemic had a significant negative impact on the mental health of staff and volunteers, leading to trust issues among colleagues and diminishing team morale.

García-Avilés et al. (2024, 182) state that:

The need to obtain reliable information about the pandemic, reduce anxiety, and understand its consequences has stimulated an increase in the demand for news, both in legacy and digital media.

Similarly, Clemente-Suárez et al. (2022, 9) assert that:

Throughout the pandemic, vital information about the virus was shared widely, reaching a large audience through various channels. Communication experts, healthcare workers, politicians, science communicators, virologists, and journalists all offered their perspectives on the situation. This environment of public uncertainty, coupled with the ease of sharing information while many were at home, led to the rapid spread of unverified news reports. Unfortunately, these reports often lacked adequate verification from public health professionals and were sometimes based on flawed or untested scientific claims.

However, Fernández-Quijada and Speck, 2020 quoted in [Vaz-Álvarez, Fieiras-Ceide](#) (2020: 14) share a different perspective on the listenership impact:

Radio consumption habits were modified by the confinement; fewer people listened to it, but listeners stayed engaged longer, mainly focused on the news.

The anxiety and uncertainty brought about by the virus, along with the stress and anxiety from lockdowns and social distancing measures, have intensified mental health challenges across society (Su et al., 2021). During global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, effective communication is crucial to alleviate fear and uncertainty while bringing people together in a united effort against the illness (Su et al., 2021). This situation has led to increased feelings of

isolation, as interactions with coworkers were limited to help prevent virus transmission. Additionally, journalists faced their own fears of contracting COVID-19, which hindered their ability to gather information and connect with news sources (Chari and Mabokela, 2022).

Chari and Mabokela (2022, 14) shared similar views when they indicated that:

Journalistic discourses on health risks demonstrated that fear of contracting the coronavirus negatively impacted the 'health' of journalism since journalists had to devise alternative and, in some cases, unorthodox ways of obtaining information to fulfil their social mandate.

In line with Asamah (2011) and the media development theory, the challenges and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on community radio stations have compromised the mandate of community media, leading to marginalised groups being underrepresented. The pandemic has undermined the operational practices of community media and limited their ability to broadcast local news, with a dominance of COVID-19-related news.

McQuail (1987), cited in Akpobo (2015: 3) states that:

Media should embrace and undertake positive development initiatives that align with established national policies. Press freedom can be subject to certain limitations based on the economic priorities and developmental needs of society. Media outlets should prioritise news and information that connect with other nearby developing countries, whether geographically, culturally, or politically. To support development goals, the government is entitled to intervene in or impose restrictions on media operations, and the use of censorship, subsidies, and direct regulation can be deemed appropriate. Journalists and media professionals hold both responsibilities and rights in their roles related to gathering and sharing information.

From this perspective, if a government is committed to the welfare of its people, public ownership and control of the media would be the most conducive path for progress. Similarly, Oneko (1996) argued that commercial newspapers primarily focus on profit-making and are unlikely to cater to small linguistic groups by publishing newspapers. Government intervention is necessary to address this gap, which affects media sustainability and aligns with the Media Sustainability model. This model evaluates a company's social, environmental, and financial performance, all of which are crucial to sustainable development (Cooper, 2002).

According to Brundtland et al.) cited in Ukko et al. (2019: 322) states that:

Sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The quotation highlights the importance of media achieving sustainable development to maintain its societal role, particularly in advocating for marginalised communities moving forward. However, the COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to the sustainability of community media. The study findings revealed that this was a difficult time that undermined the ability of community radio stations to fulfil their responsibilities, which are essential for ensuring sustainable development for future generations.

Sustainability is a three-legged stool, with a leg each representing ecosystem, economy and society. Any leg missing from the ‘sustainability stool’ will cause instability because society, the economy and the ecosystem are intricately linked together, Young (1997). Aligned with the Media sustainability model, Community media was affected economically with limited revenue from advertising and donations as businesses continue; community media was affected economically with limited revenue from advertising and donations as businesses continued to reduce their marketing and advertising budget. This affected community media sustainability as new costs emerged due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and regulations to keep their staff and volunteers safe while remaining operational in their role to represent the marginalised community. This came at a cost as community media were forced to implement salary cuts and lay off some staff and Volunteers.

