GRIEVING PROCESSES, *UBUNTU* VALUES, AND CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY FAMILIES THAT EXPERIENCED LOSSES DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN VHEMBE DISTRICT, LIMPOPO PROVINCE

BY

MUDAU DZIVHULUWANI RINAH

11564346

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SUPERVISOR: DR. F.J. TAKALANI

CO-SUPERVISOR: DR. MPHEPHU K.E.

YEAR: JANUARY 2025

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DECLARATION

I, Mudau Dzivhuluwani Rinah, hereby declare that this dissertation titled -**GRIEVING PROCESSES, *UBUNTU* VALUES, AND CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY FAMILIES THAT EXPERIENCED LOSS DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN VHEMBE DISTRICT, LIMPOPO PROVINCE -** presented to the University of Venda has not been previously submitted for a degree at this or any other university. It is my original work in both design and execution, and all referenced materials have been appropriately recognised.

SIGNATURE  **Date 24/02/2025**

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Abstract

Engaging in *Ubuntu* with grieving individuals is considered a component of the healing process, in African cultures. Grieving, however, had to be altered in shape and form due to the Coronavirus pandemic of 2019 (COVID-19), as numerous restrictions had to be implemented, worldwide, to mitigate the spread of the lethal virus. This research employed a qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis, utilising in-depth interviews. This study employed a single data collection instrument, interviews, to collect data from 20 participants across 10 families. Participants were picked conveniently by purposive sampling procedures. The data underwent thematic analysis, and the findings were presented thematically, with analogous perspectives and experiences consolidated. Data was collected and handled in a manner to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants details were not compromised. The recommendations from this study were derived from the analyses and interpretations of the findings. The results indicated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, bereaved families encountered emotional, social, and cultural obstacles, such as isolation, interrupted rituals, and insufficient community assistance, which exacerbated their mourning. Nonetheless, *Ubuntu* principles, such as empathy, solidarity, and collective resilience facilitated families' adaptation to evolving circumstances and recovery. The research advocates for interventions, such as culturally-attuned mental health therapies, utilising internet platforms to preserve social connections during disasters, and communities formulating recommendations to assist bereaved families during public health emergencies. Ethical principles such as, informed consent were adhered to, and the privacy and anonymity of participants were maintained throughout the research procedure.

Keywords: COVID-19, Grieving, Lockdown, Mourning, Bereavement, Coping Mechanisms, and *Ubuntu*.

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CHAPTER 1

1. Introduction

Chapter 1 presents the background information, encompassing the problem statement, rationale, aim of the investigation, specific objectives, research questions, and significance of the study.

1.1. Background

Africans employ many coping mechanisms to navigate the pain of losing a loved one, similar to the practices, globally. Grieving is a crucial component of the healing process following the demise of a loved one. For healing to occur, the bereaved individual must be afforded the opportunity to employ coping mechanisms during the death and healing procedures. Healing encompass a quest for meaning, which is essential for assisting the bereaved individuals in overcoming their grief (Kessler, 2019). For healing to occur, in many communities of South Africa, involves drawing strength from family and the community through the practices of *Ubuntu*. Nkomo and Mthembu, (2020) posits that the *Ubuntu* notion embodies focusing on humanity, characterised by coexisting in harmony and inclusiveness within the confines of human existence. *Ubuntu* is a traditional African concept that was initially perceived as a religion in pre-colonial African societies. It encompasses self-sacrifice for the benefit of others, alongside the concern for and protection of one's fellow human beings. Caregiving is a significant element of the *Ubuntu* philosophy, with visiting the ill and supporting bereaved families as exemplifying some of its principles. The stringent visitation policy implemented in hospitals during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, hindered the demonstration of the *Ubuntu* idea for patients and relatives of deceased individuals. The continuation of some of the practices of COVID-19 regulations has altered the methods individuals utilise to grieve or mourn for their loved ones. In African cultures, a plethora of events accompany the demise of a loved one, however, the pandemic-imposed constraints influenced their execution; for instance, observing the remains of the deceased posed a challenge during the pandemic, particularly in the case of an individual who had succumbed to COVID-19. The South African government

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implemented certain limitations during this period that adversely impacted the manner in which families mourned their loved ones in South Africa. These encompassed, but were not restricted to - the remains of the deceased were to be managed by a designated undertaker, must be enclosed in a bag, and marked as a “COVID-19 fatality” (Western Cape Government, 2020). Secondly, although family members may be granted access to view the deceased's body in the mortuary, they were prohibited from making physical contact with it. Thirdly, anyone exhibiting respiratory symptoms were prohibited from viewing the deceased to prevent possible transmission of the ailment to others (World Health Organisation, 2020). Fourthly, interprovincial travel was prohibited, particularly during Level 5 of the COVID-19 shutdown in South Africa (Banerjee et al. 2020; Kgatle, 2020); this meant that even individuals wishing to attend the burial, among the 50 permitted, were unable to do so due to the interprovincial travel restrictions. The specified limits adversely impacted the grieving process for individuals and families on the loss of their loved ones, effectively undermining the essence of *Ubuntu* during the decease of a person.

The grieving process commences with – mourning the deceased, assembling family and friends for solace and support, viewing the body, and collectively interring it with dignity and respect. All these were abruptly halted during the COVID-19 pandemic and the enacted restrictions. The aftermath experienced from these restrictions, by the bereaved, included frustration and desperation among survivors who could not bid farewell, care for, or pay their final respects to their loved ones. The lockdown and social distancing measures, hence, significantly impeded bereaved individuals and families' ability to pursue emotional intimacy and social connectivity during their experiences of loss and mourning. These experiences of loss and impotence resulted in profound sadness, remorse, and anger in bereaved families, potentially complicating their ability to cope with loss in their subsequent lives (Dew et al., 2022; Dlamini et al., 2021). Furthermore, the lockdown constraints left the bereaved entirely unsupported in their grieving and mourning processes. The heightened socio-economic inequalities observed during this outbreak intensified the obstacles to grieving and bereavement, particularly for poor and impoverished individuals, limiting their availability to external help (Bear et al., 2020). Due to the intensified control measures, mourners encountered restricted autonomy in managing their grief after the loss of their loved ones; Funerals and ceremonies were cancelled, postponed, or

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substantially modified (BBC News, 2020), therefore, funeral procedures had to be simplified. These constrained and virtual relationships could not substitute for conventional face-to-face engagements and physical commemorative activities, which encompass not only immediate family members but also individuals from wider social networks. The absence of a continuous grieving framework was particularly distressing, including the inability to bid farewell to loved ones, the anguish of separation from others during the burial, and the lack of opportunity to visit the cemetery thereafter. The inability to partake in burial rituals and the deprivation of opportunity to witness the interment of a loved one inflicted profound emotional scars on the bereaved and these compounding experiences of powerlessness may have enduring effects on their ability to comprehend and manage the loss. The implemented lockdown limits diminished the acknowledgement of the loss and suffering throughout the outbreak, as not all losses and sadness were adequately attended to. The perception of being unentitled and unsupported in publicly expressing and processing grief leads to disenfranchisement (Doka, 2021). The rigidity of the COVID-19 rules, significantly disrupted the ways in which bereaved families understand and engage in traditional rites and traditions associated with death, from an African perspective.

This study examined the impact of COVID-19 and official lockdown limitations on the grieving process and traditional African mourning practices which are rooted in *Ubuntu* principles. The research focused on the disruptions caused by COVID-19 and its subsequent lockdown limitations on bereaved families in the Vhembe District, as well as potential strategies for coping with loss in such situations. The theoretical framework of Nwoye's African Grief was employed to examine this topic. Conducting this study is pertinent due to the limited published materials regarding both conventional and non-conventional methods for addressing loss and sorrow in African communities (Nwoye, 2021).

1.2. Theoretical Framework

The research is grounded in Nwoye's African Grief Model framework concerning bereavement and mourning practices. In the African setting, grief has established practices within traditional societies, aimed at facilitating the healing of psychological wounds and pain experienced by the bereaved. The intended beneficiaries of the findings of the research are community members affected by the distressing loss of a

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loved one during stressful occasions such as COVID-19 (Nwoye, 2021). This theoretical framework focusses on the spiritual, methodical, and interactional aspects of healing in grief, as well as the resources provided by the community to bereaved persons (Nwoye, 2021).

African mourning encompasses the following interconnected objectives: to participate in activities and rituals that alleviate the effects of loss, and to shield the bereaved from profound suffering due to their loss. This approach provides community-sanctioned bereavement rituals that assist the bereaved in comprehending and accepting that grief has a distinct commencement and conclusion (Nwoye, 2021). In numerous African cultures, culture significantly influences the daily routines of individuals; culture is a fundamental component of identity, values, standards, and beliefs. The response to death is shaped by its cultural interpretation (Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2021). Africans believe that death concludes a complex life cycle and is regarded as a rite of passage that enables the individual's spirit to transition to the next realm, departing from the corporeal existence of this life (Ngubane et al., 2020). This transition, however, occurs only when authentic rituals and ceremonies are performed, and the individual has been accorded a legitimate funeral. It is believed that inability to recognise these rites results in the deceased returning to disturb the living family members (Zondi et al., 2022).

This belief is pertinent to this study as it elucidates the significance of the *Ubuntu* spirit in alleviating any obstacles faced by mourning family members at the loss of loved ones. The theory corresponds with the principles of *Ubuntu*, specifically compassion, respect, and dignity, which were egregiously undermined by the lockdown restrictions enforced by the government on individuals mourning the loss of loved ones, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to undue mental anguish for grieving families. Compassion is the virtue that reflects the capacity to comprehend another individual's challenges and emotions, along with a desire to assist them (Mafune & Tlou, 2021). Due to the intimate interconnection between the emotions of “respect” and “dignity”, hence, these two ideas are considered a single dimension in this study, similarly, certain investigations, such as those by Xie et al., (2019). Also consider them equivalent. Respect is described as the objective, impartial consideration and regard for rights, values, and property (Cullity, 2018). *Ubuntu* conceptualises fundamental

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enquiries about existence, significance, and their connection to the sacred and transcendent. This may or may not result in the development of religious rituals and the construction of community ethos (Mathebula et al., 2022). Individuals' and communities' spirituality during the COVID-19 epidemic provided as a source of hope, motivation, and good energy. Religiosity and spirituality were important in lowering psychological distress, improving health outcomes, and mitigating the effects of social isolation (Lucchetti et al., 2021). Spirituality has an important role in pandemic containment, particularly in supporting mental health therapies, encouraging community adherence to public health measures, and maintaining social cohesion during lockdowns and restrictions. Spirituality also helps to build community resilience by providing coping skills and social support networks that help people survive and recover from health crises. As a result, this theoretical framework can serve as a catalyst in this research, particularly in providing spiritual and cultural resources to communities and governments to help them prepare for and respond to future calamities and pandemics.

1.3. Problem statement

This study aims to investigate the grief processes, *Ubuntu* principles, and difficulties faced by bereaved families, in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, who suffered losses during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The absence of adequate mourning practices and the non-adherence to *Ubuntu* ideals and principles rendered the lives of bereaved families in the Vhembe District fragmented and unfulfilled due to the imposed lockdown restrictions. Bereaved family members, whose loss and grief were inadequately acknowledged in public behaviour during the lockdown limitations, felt neglected and devastated when confronting their loved one's death only as a "figure" in official statistics. Not solely in the Vhembe District but also across extensive regions of South Africa and globally, the coronavirus pandemic and its ensuing restrictions denied grieving families the customary rituals that typically provide solace, as they were prohibited from visiting their loved ones' bedside, identifying their remains, or transporting them home or to a church for a service and burial. The lack of rituals associated with death significantly altered the perception of the experience. During the period, according to governmental regulations, the undertakers must transport the bodies directly from the mortuary to the cemetery. Majority of family members in the Vhembe District during this time expressed uncertainty regarding the identity of the

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individuals in the casket, leaving them with unresolved pain in their hearts. The coronavirus caused individuals in the Vhembe District to mourn in isolation during a period when communal support was essential. Since the initial case of COVID-19 and the implementation of the stringent lockdown measures in March 2020, there has been no formal inquiry on their impact on the grief processes and *Ubuntu* ideals in the Vhembe District. There has been rising incidence of families and individuals afflicted by diverse psychological disorders and their inability to cope, particularly following the loss of loved ones, exacerbated by inadequate grieving. Consequently, the researcher felt compelled to investigate the grieving processes, *Ubuntu* principles, and challenges faced by families who had experienced losses during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province.

1.4. Aim of the study

This study seeks to investigate the grief processes, *Ubuntu* values, and issues faced by families who suffered losses during the COVID-19 pandemic limitations, in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province.

1.5. Specific Objectives

The objective of this study is:

- To identify the coping mechanisms (social, religious, traditional, or cultural practices) which were available to grieving families during the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions.
- To examine the challenges encountered by families in their grieving process due to imposed limitations during the COVID-19 lockdown and how these challenges were alleviated.
- To identify the *Ubuntu* ideals that influenced the grief process among bereaved families during the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions.

1.6. Research Questions

- What coping strategies did families employ in their grieving processes, during the COVID-19?

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- What problems did families face in their grief processes due to imposed restrictions during the COVID-19 lockdown?
- How were the *Ubuntu* ideals affected by the families' mourning processes and their adherence to the protocols and rules established by the Government of South Africa?
- How do families in the Vhembe District of Africa engage in grieving process according to the *Ubuntu* principles?

1.7. Significance of the Study

This study investigates the grief processes, *Ubuntu* principles, and obstacles faced by families, in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, who suffered losses due to the COVID-19 epidemic. The study is expected to aid bereaved families, communities, and policymakers in addressing natural disasters. The government and policymakers should incorporate greater community engagement prior to implementing policies that impact them, thereby reducing unnecessary challenges. This approach would ensure that affected individuals are included in decisions that significantly influence their lives. Additionally, it may reduce any negative impact of incidences, like COVID-19, on grief processes and the *Ubuntu* ideals from an Afrocentric perspective. The study will also prompt families to reevaluate mourning as a psychological response.

The study may contribute to the scarce literature in South Africa, regarding the significance of integrating *Ubuntu*-based values and solutions to social issues, particularly the idea that individuals cannot merely comply with laws established or enforced by the state. On the contrary, the resolution should depend on individuals' acceptance of shared norms and objectives, especially if they were engaged in the decision-making process. The study may also furnish researchers with foundational material that could be advantageous in the future for integrating *Ubuntu* values and principles in addressing natural disasters or disease outbreaks from an Afrocentric perspective.

1.8. Rationale of the study

The grieving processes, *Ubuntu* values, and challenges faced by bereaved families who suffered losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province during the lockdowns, were inadequately addressed in

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the literature, resulting in unanswered questions. This study aims to investigate the *Ubuntu* values and their relationship to challenges faced by bereaved families in the Vhembe District of the Limpopo Province, who experienced losses during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an area that remains underexplored despite several studies on *Ubuntu* and grief during the lockdown across various regions of the continent and South Africa. Numerous studies, for example, have focused extensively on the similarities and differences in grief rituals across countries and on the varying cultural perceptions and management of death. Eyetsemitan (2021) contends that culture can affect mourning experiences and that there is variability in the human responses following the death of a loved one. In the Zulu culture, death is typically perceived through the metaphor of contamination or pollution, consequently, the deceased's immediate family will be considered contaminated, and everyone who comes into contact with the body will be similarly viewed (Matende, 2022). In the Vhavenda families, when a death transpires, the family members are figuratively confined by a mud wall and must be “liberated”; the figurative barrier encircling the survivors represents their mourning (Church, 2021).The consequence is that family members may be excluded from participating in societal activities until they undergo purification through a rite.

Other studies have also examined the function of the community during the bereavement, for instance, in the Hispanic culture, individuals are encouraged to share their grief with their extended family and community (Rockford, 2018). This offers assistance by distributing some of the family's sorrow to the community members, effectively they share the burden of loss, rather than allowing bereaved families to mourn in isolation. Jewish traditions about grieving and death emphasise offering assistance to both the bereaved families and the bereaved, aiming to alleviate the loneliness associated with both experiences (Eyetsemitan, 2021).

Most studies which had examined *Ubuntu* ideals during COVID-19 focused on their adoption and application as a theoretical framework for resolving death issues associated with COVID-19 and subsequent pandemics. Limited research has been undertaken to investigate the *Ubuntu* principles that were infringed upon during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. Psychologists and social workers have advocated for the incorporation of *Ubuntu* into the theoretical framework and axiology

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of their professions (Chigangaidze, 2021; Mabvurira, 2020; Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Van Breda, 2019; Zvomuya, 2020).

1.9. Definitions of concepts

1.9.1. COVID-19

Callegos (2021) explains the Coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) as an illness induced by a novel virus causing severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV-2; previously referred to as 2019-nCoV), which was initially recognised during an outbreak of respiratory illnesses in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. The World Health Organisation was first notified on December 31, 2019. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organisation proclaimed the COVID-19 outbreak a worldwide health emergency. This study defines COVID-19 as a respiratory illness ranging from mild to severe, caused by a coronavirus primarily transmitted through contact with infectious materials such as respiratory droplets or contaminated surfaces. It is notably characterised by fever, cough, and shortness of breath, and may advance to pneumonia and respiratory failure.

1.9.2. Grieving

Warlick and Klock (2024) perceives grieving as a reaction to loss, encompassing both physical non-physical experiences; these can be exhibited through - emotions, cognition, actions, social challenges, and spiritual manifestations. According to Harris and Winokuer (2019) grieving is the process of navigating loss and sorrow, striving to manage these experiences or adapt to them; despite the challenges of grief, healing does occur over time. The bereaved individuals are anticipated to go with their lives in the absence of the departed, although, nobody is expected to forget their departed loved ones. In this study, grief refers to reaction to the death, specifically, due to the COVID-19 epidemic, of an individual to whom a link or affection had been established.

1.9.3. Lockdown

Haider et al. (2020) define a lockdown as an emergency measure implemented by authorities that restricts individuals from exiting a designated region. Individuals in the defined area are required to remain in their current location and are prohibited from entering or exiting certain buildings or specified sites during a total lockdown. A preventive lockdown is a proactive strategy enacted to mitigate an atypical

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circumstance or vulnerability within a system, thereby safeguarding individuals, organisations, or systems from potential risks. The lockdown procedure's structure, at any given time, was dictated by the nature of the threat and incorporated requisite adaptability to address the prevailing circumstances. This study indicates that the lockdown was a period during which individuals were in a state of emergency and prohibited from entering public spaces due to concerns about contamination from the outbreak.

1.9.4. *Ubuntu*

Ewuoso and Hall (2019)identified two separate clusters of meaning associated with *Ubuntu. Ubuntu* denotes the ethical attributes of an individual, namely traits like - generosity, empathy, forgiveness, and thoughtfulness. It is regarded by some as a manifestation of the divine, guiding individuals from negative habits towards virtuous conduct. Secondly, *Ubuntu* denotes a framework of interconnectedness among individuals, characterised as a worldview or philosophy. Dube (2021) contends that this second interpretation of Ubuntu materialised almost a century after the initial one, and that the Nguni proverb *"umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu"* was first employed in written form to articulate *Ubuntu* in 1993. In this study, Ubuntu denotes an African philosophy that embodies humanness through the principles of - compassion, solidarity, harmony, consensus, hospitality, empathy, and the sharing of dignity and respect.

