



## **Investigating the Sustainability Strategies of Independent Online Media Startups in Harare, Zimbabwe**

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirement of the Degree of Master of Journalism in  
the Faculty of Arts and Design at Durban University of Technology

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November 2021

# DECLARATION

## Investigating the Sustainability Strategies of Independent Online Media Startups in Harare, Zimbabwe

I declare that the thesis herewith submitted for the Master of Journalism Degree at the Durban University of Technology has not been previously submitted for a degree at any other University. I also hereby declare that except where acknowledged, this dissertation is entirely my own work, that all sources used or quoted have been acknowledged in the dissertation and the reference list.

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Signature of student.....

Date.....

I hereby approve the final submission of the following dissertation

Dr F. Awung

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Date.....

## **ABSTRACT**

Globally, the online media startups industry has been increasing in terms of size and reach. This growth has been attributed to various factors, chief amongst them being the advances in technology. In Zimbabwe, the rapid establishment of online media startups seems to be driven by other factors almost unique to this southern African country with one of the continent's tightly controlled media. Since the attainment of independence from colonial rule in 1980, Zimbabwe only has one state-owned television station and a handful of radio stations, most of which are also controlled by the state directly or indirectly. The lack of alternative media platforms has arguably created a void that these mushrooming online media startups are now occupying. However, due to Zimbabwe's harsh socio-economic and political conditions, most media startups find it difficult to survive. To this end, this research aimed to investigate the sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. The Individual Innovativeness, a metatheory of the Diffusion of Innovations theory, was applied to understand the impact of innovation on the sustainability of media startups. An interpretative paradigm anchored by a qualitative methodology was adopted, and data were collected from four online media startups and 11 participants through semi-structured interviews. Amongst other philosophical positions, the study highlights that the conditions in Zimbabwe are ripe for online media startups to thrive. The study findings show that sustainability can be achieved through a multivariable strategy that involves creating multiple revenue streams, innovating and adopting innovations early, cost-cutting measures, and having the inert passion for running or being a part of a digital media startup.

# DEDICATION

## Dedication

This research is dedicated to my late mother, Betty S. Vambe. She sacrificed everything-even her life for my siblings and me. Above all, she taught us to navigate the world in her absence.

“Uyu anogona asi kutamba chete”, she would say. I will forever strive to make you proud. Next stop PhD.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Above all, “I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever”, Psalm 86:12. Indeed, God has been faithful and merciful in my life. This research would not have been possible if it weren’t for his blessings.

I would like to acknowledge my supervisors Dr F. Awung and Mrs A. Mall, for their support and guidance during the completion of this study. When I was in doubt and drowning, Dr Awung believed in me and encouraged me. I am forever grateful.

To Dr I T Mutero, “waMai”, that discussion we had outside the Steve Biko library sparked and kindled something in me, and from it, the idea for this study was birthed. Dr Maud Blose, I cannot thank you enough for not giving up on me and my academic journey. You are the wind beneath my wings. I would also like to acknowledge the media organisations and participants that took part in this study. Their sacrifice cannot go unmentioned.

I would like to acknowledge the Canon Collins Trust for the funding through their scholarship. I feel honoured to be a recipient of such a prestigious award.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr T. Frankish, Prof S Mpofu, Dr O Adeniyi, Dr O Adebayo, Dr T Matsilele, Dr L Makombe and Mrs A Alcock, Ms S B Mitha and Prof R M Phakeng for allowing me to fill my cup with their wisdom and guidance. Academia is a better place because of you.

To my wife, Gloria, the most patient and kindest person I know. Mere words cannot express how thankful and blessed I am to have you by my side. My siblings, the lionesses Tariro and Spiwe. You are my two pillars. My Family, Mr and Mrs A Vambe, Kudakwashe Vambe, Blessing Vambe and Mrs S.Vambe-Mandina, Dr S Vambe. You are the foundation I stand on. I am incredibly grateful to Mrs Rejoice Nharaunda-Makawa for believing in me. Kalindy Mbofana, Epiphania Makurumidze and Benson Mupfurutsa, you keep me sane. I appreciate you, my Liege. I want to acknowledge Tendai Rogers Chiwandamira, Chief Ntshangase, Nkululekho Ngcobo, Khumbuzile Maisela-Mbuqe, and Snehlanhla Khanyile. You all are fantastic study buddies.

Finally, I want to acknowledge Me for not giving up, staying up and pushing.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

## 1.1 Introduction

In the last two decades, startups such as Google, Facebook and Apple have transformed large economies starting in the developed world (Moroni, Arruda and Araujo 2015: 2201). The media industry has also been experiencing an influx of media startups in response to the availability of technologies coupled with innovation and changes in consumer behaviours (Bruno and Nielsen 2012: 3). In the developing world, a similar phenomenon is happening in countries such as Zimbabwe, where the advent and subsequent advancements of digital media platforms and digital media technologies have created a conducive environment for online media startups to thrive (Kalemera *et al.* 2019: 10; Chitanana 2020: 130).