5.4. FINDINGS RELATING TO COPING STRATEGIES

The findings reveal the financial strategies adopted by Makhado FM and Vhembe to sustain themselves during the pandemic. Initially, Makhado FM secured funding through the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) relief grant, covering operational expenses such as electricity, transmission fees, and staff stipends. The MDDA provided significant emergency funding during the pandemic in addition to its regular annual spending (Rumney, 2022). For community radio, this funding included grants from the government, money from commercial broadcasters channelled through the MDDA, donations, and advertising (Rumney, 2022). Muswede (2009:64) notes that section 17 of the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) empowers the MDDA to find media organisations through subsidies and emergency bridging finance to ensure the survival of media organisations. Olaoye and Onyenankaya (2023) note how community radio stations are sustained through government grants and advertisements.

Vhembe FM implemented a strategy where advertisers competed for the opportunity to market their products in 30-second slots, with the potential to win rewards such as a 50% discount on future advertising campaigns. Additionally, operational businesses received a 65% discounted rate on their adverts, enabling them to generate income during a challenging economic period. Community radio, with the increasing adoption of digital technology, found an opportunity to capitalise on digital marketing. Traditional media experienced a more substantial decline of 12.3%, while digital advertisement spending increased by 4.5% (Euromedia Research Group, 2020). They also leveraged social media marketing to promote businesses at a minimal cost, resulting in increased audience engagement and immediate feedback on the effectiveness of the advertisements. Embracing technology, such as community radio, can expand audience reach, especially among tech-savvy youth, for the distribution of public service information and advocacy in historically disadvantaged rural areas of South Africa (Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés, 2020). Social media such as Facebook played a crucial role in maintaining engagements with their audience on their COVID-19 experiences. Zarella (2010), cited in Balaraba (2020: 181), indicated that:

Social networking platforms are currently a major focus for marketers because they offer various ways to engage with customers, such as through application plugins and fan pages.

Similarly, Balaraba (2020: 180-181) asserts that:

The use of WhatsApp and Instagram for advertising has opened up new opportunities for small businesses and individuals to sell and promote a wide range of products and services. These platforms allow sellers to reach potential buyers across different regions quickly and conveniently. Media organisations are also enhancing their business operations through online advertisements, and various online marketplaces like Amazon, Flipkart, Snapdeal, and AliExpress provide a platform for businesses to thrive, facilitating the sale and purchase of goods and services.

The findings primarily demonstrate how staff and volunteers at community radio stations adapted to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, both stations implemented a remote working strategy, allowing the news department staff to work from remote locations. This demonstrates how traditional media organisations have invested in digital platforms to support journalists and media personnel working remotely during the lockdown (Mugisha, 2020). They recorded their segments and shared them through dedicated WhatsApp groups created for production purposes. Similarly, sports presenters transitioned to remote work and provided updates on new developments. This shows how

media has been used to promote social and behavioural change within communities and dispel rumours, myths, and disinformation regarding the virus (Samuelsson et al., 2020). Further information and clarification were disseminated through community radio programs in the digitalised era (Scheepers et al., 2004). According to Camus (2020), the pandemic has significantly transformed journalism, impacting both its practice and business model. The staff and volunteers demonstrated adaptability by embracing new technologies for content production, such as conducting interviews over the phone instead of in person. During the crisis, digital technology played a pivotal role in facilitating virtual social connections and teleworking opportunities (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021). Studies on daily journalism practices suggest that there is increasing evidence that the crisis has changed the routines of journalists, requiring them to quickly adapt to new schedules, master remote production tools, experiment with new content formats, and take on new responsibilities that were not part of their daily lives before the pandemic (Trifonova-Price, and Antonova, 2024).