1.10. Summary

This study offers an Afrocentric analysis of the mourning processes experienced during a pandemic. The study examined the techniques utilised by families in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province during their grief process, along with the problems they faced due to these restrictions enforced during the lockdown. Furthermore, the study solicited recommendations from bereaved families regarding measures they believe the government or policymakers should have implemented to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. Additionally, the *Ubuntu* principles that impact the families' mourning practices and the COVID-19 protocols/regulations that adversely affect *Ubuntu* ideals will also be examined.

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2. CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

Ubuntu is not a Christian notion but is rooted in traditional African values and beliefs that emphasise the importance of life, dignity, compassion, harmony, unity, and solidarity. The African narrative posits that humans are designed for unity and can only overcome challenges via collaboration, rather than through - selfishness, exploitation, a desire for dominance, or exclusion of others. When humanity is together, it confronts global challenges with unity and excellence. No difficulty in this world will be beyond their capacity, however, when they are split, separated, or engaged in competition for dominance, their capacity to surmount the challenges that afflict them is invariably weakened. The COVID-19 restrictions fragmented individuals during a period when unity was paramount: in the wake of their loved ones' deaths due to the virus. In challenging times, like the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals require solidarity rooted in *Ubuntu* to collectively combat the crisis, aiming for social protection, dignity, and economic stability. The lockdown restrictions disrupted the grieving processes and undermined *Ubuntu* principles, leading to many issues faced by bereaved families during this period. This part will elucidate - the coping techniques employed by individuals during the COVID-19 lockdown, the challenges encountered by bereaved citizens during this period, and the erosion of *Ubuntu* principles in the context of grief during such lockdowns. The discussions will focus on how this pertains to the current study, which examines the grief processes, *Ubuntu* values, and challenges faced by families who endured loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Vhembe District. The information obtained from the literature was utilised to establish a baseline for assessing the impact of lockdown regulations on issues like the grieving processes, and *Ubuntu* values in the Vhembe District, as well as the effects on grieving families when such values are ignored (Boesak & Boesak, 2013).

2.2. A world view of the coping mechanisms at the disposal of citizens, during incidences like lockdowns

The catastrophic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been recorded globally, with significant mortality rates and evidence that survivors, family, and friends experienced profound distress. Families had to devise various coping techniques in reaction to the

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lockdowns imposed by governments worldwide. In China, where the COVID-19 pandemic originated, confirmed COVID-19 cases were promptly quarantined in specialised hospital wards. Individuals exposed to COVID-19 through contact with infected individuals were instructed to self-quarantine at home or were relocated to specialised quarantine facilities for meticulous monitoring of symptom development. These steps, however, were insufficient to impede the proliferation of the pandemic. China was compelled to implement a complete lockdown. This disrupted the lives of individuals, as they were compelled to remain in their residences, preventing them from engaging in their usual routines. The millions of citizens confined in an unprecedented lockdown in Wuhan, the epicentre of China's lethal COVID-19 outbreaks, faced significant challenges. Nevertheless, certain family members endeavoured to accommodate the challenging circumstance. The majority uploaded films showcasing various activities one may engage in within their home spaces on Weibo, China's counterpart to Twitter, garnering 230 million visitors. The videos featured persons engaging in various hobbies to pass the time, such as playing ping pong on the dining table, using a rope connected between the television and a closet for badminton, and simulating fishing in fish tanks (Gan, 2020); others adopted a sedentary lifestyle, dedicating considerable time to sleeping and eating. Citizens, therefore swiftly acclimatised to their newly-established lifestyle. Other Chinese citizens indicated that they managed more effectively by sharing their lockdown experiences with a global audience via various social media sites. Many advised that the optimal method of coping was to avoid social media posts regarding COVID-19 and to obtain information solely from credible sources. Social media was inundated with deceptive material that provoked significant dread and anxiety (Gan, 2020). Some individuals survived by creating video blogs, documenting their daily experiences during lockdown and sharing these recordings with the external world. Chen (2020) asserts that individuals would record films of themselves strolling to the grocery and of birds singing outside their windows, serving as a reminder that the lockdown was temporary and would eventually end. Others maintained public diaries documenting their daily lives during the lockdown, while Some trivialised the situation by creating memes that mocked the insufficient use of medical masks to prevent the illness's spread, showcasing alternative protective gear through videos and images of individuals utilising bras, sanitary pads, and fruits as facial protection against the virus (Perper, 2020).

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Families utilised this disruption to strengthen their connections; couples began to re-establish their connections, and children reunited with their parents. Liao (2020) indicates that families engaged in numerous online games, watched television, listened to music, and practiced self-reflection (Yau, 2020). The psychological advantages of music, during this time, were significant and diverse, encompassing, but not limited to, the alleviation of stress and anxiety (Nasim, 2015). The WHO (2020) noted that Europe was not exempt from this worldwide pandemic, with Italy seeing the most severe impact, with 105,792 confirmed cases as of 1 April 2020, followed closely by Spain with 102,136 confirmed cases on the same date. The pair recorded the greatest global COVID-19 fatality rates of 12,428 and 9,053, respectively. Acheson (2020) states that, despite the significant number of the documented cases of the disease in Spain, the populace remained cohesive and consistently motivated one another. Several folks undertook the initiative to motivate their compatriots by displaying handmade banners inscribed with slogans like 'everything will be ok,' among others. Collective actions included cheering and encouraging one another, as well as the medical staff, by going out onto their balconies at specified periods during the night. During a particular instance, citizens sang the national anthem uninterrupted for over 10 minutes, just to create a positive and motivating atmosphere (Acheson, 2020). Numerous individuals also dedicated time to engage in physical exercise within their residences. Italy, predominantly a Catholic nation, utilised social media to conduct Mass, during which intercessory prayers were offered for the victims of the COVID-19 pandemic. This method was universally embraced by diverse Christian groups as a means of instilling hope in an apparently desolate circumstance. Piana and Bordoni (2020) reported that numerous individuals created online prayer groups that convened at specific times to pray for the nation and the global community. Catholic nuns visited hospitals to pray for the sick, offered inspirational Bible verses, and recited the rosary, fostering a positive mindset and mutual support during the lockdown (Piana & Bordoni, 2020). Prayer instilled a sense of optimism by affirming the presence of a higher power in control.

In the United Kingdom, as the virus persisted in its transmission, the nation instituted a lockdown. Numerous individuals lost their loved ones and attempted to manage their grief independently, as the pandemic interrupted their customary mourning rituals.

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Widows convened to establish WhatsApp groups, wherein participants engaged in regular communication, offering mutual support, dispensing counsel, and sharing humour to alleviate the day's burdens (Shepka & England, 2020). A group of widows established a virtual pub named 'the widows' arms,' where they convene to socialise over drinks and participate in quizzes (Shepka & England, 2020). Social media platforms facilitated communication with loved ones without the necessity of leaving home (Baruah, 2012). Shepka and England (2020) contended that some individuals utilised this period of inactivity to engage in extensive cleaning, home upkeep, and reorganisation. These activities had been postponed by many individuals due to their commitments to work and other everyday obligations that required them to leave their homes. Others utilised this opportunity to experiment with new recipes for the family and engage in some baking.

As of 1 April 2020, South Africa was the most severely affected country in Africa, reporting 1,353 confirmed cases and 5 fatalities, followed by Algeria with 716 confirmed cases and 44 deaths. Zimbabwe documented 9 cases and 1 fatality on the same date. The Rwandan Government initiated the distribution of food kits to households nationwide to assist citizens during the lockdown. In Cape Town, South Africa, as in Spain, locals would go onto their balconies to applaud health-care personnel combating the pandemic (Stone, 2020). Cohen (2020) states that the lockdown in South Africa prohibited individuals from exercising outdoors or walking their dogs, prompting citizens to engage in home workouts with their pets. Individuals permitted to work remotely maintained engagement with their tasks. Numerous families utilised this period to strengthen their connections and relationships by engaging in board games and seeing films and series collectively.

The Zimbabwean government instituted a lockdown beginning on March 30, 2020, to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19. The lockdown in this country, as in all other nations globally, mandated that individuals remain at home and required the closure of all non-essential companies. The economy of Zimbabwe is primarily informal, leading most individuals in the country to rely on self-employment for their livelihood (Nyanga, 2013). The lockdown resulted in the total cessation of income-generating opportunities. This created a distinct scenario where the psycho-social challenges of the lockdown were exacerbated by actual economic hardships.

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2.3. Challenges encountered by grieving people during the lockdown

The COVID-19 epidemic resulted in extensive mourning on an unprecedented worldwide level. The absence of access to and physical interaction with loved ones at their time of death, along with limits on burials and the abruptness of most COVID-19 fatalities, resulted in significant pain for people suffering losses during the epidemic. Traumatic end-of-life and death experiences complicate mourning (Harrop et al., 2016), while restricted access to typical support networks and significant social disturbances heightened the risk of adverse bereavement outcomes (Eisma et al., 2021). Hanna et al. (2021) asserts that the number of COVID-19 deaths, restricted access to and physical interaction with relatives during the time of death, and limitations on funerals were profoundly unpleasant for bereaved families, potentially affecting the mourning process in the long run. Furthermore, Goveas and Shear (2020) indicated that the absence of customary support networks and significant societal disruption exacerbated risks for all individuals who experienced bereavement during the epidemic. In light of these challenges and drawing parallels with earlier mass bereavement events, researchers anticipated a rise in the prevalence of family members suffering from prolonged grief disorder (PGD) and other mental health issues (Eisma et al., 2020).

In their study, Stroebe and Schut (2021) thoroughly analysed and categorised pandemic-related grief situations into loss-oriented (LO) stressors and responses, and restoration-oriented (RO) stressors and responses, as conceptualised in their 2010 Dual Process Model (DPM). This model characterises normal grieving as bereaved individuals concentrating on the loss of the deceased (LO coping, such as mourning) and managing the practical and psychosocial changes in their lives resulting from bereavement (RO coping, such as establishing new roles, identities, or relationships). The authors contend that the transforming processes were likely to be adversely affected by the pandemic, necessitating alterations in individuals' loss-oriented (LO) and restoration-oriented (RO) activities and behaviours, which may have enduring consequences on mourning outcomes (Stroebe & Schut, 2021). Instances of pandemic-specific loss-related stressors, in cases of losing a family member, usually involve insufficient emotional and practical preparation time, painful fatalities (such as the inability to bid farewell and inadequate treatment), significantly modified funeral customs, and a deficiency in social or cultural acknowledgement of the bereavement.

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Stroebe and Schut posit that responses to these stressors may result in guilt, humiliation, wrath, and loneliness. Instances of RO stresses include job loss, changes in housing conditions and family structures, depletion of coping mechanisms, modifications to daily routines, and the loss of pre-crisis lifestyles. RO reactions may involve anxiety, a reduced sense of control or purpose, and sensations of vulnerability and insecurity.

This study examines the grief processes, *Ubuntu* ideals, and issues faced by families, in Vhembe, who suffered losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study of Stroebe and Schut (2021) may provide insights also into the challenges faced by bereaved families during the pandemic in the Vhembe District, with focus on the loss of the deceased (loss stressors, LO) and the negotiation of practical and psychosocial adjustments necessitated by the bereavement.

The study is also closely aligned with Nwoye's African Grief perspective, which serves as the foundation of this research in three distinct aspects. Initially, Stroebe and Schut's Dual Process Model, like the Nwoye's African Grief model, emphasises the experiences of community members who are affected by the profound loss of a loved one. Secondly, they focus on the spiritual, systematic, and interactive aspects of healing during grief, as well as the resources the community provides to bereaved individuals to alleviate the psychological vulnerabilities that arise when the bereaved families lack support or resources to cope with their loss. Finally, they both underscore the efforts that communities can undertake to mitigate the effects of loss and shield the bereaved families from profound pain stemming from their grief. The Dual Process Model highlights that bereaved individuals oscillate between concentrating on the loss of the deceased (loss-oriented coping, such as grieving) and addressing the practical and psychosocial changes in their lives resulting from the bereavement (restoration-oriented coping, such as establishing new roles, identities, and relationships). In contrast, Nwoye's African Grief Model emphasises community-sanctioned bereavement rituals that assist the bereaved in comprehending and accepting that grief has a distinct beginning and conclusion.

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2.4. *Ubuntu* values were decimated during the families' grieving during the lockdown

African culture is centred on *Ubuntu*, stressing the importance of mutual respect and assistance among individuals in the face of global adversities. The essence of *Ubuntu* holds significant in African culture, particularly, at periods of death and mourning. The elements of *Ubuntu* derived from Nwoye's African Grief and Stroebe and Schut's Dual Process Models for alignment with this study include, compassion, respect, and dignity.

2.4.1. Compassion

Compassion is the virtue that exemplifies the capacity to comprehend the challenges and emotions of others, in order to assist them. (Sigger et al., 2010). Consequently, the saying 'sorrow shared is half sorrow,' indicates that individuals must engage in genuine empathy towards one another (Broodryk, 2006). Mangaliso (2001) asserts that individuals within a family or society can cultivate a collective vision via mutual understanding and care for one another. Furthermore, Poovan et al. (2006) assert that the essence of compassion lies in profound empathy and acknowledging one another's difficulties. Through empathy and compassion, societal members can exert significant efforts towards a collective vision. In challenging times, families often share burdens, however, the bereaved in this study, are families who experienced the loss of loved ones during the pandemic in the Vhembe District, but were unsupported in their grief. This study discusses the practice of compassion within the context of *Ubuntu* as observed in Vhavenda culture after death and mourning under situations, like lockdown.

2.4.2. Respect and Dignity

Given that the principles of 'respect' and 'dignity' are intrinsically linked, these two ideas are frequently employed interchangeably or as a singular dimension, in this study; even prior research conducted by Poovan et al. (2006) and Broodryk (2006) failed to differentiate between 'respect' and 'dignity'. In African culture, these values are regarded as a singular entity, and in Nwoye's African Grief Model, they are perceived as the fundamental social values (Sigger et al., 2010). Respect is defined as the objective, impartial evaluation and regard for rights, values, beliefs, and property (Yukl et al., 2002; Poovan et al., 2006). Dignity, on the other hand, refers to

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the inherent worth and value of every human being, encompassing the recognition of each person's fundamental right to be treated with honour and esteem regardless of their circumstances (Sigger et al., 2010). Consequently, respect may be seen as the cornerstone of Ubuntu." Due to the intimate interconnection between the emotions of 'respect' and 'dignity', hence, these two ideas are considered a single dimension in this study.

2.5. Summary

This chapter examined the global perspective on the coping techniques available to grieving families during the COVID-19 lockdown. The discussions also concentrated on the obstacles faced by mourning individuals during the lockdown and the *Ubuntu* principles that were undermined during the general process of grieving. The literature however, lacks studies that thoroughly investigate the particular behaviours of bereaved families. Several studies have been conducted that examine the obstacles encountered by bereaved families and the copying methods they employed, however none of these addressed the core experiences of families bereaved during COVID-19, the obstacles they faced owing to the lockdown limitations, or the ways in which the principles of *Ubuntu* were jeopardised during the government-imposed lockdown in the Vhembe District. The significance of extrapolating the lived experiences of afflicted families during lockdown is to enable comprehension of the distinct challenges encountered by bereaved families in the Vhembe District. This comprehension may empower health professionals, society, and policymakers to empathetically connect with families and offer support and help when global concerns, such as COVID-19, impact communities in the future. The literature review, therefore, has established the basis for this investigation. The discussions in this study will be from psychological, cultural, and sociological viewpoints of grief. Governments and policymakers are urged to acknowledge citizens' rights and to involve or consult them when formulating policies that impact them. The subsequent section concentrated on the research approach to be employed by the researcher in data collection to achieve the study's objectives.

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3. CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This chapter details the research methodology employed for data gathering and analysis in this study, aiming to validate the chosen research methods, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques implemented. The sections also describes the semi-structured interview as the data collection instrument employed in the study. Nachmias & Nachmias (2006) assert that a research methodology constitutes a framework of defined norms and procedures that underpin research and serve as a basis for evaluating knowledge. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2010), similarly, explain that a research methodology delineates the specific instruments and methodologies to be employed, as well as the overarching framework of the research design. The authors concluded that research methodology renders social science empirical. The advantages and disadvantages of a study and its trustworthiness primarily hinge on the methodology employed. The ethical considerations - informed consent, anonymity, potential harm to responders, and the assurance of privacy - that informed the data collection from participants are also explicated.

3.2. Research Approach

This study primarily aimed to investigate the grief processes, *Ubuntu* values, and issues faced by families, in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, who endured losses due to COVID-19 pandemic limitations. The study employed a qualitative research methodology to obtain firsthand accounts from families who suffered loss of loved ones, due to COVID-19. This approach can yield data based on participants' experiences, sentiments, and emotions through established rapport with the researcher, however it is time-consuming and costly (Makore-Rukuni, 2001). De Vos et al. (2013) contended that qualitative research uses natural interpretative methods to address respondents' issues. The qualitative technique enables researchers to comprehend a social or human issue from various viewpoints. The research was conducted in a natural setting and aimed to construct a comprehensive and intricate understanding of the phenomenon of interest, enabling a researcher to examine situations that reveal participants opinions, motivations, emotions, and attitudes. The advantages of adopting a qualitative approach motivated the author to adopt this

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research strategy in the study. Berg and Howard (2012) characterise qualitative research as encompassing meanings, concepts, definitions, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of phenomena. The primary advantage of the qualitative research approach is the potential for the utilisation of diverse data collection instruments, such as - observation, open-ended questions, in-depth interviews (audio or video), and field notes – which can be performed in natural environments. The data gathering methods provide a comprehensive account of the research, with the persons involved. Employing the qualitative approach yields extensive information regarding actual individuals and circumstances (De Vaus & De Vaus, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2014).

3.3. Research design

This study, utilised a descriptive research methodology, which offered a thorough understanding of the grief processes faced by relatives of individuals who died from the COVID-19 pandemic. Kumar (2018) explains this design as consisting of the following steps: acquiring data that characterises occurrences, followed by systematically organising, classifying, portraying, and clarifying the collected information. The research utilised the descriptive methods to generate thorough and objective analyses that offer significant insights into patterns and trends. The descriptive technique offers a thorough understanding of the current conditions, essential for pinpointing potential areas for further research and hypothesis testing in future studies. Consequently, this methodological framework ensured the achievement of the study's objectives by providing an accurate depiction of the research variables in their genuine context (Kumar, 2018).