According to Newman (2021) cited in Casero-Ripollés (2021:59):

The current health crisis has accelerated the shift towards digital transformation in media organisations, leading to a decentralisation of journalistic work that increasingly reduces reliance on traditional newsrooms. This trend suggests that labour flexibility in the industry may grow, resulting in the development of new types of contracts between journalists and media companies. We can also anticipate a significant rise in the use of digital technologies in the news production process, along with further decentralisation and off-shoring.

The strategies mentioned include implementing flexible working arrangements, providing personal protective equipment for staff, distributing media products through digital channels, offering data bundles and devices for staff, exploring alternative funding models, and using conferencing platforms to conduct interviews (Santos and Mare, 2021). Additionally, reporters, videographers, and photographers prioritised health and safety by using personal protective equipment and following hygiene guidelines to prevent the spread of the coronavirus (Matsilelet al, 2022). Mental health is a challenge that needs to be addressed. The two stations sought to find alternative methods to deal with the challenge by seeking assistance from religious leaders and having mental health professionals that their staff could access to assist. Medical schools around the world provide triage and consultation through satellite telephones and video calls. Telepsychiatry has more potential than telemedicine in providing remote care (Hassankhani et al., 2021). Hassankhani et al (2021:6) states that:

As there are limited places and services for mental health remedies and consultations in their vicinity, telepsychiatry plays a critical role in post-trauma recovery.

The two radio stations set up a platform for their staff and volunteers to express their emotions and share their experiences, which can help combat feelings of isolation and loneliness. During the pandemic and its challenges, it was crucial for community radio stations to work together to maintain their operations. Research shows that newsrooms have adopted various technologies to improve organisational processes (Kosterich and Weber, 2019) and to foster collaborative editorial practices (Carson and Farhall, 2018), ultimately enhancing their creative output (Malmelin and Virta, 2016). However, the efforts for collaboration faced obstacles related to infrastructure, such as limited internet access in remote rural areas and transmission range issues, which meant that information was only shared from a broadcasting perspective. As noted by García-Avilés et al. (2024, 1257):

Teleworking in virtual newsrooms increased collaboration and promoted a more flexible interaction between management and their employees. At the same time, the consolidation of remote working has brought unprecedented organisational change to newsrooms, accelerating digital transformation.

The above quotation illustrates that the adaptation of remote working and engagement with media organisations, which also made it possible to collaborate with other institutions, was possible. Production continues remotely, which aligns with the findings of the study, which revealed that the news department and sports presenters adapted remote working through recording, which was shared within WhatsApp groups that were utilised to share content production, and teleworking for interviews and receiving the latest updates with colleagues working remotely. This shows that the COVID-19 pandemic fast-tracked the adaptation of new technology in daily operations, content production, and audience engagement as well.

According to Brundtland, Khalid, Agnelli et al. (1987: 08), "sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Community media should be developed in a way that addresses the current community needs and those of future generations. This can be done through technological advancement which requires the government to put in place regulations, and financial support that will ensure that community media are in a better position to transform their operation incorporating modern technology such as social media as their marketing and

communication tool which will offer them unlimited space for advertisers to promote their brands with community Media increasing their revenue streams.

5.5. Conclusion

This chapter discussed findings from the study based on in-depth interviews held with staff members of the two community radio stations, Makhado FM and Vhembe FM. Findings from the study shed insights into the nature of challenges faced by the two community radio stations during the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of the pandemic on the stations, and their coping strategies. Some of the challenges discussed include financial constraints, Schedule and Workforce Challenges, Regulatory and Operational Limitations, Audience Engagement and Accessibility, Health and Wellness Challenges on Staff, Content Production Challenges, and Technical and Infrastructure Challenges.

The study revealed that financial instability was the major challenge to decreased advertising revenue and donations, as businesses shuttered during lockdowns. Health and safety regulations also necessitated operational changes, leading to reduced studio capacity and increased workload for remaining staff, further exacerbated by staff shortages. Despite these challenges, the resilience demonstrated by the stations underscores the critical role community radio plays in maintaining communication and cohesion in times of crisis. The pandemic's challenge and impact align with the media sustainability model that frames this study. The findings indicate matters of maintaining sustainability in the media, both financial and operational. Media development theory aligns with the findings as the adaptation of technology in the community radio stations shows the developmental role played through the innovation of coping strategies. This study contributes to understanding the pandemic's impact on community media in South Africa and, by extension, Africa and points to the need for strategies to support these vital entities in navigating future challenges. The next chapter, which is the final chapter, provides a summary of the findings, conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the research findings, integrating them with existing literature and the theoretical framework to enhance understanding of challenges faced by the two community radio stations under study, namely Makhado FM and Vhembe FM. This chapter summarises findings from the study, draws conclusions from the study, and gives recommendations based on the study findings. These recommendations help the community radio stations to address future challenges and maintain sustainability, ensuring their continued commitment to advocating for marginalised communities. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the limitations of the study and provides directions for future studies.

6.2. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

6.2.1. Difficulties that community radio stations in South Africa encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic

The research highlighted the various challenges faced by two community radio stations, Vhembe FM and Makhado FM, because of the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges encompassed financial difficulties, issues with scheduling and staffing, regulatory hurdles, audience engagement and accessibility obstacles, health and wellness concerns, struggles with content creation, and technical and infrastructure problems. The pandemic caused many businesses to shut down, leading to a decline in advertising revenue and marketing funds, which threatened the financial stability of community radio stations. While operational costs rose, income fell, forcing the stations to make cuts to salaries and allowances for both staff and volunteers. A report by the Euromedia Research Group (2020) indicated that European media markets saw a 30 to 50 per cent drop in advertising revenue during the initial lockdown in March 2020. Similarly, Posetti et al. (2020) noted that many respondents reported significant revenue declines during the COVID-19 crisis, with some even experiencing drops of up to 75 per cent. This was largely due to businesses facing uncertainty about the future and hence refraining from investing in marketing and advertising, especially if they were not operational during that period.

The study also revealed scheduling and workforce challenges, which resulted in community radio stations facing absenteeism and shortage of staff, as some of the staff and volunteers would face transport challenges that forced them to arrive late at work. In contrast, others had to be laid off or leave their jobs since they could not afford to pay their stipends, implementing salary cuts. For example, findings from Vision Group in Uganda, which is partly government-owned, halted the publication of three regional newspapers in local languages which are Orumuri, Etop, and Rupiny, laid off the staff associated with these publications (Muhindo, 2020), which aligns with the findings of the study.

Government regulations further complicated their operations, especially for staff and volunteers who relied on public transport. Curfews and passenger limits made travel difficult, affecting those commuting from distant locations. These constraints disrupted regular schedules, resulting in increased absenteeism and extended working hours for remaining staff, particularly presenters. Despite being classified as essential workers, media personnel faced challenges justifying their presence during restrictions, especially during night shifts. In response to the viral outbreak, many governments in Southern Africa implemented strict measures, such as national lockdowns, mandatory and voluntary quarantines, travel restrictions, and social distancing (SADC, 2020). The devastating impact of COVID-19, its global reach, plummeting oil prices, stock market instability, the widespread cancellation of political, sports, and business events, flight cancellations, restricted travel, and government directives to mitigate the virus have stirred widespread panic among populations (Sadhna and Hawaldar, 2020; Mejia et al., 2020).

The ability to produce and program content was also adversely affected, as movement restrictions made it challenging to verify local news, leading to greater reliance on government updates. This reliance diminished the variety of content, heavily concentrating on COVID-19-related news and addressing misinformation on social media. Live interviews shifted to phone calls as a workaround, complicating operations even more. Journalists faced significant obstacles in accessing news and information during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Chari and Mabokela, 2022). Moreover, mental health issues surfaced as staff and volunteers dealt with feelings of distrust, isolation, and depression stemming from reduced community engagement and fears surrounding infection. The absence of sufficient technical support amplified these challenges, as key technical staff were not classified as essential during the pandemic. This had a detrimental effect on teamwork, particularly for shows that rely on interaction between co-

hosts and interns, often leaving presenters to work solo in studios. The anxiety and distress caused by misinformation related to COVID-19 could leave a lasting impact on mental health long after the media attention on the pandemic has faded (Su et al., 2021). Community radio stations in rural South Africa faced intensified challenges, such as limited transmitter reach and poor internet infrastructure, while trying to adapt to remote work and new broadcasting technologies. Increased absenteeism and resource shortages added to these difficulties, highlighting the struggles faced by these stations during the crisis. The combination of remote working and phone interviews was further hampered by connectivity issues, which compromised content quality and limited the information exchanged between audiences and presenters. Despite these obstacles, digital technology emerged as a vital tool for maintaining virtual connections and enabling teleworking during this challenging period (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021).