3.4. Study Setting

This research was carried out in the Vhembe District, Thulamela Municipality, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The researcher selected Vhembe District Thulamela Municipality for the study because of the cultural diversity present in South Africa, particularly in the Vhembe District. Examining how various cultural groups in this region address mourning resulting from situations like COVID-19, can yield valuable insights on culturally-relevant support systems and therapeutic approaches. The demise of a cherished person owing to circumstances like COVID-19, can lead to considerable psychological consequences, including increased vulnerability to feelings of despair, anxiety, and complicated mourning. Examining bereavement

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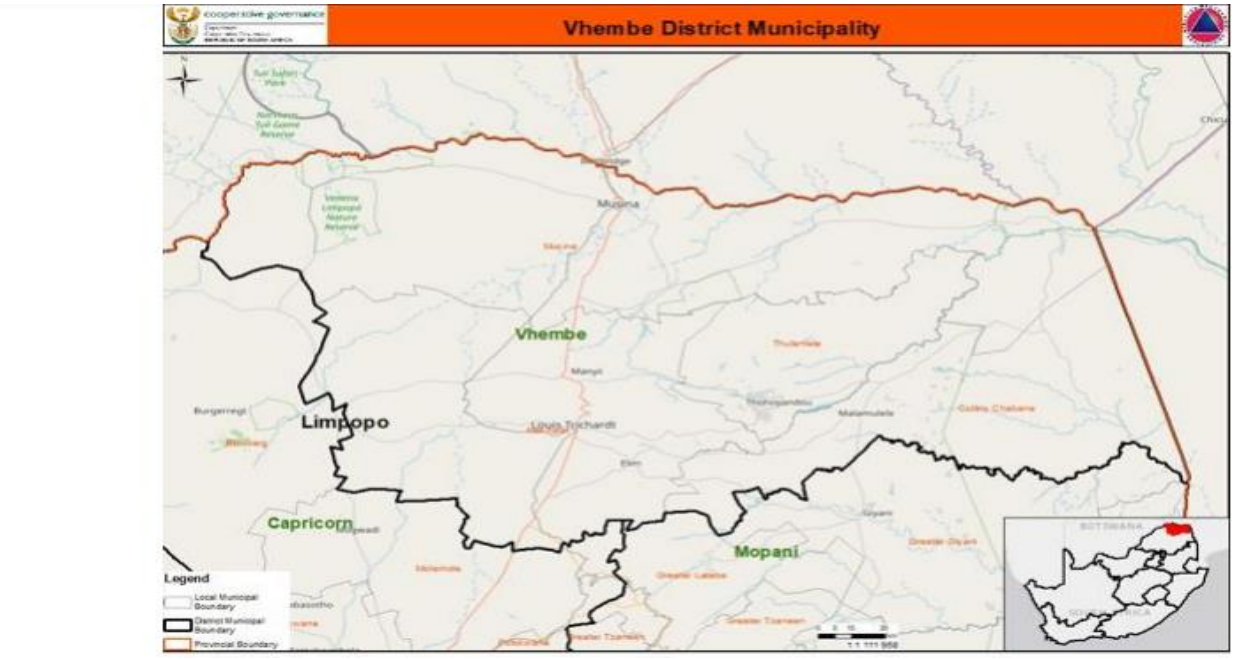
processes can provide significant insights into the mental health difficulties encountered by families and aid in the formulation of mental-health support programs. In addition the process can structure delivering of assistance, shaping policies, enhancing mental health, and deepening our understanding of community responses to losses during a pandemic.

The Vhembe District is located in the northern region of Limpopo Province, adjacent to the Capricorn and Mopani Districts to the east and west, respectively. The boundaries are shared with Zimbabwe to the north, Botswana to the northwest, and Mozambique to the southeast via the Kruger National Park. Vhembe District was initially inhabited by the Khoisan tribes and subsequently by the Venda people, who migrated from present-day Matabeleland South in Zimbabwe, and currently comprise the bulk of the population in this region. The District consists of four local municipalities - Thulamela, Makhado, Musina, and the newly founded Collins Chabane. The District has an area of 25,597 square kilometres and comprises four towns: Makhado, Malamulele, Musina, and Thohoyandou. As of 2019, Vhembe District's population totalled 1,402,779, comprising 416,728 in Makhado, 497,237 in Thulamela, 347,974 in Collins Chabane, and 32,009 in Musina. Makhado is the most populous municipality in the District, and Musina is the least populous. The District contains 7,470 child-headed families, with around one-quarter of this number located in Limpopo; approximately 51% of families are led by women.

3.5. Entry permission in the Study Area

Given that the study necessitates the involvement of bereaved families in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, the researcher sought authorisation from the gatekeepers, such as the leaders in the Vhembe District, to perform the study. The writer sent an application letter to traditional chiefs for authorisation to undertake the study.

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3.6. Research Population

In performing a study, data is obtained from a segment of the population. Best and Khan (1993) define a population as a collection of individuals sharing one or more traits relevant to the researcher. Cardwell (2018) asserts that a population comprises individuals who are the subject of a researcher's inquiry and to whom the findings are applicable, hence, the population refers to the group from which the researcher intends to draw judgements. The study population consisted of families in the Vhembe District who suffered the loss of a loved one, due to COVID-19.

3.7. Sampling

Sampling denotes the procedure of choosing a subset of the population that adheres to particular criteria for analysis; a sample, therefore, is a subset of a population chosen for participation in the study (Polit & Beck, 2004; Basson & Uys, 1991). Neuman (2010) contends that a sample is a subset of examples chosen by the researcher, from a larger population pool; Parker (2019) equates sampling with selection. Families for this study were chosen utilising the snowball sampling methods. Dosek (2021) characterised snowball sampling as the process of identifying cases through individuals who are acquainted with potential contributors to the research topic. Consequently, the initial bereaved families in the Vhembe District identified other families, presumed to be potential study participants, who also subsequently

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recommended the researcher to further families, until data saturation was attained. Neuman (2010) asserts that the snowball technique operates like a snowball, which starts little but grows larger as it accumulates more snow while rolling. The process started as a purposive sampling method to identify bereaved households in the Vhembe District. Twenty participants from ten families were identified. A maximum of two volunteers from each family was intentionally chosen. Odoh (2021) asserts that purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique when participants are selected based on their expertise or discernment related to the topic being studied. Singh and Masuku (2013) had stated, similarly, that purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which persons or participants are picked based on specific criteria or objectives. Marshall (1996) advocates for purposive sampling procedures as more appropriate for qualitative researchers, asserting that individuals vary in their ability to observe, comprehend, and interpret their own and others' conduct. Mchunu (2013) asserts that qualitative researchers acknowledge that certain informants possess more valuable data than others, making them more likely to offer insight and comprehension to a researcher. Brink (1996) asserts that purposive sampling necessitates the selection of participants who possess expertise about a pertinent problem, due to their extensive experience with the situation. Creswell (2003) defines purposive sampling as the selection of places or people that most effectively aid the researcher in comprehending the problem and the study topic, resulting in their willingness to reflect on and disseminate this information. Given the sensitivity of the study, the researcher meticulously chose participants aged 18 and older and based on recommendations from their family members, considering their availability and desire to engage in the study. In addition, Participants were chosen according to the specified inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion criteria

• The subjects of this study must be residents of the Vhembe District, particularly within the Thulamela Municipality.

• Participants must have experienced the death of a family member (such as a spouse, parent, child, or sibling) specifically, due to and during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

• Individuals must be aged 18 years or older.

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Exclusion Criteria

Individuals residing beyond the Vhembe District, particularly in the Thulamela Municipality, were excluded from the study.

Participants under 18 years of age were excluded from the study due to ethical considerations and the potentially sensitive nature of the topic matter.

3.8. Data collection procedures

Burns and Grove (2010) define data collection as the process of selecting participants and acquiring data from them. The researcher convened with individual participants at their houses in the Vhembe District. This initial contact session aimed to introduce the research topic to participants, create rapport, address any enquiries, and secure consent for participation and authorisation to record the interviews. The researcher subsequently reached an agreement with the participants regarding the venue and timing for the interviews. A writing pad, pen, and tape recorder were prepared beforehand.

Throughout the interviews, the researcher employed communication techniques, like reflection, sustained eye contact, inquiry, clarification, and facilitation, along with nodding, to urge participants to express themselves until no new themes or information surfaced. Field notes were taken during the interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded, followed by the creation of verbatim transcriptions. Subsequent interviews were conducted with several participants after reviewing the initial recordings. This was conducted to validate and enable participants to elaborate on insufficient explanations or to provide additional descriptions of the themes.

The researcher employed unstructured interviews as the data collection method to enable participants to comprehensively articulate their perspectives. This data collection strategy is selected to enable participants to articulate their narratives in their own terms, rather than according to preconceived frameworks established by the researcher. Interviews are considered the most effective method for exploring and collecting experiential narrative material, which may be utilised to cultivate a more profound understanding of a human phenomenon (Munhall, 2012; Speziale et al., 2011). This study utilised semi-structured interviews to obtain comprehensive data,

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allowing participants to express their perspectives independently of the researcher's influence. Participants provided comprehensive narratives regarding their grieving processes, *Ubuntu* principles, and the difficulties they faced as a result of losses incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in the Vhembe District.

The researcher used a rigorous thematic data analysis to investigate and interpret qualitative data on the experiences, sentiments, and emotions associated with grieving processes, Ubuntu values, and challenges faced by grieving families in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. This approach was chosen because it is consistent with current psychological research, which promotes authenticity and avoids preconceived concepts or assumptions, hence ensuring the study's validity and reliability.

Step One: Data Preparation and Familiarisation

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and then transcribed verbatim. The researcher listened to each recording several times and looked through the transcripts to guarantee correctness and thoroughness. Transcripts were checked for any identifiable information, which was removed or replaced with pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality. The researcher reviewed all transcripts several times to get a sense of the depth and breadth of the data, making preliminary notes on potential patterns and areas of interest.

Step 2: The Initial Coding Process

Each transcript was meticulously classified line by line, identifying meaningful units of text that linked to the research objectives. Initial codes were formed inductively from the data, allowing concepts to arise organically from individuals' experiences rather than being imposed as preconceived categories. To maintain uniformity throughout the analysis process, a thorough code book was created, containing each code's definition and data examples.

Step 3: Code Development and Refinement.

Related codes were grouped together to explore potential categories and correlations among various aspects of participants' experiences. Throughout the coding process, fresh data was regularly compared to previously coded information to improve codes

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and maintain consistency. The supervisor checked a sample of transcripts independently to ensure the coding technique was suitable and consistent.

Step 4: Theme Development.

Participants' experiences were organised into clustered codes based on topics such as coping mechanisms, pandemic challenges, the impact of Ubuntu values on grieving, and African cultural grieving practices in the Vhembe District.

Major themes were determined from the categories to ensure that they conveyed the substance of the participants' experiences while also answering the study objectives. Each major topic was subsequently examined to create sub-themes that gave extensive information about specific aspects of the participants' experiences.

Step 5: Theme Validation and Refinement

Themes and sub-themes were cross-checked against the original data to ensure that they appropriately represented the participants' experiences and that there was enough evidence to support each theme. Selected participants were contacted to assess the preliminary themes and provide input on how well the interpretations mirrored their experiences. Themes were explored with supervisors and colleagues to gather other viewpoints and verify the analysis's robustness.

Step 6: Final Theme Structure and Interpretation.

A final thematic structure was developed, which clearly defined the relationship between key themes and sub-themes. The researcher validated that the themes encompassed the full range of experiences stated by participants, and that no new important themes emerged from subsequent interviews. Each subject was thoroughly examined, taking into account the consequences for comprehending grieving processes, Ubuntu values, and the problems of the COVID-19 epidemic.

Step 7: Report Writing and Presentation.

Each topic and sub-theme has clear definitions.

- Supporting quotes from participants.
- Analyse the theme's relevance.
- Links to the theoretical framework and existing literature.

A coherent narrative was created to portray the topics in a logical order, demonstrating

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how they linked to one another and met the research objectives. The findings were combined with the literature evaluation and theoretical framework to provide a complete grasp of the research topic.

Quality Assurance Measures

Several mechanisms were put in place during the analysis process to ensure rigour and trustworthiness:

Detailed records of all analytical decisions, including the growth of codes and themes, were kept providing transparency in the analytical process. To reduce their influence on the analysis, the researcher kept a reflexive notebook, documenting personal biases, preconceptions, and reactions to data. Before deciding on the final topic arrangement, various analytical methodologies were investigated, as well as alternate data interpretations. All data was methodically organised and securely kept, with unambiguous version control to trace changes and advancements during the investigation. The methodical application of these analytical stages guaranteed that the findings accurately represented the participants' experiences while preserving the rigour required in qualitative research. The resulting themes provided extensive insights into how families in the Vhembe District dealt with bereavement during the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of Ubuntu ideals in their coping mechanisms, and the obstacles they faced during this unusual period.

3.10. Data Analysis

The researcher employed a rigorous thematic data analysis to investigate and interpret the qualitative data concerning the experiences, sentiments, and emotions associated with the grieving processes, *Ubuntu* values, and challenges faced by grieving families in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. This approach was chosen as it aligns with contemporary psychology research that endorses authenticity and circumvents preconceived notions or assumptions, therefore ensuring the study's validity and reliability. The data were transcribed, organised, tagged, and handled manually. A compilation of code labels was subsequently established, and a set of categories for the principal topics that emerged were formed and organised to enable the researcher to extract themes and patterns

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from the participants' responses. These themes included significant aspects of the data related to the study topic and provided meaning within the data set.

3.11. Pre-testing

Brink (1996) asserts that pre-testing involves a preliminary, scaled-down conducting of the principal investigation. The objective of the trial run/ piloting is to gather data for enhancing the project or evaluating its viability. The primary comprehensive questions intended for the study were posed to three participants prior to the actual interviews. This was conducted to evaluate the instrument's efficacy and identify any challenges it may present to the participants, in order to ascertain the instrument's effectiveness. No contradictions were found in the research questions and participants fully comprehended the requirements outlined by the questions.

3.12. Trustworthiness of the study

Speziale (1999) contends that the credibility of a study pertains to the validation and dependability of the results of qualitative research. The author adds that qualitative research is reliable when it faithfully reflects the experiences of the study participants Haq et al. (2023) give four principal criteria for evaluating the reliability and credibility of qualitative research. The following sections will discuss these aspects and their consideration by the researcher during the data gathering phase of this study.

3.12.1. Credibility

Speziale et al. (2011) assert that trust is established when individuals can identify the presented research findings with their personal experiences. To guarantee the credibility of this research, the researcher ensured that the following criteria were adhered to during the data collection process:

- All participants undergo identical unstructured interview questions.
- The researcher performed debriefing sessions with informants, incorporating any supplementary information during the analysis (member checks).
- The researcher conducted interviews with participants until data saturation was reached, at which point no new information emerged.
- The interviews were audio-recorded, and transcriptions were produced of each interview session (referral adequacy).
- The researcher consulted several participants to verify the accuracy of the transcribed data in reflecting their experiences.

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3.12.2. Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1986) contend that the dependability criterion pertains to the constancy of results. The pair articulated that validity cannot exist without reliability, and hence, credibility cannot exist without dependability; consequently, a demonstration of the former suffices to confirm the presence of the latter. A detailed account of the technique employed in the investigation and an accurate depiction of the data was presented. The data was systematically categorised into themes. All interview materials, transcriptions, documentation, findings, interpretations, and suggestions were preserved, and any other pertinent items related to the study were made accessible to the supervisor and other researchers to facilitate an audit trail.

3.12.3. Confirmability

This involves the objectivity or neutrality of the data, ensuring consensus among two or more independent individuals regarding the data's interpretation (Krefting 1991, p. 221). The researcher conducted data analysis, while the supervisors performed an audit of the processes, encompassing verbatim descriptions, categories, and themes.

4.12.4. Transferability

Transferability denotes the degree to which the results can be utilised in alternative situations or with different participants (Marais 1998). A literature study was conducted, summarising findings from other research investigations. Furthermore, the researcher offered an exhaustive account of the research methodology, participant demographics, and research setting to facilitate potential transferees in determining the feasibility of the transfer. Furthermore, purposive sampling was employed, which facilitated transferability (Krefting 1991, p. 214).

3.13. Ethical considerations

Ethics pertains to the integrity of research in relation to their compliance with professional, legal, and societal responsibilities towards research participants (Polit & Beck, 2004). This research, since it included human subjects, necessitated adherence to both internal and external ethical considerations.

3.13.1. Internal Ethical Consideration

The proposal was submitted to the Department of Psychology for evaluation. The proposal was forwarded to the University of Venda Ethics Committee for additional

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examination and ratification following the departmental assessment. Ethics were evaluated at this step, resulting in the issuance of an ethical clearance certificate.

3.13.2. External Ethical considerations

The external ethical considerations were primarily intended for the traditional leaders in the Vhembe District, where the research project was conducted. A request for permission to conduct the study was filed with the traditional leaders of the Vhembe District. The researcher requested the leaders to inform the participants about the proposed study in the letter. Upon approval of the study, the researcher initiated steps to contact the participants. The researcher complied with the following ethical issues when engaging with subjects.

3.13.3. Right to self-determination

Burns and Grove (2010) assert that the right to self-determination is founded on the ethical concept of respecting individuals. Participants must receive sufficient information about the research, possess the ability to understand this information, and have the autonomy to voluntarily consent to or decline participation in the study. The study's objectives were elucidated to the participants, and their informed consent was acquired. Additionally, the participants were apprised of their rights to withdraw from the study at any moment. During the data collecting interviews, the participants were consistently reminded and advised of their opportunity to review the initial agreement (informed consent).

3.13.4. Right to confidentiality

According to Burns and Grove (2010), confidentiality entails the researcher’s handling of private material provided by participants, which must remain undisclosed to others without the participants’ consent. To guarantee anonymity in this investigation, multiple procedures were implemented. The researcher initially issued pseudonyms to all participants to safeguard their identities, ensuring that their names and any identifying information were not associated with the acquired data. Secondly, all data gathered during the interviews was securely maintained in password-protected digital files and locked cabinets, accessible solely to the researcher. Third, the written consent forms completed by the participants expressly implemented methods to protect their privacy and confidentiality. Fourth, all information disclosed during the study was utilised exclusively for research purposes, and participants were guaranteed that no third

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parties would access the raw data. Ultimately, participants were assured that their anonymity would be preserved in the dissemination of the findings, as no identifying information would be incorporated.

3.13.5. Anonymity

Anonymity is achieved when readers of the final report are unable to associate a participant with his/her data (Burns & Grove, 2010). While complete anonymity in qualitative research cannot be assured (Speziale et al., 2011), the researcher has endeavoured to prevent association of the data with any participant. The data was secured by storing it in a locked cupboard and incinerating the data at the study's conclusion. Identifying information, including participant names, was removed during data collection to prevent any publication of participant identities.

3.13.6. The right to privacy

The researcher prioritised the safeguarding of privacy and protection of all personal information acquired from participants, which could have been expressed as their feelings, beliefs, or attitudes. Raw data was protected from unauthorised access, passwords were not shared, and it was securely stored in a locked cabinet. The tapes were obliterated following the conclusion of the study (Burns & Grove, 2010). Furthermore, no participant's identity was linked to the collected data.

3.13.6. 'Non-maleficence

Non-maleficence, derived from the Latin phrase "primum non nocere" (first, do not hurt), is a core ethical principle that requires researchers to avoid harming participants (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). The idea of nonmaleficence was especially important in this study because the research issue was delicate, involving the exploration of grief and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To guarantee the participants' physical well-being, all interviews followed COVID-19 safety guidelines. When face-to-face interviews were required, suitable social distancing measures were in place, and both the researcher and the participants wore protective masks. Hand sanitiser was provided, and interviews were held in well-ventilated areas to reduce the risk of virus transmission.

Given that the study entailed addressing devastating experiences of loss and grieving,

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numerous precautions were taken to prevent psychological injury. The researcher was ready to offer quick emotional support if individuals felt distressed during the interviews. Contact information for local counselling services and mental health specialists was readily available for participants to use if necessary. Interviews were conducted at a pace that was suitable for the participants, with frequent checks on their emotional well-being. If participants felt overwhelmed, they could pause, take breaks, or end the interview at any moment. Following each interview, participants were debriefed and given the opportunity to share any concerns or emotional responses that developed during the talk. The researcher ensured that no participant left the interview in distress. Participants were given the researcher's contact information and told that they could contact her if they had any delayed emotional responses or needed more support after the interview.

3.14. Summary

This section has detailed the research methods of the study, hence, the research methodology and framework were discussed. This section also addressed the tools utilised in the study, data collection processes, data analysis, ethical considerations, and the reliability and validity of the results.

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4. CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Introduction

In this Chapter is discussed the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 participants from 10 families in the Vhembe District of Limpopo who shed light on grief, *Ubuntu*, and how families were impacted by COVID-19. Interviewees articulated the impact of the pandemic's restrictions on grief traditions, the role of faith and *Ubuntu* in fostering resilience, and the emotional and financial responsibilities associated with mourning. The unique circumstances of COVID-19 affected cultural grief procedures as restrictions on gatherings hindered conventional African mourning practices. Families devised methods to maintain connections through private rituals and virtual communication; despite their creative initiatives, these alterations exposed intergenerational knowledge deficiencies and raised concerns regarding cultural preservation during crises.

The limited assistance obtained by households negated the *Ubuntu* values of interconnection and mutual support during such times. *Ubuntu* was reinforced by telephonic communication, sustenance, and virtual expressions of sympathy from neighbours and extended relatives, notwithstanding the isolation imposed by the disease. The interviewees highlighted how prayers and candle-lighting ceremonies invigorate and motivate during such periods. This chapter categorises the findings by demographics, mourning processes, and obstacles, into primary and secondary themes. Accounts from participants illustrate the influence of cultural and communal norms on grieving during the pandemic and the findings are compared to the literature to see if they support or refute grieving rituals.

4.2 Demographics of the Participants

Twenty individuals from ten households of varying ages, marital statuses, educational backgrounds, and family structures participated. These variations facilitated a comprehensive examination of the pandemic-related grief-handling processes experienced by families in the Vhembe District. The participants' ages ranged from 32 to 63 years, with a median age of 47. The participants comprised an equal distribution of 50% male and 50% female, ensuring gender balance and they were either married

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(60%), single (20%), and widowed or divorced (20%). This variation demonstrated the impact of sorrow on differently-aged family members.

Details on education determined whether participants had matriculation certificate, a bachelor's degree, or diplomas. Forty percent of individuals have post-secondary qualifications, indicating diverse educational attainment. The accessibility to engage in virtual grief and utilise communication platforms was inconsistent. Online platforms enhanced familial and communal involvement among individuals with higher levels of education. On the average, families consisted of six to ten individuals during the pandemic. This group also included extended family members who were unable to travel home owing to constraints. Participants indicated that larger homes offered emotional support, although imposed financial burdens and restricted room for mourning practices limited numbers gathering in a particular location or home.

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Responses indicated that religion and society influenced responses to grief, hence, for majority of Christians, prayers and sermons facilitated their coping mechanisms. African mourning traditions such as pouring of libations and honouring the ancestors were pointed out by the participants. The demographic diversity of participants demonstrated the influence of - participants' details, culture, religion, and communal views - on grieving practices. This study demonstrated families' resilience in addressing these condition while maintaining their culture and faith.

4.3 Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes

The data analysis identified four primary themes and associated sub-themes concerning COVID-19 grieving. These topics illustrate the intricacies of pandemic-related grief and the resilience and susceptibility of families. The subsequent sections analyse the socio-cultural and intellectual ramifications of the data.

Table 4.2: Themes and Sub-Theme

Research Question	Major Theme	Sub-Themes

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What coping mechanisms did families rely on in their grieving process?	Coping Mechanisms During Grieving	1. Adoption of family prayers and spiritual practices. 2. Adaptation of traditional rituals (for example, candle lighting and libations) 3. Use of storytelling and songs to preserve memories 4. Reliance on immediate family for emotional support
Are there any challenges that were encountered by families in their grieving process as a result of imposed limitations during lockdown?	Challenges Encountered During Grieving	1. Isolation due to COVID-19 restrictions
		2. Financial difficulties impacting burial and mourning rituals. 3. Limited participation of elders in cultural and traditional practices. 4. Incomplete mourning processes due to absence of community involvement

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How were the *Ubuntu* values affected during the families' grieving processes and their observation of protocols/regulations gazetted by the Government of South Africa?	Influence of *Ubuntu* Values on Grieving	1. Support from neighbors through calls and food parcels 2. Financial contributions and assistance with funeral-related activities 3. Acts of kindness reinforcing community interconnectedness 4. Limitations of physical gatherings weakening communal grieving
How do African families grieve in Vhembe district?	African Cultural Grieving Practices	1. Importance of ancestral rituals and libations 2. Continuation of mourning traditions like wearing black clothing
		3. Preservation of cultural practices through hymns and storytelling 4. Challenges of intergenerational knowledge transfer during crises

4.4 Major Theme 1: Coping Mechanisms During Grieving

The subthemes below address numerous strategies and approaches individuals employed to navigate the grief process during the pandemic.

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4.4.1Sub-Theme 1: Adoption of Family Prayers and Spiritual Practices

The semi-structured interviews revealed that Vhembe families mourning during the COVID-19 pandemic engaged in spiritual practices and familial prayers. Numerous families employed communal prayers to foster emotional and spiritual connections in the face of adversity. Evening prayers fostered familial connections, however, the lockdown regulations limited communal assemblies, prompting families to seek spiritual assistance. Furthermore, virtual or telephonic pastoral care enhanced their spiritual experience. Notwithstanding their inability to engage in full traditional grieving, family members expressed gratitude for prayers as a source of hope and perseverance.

> *"We prayed together every day, especially in the evenings. The pastor from our church would call us on the phone and pray with us, which was comforting. It gave us hope, knowing that God was still with us during that dark time."*
>
> (Participant 3).

> *"Religion played a big role for us. We prayed as a family every morning and evening. Our pastor couldn't visit, but he sent us voice messages and scripture readings. Those reminders of faith gave us hope and strength to keep going."*
>
> (Participant 6).

> *"Even though we couldn't go to church, we listened to sermons online. It made us feel like God hadn't forgotten us, even though we were struggling so much."*
>
> (Participant 8).

> *"We spent more time together in prayer than we ever did before. This time brought us closer spiritually."*
>
> (Participant 12).

> *"Praying together as a family every evening gave us strength. Even though it wasn't easy, it felt like we had a shield."*
>
> (Participant 15).

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Studies have indicated that spiritual practices alleviate the psychological cost of mourning during a pandemic. During the lockdown, families substituted extensive group sessions with family prayers. Adaptability facilitated the preservation of their beliefs and the cultivation of intergenerational ties. Virtual religious sessions signified a transition towards hybrid spirituality that could still impact grieving. These alterations had disadvantages, and participants emphasised the emotional solace provided by on-line religious sessions.

The literature corroborates these findings, indicating that spiritual practices can help mitigate the psychological distress of grief during a pandemic. Families substituted conventional large group gatherings with intimate family prayers, enabling them to adapt to the lockdown while maintaining their religious practices. This adaptability also fostered intergenerational bonds within households. The introduction of virtual religious sessions signifies a transition towards hybrid spirituality, perhaps influencing future grief coping strategies.

These findings align with the notion of spiritual resilience, which is essential during calamities. Religion significantly aids individuals in managing grief, likewise, familial spiritual practices promote healing and unity amid challenging circumstances. Utilising digital media for religious practices may diminish the emotional resonance of spiritual rites, although all kinds of spiritual activities are significant, enhancing the accessibility and emotional resonance of virtual religious services could better assist families encountering similar challenges.

4.4.2 Sub-Theme 2: Adaptation of Traditional Rituals (for example, Candle Lighting and Libations)

Interviewees reported that families modified mourning rituals in order to preserve cultural continuity during the outbreak. Candlelight and prayers were recurring activities, each evening, although, minor ceremonies also represented and connected individuals to the deceased. Participants emphasised the emotional significance of traditions in the absence of elders to instruct them. Families adeptly integrated traditional components with intimate gatherings to preserve cultural values during challenging periods.

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"We lit a candle every evening to remember the person we lost. It wasn't the same without the whole family, but it gave us a way to honor him."

(Participant 1).

"Pouring libations at home and speaking to the ancestors as a family helped us feel connected to our culture. It was different, but we did our best."

(Participant 7).

"We couldn't slaughter a cow for the ancestors because of restrictions, but we still followed some mourning rules, like wearing black for a month."

(Participant 10).

"Singing traditional songs during our small gatherings gave us a sense of comfort. It wasn't the same as a full ceremony, but it kept the spirit alive."

(Participant 14).

"Not being able to invite the elders to perform the rituals felt incomplete, but we tried to follow the essentials within our family."

(Participant 18).

Participants' responses demonstrate the adaptability of traditional customs to external challenges, hence, families maintained their culture by adjusting to confinement. The exclusion of elders or the inability to conduct communal activities was a persistent worry due to the communal nature of African mourning rites. The pandemic limits resulted in ritual hybridisation, preserving vital elements while altering non-essential ones.

These findings support the discourse on cultural resilience in relation to crises; showing that cultural rituals can evolve in response to shifting settings to maintain identity. Candlelight and taking certain drinks foster psychological solace by engaging

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the spiritual aspect, while insufficient rituals exacerbate shame and cultural dissonance in bereaved families. This inconsistency underscores the necessity for contextually relevant, culturally authentic, and pragmatic approaches. The evidence indicates that communities require resources to modify rituals while also preserving their culture.

4.4.3 Sub-Theme 3: Use of Storytelling and Songs to Preserve Memories

Grieving families also commemorate their loved ones through narratives and traditional music, as indicated by during the semi-structured interviews. Participants indicated that these activities are done in honour of the departed members and to preserve their heritage within the family. Therapeutic family storytelling assisted families in recalling the positive attributes and memories of the departed. Traditional songs from evening meetings reinstated cultural values and cemented connections among bereaved members. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown limitations, however, families modified these traditions for smaller, more intimate gatherings, showcasing their tenacity and commitment to cultural preservation.

> *"We would gather as a family in the evenings and share stories about the person we lost. It was comforting to focus on the good memories and keep their spirit alive."*
>
> (Participant 4).

> *"Singing traditional songs together brought us a sense of peace. Even though we couldn't have the larger community with us, it felt like a way of connecting with our culture."*
>
> (Participant 8).

> *"My grandmother told us stories about how our loved one overcame challenges in life. It reminded us of their strength and gave us hope during this difficult time."*
>
> (Participant 12).

> *"Sharing stories and singing their favorite hymns helped us to feel close to them, even though they were no longer with us."*
>
> (Participant 16).

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"We couldn't have a big gathering, but singing and storytelling in our small circle made the grieving process bearable."

(Participant 19).

These examples illustrate the various applications of narrative and music in grief therapy. Narratives facilitated emotional expression among senior family members and enabled intergenerational teaching. Music alleviated distress by facilitating emotional release and fostering spiritual connections. These actions, however, were modified to accommodate the pandemic, yet their symbolic significance endured, demonstrating how cultural traditions can stand the test of time and provide solace to mourners. Participants, thus, lost the communal nature of these rites in the absence of extended family and community, but family members still persisted.

Research supports the utilisation of narrative and music in bereavement therapy. Narrative assists individuals in processing emotions and extracting meaning from loss, hence, augmenting resilience. Traditional songs cultivate cohesion and facilitate healing within African communities. Participants complained that the use of these rituals diminished at the continuation of the lockdown, in contrast to the communal grief norms shown in other studies. Traditional grieving involves communal participation, however, the pandemic has shifted rituals towards family-centered practices, potentially impacting cultural mourning traditions.

These findings emphasise the necessity for adaptable cultural preservation strategies that address any unexpected practical limitations. Virtual storytelling and song-sharing on online platforms may be distant, still these activities promote intergenerational connections, ensuring their persistence despite any current challenges. This study demonstrates that African mourning traditions can adapt while retaining their cultural essence.

4.4.4 Sub-Theme 4: Reliance on Immediate Family for Emotional Support

The semi-structured interviews indicated that immediate family members were crucial to provide mourning support, particularly during such incidences as COVID-19 lockdown; these times necessitated increased familial support. Conversations about

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the deceased, demonstrations of solace, and mourning were depended upon to make solitary mourning, bearable. The pandemic regulations limited familial and communal assemblies, although it fostered intimacy. Families had to depend on one another for mourning, ritual responsibilities, and emotional assistance and although families had to mourn in smaller groups, many perceived these moments as both unifying and heartbreaking.

> *"We had no choice but to turn to each other for strength. My siblings and I would sit together every night and talk about how much we missed our mother."*
>
> (Participant 5).

> *"It was not easy without the extended family, but I think it brought us closer as a household. We prayed together and tried to encourage each other every day."*
>
> (Participant 11).

> *"The hardest part was not being able to hug my cousins or have them around, but my children gave me a reason to keep going. We comforted each other."*
>
> (Participant 18).

> *"When I felt like crying, I would sit with my brother, and we would just talk about the good memories we had with our father."*
>
> (Participant 7).

> *"Our family bond became our safety net. We learned to lean on each other for everything—practical tasks and emotional support."*
>
> (Participant 15).

These quotations demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of families during the during the mourning periods, during the epidemic. The absence of extended family and community support was challenging, nonetheless, numerous individuals fortified their connections with immediate relatives. Participants responded that exchanging narratives, meals, and prayers assisted families in managing bereavement, although owing to the insufficient support, numerous individuals still experienced isolation and yearned for community members.

The results corroborate earlier studies, on direct family-member's bereavement management. The emotional resilience of the nuclear family amid disasters is

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highlighted, particularly, when collective mourning is restricted. From these findings, African households can modify their support networks in response to pandemics and other societal disruptions. This study diverges from other research on African mourning practices and the roles of extended family and community networks. Data indicates a family's ability to transformation emotional support from extended family to immediate household due to situational necessities rather than holding on to cultural preference.

Amidst restraints such as COVID-19, the mourning practices of African families underwent transformation, hence, despite traditional mourning practices being restricted, immediate families offered dependable emotional support in the absence of the broader networks. Future researchers could assess virtual meetings' ability to connect direct and extended family support systems. The impact of nuclear and extended family interactions in comprehensive emotional well-being must be investigated and acknowledged in crisis-resilience strategies.

4.5 Major Theme 2: Challenges Encountered During Grieving

This subthemes examined the difficulties and issues individuals encounter during the grieving process in situations, such as COVID-19 interruptions.

4.5.1 Sub-Theme 1: Isolation Due to COVID-19 Restrictions

Families in Vhembe District experienced difficulties with COVID-19-induced isolation, as revealed by participants' responses during the semi-structured interviews. Participants constantly indicated that the absence of extended family and community impeded the grieving process for the lockdown obstructed communal mourning practices, forcing close family members only, to manage grief in isolation. This isolation exacerbated grieving as families were unable to utilise *Ubuntu's* customary support systems. The absence of communal mourning resulted in numerous individuals experiencing feelings of isolation, incompleteness, and dissatisfaction. One participant described solitary grieving as "a profound quiet" in contrast to communal sadness.

> *"The hardest part was not being able to gather with the extended family and friends. It felt like we were grieving alone, without the support that we're so used to"*

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(Participant 3).

Other participants said that they felt something was missing without the direction of elders and others to soothe them.

> *"Usually, the whole community comes together, but this time, it was just us. It felt like something important was missing."*

(Participant 12).

> *"Not having the elders around for guidance made everything feel incomplete. We tried our best, but it wasn't the same."*

(Participant 8).

> *"The restrictions made it so hard to connect with others. We missed the comforting presence of people who usually share in the mourning."*

(Participant 16).

> *"Grieving without the usual community support made the pain feel heavier, like we were carrying it all by ourselves."*

(Participant 19).

These pieces exemplify the emotional weight of isolation caused by grief. The process of mourning, which often requires coordination, was hindered by a lack of extended family and community support. The symbolic and practical roles of communities in offering solace, facilitating sharing, and honouring the deceased were highlighted. Disregarding these culturally relevant activities led to increased loss and isolation. Families traversed the grief process devoid of guidance, owing to the lack of elders and custodians of cultural wisdom.

The results corroborate many African-grief research that identifies the significance of communal assistance. Collective mourning, particularly following a bereavement, enhances emotional fortitude and social intimacy, while isolation, amplifies the psychological effects of grief, and how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted conventional practices. Extended family networks provide emotional and logistical support to mourners, which was absent during the pandemic.

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4.5.2 Sub-Theme 2: Financial Difficulties Impacting Burial and Mourning Rituals

The findings revealed that families in the Vhembe District faced financial difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with funeral and mourning customs. Participants highlighted the detrimental impact of the lockout on their income and financial stability. Due to the constraints and insufficient funds, mourning customs such as livestock sacrifice for communal feasts and large gatherings were economically unviable. This financial strain impeded families from culturally commemorating loved ones, resulting in guilt and frustration. Participants, thus, had to concede on some cultural and communal values.

"We could not afford to slaughter a cow or even have a decent meal for the few relatives who managed to come. It felt like we were failing our loved one."

(Participant 5).

"The lockdown affected our jobs, and with no income, we could barely manage to buy the basic necessities, let alone organize *a proper burial."*

(Participant 8).

"Hiring people to assist with cooking and cleaning during the mourning period was out of the question. Everything was left to the immediate family, which was exhausting and overwhelming."

(Participant 13).

"In our culture, we honor the deceased by providing for those who come to mourn, but the financial hardships made this impossible. It was heartbreaking."

(Participant 17).

"We had to choose between paying for transport to the cemetery and buying food for the household. These are choices no family should have to make."

(Participant 19).

These findings align with research on the economic impacts of mourning in African nations characterised by robust communal rituals. Financial instability during bereavement produces psychological anguish as families navigate the dual

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responsibilities of honouring the deceased and sustaining their households. Rural populations, reliant on informal jobs as their primary economic source, were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, hence, the lockdown affected the economy, altering familial behaviours where financial resources where required.

These participants statements indicate a significant disparity in grieving procedures when compared to pre-pandemic bereavement. Families who were affected by the epidemic as well as certain burial ritual were compelled to choose survival over conventional mourning customs involving communal participation and material offerings. Cultural norms needed to be redefined during crises, demonstrating adaptive resilience from the affected communities. Families in the resilient Vhembe District streamlined traditions, adapted and depended on close family connections, and utilised virtual memorials or personal gatherings to commemorate their loved ones.

4.5.3 Sub-Theme 3: Limited Participation of Elders in Cultural and Traditional Practices

The semi-structured interviews' data indicated that the restrictions enforced on elders, relating to cultural and traditional mourning practices created challenges for households in the Vhembe District, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic restrictions and health risks, elders, who conveyed cultural wisdom and guided mourning rituals, were unable to engage.

Family members experienced a disconnection from their culture owing to the lack of customary mourning practices supervised by the elders. Participants indicated that ancestral blessings, animal killing, and prayers conducted by the elder were omitted or altered, undermining traditional authenticity. This void engendered a feeling of melancholy, as these events are intended to commemorate the deceased and provide closure for the bereaved family members.

> *"We couldn't invite the elders to lead the rituals because of the lockdown rules. Without them, it felt like we weren't doing things properly."*
>
> (Participant 4).

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"The elders are the ones who guide us on how to perform the rituals. Without their presence, we felt lost and unsure if we were doing the right thing."

(Participant 10).

"The absence of the elders meant that some of the rituals were skipped altogether, which was painful for us."

(Participant 7).

"Our grandmother usually leads the prayers and gives the blessings, but she couldn't come because of the fear of COVID-19. It left a gap in our mourning process."

(Participant 15).

"The elders bring wisdom and comfort during such times. Without their presence, the grieving felt incomplete and lonely."

(Participant 18).