6.3.2. Determining how the COVID-19 pandemic affected certain community radio stations in South Africa

The findings highlight the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the two community radio stations. Key areas affected include financial impact. This is because the pandemic caused financial instability for the stations, making it challenging for them to meet financial obligations. Staffing and workforce impact: the working conditions for staff and volunteers were altered, leading to increased workloads and mandatory overtime, often accompanied by pay cuts. Regulatory and Policy impact and restrictions on operational freedom limited the stations' ability to investigate local stories, hampering their journalistic efforts. Programming and content production programming became more focused on COVID-19-related news due to restricted access to other news sources and the cancellation of public events. Audience engagement and listenership, changes in regulatory compliance requirements by ICASA, including the suspension of Annual General Meetings to curb virus spread, affected listener engagement. Health and well-being: staff and volunteers faced mental health challenges, including feelings of isolation and depression.

Due to a reduction in advertising revenue, Vhembe FM and Makhado FM encountered financial challenges that hindered their operational capacity and ability to meet public service commitments. This situation adversely affected the salaries and stipends of staff and volunteers, who were required to work longer hours to adjust to the new scheduling, and remote Working impacts operational costs and financial sustainability. For example, in Nigeria,

journalists at Dandal Kura International, an independent radio network, were earning about \$100 per month but faced salary reductions. As a result, a third of the radio's staff had to stay at home with an 80% pay cut (Krippahl, 2020). In South Africa, several media houses were forced to implement salary cuts, while others shut down completely (Krippahl, 2020). Consequently, staff and volunteers experienced salary cuts, while Makhado FM struggled to pay monthly transmission fees, and the costs associated with housing its transmitter in a private facility. Journalists indicated that their working allowances were insufficient to meet the increased expenses (e.g., buying large amounts of data, commuting in private taxis) incurred while discharging their duties (Alade and Sanusi, 2022). The necessary operational adjustments also impacted their telephone bills, resulting in a shift from live interviews to telephonic interviews. Furthermore, remote working necessitated additional equipment to ensure sound quality, negatively affecting their financial sustainability. They faced increasing operational expenses amidst a decline in revenue following businesses' cancellation of advertising and marketing investments.

The recent changes in regulations and policies have significantly influenced the operations and local content production at Vhembe FM and Makhado FM, particularly in terms of the quality of reporting and adherence to ethical standards. New transport regulations have made it difficult for community radio staff and volunteers to travel, resulting in higher rates of absenteeism and lateness. This situation has disrupted scheduling and led to a need for overtime to fill shifts while staff faced pay cuts and inadequate rest. The world of traditional journalism has seen major shifts, affecting both how news is reported and the ethical frameworks that guide it (Matsilele et al., 2022). It's crucial to recognise that not all news is reliable (Ruchansky et al., 2017; Zubiaga et al., 2018), highlighting the media's vital role in fostering understanding and security within communities, regardless of their conditions. Additionally, these regulations have restricted content production by limiting the opportunities for staff and volunteers to connect with the community for local news, ultimately undermining the credibility of both radio stations. The decision to suspend live interviews due to restricted studio access—implemented to help contain the virus—also adversely affected content quality by reducing the audience's engagement with interviewees. Consequently, both stations redirected their focus primarily to COVID-19 news, which led to a decrease in their entertainment offerings. They also worked to combat the challenges posed by the rapid spread of misinformation on social media, which added another layer of difficulty to their efforts. Ali (2020) noted that during the pandemic, online platforms became a major source of fake news and misinformation,

illustrating how digital media could hinder efforts to control the COVID-19 pandemic (Chari and Ufuoma, 2021).