These extracts portray how elders preserve cultural and spiritual mourning rituals, therefore, their incapacity to engage with the process of mourning interrupted ceremonies and marginalised homes. Senior individuals provide spiritual counsel and emotional assistance that transcends rituals; the lack of their presence intensified familial distress and adversely affected the communities' mourning.

Building on previous research, our findings validate the point that seniors act as cultural intermediates who transmit traditions. COVID-19 disrupted intergenerational connections, undermining traditional behaviours and cultural heritage. Families attempting to modify traditions to accommodate the absence of the elders' guidance experience heightened spiritual and mental distress.

Interpretation of the data demonstrated familial adaptation and resilience. In the absence of elders, numerous participants reported being obliged to modified cultural activities. Junior family members assumed senior positions, and specific ceremonies were conducted virtually or postponed until restrictions were lifted. This adaption strategy demonstrates that African communities are resourceful and resilient in maintaining traditional practices throughout crises, nevertheless, some of these alterations failed to reproduce the spiritual and emotional satisfaction of prior rituals.

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4.5.4 Sub-Theme 4: Incomplete Mourning Processes Due to Absence of Community Involvement

According to discussions during the semi-structured interviews, bereaved families faced difficulties in the absence of community engagement. In the Vhembe District, traditional grieving involves gathering with extended family, friends, and neighbours for emotional and practical support. The limits on gatherings due to COVID-19 resulted in families mourning in isolation. Participants indicated postponements or cancellations of communal prayers, memorial ceremonies, due to the required logistical arrangements which could not implemented. This interruption resulted in loneliness, emotional distress, and an incomplete commemoration of loved ones. The loss of communities' presence impeded grieving support, as well as spiritual and cultural fulfilment.

> *"The lockdown made it impossible for us to invite the community to our home. It felt like we were going through everything alone, which was overwhelming."*
>
> (Participant 3).

"We couldn't hold a proper memorial service. Normally, the community helps us with cooking, cleaning, and organis*ing everything, but this time, it was just us."*

(Participant 8).

"The absence of people singing and praying together made the house feel so empty. Mourning is not just for the family; it's for everyone to share the loss."

(Participant 12).

"We didn't have the chance to say goodbye properly because there was no one to console us or share memories of our loved one."

(Participant 14).

"The funeral was rushed, and we couldn't even invite the extended family. It felt incomplete, like we didn't do justice to her memory."

(Participant 19).

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These examples illustrate the adverse effects of insufficient community involvement on emotional and cultural health. The lack of collective mourning intensified participants' challenges in handling emotional, cultural and practical obligations, resulting in increased feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction. The abbreviated funerals and little community support caused families to feel a failure in commemorating their loved ones, intensifying their grief.

Previous comprehensive studies demonstrate the significant negative consequences of community disengagement. Their absence frequently impeded traditional rites and diminished the sharing grief, thereby, negating the principles of *Ubuntu* which foster unity and solidarity in the face of loss, which are appropriate and urgently required at such occasions. Bereavement is profoundly embedded in culture; cultural practices were ignored during the COVID-19 pandemic, hence, families experienced a sense of disconnection from their community. Hymns, communal meals, and collective prayers, which offer comfort and resolution, were absent.

These findings corroborate previous research indicating that the pandemic affected culture. In *Ubuntu*-based African societies, communal mourning is essential for emotional and spiritual healing, meaning that insufficient group mourning and interaction can lead to emotional turmoil and social isolation - the COVID-19 regulations impeded these endeavours. The incapacity to engage in communal rituals undermines cultural identity and causes distress to families.

Research indicates that bereaved families, however, exhibited resilience and adaptability. Numerous individuals discovered methods to commemorate loved ones and maintain connections despite the challenges encountered; examples include, inability to conduct domestic rituals, having virtual memorials, and non-conducting of intimate family reunions. While these were less gratifying than conventional rituals, however, these alterations offered solace and stability. History testifies that African nations have preserved cultural customs through ingenuity during disasters.

The grief of families in the Vhembe District was exacerbated by community’s inability to support. The family's resilience was notable, yet, the absence of societal support created an emotional and cultural void, underscoring the necessity for innovative crisis management strategies. Community leaders and governments could establish virtual platforms or organise staggered mourning sessions to suit cultural and emotional requirements under challenging circumstances, such as COVID-19 era.

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4.6 Major Theme 3: Influence of *Ubuntu* Values on Grieving Processes

This section explores how *Ubuntu* values impacted individuals and communities in their experiences and management of loss, during trying times.

4.6.1 Sub-Theme 1: Support from Neighbors through Calls and Food Parcels

Analysis of Data Findings

Ubuntu principles motivated communities to assisted grieving individuals with calls and food donations from neighbours. Participants referred to these actions as “lifelines” at a period of profound isolation. Gathering limitations inhibited families from mourning collectively, thereby, community members offered either remote or reduced in-person assistance. Families lamented *Ubuntu's* conspicuous absence, yet, the neighbours' endeavours to maintain communication and provide assistance demonstrated *Ubuntu's* fortitude in the face of crises. Communal assistance alleviated the mental and financial strains of pandemic-related mourning. This is demonstrated by the following*:*

> *“Our neighbors brought food parcels when they heard about our loss. It was comforting to know we were not completely alone during that time.”*
>
> (Participant 6).

> *“Even though people couldn’t visit, they would call and check on us. It felt good to hear their voices and know they cared.”*
>
> (Participant 10).

> *“One neighbor even sent us cooked meals for the funeral because she knew we couldn’t afford to cater for the few people who came.”*
>
> (Participant 15).

> *“The lockdown made things hard, but people still found ways to show their support. A simple call from a neighbour reminded us that we were not forgotten.”*
>
> (Participant 12).

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> *"It wasn't the same as having people around, but the food parcels and messages showed that Ubuntu was still alive."*
>
> (Participant 18).

Participants claim that *Ubuntu* adapts efficiently to demands during adverse situations. Food parcels and telephone communications from neighbours exemplified solidarity and interconnectedness, surpassing basic comfort. These efforts fortified familial bonds and support, and although these activities did not mitigate the sadness, participants indicated a reduction in loneliness caused by the epidemic.

Community cooperation in times of crisis evolves with the adaptation of neighbours. Telephone calls and emails provided solace to socially-isolated individuals. In spite of economic uncertainty, neighbours' food deliveries assisted families in catering for funerals and managing grief. These results indicate that application of *Ubuntu* principles promoted resilience and communal cohesion, even with minimal representations by non-family members.

These results endorse *Ubuntu* as a crisis-assistance framework in African societies. Ubuntu advocates for interconnection and the community's obligation to assist its members, although neighbours adjusted their cooperation to the confines of the epidemic. Communities in Southern Africa creatively upheld *Ubuntu* principles via digital and non-physical assistance throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Studies indicate that *Ubuntu's* spiritual and cultural attributes were at odds with the practicalities of the pandemic. The food deliveries and calls were appreciated; nonetheless, some participants believed that the lack of physical presence diminished the communal aspect of mourning. The entire potential of *Ubuntu* is more effectively realised through community-building physical interactions.

Ubuntu principles persisted throughout the pandemic. Crises catalyse innovation in traditional traditions while preserving values, demonstrating neighbours' capacity to adapt and sustain support networks. *Ubuntu's* innovative pandemic responses illustrate its relevance, cultural significance and adaptability.

The results of this study indicate that *Ubuntu* principles enhance communal ties in times of crisis. The changes during the pandemic were atypical, yet, neighbours provided emotional and financial support to bereaved families, showing that *Ubuntu* is a socially-flexible framework. Research on the application of *Ubuntu* in contemporary

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situations is crucial for maintaining the relevance and significance of its principles amid future transformations.

4.6.2 Sub-Theme 2: Financial Contributions and Assistance with Funeral-Related Activities

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, *Ubuntu* principles, like financial assistance and funeral support gained prominence. During challenging economic periods, neighbours, extended relatives, and community organisations contribute to funeral expenses. Numerous households experienced a decline in income during the lockdown, making this assistance essential, however, contributions from neighbours financed cemetery provisions, refreshments and transportation. *Ubuntu* principles, consistently, motivated others to provide assistance without solicitation, demonstrating its initiative. Notwithstanding community support, some participants experienced feelings of guilt or inadequacy for failing to fulfil cultural funeral preparations. This is demonstrated below:

> *"When our neighbors heard about our loss, they pooled money to help us. It was such a relief because we didn't know how we would pay for the coffin."*
>
> (Participant 4).

> *"Our church members contributed money for the funeral. It wasn't a lot, but it showed us that they cared about us during our time of need."*
>
> (Participant 8).

> *"We were struggling financially, but our uncle sent us money from Johannesburg to help with the burial costs. Without that, we wouldn't have been able to do much."*
>
> (Participant 13).

> *"One of our neighbors* organised *a collection for us and even helped us pay for the transport to the cemetery. It was a reminder that we are not alone."*
>
> (Participant 15).

> *"The little money people contributed made a huge difference. It wasn't just about the money; it was about feeling supported and cared for."*

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(Participant 19).

Participants' stories demonstrate *Ubuntu's* significance in providing financial and logistical support to bereaved families. Monetary contributions demonstrated that *Ubuntu's* communal responsibility can be pragmatic. Unsolicited resource-sharing indicated community awareness and connectivity during periods of stress. *Ubuntu's* principles focus on unsolicited assistance and this reflects its inherent compassion for others.

The results also indicate that financial assistance is insufficient to meet the emotional and cultural requirements of bereaved families. Participants commended their communities but emphasised that financial contributions could not substitute for customary activities hindered by the pandemic. In the absence of traditional gatherings, families saw a lack of commemoration for their loved ones, hence, the disparity between practical assistance and cultural norms, hampers *Ubuntu's* crisis functionality, although these findings endorse *Ubuntu* as a paradigm for crisis management and resource allocation. Ubuntu embodies a community-centric worldview and the participants' narratives of neighbours and relatives contributing funds, unsolicited, illustrated this. Communities modify traditional methods to address contemporary concerns, thereby enhancing the resilience of *Ubuntu* values.

Some analysts question *Ubuntu's* ability to mitigate systemic inequity since they believe it mainly promotes interpersonal cooperation, thereby, may not be able to tackle structural challenges such as poverty or unemployment, which worsened during the epidemic. Financial aid diminished bereaved families' immediate expenditures but did not entirely mitigate families' economic difficulties, as indicated by participants. *Ubuntu* addresses cultural expectations in times of crisis, thus focuses on utilitarian requirements but constrains spiritual and cultural aspects, particularly in times of pandemics. This validates participants' views regarding the cultural-sorrow limitations of cash contributions.

The results demonstrate *Ubuntu's* persistent significance in providing emotional and practical support to grieving families. Financial contributions and burial assistance illustrate Ubuntu's adaptability in crisis reaction. Financial limitations and conventional mourning practices conflicted for families, highlighting the dichotomy between pragmatic assistance and cultural obligations. Future research, hence, should investigate *Ubuntu's* capacity to address significant and systemic issues. Funeral and

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cooperative savings schemes can institutionalise *Ubuntu* and provide financial support for it so that the principle may extend its communal-care model beyond personal crises to tackle systemic inequities by integrating these Ubuntu principles into economic and social policies.

4.6.3 Sub-Theme 3: Acts of Kindness Reinforcing Community Interconnectedness

Acts of kindness enhanced community connectivity during the loss experienced by families in Vhembe District during the COVID-19 epidemic, as indicated by participants during the semi-structured interviews. Participants indicated communal food procurement, meal provision, and financial assistance were efforts which demonstrated *Ubuntu's* benevolence and ability beyond commerce. These actions symbolised community for numerous families, even at infrequent gatherings. These measures were beneficial, nevertheless, some participants said that they could not substitute *Ubuntu* for in-person social practices during grieving moments.

> *"Neighbors would come by and leave groceries at the gate. It wasn't much, but it reminded us that we were not forgotten, even during such a hard time."*
>
> (Participant 7).

> *"A few friends sent us cooked meals every day for a week after the funeral. It was their way of showing support, and it really helped because we were emotionally drained and couldn't even think about cooking."*
>
> (Participant 10).

> *"My colleagues from work pooled money to help us with the funeral costs. They couldn't attend the funeral, but their support reminded me of how interconnected we are as people."*
>
> (Participant 15).

> *"One of our neighbours mowed our lawn and cleaned our yard before the funeral. It was a simple gesture, but it meant so much to us in that moment."*
>
> (Participant 4).

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"People we hadn't spoken to in years reached out during this time, sending messages of comfort and encouragement. It showed that the community spirit of Ubuntu is still alive."

(Participant 2).

Ubuntu principles can withstand isolation and disruption through empathetic acts of emotional and practical support, as seen above. Despite the constraints of distance on mourning, provisions, financial support, and symbolic gestures strengthened communal bonds. *Ubuntu* advocates for collective humanity, and these actions provided tangible assistance, nevertheless, participants indicated that such activities cannot completely satisfy bereaved families. African mourning necessitates communal assemblies and rituals, which numerous families were deprived of, hence, notwithstanding the benevolence, mourners experienced feelings of isolation and incompleteness. This contrast underscores *Ubuntu's* emphasis on comfort and the urgency of implementing it in unforeseen circumstances, like a COVID-19 pandemic. *Ubuntu* demonstrated its capacity to fortify communities in times of crisis as the concept flourishes via collective humanity and communal assistance, evident in tangible acts of compassion at periods of grief or distress. Participants voiced the innovative methods employed by community members to provide support throughout the pandemic. This is a clear manifestation that the values of *Ubuntu* are enduring, despite the constraints imposed by such pandemic limitations. Despite receiving practical and symbolic support, participants experienced emotional distress due to the absence of community mourning rituals, thus, the data supports assertions that *Ubuntu* is contemporary-friendly. The concept can adapt to emerging difficulties such as through remote communication and contactless deliveries of food and contributions of financial resources. Participants indicated that these modifications were very advantageous and appropriate, emphasising the necessity of reconciling traditional and contemporary communal assistance methods.

Past studies indicate that kindness enhances community relationships during times of stress, therefore, practical and emotional support articulate *Ubuntu's* philosophy. Interviewees asserted that *Ubuntu's* social impact is challenging to reproduce in the absence of rituals and gatherings, so incorporating *Ubuntu* principles into government help will enhance their engagement in future crises. Community leaders might create bereavement counselling networks to assist families both emotionally and practically.

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Virtual mourning rituals and traditional practices can facilitate community connection while adhering to diverse public norms, such as those relating to health and others. *Ubuntu*, a fundamental element of African social structures, adjusts to diverse contexts while preserving its core principles; intentionality these principles are required to integrate traditional and contemporary methods to optimise their potential.

4.6.4 Sub-Theme 4: Limitations of Physical Gatherings Weakening Communal Grieving

The semi-structured interviews revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic impeded physical assemblies, resulting in a reduction in social support. Participants assert that *Ubuntu*-based bereavement rituals necessitate physical presence for both emotional and practical support. Bereaved families in the Vhembe District experienced a deficiency in energy and camaraderie due to the absence of substantial family and community gatherings during grieving. Family distress escalated due to restrictions on mobility and gathering size. The absence of community elders and cultural custodians undermined traditions, resulting in disappointment among some individuals.

> *"Usually, we have a large gathering where everyone comes to comfort the family and participate in the rituals, but the lockdown left us with just a few people. It felt so empty."*
>
> (Participant 3).

> *"We couldn't even perform the ritual of slaughtering a cow because the elders were not there to guide us. It felt like we had failed to honor our loved one properly."*
>
> (Participant 8).

> *"The absence of the community meant we were alone in our grief. There was no one to share stories or even just sit with us, which is what makes mourning bearable."*
>
> (Participant 15).

> *"During the burial, only immediate family members were allowed. The silence was overwhelming. It felt like our loved one was forgotten by the community."*

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(Participant 19).

"Even though people sent us messages and food parcels, it wasn't the same as having them there. Their physical presence is what gives strength during these times."

(Participant 12).

In *Ubuntu*-based contexts, physical assemblies are necessary. Participants believed that *Ubuntu's* norm of unity was compromised by insufficient communal engagement. Disrupting traditional mourning practices and the sharing of grief has resulted in familial isolation and a lack of support; these shortcomings illustrated the psychological burden of solitary mourning. A multitude of participants experienced profound feelings of solitude and melancholy as communities' absence intensified their emotional issues, as traditional rites provide closure and spiritual healing. The absence of cultural participation led some individuals to question if they had adequately honoured their loved ones, exacerbating their sense of shame alongside their grief.

Research indicates that African civilisations prioritise collective mourning. In-person gatherings during mourning allow the bereaved to perceive the continuity of life. Participants articulate that the absence of such connections resulted in familial isolation during periods of mourning. The current study's data indicates challenges inadequately addressed in the literature. The concepts of *Ubuntu* are durable and adaptable, thereby, enabling virtual gatherings to alleviate physical isolation, nonetheless, the participants deemed these options inadequate for reinstating the emotional and cultural significance of physical presence. The adaption ideas of *Ubuntu* do not align with the experiences of bereaved families.

The interruption of mourning rituals underscores the need of cultural preservation during crises as some public-health constraints, during pandemics, may diminish conventional practices. The participants' experiences indicate that *Ubuntu* principles are crucial to mourning, although the outbreak exposed implementation challenges. Physical assemblies are essential to *Ubuntu*-oriented grief so while valued, the community's virtual or just material assistance could not substitute for in-person emotional and cultural connections. This illustrates the necessity for innovative approaches to preserve communal cohesion during crises while safeguarding

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traditions, therefore, policies and governmental mandates must integrate public health with cultural preservation. Smaller, staggered assemblies or hybrid formats incorporating both real and virtual participation may enhance inclusivity. An intergenerational discourse on the value of mourning rituals may facilitate their preservation, albeit in altered forms.

4.7 Major Theme 4: African Cultural Grieving Practices

The following subthemes explore the traditional grief rituals, beliefs, and practices specific to the Vhembe District, highlighting their cultural significance and role in the mourning process.

4.7.1 Sub-Theme 1: Importance of Ancestral Rituals and Libations

The semi-structured interviews revealed that mourning in the Vhembe District, necessitates ancestral rituals and libations. Participants indicated that these ceremonies facilitate the reception of spiritual messages, honouring the deceased, and promoting emotional healing. COVID-19 prohibited the attendance of extended family and elders at these ceremonies, unfortunately, when these are reduced to just familial rites, they appeared insufficient. Numerous participants perceived inadequacy in cultural obligations, despite engaging in ancestral veneration through, such acts as drinking traditional brews and prayers at home. The absence of spiritual and cultural guidance from village elders rendered the situation challenging.

> *"We poured libations at home and spoke to the ancestors as a family. It helped, but not having the elders there felt like we were missing something essential."*
>
> (Participant 5).

> *"The restrictions meant we couldn't slaughter a cow, which is crucial in our culture for appeasing the ancestors. It felt like an incomplete ritual."*
>
> (Participant 11).

> *"Speaking to the ancestors brought some comfort, but the absence of the larger community made it feel less powerful."*

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(Participant 3).

"We did what we could with the restrictions, but I kept wondering if the ancestors understood our situation. It felt like we were failing them."

(Participant 8).

"The libations gave us a way to connect spiritually, but without the full ritual, it lacked the depth we're used to."

(Participant 14).

These results illustrate the impact of ancestral rituals and traditional brews on mitigating grief, both culturally and emotionally. These traditions provide spiritual healing, cultural continuity, and reverence for the deceased. Participant narratives illustrated cultural norms in contrast to demands due epidemic restrictions.

The absence of elders and extended family was noted in these collaborative, intergenerational rites. Participants had feelings of guilt and inadequacy for failing to honour the deceased through ceremonial observances. These rituals exemplify perseverance, adaptability, and the psychological impact of incomplete tasks. The results further demonstrate that libations signify a spiritual bond with the deceased. These activities assist participants in communicating and seeking ancestral guidance. The absence of communal validation diminished the efficacy of these rites, highlighting the interdependence of individual and collective mourning in African societies.

African mourning literature underscores ancient rituals as ancestral rites are essential to African spirituality, facilitating the connection between life and death. These funeral practices fortify community and culture. Participants experienced some degree of spiritual and emotional solace in performing libations, despite the limitations. The results demonstrate a complexity that challenges assumptions on the adaptability of these techniques. African traditions can adjust, to some degree, to contemporary challenges, although the narratives of participants indicate emotional repercussions. The literature shows paucity in studies on spiritual alienation resulting from the absence of communal elders and rituals, however, the current findings indicate that African mourning encompasses ancestral rituals and libations, thus, the modifications in rituals in response to COVID-19 frequently resulted in spiritual and cultural

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dissatisfaction among the participants. This underscores the imperative for virtual or hybrid methodologies that would enable elders to provide remote guidance during crises to maintain traditions and this research has emphasised the crucial nature of intergenerational knowledge transfer to preserve these behaviours. Community leaders and cultural custodians can document and disseminate ancestral rituals for future generations to utilise during challenging periods to reduce feelings of loss.

4.7.2 Sub-Theme 2: Continuation of Mourning Traditions like Wearing Black Clothing

A Vhembe family dons black attire while mourning. Participants remarked that this ritual commemorates the departed and conveys sorrow. Financial limitations resulting from COVID-19, however, hindered the procurement of funeral garments, notwithstanding these limitations, families modified or recycled clothing to maintain this practice. The use of black attire fostered familial mourning and connection; the decrease in community gatherings diminished external affirmation of this attitude, which is essential in communal grieving.

> *"Wearing black is how we show respect to the departed. Even with the lockdown, we made sure to follow this tradition, though it was hard to buy new clothes."*
>
> (Participant 9).

> *"For a whole month, we wore black to honor our loss. It felt right, even if the community couldn't see it as much as before."*
>
> (Participant 15).

> *"We had to be creative. I used an old black dress and adjusted it because we couldn't afford new clothes during the lockdown."*
>
> (Participant 6).

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"It felt incomplete without the community noticing our mourning attire. Wearing black was still important to us, but it's not the same without the bigger gatherings."

(Participant 12).

"Some younger people in the family didn't see why it mattered so much, but for us, it's a way of keeping our culture alive."

(Participant 3).

These replies illustrate one enduring cultural sign of grieving among the black community in the Vhembe District. These customs articulate grief and foster familial connections and reverence for the departed. Participants' compromise, such as repurposing apparel, illustrate how some mourning activities may adjust to financial constraints imposed by the pandemic. The collective impact of wearing black waned in the absence of communal recognition and social assemblies.

The results indicate that mourning, particularly through the wearing of black attire, is integral to the culture of the Vhembe District. The families successfully adjusted to confined living-areas following the epidemic's disruption of community traditions, showing that cultural traditions can adapt to external circumstances while retaining their significance. In an evolving civilisation, generational transitions jeopardise these traditions however, community leaders and cultural custodians can educate children on the symbolism of some of these rituals like wearing mourning clothes. These traditions can be maintained and contemporised through education and communal initiatives.

4.7.3 Sub-Theme 3: Preservation of Cultural Practices through Hymns and Storytelling

The interviews revealed the manner in which families in the Vhembe District mourn through hymns and narratives. Participants reported that these practices aided them in coping and maintaining their culture during the pandemic. Traditional and religious hymns provided solace and stability during significant turmoil, thereby, storytelling facilitated familial remembrance and cohesion, demonstrating communities' adaptations to pandemic restrictions. Family-oriented events, with hymns and narratives, supplanted extensive communal assemblies. Participants demonstrated

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resilience and flexibility by sustaining these practices within their immediate households, despite absent extended family and community members. These activities provided solace to the bereaved and imparted cultural values to youngsters.

> *"Singing hymns every evening helped us feel connected, both to God and to our loved one who passed away. It was our way of keeping the tradition alive, even without the usual gatherings."*
>
> (Participant 7).

> *"We shared stories about my father, the things he used to say and do. It made us laugh and cry, but it also reminded us of who he was and what he meant to us."*
>
> (Participant 3).

> *"The younger kids didn't understand why we were singing or telling stories, but as we explained, they started joining in. It was a way of teaching them about our culture."*
>
> (Participant 15).

> *"Normally, the whole village would join in singing and storytelling. Without that, it felt quieter, but it was still important to us as a family."*
>
> (Participant 10).

> *"When we sang the hymns my grandmother loved, it felt like she was still with us, even though the pain of losing her was very fresh."*
>
> (Participant 18).

These findings illustrate the emotional and cultural importance of hymns and storytelling in the mourning process. Participants regarded these activities as therapeutic, offering both solace and continuity at a challenging time so despite the lockdown limits on communal gatherings, hymns and narratives facilitated the preservation of traditional values and familial connections. The transmission of traditional knowledge via storytelling also served an educational function, fostering intergenerational learning despite little community engagement.

The findings underscore the significance of hymns and storytelling within African

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mourning traditions. Hymns function as a spiritual remedy and a cultural artefact that promotes community togetherness and emotional restoration. Storytelling safeguards oral history and promotes intergenerational communication. The participants' experiences highlight the enduring significance of these behaviours in bereavement, despite contemporary constraints such as pandemic-related limits.

These results enhance the current literature by demonstrating the adaptation of these rituals to current settings. The communal aspects of African mourning rituals are frequently highlighted, hence, the current data indicate that hymns and storytelling can also be efficacious in smaller, more intimate environments. This transition underscores the adaptability of families in altering conventional routines to address the challenges posed by a pandemic.

The focus on engaging younger family members introduces a progressive aspect to cultural preservation. The issue of cultural degradation stemming from evolving societal norms is evident, however, the participants' intentional inclusion of children in hymns and storytelling exemplifies proactive cultural preservation. This demonstrate that traditions can evolve and persist, even during periods of crisis.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, bereaved families in the Vhembe District employed hymns and storytelling to cope with their loss. These rituals cultivated resilience, emotional recovery, and cultural identity, despite the interruptions imposed by the lockdown laws. Nonetheless, the findings also indicate limitations, as the absence of communal participation undermined the collaborative essence of these practices. Innovative strategies are required to amalgamate ancient and contemporary features, such as utilising internet platforms for expansive storytelling sessions. Involving younger generations in these activities guarantees the preservation of cultural practices, demonstrating that traditional ways may evolve with societal changes while maintaining their core character.

4.7.4 Sub-Theme 4: Challenges of Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer During Crises

The analysis indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic rendered intergenerational cultural transmission of grief knowledge challenging. Participants observed that the restrictions on gatherings disrupted the routines of senior family members. Younger generations infrequently acquire these traditions from their predecessors, hence,

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bereaved families asserted that a ceremony lacking elder-direction was inappropriate. A multitude of individuals were unable to genuinely and appropriately commemorate their loved ones, owing to cultural erosion and deficiencies brought on by the times. The pandemic also resulted in the deaths of elders in care facilities, exacerbating the knowledge gap and eroding cultural foundations. Participants talked extensively of motivated seniors who made the effort to impart their knowledge during their mourning period, despite these obstacles. These constrained endeavours exemplify communities' desire to retention their cultural identity under duress. The following extracts derived from the interviews, confirm this:

> *"We wanted to perform the proper rituals, but without the elders, we felt lost. They are the ones who guide us on how to do these things the right way."*
>
> (Participant 6).

> *"The lockdown kept my grandmother from teaching my children about the significance of our practices. Now, I worry they won't understand what it all means."*
>
> (Participant 12).

"My mother tried to explain the rituals to us, but without the whole community, it didn't feel complete. It's hard to teach these things when people are scattered."

(Participant 9).

"We had to rely on what we remembered from previous funerals. It made me realize how much we depend on the older generation for cultural guidance".

(Participant 14).

"I wish we had recorded my grandfather's explanations of our rituals before he passed. Now, there's no one to answer our questions about what we should do."

(Participant 18).

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Interview extracts reveal a significant dependence on older family members for cultural knowledge. Participants examined the impact of elders on rituals and the preservation of symbolism. The pandemic disrupted oral traditions that need community and physical presence; participants articulated the emotional burden of these anomalies. Insufficient guidance resulted in distress and cultural vacuum, particularly, among younger family members. This demonstrates that knowledge loss across generations during a crisis can be emotional, cultural, and practical. The storytelling practices of participants demonstrate resilience and a deliberate effort to reduce knowledge gaps and despite being incomplete, these efforts demonstrate a commitment to preserving cultural assets in the face of significant challenges. This resilience emphasised the necessity for innovative strategies to safeguard intergenerational knowledge during future crises.

The results support research on intergenerational knowledge transfer and cultural identity. Elders are essential to oral traditions, and their absence impacts the continuity of African culture. The experiences of participants illustrate the significance of older people's mentorship; literature does advocates for seniors within communities, although the epidemic highlighted also the prevalence of nuclear homes during such times. This change necessitates storytelling and informal recording for information sharing, which are less reliant on communal gatherings indicating the propensity for cultural practices to evolve in response to social advancements. These findings also undermine the viability of oral traditions in the absence of elders. The endeavours of participants to engage youngsters in ceremonies, and their willingness to participate in them, refute assertions that younger generations are disconnected from traditional practices. Younger generations can actively preserve culture given their talents and chances.

The transfer of knowledge during crises highlights the vulnerability of oral traditions to exogenous disruptions. The outbreak underscored issues of cultural continuity, highlighting the imperative to safeguard traditional knowledge. Elders facilitate traditional preservation, but participants' experiences indicate that other forms of storytelling and digital documentation can contribute significantly. These methods enable us to reevaluate the transfer of cultural knowledge in a transforming society. By amalgamating modernity with tradition, families and communities can fortify their cultural identity; this approach tackles significant problems with preservation of culture. In particular continuation of burial rituals.

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4.8 Conclusion

This chapter's data analysis and discussions illustrate the anguish experienced by families in the Vhembe District due to COVID-19 - legacy shocks, *Ubuntu's* principles and cultural challenges were all present. Minor rituals and technological advancements aided families in enduring hardships, but financial limitations and societal absence exacerbated their suffering. These results demonstrate the influence of culture, socio-economic factors, and technology on crisis-related mourning and advocates for community-oriented support networks and intergenerational knowledge-transfer education. The chapter ultimately emphasises cultural identity and novel resiliency strategies during times of crises.

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5. CHAPTER 5:DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter expands upon the findings from Chapter 4 by situating them within the current literature. It investigates aspects like, the socio-cultural, emotional, and financial aspects of mourning during the COVID-19 epidemic and critically assesses how the results correspond with or differ from previous research. The chapter seeks to enhance comprehension of how families in the Vhembe District managed losses, emphasising the resilience exhibited and the obstacles faced.

5.2 Grieving Processes During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The research indicated that pandemic restrictions, considerably hindered conventional mourning practices. Participants emphasised the difficulties encountered in organising extensive funerals and huge family and community assemblies, which are traditional in African mourning customs. Families adjusted by, participating in smaller collective prayers, and partaking in storytelling to preserve a semblance of ritual and bring solace. These rituals provided a semblance of emotional comfort, yet the absence of community engagement was acutely sensed. Ndlovu (2019) asserts that collective mourning rituals are fundamental to African grieving, by facilitating emotional recovery and fostering social cohesion. Participants indicated that the absence of these rituals resulted in increased emotions of isolation and sorrow, highlighting the emotional burden of solitary grieving.

Cultural resilience emerged as a significant topic, with families exhibiting adaptability by altering rituals to accommodate the limitations imposed by the epidemic. Intimate, small assemblies supplanted grand ceremonies, allowing families to maintain cultural traditions in a constrained manner. These adjustments were inventive, although, they also exposed significant obstacles for intergenerational knowledge transfer. The lack of elders, who usually played a crucial role in instructing and elucidating these rites, resulted in younger generations potentially missing essential cultural teachings. Tshivhase (2019) emphasises that such deviations may undermine cultural continuity, potentially influencing future generations' engagement with mourning traditions.

The emotional consequences of the grieving processes were exacerbated by the lack of communal mourning. Participants characterised their grieving during this period as a solitary and disjointed experience, wherein the lack of communal support created a vacuum that individual family endeavours could not completely address. This

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corresponds with Eisma et al. (2020), who contend that interruptions to conventional mourning practices can exacerbate feelings of grief and impede emotional healing. In many instances, individuals articulated sentiments of guilt or inadequacy for failing to commemorate their loved ones in alignment with societal standards, thereby intensifying their emotional distress.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the study also underscored the possibility for cultural innovation. Families utilised innovative methods, like virtual meetings and digital storytelling, to sustain links with extended relatives and uphold cultural traditions. Although these systems have limits, they signify a crucial advancement in the integration of technology and tradition. This conclusion aligns with Dube and Ngulube (2021), who contend that digital tools might operate as a conduit between contemporary limitations and ancient methods, however, they do facilitate cultural preservation in difficult situations. Nonetheless, to ensure an enduring viability of these alterations, necessitates additional investigation to guarantee that the spiritual and emotional profundity of conventional mourning practices, is preserved.

5.3 *Ubuntu* Values and Community Support

The principles of *Ubuntu* were manifested in the assistance families obtained from neighbours and community members during the pandemic. Acts of benevolence, such as the distribution of food boxes, telephone calls, and virtual communications, strengthened a sense of communal connectivity, despite the limitations on physical assemblies. For instance, participant 6 described how neighbours supplied food parcels, which provided both tangible support and emotional solace. Participant 15 similarly indicated that church members consolidated financial resources to assist with funeral expenses, illustrating the *Ubuntu* principle of communal support. Vilakazi (2021) asserts that *Ubuntu* goes beyond mere physical presence, emphasising its supportive actions that embody collective unity.

Certain individuals, also observed that virtual assistance lacked the emotional profundity and community connection, characteristic of conventional face-to-face encounters. Participant 10 stated that although phone calls and virtual messages were valued, they could not substitute for the reassuring presence of community members during an in-person gathering. This discovery underscores the constraints of *Ubuntu's* practical implementation in crisis situations, when socio-economic and contextual factors may affect its efficacy. Mabunda and Ndlovu (2020) contend that Ubuntu

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constantly mitigates pain by communal involvement, although participants current experiences contested this viewpoint, exposing a more complex reality. Families from lower socio-economic backgrounds sometimes encountered difficulties in accessing virtual platforms, thereby restricting their capacity to participate in community networks. This gap highlights the necessity for inclusive initiatives that harmonise technical adaption with cultural and emotional requirements.

The study additionally demonstrated that acts of generosity, such as neighbours collaborating to support bereaved families, illustrated the notion of collective care inherent to *Ubuntu*. Participant 4 attested to how neighbours pooled financial resources to defray funeral costs, underscoring the community obligation, intrinsic to *Ubuntu*. These acts constituted an essential safety net during a period of financial and emotional precariousness, underscoring the shared essence of *Ubuntu*. Tlhabi (2022) note the significance of these actions in promoting social cohesiveness and resilience in times of crisis. The data, however, also indicated that the dependence on such gestures differed across socio-economic situations, with affluent families capable of offering more substantial support, hence emphasising differences within communities.

Notwithstanding the limitations imposed by the pandemic, *Ubuntu's* core principle of interconnection endured, albeit in altered manifestations. Participants articulated inventive methods to sustain community connections, including the organisation of virtual meetings and the utilisation of social media channels to coordinate assistance. Participant 18 noted that these adjustments facilitated the involvement of extended family members in mourning rituals from a distance, preserving a sense of connectedness despite physical separation. These adjustments demonstrate the endurance of *Ubuntu* as a cultural framework, adept at changing to address modern issues. Some participants, however, voiced apprehensions over the durability of these developments, especially in relation to their capacity to encapsulate the spiritual profundity of ancient traditions. Tutu and Zondi (2023) assert that *Ubuntu* relies on physical and emotional presence, and its partial virtualisation may jeopardise its fundamental character.

The participants' experiences underscored the advantages and drawbacks of *Ubuntu* in managing grief during the epidemic, for although acts of kindness and communal support were essential in mitigating immediate difficulties, they did not entirely substitute for the communal rituals integral to conventional mourning practices. Participant 19 expressed the emotional void created by the lack of communal prayers

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and songs, which conventionally provide spiritual closure. This void highlights the necessity for forthcoming interventions that amalgamate the emotional and cultural aspects of *Ubuntu* with pragmatic support systems. Hybrid methodologies that include virtual and physical components may enhance accessibility while maintaining the cultural integrity of *Ubuntu* practices and government policies. By tackling these complications, *Ubuntu* can sustain its dynamic and successful framework for community resilience and support amid developing societal challenges.

5.4 Challenges Encountered During the Pandemic

Participant encountered a combination of factors, such as emotional, economic, and cultural difficulties during the COVID-19 epidemic. Isolation one of these factors, was caused by movement constraints which exacerbated the emotional burden of mourning, resulting in numerous individuals feeling unsupported and overwhelmed. Participant 3 characterised the experience as "grieving alone," highlighting the lack of the extensive community support typically depended upon during bereavement. This corresponds with Phiri et al. (2021), who assert that isolation intensifies the psychological effects of grieving by interrupting community-mourning rituals. The finding of the current research indicate that the absence of older people's involvement in rituals, resulted in families feeling culturally unmoored, since younger generations faced difficulties in conducting rites without direction. Tshivhase (2019) maintains that crises can disproportionately hinder the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge in groups.

Financial challenges constituted a substantial obstacle for families, especially regarding their capacity to perform culturally significant rituals. Participant 10 articulated the distressing choice to abandon traditional practices owing to insufficient means, characterising it as "failing to adequately honour our loved ones." Participant 8 reiterated this sentiment, focusing on the financial burden of supporting the family while striving to uphold mourning rituals. Phiri et al. (2021) assert that financial difficulties exacerbate the weight of mourning, especially in cultures where communal rituals necessitate substantial economic contributions. The outcomes of this study highlight that socio-economic gaps exacerbated these issues, as affluent families were more capable of adapting, financially, to pandemic restrictions. This reflects the observation by Amoateng and Richter (2020) that crises disproportionately affect economically disadvantaged groups, exacerbating existing disparities.

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The inability to hold community gatherings aggravated the difficulties of mourning. Participants regarded the lack of communal rituals, like singing and group prayer, as emotionally destabilising. Participant 19 notes - "the stillness at the burial felt oppressive" – drawing attention to the emotional emptiness resulting from the lack of community involvement. This conclusion aligns with Ndlovu (2019), who contends that collective mourning rituals are vital for grieving families' emotional healing and societal cohesiveness. The absence of these rituals rendered families both emotionally isolated and culturally estranged, underscoring the relationship between mourning and cultural identity. These disturbances demonstrate the pressing necessity for culturally-tuned therapies that tackle both the emotional and practical dimensions of bereavement management.