The pandemic substantially impacted the listenership numbers of two radio stations. Some stations experienced a decline in their audience due to an increased focus on COVID-19 news, with limited content diversity. Conversely, others saw a rise in listenership, driven by a heightened demand for credible information, with community media emerging as a trusted source. Radio listenership, and along with that radio news audience, seems robust, though measurement problems prevented precise tracking; using ad spending as a proxy, radio might have suffered a slight decline in 2021 to TV's benefit SANEF, (2020). The pandemic also adversely affected the mental health of staff and volunteers at both stations. Concerns over virus transmission led to a breakdown of trust among colleagues, which hindered the teamwork essential for effective broadcasting. This decrease in team engagement fostered feelings of isolation and depression among staff and volunteers. The worries and unpredictability tied to the virus, along with the anxiety and stress resulting from lockdowns and social distancing, have worsened mental health problems in different ways across society (Su et al., 2021). This situation has impacted how well presenters work together, which has, in turn, affected the overall quality of co-hosted shows.

6.3.3. Coping strategies employed by selected community radio stations during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns

Findings from the study revealed that Vhembe FM and Makhado FM adopted various strategies to address their financial challenges. Financial survival strategies, flexible staffing and volunteer support, technological innovations, health and wellness initiatives, audience engagement and community support, content adaptation, and collaboration and partnerships between community radio stations. A significant approach was seeking grant funding from the Media Development and Diversity Agency. The MDDA provided significant emergency funding during the pandemic in addition to its regular annual spending (Rumney, 2022). For community radio, this funding included grants from the government, money from commercial broadcasters channelled through the MDDA, donations, and advertising (Rumney, 2022). Additionally, Vhembe FM launched a competition for potential advertisers, offering a chance to win a 50% discount on future advertising campaigns. Established businesses could benefit from discounts of up to 65% on advertising rates.

Furthermore, the stations leveraged the rise of social media marketing by offering advertisers the opportunity to promote their brands through these platforms. This strategy broadens their target audience and draws in a younger, tech-savvy demographic. Traditional media experienced a more substantial decline of 12.3%, while digital advertisement spending increased by 4.5% (Euromedia Research Group, 2020). The findings reveal that social media marketing as part of digital marketing was growing during the pandemic. Makhado FM took advantage of the opportunity to stabilise its finances through such moves. They leveraged technological advancements by implementing remote work. The content was shared with the main studio via dedicated WhatsApp groups created explicitly for staff in the news department and sports presenters and for collaboration with other stations to exchange information and experiences. Research shows that newsrooms have adopted various technologies to improve their internal processes (Kosterich and Weber, 2019) and foster better collaboration among editorial teams (Carson and Farhall, 2018), which in turn enhances their creative results (Malmelin and Virta, 2016). Additionally, to protect their staff and volunteers, they supplied necessary personal protective gear and set up phone interviews with mental health experts. Additionally, they established a platform where staff and volunteers could openly share their experiences and feelings, significantly alleviating feelings of isolation. Although official collaboration among the stations was limited due to infrastructure constraints, they effectively utilised the WhatsApp groups created for various community radio stations for information-sharing. Teleworking in virtual newsrooms increased collaboration and promoted a more flexible interaction between management and their employees. At the same time, the consolidation of remote working has brought unprecedented organisational change to newsrooms, accelerating digital transformation (García-Avilés et al., 2024).

The challenges and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on community radio stations have compromised the mandate of community media, leading to marginalised groups being underrepresented, which is in line with Asamah's (2011) media development theory and also McQuail's (1987) argument that the media should actively engage in positive development initiatives that align with national policies. He believes that while freedom of the press is important, it may need to be regulated based on the economic priorities and developmental goals of society. Media should prioritise news and information that connects with other developing countries that share geographical, cultural, or political ties. To support development objectives, the government has the authority to intervene in media operations, and measures such as censorship, subsidies, and direct control can be reasonable. Additionally, journalists

and media professionals have both freedoms and responsibilities when it comes to gathering and sharing information. This is in support of the community media's implementation of copying strategies and adopting technology as a means of maintaining the sustainability of their operational mandate. Sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland et al., 1987).