Notwithstanding these hurdles, families exhibited tenacity in adjusting to their circumstances, although, these adjustments frequently failed to address the emotional and spiritual requirements of the bereaved. Participant 7 maintains that virtual gatherings, although beneficial - "could not replace the comfort of physical presence." This aligns with the conclusions of Thomas et al. (2021), that although virtual platforms offer a viable substitute, they do not possess the profundity and closeness of conventional communal rituals. The study accents the necessity for policies and programs that combine economic assistance with cultural awareness, enabling families to manage loss while preserving their cultural identity.

5.5 Adaptations and Innovations in Grieving Practices

Families exhibited exceptional adaptation throughout the epidemic, ingeniously merging technology with conventional behaviours to navigate the limitations of the lockdown. Virtual memorials, internet prayer meetings, and only intimate-family assemblies emerged as prevalent strategies. Participant 6 recounted orchestrating a virtual ceremony in which extended family members exchanged narratives and prayers, fostering a semblance of unity, despite geographical distance. This corresponds with Dube and Ngulube (2021), who contend that digital instruments can safeguard cultural practices in contemporary settings, although participants observed constraints in these adaptations, especially about their capacity to convey the spiritual profundity of traditional rites. Participant 14 asserted - "virtual meetings felt inadequate" - highlighting the widespread apprehensions regarding the spiritual genuineness and appropriateness of these innovations.

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Younger family members played a vital role in leading technological adjustments. Participant 12 dwelt upon younger relatives established online forums for prayers and storytelling, illustrating intergenerational cooperation in the preservation of cultural practices. This discovery corroborates Nwoye's (2021) claim that younger generations are becoming increasingly essential in modifying traditional practices for modern circumstances. Nonetheless, older participants voiced concerns over these modifications, questioning their adherence to the spiritual integrity of conventional mourning practices. Thomas et al. (2021) also point to the conflicts between modernity and tradition, observing that, although virtual religious involvement is pragmatic, it frequently lacks the community connection, characteristic of physical assemblies.

Adaptations also encompassed hybrid methodologies that integrated traditional and contemporary methods. Participant 18 recounted conducting intimate in-person rituals augmented by virtual attendance from remote family, a method that harmonised safety with cultural preservation. This corresponds with Mokwena and Ncube (2021), who underscore the significance of hybrid methodologies in preserving cultural traditions throughout crises; nevertheless, the study also uncovered obstacles in guaranteeing equitable access to these advancements. Families from lower socio-economic backgrounds frequently lacked the resources to adopt digital adjustments, hence accentuating differences in families' capacity to maintain cultural practices. This highlights Tshivhase's (2019) assertion that socio-economic disparities influence the durability and accessibility of cultural traditions in times of crisis.

These modifications demonstrated resiliency while stressing the necessity for intergenerational discussion to facilitate cultural preservation. Participant 8 observed that younger family members frequently possessed a superficial comprehension of the rituals they were adopting, raising worries regarding the long-term consequences for cultural continuity. This discovery corroborates the assertion by Mabunda and Ndlovu (2020) that intergenerational knowledge transfer is essential for the preservation of cultural practices. This research recommends that forthcoming endeavours to merge technology with tradition, ought to encompass educational activities aimed at bridging generational divides, so preserving the authenticity and value of cultural practices.

The epidemic reveals the possibilities and constraints of merging technology with conventional mourning rituals, for although virtual platforms provided some support for numerous families, they were unable to completely emulate the emotional and spiritual profundity of in-person rituals. Participant 10 characterised these adaptations as - "a

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temporary solution, not a replacement" - supporting the necessity for future efforts that reconcile modernity with traditional authenticity. By confronting these issues, families may guarantee that their mourning rituals progress while retaining their cultural significance in times like the COVID-19 era.

5.6 Conclusion

The discourse in this chapter has focused on the intricate interaction of culture, socio-economic elements, and technology in influencing mourning practices during the COVID-19 epidemic. Families demonstrated resilience through modified rituals and community support rooted in Ubuntu, however, the findings also highlight the necessity for systemic interventions to tackle socio-economic and cultural obstacles. The recommendations from participants focused on promoting intergenerational knowledge exchange and establishing community-based support networks that amalgamate ancient and contemporary methods. These strategies correspond with Zulu and Mpofu's (2020) advocacy for culturally-sensitive interventions that honour the principles of *Ubuntu* while addressing modern concerns.

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6. CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

6.1 Introduction

Cultural and situational factors can complicate sorrow. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted daily life, such as curtailing mourning customs in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. This chapter integrates literature and empirical studies to provide a comprehensive knowledge of sorrow, *Ubuntu*, and the challenges faced by families that had lost loved ones during this exceptional period. This chapter illustrates the impact of cultural traditions and pandemic responses on the resilience and resourcefulness of grieving families. Twenty individuals exchanged persceptives and experiences.

Ubuntu fosters community, compassion, and connectivity across Africa. The pandemic impeded communal mourning and this study examined the manifestation of *Ubuntu* values in virtual communication and intimate family gatherings throughout the pandemic, as families required culturally-relevant assistance for financial and emotional challenges. This chapter comprises three segments. The initial portion delineates the literature reviewed to elucidate African mourning and issues surrounding COVID-19. The second portion addresses mourning and adaptability associated with epidemics, finally, this chapter concludes with ideas for culturally-relevant and sustainable support policies and practices for bereaved families. This chapter employs scholarly theories and human experiences to comprehend the handling of grief during a global health crisis.

6.2 Summary of the Findings

The findings are summarised in accordance with the study goals. Each objective is addressed concisely, dwelling on the principal conclusions of the investigation.

6.2.1 Findings from the Literature Review

The results of this part were attended to in Chapter 4, where they were amalgamated with the findings of the data collected to improve coherence and eliminate redundancy. This overview portrays the complex interplay among cultural traditions, communal support, and mourning behaviours, as examined in the literature.

African mourning practices conventionally depend on communal prayers, songs, and

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ancestral rituals, which facilitate the expression of grief and reinforce cultural identity (Chigangaidze, 2021; Mkabela, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted these patterns, necessitating families to modify their activities within the constrained environments. The “two process grieving model” proposed by Stroebe and Schut (2021) indicates that these adaptations can promote resilience, even in the face of isolation.

The *Ubuntu* ideology underscores feelings of community, unity, and humanity, acting as fundamental sources of emotional and practical support, in times of bereavement. Mabvurira (2020) observes that *Ubuntu* principles are exemplified via communal care, including the provision of sustenance, emotional aid, and resources to bereaved families. Lockdowns required virtual and remote support, substituting for conventional in-person meetings. Technology-mediated contacts, as emphasised by Kgatle (2020) and Hanna et al. (2021), enabled families to sustain communal connections; these, although creative, were deficient in the emotional depth characteristic of traditional in-person methods.

The pandemic's financial repercussions intensified sadness, as families faced difficulties in covering the costs of ensuring culturally-significant funerals. Eisma et al. (2020) and Goveas and Shear (2020) indicate that economic challenges frequently result in contracted funeral services, prompting concerns regarding cultural disintegration and spiritual discord. Nevertheless, the literature highlights the tenacity of bereaved families, who reconciled tradition with necessity. Chigangaidze (2021) posits that *Ubuntu* ideals can be modified to address emerging difficulties, hence enhancing resilience in adversity.

6.2.2 Findings from the Empirical Study

Data from Vhembe District indicates families were affected by the pandemic as participants perceived alterations in grieving rituals as emotionally and culturally disconcerting. Numerous families were unable to conduct extensive ancestral ceremonies owing to lockdowns, instead, they lighted candles, performed songs, and recounted family narratives. These modifications offered some solace but were deemed inferior to full conventional rituals.

Participants attributed their resilience to the principles of *Ubuntu*. Food boxes and condolences were prevalent manifestations of solidarity, for example, community

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groceries assisted with funeral expenses. Notwithstanding these commendable efforts, many experienced loneliness due to the communities' absence. According to Gade (2012), *Ubuntu* flourishes on physical and emotional connections, which were constrained by the virus.

Financial challenges were prevalent. Participants indicated that job losses and reduced money due to the pandemic, rendered traditional celebrations difficult. Numerous families utilised crowd-funding or extended payment plans to cover funeral expenses. These experiences align with the economic data presented by Haider et al. (2020), which demonstrates COVID-19's unequal financial repercussions on marginalised communities. Financial limitations hindered certain rituals, resulting in spiritual distress while highlighting their cultural significance.

Empirical evidence demonstrated intergenerational grieving patterns. Junior members of families constructed digital sessions and facilitated online communication among extended families. This alteration was embraced but they still highlighted the distinctions between traditional and contemporary mourning practices. Senior participants raised concerns about the spirituality of virtual rituals and meetings. This concern aligns with Tshivhase (2019), who posits that intergenerational dialogue reconciles traditional and contemporary ideals. Participants, also evaluated the psychological consequences of pandemic-related sadness. Owing to restrictions on mourning, numerous individuals experienced feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and sorrow. Stroebe and Schut (2021) assert that pandemic grief is exacerbated by emotional and situational pressures. Participants praised their family for their resilience and ingenuity in surmounting these challenges.

6.3 Conclusions of the Study

This study investigated the grief processes, *Ubuntu* principles, and difficulties encountered by families in the Vhembe District throughout the COVID-19 pandemic period. The study revealed substantial disturbances to conventional grieving patterns and emphasised the resilience and adaptation of families confronting these obstacles through a synthesis of literature evaluation and empirical analysis. The results demonstrated the intricate relationship among - cultural identity, community cohesion, as well as the socio-economic and psychological effects of the epidemic as the COVID-19 regulations significantly impacted conventional mourning practices. The

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results of the current research indicated that community involvement, a fundamental aspect of African mourning customs, was significantly restricted. This absence rendered families feeling fragmented and estranged from their cultural heritage. Participants noted the diminished spiritual and emotional profundity of rituals without the presence of elders, community members, and extended relatives. These findings correspond with Stroebe and Schut (2021), who underscore the significance of group rituals for emotional recovery and cultural satisfaction. The failure to engage in these practices heightened isolation and deepened the mourning process.

Ubuntu, despite its limitations, significantly contributed to alleviating sadness. Communities demonstrated *Ubuntu* through modest but significant actions, such as neighbours providing groceries and conveying empathy through phone calls. These actions, nonetheless, could not entirely replace the physical presence and cooperation that *Ubuntu* principles conventionally necessitate. Gade (2012) contends that *Ubuntu* flourishes through shared experiences and proximity, both of which were impeded by pandemic limitations, however, the enduring nature of these ideals, even in modified forms, illustrated the resilience of cultural principles throughout challenges. Participants dwelt on the significance of these minor acts of kindness, which, although constrained in scope, mitigated certain emotional burdens experienced during solitude. The discussions with the participants indicated that *Ubuntu's* resilience is rooted in its capacity to adapt to evolving conditions while preserving its fundamental values of community and mutual support.

The pandemic's financial repercussions surfaced as another significant discovery. Financial difficulties hindered some families from conducting conventional funerals or performing full mourning rituals. Participants developed feelings of inadequacy in honouring their deceased loved ones, owing to the financial limitations. This discovery corresponds with research conducted by Haider et al. (2020) and Goveas and Shear (2020), which revealed the unequal effects of COVID-19 on marginalised communities. Financial difficulties exacerbated the emotional turmoil faced by families, as they endeavoured to reconcile their traditional responsibilities with practical constraints. The inability to cover necessary funeral costs engendered feelings of shame and guilt, exacerbating the grief process. The researcher, therefore, determined that bereaved families need structural assistance to tackle economic and logistical difficulties during crises, guaranteeing their fair access to culturally-important mourning traditions.

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Participants additionally indicated increased worry and unresolved sadness stemming from inadequate community support and interrupted routines for although virtual relationships and small-scale intimate family meetings offered some solace, these inadequately addressed the emotional requirements of bereaved families. These findings corroborate the works of Stroebe and Schut (2021) and Eisma et al. (2020), which associate situational pressures and emotional discomfort with heightened incidences of pandemic-related sadness and extended grieving. The absence of relatives' physical presence and communal experiences rendered families feeling alone and incapable of completely processing their grief. Participants emphasised that the lack of elders and community engagement intensified their sense of incompleteness and loss. This highlights the necessity of establishing support networks that would combine traditional methods with contemporary modifications to meet the diverse needs of grieving families, in crisis situations.

Participants responses emphasised the significance of intergenerational ties in the context of pandemic-related grief. Junior family members significantly contributed to establishing web relationships and coordinating virtual tributes and although these endeavours were praiseworthy, they also exposed conflicts between conventional and contemporary methods of mourning. Tshivhase (2019) notes the significance of intergenerational conversation to harmonise cultural values with modern reality. By facilitating such dialogues, families can manage the intricacies of maintaining cultural identity while adopting progressive practices. Participants recognised that these virtual activities mitigated certain gaps, yet, they also illustrated the indispensable significance of face-to-face contacts and communal rituals, thus, utilising the assets of both generations can improve cultural resilience and maintain significant mourning behaviours.

6.4 Recommendations from the Study

6.4.1 Enhancing Cultural and Communal Support Systems

Enhancing cultural and societal support for bereaved families is essential. Traditional leaders and community organisations ought to cooperate on contemporary mourning systems. Virtual assemblies, for instance, may enhance engagement in minor rituals; communities ought to instruct youth in cultural preservation techniques.

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6.4.2 Addressing Financial Barriers

Local governments and NGOs should assist families to alleviate the financial burden of sorrow during times like the COVID-19 period. These initiatives may finance funerals, and any additional necessities. Numerous families were unable to finance basic mourning practices, exacerbating their emotional distress. Community-oriented savings groups and crowd-funding initiatives can provide assistance.

6.4.3 Promoting Mental Health Support

Bereaved families require mental health support services. Bereavement counselling and support groups should be accessible at Vhembe District clinics and community centres. *Ubuntu* principles such as social collaboration and collective healing may enhance counselling practices.

6.4.4 Leveraging Technology for Mourning Practices

The epidemic demonstrated how technology may enhance community engagement. Communities require digital infrastructure and training for virtual mourning. Extended families may engage in memorial services and traditions through video conferencing.

6.4.5 Strengthening Intergenerational Dialogue

The reconciliation of ancestral and contemporary activities necessitates intergenerational conversation. Tech-savvy younger relatives could modernise traditional rites for the elderly so that community seminars and forums may explore sorrow and creativity in line with modern technologies.

6.4.6 Policy Recommendations

Policymakers should prioritise proposals for culturally-responsive crisis-grief management to ensure standardised funeral parameters, financial assistance, and psychological support services. This paper recommends that government agencies collaborate with traditional leaders and community organisations to include local culture into programs. Eisma et al. (2020) promote therapy of pandemic-related mourning, tailored to individual contexts.

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6.4.7 Raising Awareness and Advocacy

Community awareness must be raised on the preservation of historic norms while adapting to evolving circumstances. Workshops, radio, and social media can facilitate the promotion of *Ubuntu* and communal healing. Zvomuya (2020) asserts that campaigning fortifies African communities, similarly, awareness programs diminish the stigma associated with financial and psychological assistance.

6.5 Limitations of the Study

Several research in the Vhembe District regarding grief, *Ubuntu*, and familial issues during the COVID-19 pandemic were enlightening, albeit on a restricted scope. A significant limitation was the small sample size, predominantly derived from a single district, hence, despite the Vhembe District's rich cultural heritage, the exclusion of families from other districts constrained the generalisability of the findings. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2010) contend that geographical sampling enhances the external validity of qualitative research, although a more diversified participant pool would have facilitated a better understanding of mourning in Limpopo Province.

A further constraint was the requirement for virtual and telephonic interviews according to COVID-19. The protocols guaranteed participant safety but diminished the monitoring of non-verbal cues, which is essential for qualitative researchers (Lichtman, 2012). In-person interviews would have yielded more data, particularly about the emotional complexities of mourning. Krefting (1991) asserts that the absence of face-to-face encounters might undermine qualitative insights, particularly in culturally-sensitive contexts.

The study was hindered by participants' reluctance to disclose sensitive information as certain families refrained from addressing loss due to its emotional ramifications. Financial or familial issues may also have been inadequately reported upon due to this reluctance. According to Lincoln and Guba (1986), qualitative research necessitates trust and rapport to elicit candid and thorough responses, unfortunately, the collecting of data in a virtual format impeded the establishment of trust.

The cultural and linguistic variety in Vhembe District constituted additional concern. The concepts of *Ubuntu* were examined, nevertheless, cultural differences in bereavement rituals and processes rendered synthesis unfeasible. According to Seehawer (2018), culturally-grounded research necessitates sophisticated local

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awareness, which is challenging in diverse communities. Regional dialects may lead to misinterpretation or loss of meaning in translation.

The pandemic circumstances enforced further constraints. The rapid changes in COVID-19 restrictions hindered the longitudinal tracking of grief stages in the study. Stroebe and Schut (2021) assert that grief develops with time. A longitudinal study could have documented family adjustment. A further issue was the absence of quantitative evidence to support qualitative assessments. The narratives were engaging, nevertheless, the absence of statistical analysis hindered arriving at objective measurement of familial issues or *Ubuntu* principles. Similarly, Eyisi's (2016) mixed-methods study may have been improved by integrating qualitative and quantitative data.

6.6 Suggestions for Future Studies

6.6.1 Broader Geographical and Demographic Coverage

Subsequent research ought to encompass places within Limpopo Province and additional regions of South Africa. This would facilitate cross-cultural comparisons and enhance the comprehension of mourning. De Vaus & De Vaus (2014) assert that comparative studies among populations elucidate socio-cultural processes more effectively. The inclusion of urban and peri-urban individuals alongside rural populations would enhance the findings.

6.6.2 Incorporation of Longitudinal Designs

A longitudinal study is required to examine sorrow and *Ubuntu* principles because of their evolving characteristics. Such an approach would enable researchers to examine how families manage grief over time. Stroebe and Schut (2021) advocate for longitudinal methods to comprehend sorrow and its enduring effects on families.

6.6.3 Mixed-Methods Approaches

Subsequent research should also employ quantitative approaches to enhance the qualitative results; the quantitative data could reveal familial issues and coping strategies. Mixed-methods designs integrate data to enhance validity and reliability, as stated by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2010). Surveys assess the economic costs of

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funeral limits, whereas interviews evaluate their emotional impact. This shows that a mixed methods approach would have produced very comprehensive results.

6.6.4 Exploration of Technological Adaptations

Subsequent research ought to investigate the impact of technology on grieving rituals. The outbreak illustrated how online platforms might create virtual communities and memorials. Research may investigate how these platforms can facilitate *Ubuntu* and mitigate isolation at such times. Kgatle (2020) asserts that religious live-streaming was essential for spiritual involvement during COVID-19, suggesting its continued application in mourning.

6.6.5 Focus on Intergenerational Perspectives

Future research should examine intergenerational grieving, hence, examining how younger family members adapt to traditional mourning customs may be intriguing. Chigangaidze (2021) asserts that intergenerational discourse is essential for the preservation of cultural values in an evolving society. The methods by which elders can instruct younger generations on mourning, warrant examination.

6.6.6 Policy-Oriented Studies

Research and policies must assist bereaved families during crises. Policy-makers require evidence-based norms for mourning management that prioritise cultural sensitivity. Haider et al. (2020) underscore the need of empirical policy approaches guided by local context. Future research may investigate how these strategies enhance community resilience.

6.6.7 Examination of Psychological Interventions

An urgent study is required on culturally and emotionally-acceptable psychological therapies for grieving South African families. Prolonged grief may be evaluated through community-oriented counselling and support groups. Goveas and Shear (2020) advocate for the incorporation of cultural elements in mental health care to enhance relevance and accessibility.

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6.7. Conclusion

The hardships faced by grieving families in the Vhembe District during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate cultural resilience, flexibility and *Ubuntu.* The outbreak revealed deficiencies in conventional mourning practices while underscoring *Ubuntu's* significance in communal healing and collaboration. The results underscore issues of cultural identity and innovative grief management. The integration of ancient and contemporary practices would aids communities in enduring tragedies, such as loss of family members, in unusal circumstances like COVID-19. The researcher recommends that politicians, scholars, and community leaders must confront the socio-economic, psychological, and cultural issues of grieving in the modern context. Society must derive lessons from bereaved families as they recuperate from the pandemic. These findings can facilitate the development of culturally-attuned support systems that respect *Ubuntu's* profound heritage while accommodating contemporary contexts. The study has emphasised the transformational influence of grief and collective values.

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6.9. Appendix A: Transcript for participants

Transcript for participants

Transcript for Participant 1

Section 1: Demographics

Interviewer: What is your age?

Participant 1: I am 42 years old.

Interviewer: What is your gender?

Participant 1: I am a woman**.**

Interviewer: What is your marital status?

Participant 1: I am married.

Interviewer: How many members were in your household during the COVID-19 lockdown?
Participant 1: There were six of us, including myself, my husband, our three children, and my mother-in-law.

Interviewer: What is your highest level of education?

Participant 1: I completed matric... uh, but I didn't go further than that.

Section 2: Coping Mechanisms (Social, Religious, Traditional, or Cultural Practices)

Interviewer: Could you describe the practices or rituals your family followed to cope with the loss during the COVID-19 lockdown?

Participant 1: Well, we tried to stick to our traditions as much as possible. We lit candles and held a small family prayer service every evening. It wasn't the same as gathering with the extended family, but it helped us feel connected to... to those who had passed, you know?

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Interviewer: What role did religious practices or beliefs play in helping your family cope?
Participant 1: Ah, religion was a big part of it. We prayed a lot, every day, and read the Bible together. Um, our pastor also sent us voice notes of sermons and prayers, which was comforting. But not being able to go to church, huh, that was really hard.

Interviewer: Did your family observe any cultural or traditional mourning rituals during the pandemic? If so, please describe them.

Participant 1: Yes, we did. We had to modify some of them, though. For example, we couldn't hold the usual big gathering for the cleansing ceremony, so we just did a small version with immediate family. It felt incomplete, but we did what we could.

Interviewer: How did social support from family, friends, or the community assist you in your grieving process?

Participant 1: Hmm... (pauses) we received a lot of phone calls and WhatsApp messages. Some people dropped off food at the gate, which was really thoughtful. But it wasn't like before, where people could come and sit with you. That part was very lonely.

Interviewer: Were there any specific practices or rituals that were restricted or prohibited due to the lockdown regulations? If so, how did this affect your grieving process?
Participant 1: Yes, the funerals were a big issue. We could only have 50 people, and in our culture, funerals are open to the whole community. Choosing who could attend... uh, it caused a lot of tension in the family. It also made it feel like we didn't say goodbye properly.

Section 3: Challenges Encountered in the Grieving Process

Interviewer: What were the main challenges your family faced while grieving during the COVID-19 lockdown?

Participant 1: The biggest challenge was not being able to have people around us. Grieving alone—it's not how we do things. And, um, there was also a lot of fear about the virus itself. It was... it was like grieving in isolation, really.

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Interviewer: How did the restriction on gatherings, such as funerals, impact your family's ability to grieve?

Participant 1: It was, uh... very painful. Funerals are where we find closure, but with so few people, it felt empty. And some family members, like my aunt, couldn't even travel to be there. It was heartbreaking.

Interviewer: Were there any emotional or psychological challenges encountered due to the lockdown restrictions?

Participant 1: Oh yes. My youngest daughter kept asking why no one was coming to visit or why we couldn't visit her granny's grave properly. I, um, I found myself crying a lot at night when the children were asleep. It was a very heavy time for us.

Interviewer: Did you experience any difficulties in accessing support systems, such as counseling or spiritual leaders, during this period?

Participant 1: Yes, definitely. Our pastor could only talk to us over the phone, and counseling services were hard to find because of the lockdown. Even the ones that were available were expensive.

Interviewer: In your view, what measures could have been taken to minimise the challenges faced by grieving families during the lockdown?

Participant 1: I think, uh... if they had allowed slightly larger gatherings with proper safety measures, it would've helped. Also, more accessible counseling services or community-based support programs would've been good.

Section 4: *Ubuntu* Values in the Grieving Process

Interviewer: How did the concept of *Ubuntu* (interconnectedness and communal support) influence your family's grieving process during the pandemic?

Participant 1: Hmm... *Ubuntu* was there in spirit, but not fully in practice because of the restrictions. People wanted to help, but they couldn't come close. We did feel their support through messages and, uh, small acts like food deliveries, though.

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Interviewer: Were there instances where neighbors or community members provided support to your family during this time? Please describe.

Participant 1: Yes, one neighbor brought us vegetables from her garden. Another left a loaf of bread at the gate with a little note. It was, um... very touching.

Interviewer: What *Ubuntu* values, such as compassion, solidarity, or sharing, were most evident in the community during your family's mourning period?

Participant 1: Compassion and solidarity, for sure. Even though people couldn't be there physically, they still found ways to show they cared. It reminded us we were not alone, even if it felt like it sometimes.

Interviewer: Did your family engage in any communal activities or practices that aligned with *Ubuntu* principles during the pandemic?

Participant 1: Not really, no. The lockdown made it hard to do anything communal. But we did try to stay connected by calling family members and checking on each other.

Interviewer: In your opinion, how can *Ubuntu* values be strengthened to support grieving families in future crises?

Participant 1: I think we need better ways to connect remotely—maybe, uh, community Zoom meetings or something like that. And local leaders could organise safe ways for people to support each other without breaking the rules.

Section 5: Recommendations and Reflections

Interviewer: Looking back, what would you say was the most helpful source of support during the grieving process?

Participant 1: Hmm... I would say prayer and the small acts of kindness from neighbors. They reminded us that we were not forgotten.

Interviewer: What traditional or cultural practices do you think should be preserved or adapted for similar situations in the future?

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Participant 1: Our cleansing ceremonies are very important. If we can adapt them to be done safely in small groups, that would be good.

Interviewer: How could the government or other organisations have better supported grieving families during the pandemic?

Participant 1: They could have provided free or affordable counseling services and maybe allowed for slightly bigger funeral gatherings with strict safety measures.

Interviewer: In what ways could community members better assist families dealing with loss in the context of *Ubuntu*?

Participant 1: Just by being there in any way they can, even if it's small things like checking in or dropping off food. It makes a big difference.

Interviewer: Do you have any additional thoughts or suggestions on how grieving families can be better supported during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic?
Participant 1: Um, I think we should learn from this and find ways to stay connected as communities, even in difficult times. Technology could play a bigger role, and leaders should be more present to guide us.

Closing:
Interviewer: Thank you for sharing your experiences and insights. Your responses will help contribute to understanding how families coped with loss during the pandemic and how *Ubuntu* values were practiced in this context.

Participant 1: Thank you. I hope it helps others too.

Transcript for Participant 2

Section 1: Demographics

Interviewer: What is your age?

Participant 2: Uh... I'm 55 years old.

Interviewer: What is your gender?

Participant 2: I'm a man.

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Interviewer: What is your marital status?

Participant 2: I am married.

Interviewer: How many members were in your household during the COVID-19 lockdown?
Participant 2: Uh, there were... five of us: myself, my wife, and our three children.

Interviewer: What is your highest level of education?

Participant 2: I finished my diploma in, uh, electrical engineering.

Section 2: Coping Mechanisms (Social, Religious, Traditional, or Cultural Practices)

Interviewer: Could you describe the practices or rituals your family followed to cope with the loss during the COVID-19 lockdown?

Participant 2: Well, we, uh... we tried to follow our cultural practices as much as possible. For example, we lit a fire in the yard for seven days, which is part of our mourning tradition. It wasn't easy because we couldn't have other family members join us, but... uh, we did it to honor our loved one.

Interviewer: What role did religious practices or beliefs play in helping your family cope?
Participant 2: Religion played a very important role. We had daily prayers, and we also, uh, listened to sermons on the radio and online. It gave us some peace knowing that God was with us during this time. But, uh, not being able to go to church was very difficult.

Interviewer: Did your family observe any cultural or traditional mourning rituals during the pandemic? If so, please describe them.

Participant 2: Yes, we did. Like I said, we lit the fire, and we also avoided certain foods, like meat, during the mourning period. Um, we couldn't do the usual big gathering for the final rituals, though, which was hard because it felt like something was missing.

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Interviewer: How did social support from family, friends, or the community assist you in your grieving process?

Participant 2: Uh, well... people were supportive in their own way. We received a lot of phone calls and, um, some people even sent money to help with funeral costs. It was very touching, but it wasn't the same as having people around, you know?

Interviewer: Were there any specific practices or rituals that were restricted or prohibited due to the lockdown regulations? If so, how did this affect your grieving process?

Participant 2: Oh yes, funerals were the biggest restriction. We could only have 50 people, and in our culture, funerals are... they're a community affair. It was very painful to tell some family members that they couldn't come. It felt like we didn't give our loved one the send-off they deserved.

Section 3: Challenges Encountered in the Grieving Process

Interviewer: What were the main challenges your family faced while grieving during the COVID-19 lockdown?

Participant 2: The main challenge was, uh, isolation. Grieving is something we do together as a family and a community, but during the lockdown, we couldn't do that. It was very lonely. And, um, there was also a lot of financial strain because of job losses in the family.

Interviewer: How did the restriction on gatherings, such as funerals, impact your family's ability to grieve?

Participant 2: It was... it was very hard. Funerals help us, uh, to find closure, but with the restrictions, it felt incomplete. Some family members even joined on WhatsApp video calls, which felt strange and, uh, a bit sad.

Interviewer: Were there any emotional or psychological challenges encountered due to the lockdown restrictions?

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Participant 2: Yes, definitely. I, uh... I found myself feeling very angry at times. My wife was very emotional, and the children didn't understand why they couldn't go to school or play with their friends. It created a lot of tension in the house.

Interviewer: Did you experience any difficulties in accessing support systems, such as counseling or spiritual leaders, during this period?

Participant 2: Yes, we did. Uh, our pastor could only talk to us over the phone, and there were no in-person counseling services available. It was very frustrating because we really needed that support.

Interviewer: In your view, what measures could have been taken to minimise the challenges faced by grieving families during the lockdown?

Participant 2: I think, uh, the government could have allowed larger gatherings with strict safety protocols. And they should have provided free counseling services for families who lost loved ones.

Section 4: *Ubuntu* Values in the Grieving Process

Interviewer: How did the concept of *Ubuntu* (interconnectedness and communal support) influence your family's grieving process during the pandemic?

Participant 2: Uh, *Ubuntu* was still there, but it was... it was different. People showed support in ways that were safe, like calling or sending messages, but it wasn't the same as being physically present.

Interviewer: Were there instances where neighbors or community members provided support to your family during this time? Please describe.

Participant 2: Yes, uh, one of our neighbors brought us fresh vegetables from their garden. Another family sent us a cooked meal. It was, um, a small gesture, but it meant a lot to us.

Interviewer: What *Ubuntu* values, such as compassion, solidarity, or sharing, were most evident in the community during your family's mourning period?

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Participant 2: Compassion and sharing were the most evident. People made an effort to check on us and, uh, to help where they could, even if it was just sending a message or, uh, dropping off something small.

Interviewer: Did your family engage in any communal activities or practices that aligned with *Ubuntu* principles during the pandemic?

Participant 2: Not really. The restrictions made it hard to do anything communal. We did, uh, try to stay connected with extended family through phone calls and group chats.

Interviewer: In your opinion, how can *Ubuntu* values be strengthened to support grieving families in future crises?

Participant 2: I think, uh, communities should find ways to stay connected, even when they can't gather in person. Maybe using technology more or organising safe ways to help families in need.

Section 5: Recommendations and Reflections

Interviewer: Looking back, what would you say was the most helpful source of support during the grieving process?

Participant 2: Uh, prayer and, uh, the small acts of kindness from neighbors and friends. It reminded us that we weren't alone.

Interviewer: What traditional or cultural practices do you think should be preserved or adapted for similar situations in the future?

Participant 2: The cleansing ceremonies and the lighting of the fire are very important. We should find ways to adapt them to be done safely, even during pandemics.

Interviewer: How could the government or other organisations have better supported grieving families during the pandemic?

Participant 2: They could have provided, uh, more financial support for families who lost loved ones and created better ways for people to access counseling services.

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Interviewer: In what ways could community members better assist families dealing with loss in the context of *Ubuntu*?

Participant 2: Just by being there in whatever way they can. Even small gestures like dropping off food or checking in can make a big difference.

Interviewer: Do you have any additional thoughts or suggestions on how grieving families can be better supported during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic?
Participant 2: Uh, I think we need to find a balance between safety and... and allowing people to grieve properly. Communities and leaders should work together to find creative solutions for future crises.

Closing:
Interviewer: Thank you for sharing your experiences and insights. Your responses will help contribute to understanding how families coped with loss during the pandemic and how *Ubuntu* values were practiced in this context.

Participant 2: Thank you, uh, for letting me share my story. I hope it helps.

6.10. Appendix B: Interview guide

Interview guide

Interview Guide: Grieving Processes, *Ubuntu* Values, and Challenges Encountered by Families during COVID-19 in Vhembe District

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of this interview is to understand the experiences of families grieving during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Vhembe District. Your responses will be confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

Section 1: Demographics

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?

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3. What is your marital status?
4. How many members were in your household during the COVID-19 lockdown?
5. What is your highest level of education?

Section 2: Coping Mechanisms (Social, Religious, Traditional, or Cultural Practices)

1. Could you describe the practices or rituals your family followed to cope with the loss during the COVID-19 lockdown?
2. What role did religious practices or beliefs play in helping your family cope?
3. Did your family observe any cultural or traditional mourning rituals during the pandemic? If so, please describe them.
4. How did social support from family, friends, or the community assist you in your grieving process?
5. Were there any specific practices or rituals that were restricted or prohibited due to the lockdown regulations? If so, how did this affect your grieving process?

Section 3: Challenges Encountered in the Grieving Process

1. What were the main challenges your family faced while grieving during the COVID-19 lockdown?
2. How did the restriction on gatherings, such as funerals, impact your family's ability to grieve?
3. Were there any emotional or psychological challenges encountered due to the lockdown restrictions?
4. Did you experience any difficulties in accessing support systems, such as counsellors or spiritual leaders, during this period?

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5. In your view, what measures could have been taken to minimise the challenges faced by grieving families during the lockdown?

Section 4: *Ubuntu* Values in the Grieving Process

1. How did the concept of *Ubuntu* (interconnectedness and communal support) influence your family's grieving process during the pandemic?

2. Were there instances where neighbors or community members provided support to your family during this time? Please describe.

3. What *Ubuntu* values, such as compassion, solidarity, or sharing, were most evident in the community during your family's mourning period?

4. Did your family engage in any communal activities or practices that aligned with *Ubuntu* principles during the pandemic?

5. In your opinion, how can *Ubuntu* values be strengthened to support grieving families in future crises?

Section 5: Recommendations and Reflections

1. Looking back, what would you say was the most helpful source of support during the grieving process?

2. What traditional or cultural practices do you think should be preserved or adapted for similar situations in the future?

3. How could the government or other organisations have better supported grieving families during the pandemic?

4. In what ways could community members better assist families dealing with loss in the context of *Ubuntu*?

5. Do you have any additional thoughts or suggestions on how grieving families can be better supported during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic?

Closing

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Thank you for sharing your experiences and insights. Your responses will help contribute to understanding how families coped with loss during the pandemic and how *Ubuntu* values were practiced in this context. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to reach out.

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6.11. Appendix C: Ethical clearance

Ethical Clearance

ETHICS APPROVAL CERTIFICATE RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

NAME OF RESEARCHER/INVESTIGATOR:
Mrs DR Nthakheni

STUDENT NO:
11564346

PROJECT TITLE: Grieving processes, *Ubuntu* values, and challenges encountered by families that experienced loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in Vhembe District, Limpopo province.

ETHICAL CLEARANCE NO: FHS/24/PSYCH/1 1/1911

SUPERVISORS/ CO-RESEARCHERS/ CO-INVESTIGATORS

NAME	INSTITUTION & DEPARTMENT	ROLE
Dr FJ Takalani	UNIVEN, Psychology	Su ervisor
Mrs DR Nfhakheni	UNIVEN, Psychology	Investigating Student

Type: Master's Research

Risk: Minimal risk to humans, animals, or environment (Category 2)

Approval Period: November 2024 — November 2025

The Human and Clinical Trials Research Ethics Committee (HCTREC) hereby approves your project as indicated above.

Signature:

UNIVERS F VEND
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR
RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
2024 -11- 19
Private Bag X5050
Thohoyandou 0950

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General Conditions

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, please note the following.

- The project leader (principal investigator) must report in the prescribed format to the REC:

Annually (or as otherwise requested) on the progress of the project and upon completion of the project.

- Within 48hrs in case of any adverse event (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the project. Annually a number of projects may be randomly selected for an external audit.
- The approval applies strictly to the protocol as stipulated in the application form. Would any changes to the protocol be deemed necessary during the course of the project, the project leader must apply for approval of these changes at the REC. Would there be deviated from the project protocol without the necessary approval of such changes, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the project may be started. Would the project have to continue after the expiry date; a new application must be made to the REC and new approval received before or on the expiry date.
- In the interest of ethical responsibility, the REC retains the right to:
- Request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the project,
- To ask further questions; Seek additional information; Require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process. withdraw or postpone approval if:

Any unethical principles or practices of the project are revealed or suspected.

- It becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the REC or that information has been false or misrepresented. The required annual report and reporting of adverse events was not done timely and accurately,

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New institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.

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ISSUED BY:

UNIVERSITY OF VENDA,

RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE Date Considered: November 2024

Name of the HCTREC Chairperson of the Committee:

Prof NS Mashau

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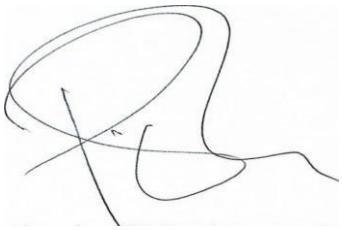
6.12. Appendix D: Letter of editing

Proof of editing

12 February, 2025

This is to certify that I, Dr P Kaburise, have proofread the dissertation titled -

GRIEVING PROCESSES, *UBUNTU* VALUES, AND CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY FAMILIES THAT EXPERIENCED LOSSES DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN VHEMBE DISTRICT, LIMPOPO PROVINCE - by MUDAU DZIVHULUWANI RINAH (student number: 11564346). I have indicated some amendments which the student has undertaken to effect before the final dissertation is submitted.



Dr P Kaburise (0794927451/ 0637348805; email: phyllis.kaburise@gmail.com**)**

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Dr P Kaburise: BA (Hons) University of Ghana (Legon, Ghana); MEd University of East Anglia (Cambridge/East Anglia, United Kingdom); Cert. Teaching English as a Foreign Language (Cambridge University, United Kingdom); Cert. English Second Language Teaching, (Wellington, New Zealand); PhD University of Pretoria (South Africa).

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6.13. Appendix E: Turnitin results

Turnitin results

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