6.4. Findings Conclusions

The study concludes that community radio stations, specifically Vhembe FM and Makhado FM, faced significant challenges. Both stations exhibited critical financial vulnerability and operational limitations, which impacted their sustainability. The decline in advertising revenue and the rise in operational costs hindered their ability to fulfil public service commitments and engage effectively with their audiences. The shift to remote work and telephonic interviews further compromised the quality and diversity of their content. Additionally, mental health challenges arose among staff due to feelings of isolation, fear of infection, and increased workloads.

To survive, both community radio stations implemented strategies aimed at enhancing resilience and sustainability. These included strengthening financial support, investing in technology and infrastructure, and improving community relations through social media and other remote communication platforms. These efforts are essential for maintaining their role in advocating for and empowering marginalised voices within rural communities.

Furthermore, this study serves as a valuable resource for the community radio industry, offering lessons to better prepare for future challenges and addressing the limitations within community media. There is a pressing need for improved technical and infrastructure support to keep pace with evolving technologies. This improvement will introduce new financial revenue streams through digital marketing, enhance operational efficiency, and boost accessibility. The findings highlight the necessity for a more advanced approach to enhance the competitiveness and viability of community media, ultimately ensuring the sustainability and development of rural communities.

6.5. Recommendations

The study indicates that there should be a significant increase in investment in the infrastructure, technology, and digital development of community radio. Such enhancements would improve accessibility and relevance for the large youth audience while also taking advantage of expanding digital marketing opportunities to boost marketing and advertising revenue. These improvements would empower community radio stations to compete more effectively, represent marginalised communities, and advocate for their primary audience, which primarily consists of large rural populations.

Government regulations, particularly regarding funding models, need to be reviewed to allow community radio stations to compete with public and commercial radio for talent and audience. Investments in the latest technology will help increase their audience reach, including those members of their target rural communities who have moved to cities for better job opportunities but still return home during holidays.

Furthermore, it is essential for the government to be flexible enough to support community development through the adaptation of digital broadcasting without compromising the mandate of community media to advocate for local marginalised communities by showing tangible development within the sector itself.

6.6. Limitations of the study

The research specifically looked at the views of the staff, volunteers, and management from two community radio stations, Vhembe FM and Makhado FM. However, it missed including the audience's perspective, which could have provided important insights into how the COVID-19 pandemic affected these stations from both an operational and audience-centred angle. Additionally, since the study was confined to just these two community radio stations in Limpopo province, South Africa, it is challenging to apply the findings more broadly. This limitation is particularly significant given that the funding model for community media in Limpopo may not be representative of the broader context, where some stations benefit from community member contributions that help sustain their operations. Furthermore, the research does not explore commercial or public service radio stations, which might have offered valuable strategies for community media to ensure their sustainability. Lastly, the study relied on a small sample of staff members from these two stations, which restricts the breadth of knowledge and perspectives that could have been included in the investigation.

6.7. Directions for future studies

The research concentrated solely on community radio stations and did not consider private or commercial radio stations. For future research, it would be beneficial to include these types of broadcasters to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the broadcasting industry. Additionally, expanding the sample size to encompass multiple community radio stations across various provinces would provide a wider view of the challenges faced by these stations during the pandemic, making the results more applicable on a larger scale.

6.8 Conclusion

This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of funding, detailing the findings related to the challenges faced by two community radio stations, Vhembe FM and Makhado FM, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter highlighted how these stations responded to these difficulties with specific coping strategies aimed at maintaining their sustainability and effectiveness in serving marginalised rural communities. Additionally, the chapter offered conclusions that outlined the study's contributions to the existing knowledge base, along with recommendations derived from the findings. It also addressed the study's limitations and suggested areas for future research.

The study gave insight into the experiences of staff, volunteers and management of the two community radio stations regarding the challenges and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and their coping strategies, which contributed to their sustainability during the pandemic. The study will serve as knowledge that will assist in better preparing for future global challenges through the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic experience, not only for the community radio sector but the media sector.

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