Apart from technology, other factors have contributed to the sprouting of digital media organisations in Zimbabwe, such as a polarised and monopolised legacy media environment, which has left audiences starved for content and alternative voices prompting them to find substitute content providers who happen to be online (Mutsvairo and Columbus 2012: 127; Kelly *et al.* 2017: 377; Makombe 2017: 5). However, the digital space presents many challenges to some online-based media organisations as they are yet to find sustainable strategies (Wirtz, Schilke and Ullrich 2010: 272; Chan-Olmsted and Wang 2019: 133). Digital technology has made it possible for online media to access large audiences. However, it has not made it possible for the same media to make tangible connections with that audience (Vukanovic 2018: 10). Scholars like Villi and Picard (2019: 121) have noted the need for the media industry to foment new ways of doing business and new media business models, and new strategies if they are to survive in this new digital era. This could therefore be argued that generating sustainable revenue from digital platforms by online media might be a challenge, and thus there is a need to investigate sustainability strategies being used by online media.

## 1.2 Context of the research

Globally, the media industry is going through a radical and unprecedented transformation period necessitated by a plethora of factors such as technological advancements, new competitive market structures, changes in governments and regulations, amongst others (Wirtz, Schilke and Ullrich 2010: 273). For instance, Statista (2021) reports that social media's popularity in today's world is brutal for both businesses and individuals to ignore as more than half of the world's population (56%) are actively using it for a plethora of functions. This suggests that the evolution of social media through advancements in technology has brought ease, fast and cheaper ways of communication, resulting in social media being adopted by both the consumers and businesses (Uddin, Chowdhury and Mamun 2017: 3). For the media industry in general, the impact of this transformation has resulted in the decline of the number of audiences accessing traditional media content and a sharp decline in advertisement revenue which has been the backbone of legacy media (Liyong 2019: 660; Fang and Xiong 2020: 2). This has paved the way for independent online media players to take over the role previously occupied by legacy media in both the developed and the developing world (Wagemans, Witschge and Deuze 2016; Wani, Pawar and Gupta 2016: 25; Salamzadeh, Kawamorita Kesim and Karami 2019: 2). However, not all individuals and organisations alike who have ventured on to social media have succeeded because of limited capital, human resources, and politics (Mudambi and Treichel 2005: 545). Rich Gordon, cited in Davis (2018), posits that some online media startups have been experiencing similar challenges being faced by startups from different industries.

Similarly, Robinson, Grennan and Schiffrin (2015: 7) contend that most online media startups worldwide are struggling with generating revenue from their use of social media and given the prevailing economic conditions in Zimbabwe, it is even more challenging. Further, a study by Smith, Yoon and Lilien (1985) found that only a third of online media startups can successfully reach the sustainable revenue-generating stage while the rest collapse right after inception. Given this background, the probability of a media startup failing to become sustainable in Zimbabwe could be argued to be much higher since the country's social, political and economic environments have, for the last two decades, been on a downward spiral (Kalemera *et*

*al.* 2016: 6; Kalemera *et al.* 2019: 17). This points to the possibility that there are many challenges that mushrooming online media startups in Zimbabwe, a country whose socio-economic and political environment continues to be on a downward trajectory, are facing. Thus there is a need to find out how they are overcoming such challenges. This study aims to investigate the sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe.

### **1.3 Problem statement**

The monopolisation of traditional media by the state typically characterises the media industry in Zimbabwe (Moyo 2009: 82; Mpofu 2015: 84; Mpofu 2017: 106; Mutero 2017: 36). The significant consequences of the tight control of legacy media have contributed to the high internet penetration in Zimbabwe and, subsequently, the rise of alternative digital media platforms (Mutsvairo and Columbus 2012: 122). A study by Bruno and Nielsen (2012: 7) suggests that the number of online media startups around the world is increasing, and the ability of these online media startups to remain sustainable has been a challenge prompting them to implement an array of strategies. Research to date has tended to focus on startups in general and a few online media startups operating in developed countries (Cantamessa *et al.* 2018; Oliva and Kotabe 2019; Rocha, Maméidio and Quandt 2019; McDonald and Eisenhardt 2020). Studies by Bruno and Nielsen (2012: 7); Robinson, Grennan and Schiffrin (2015: 6) confirm a limited number of studies on online media startups from developing countries. Thus, this study seeks to investigate the sustainability strategies of online media startups operating from Harare, Zimbabwe.

### **1.4 Aim and objectives**

The study aims to investigate the survival strategies that online media startups are adopting in pursuit of sustainability. The focal objectives are outlined below:

- I. To understand the impact of constantly changing technologies on independent online media startups.

- II. To find out the influence of the socio-economic and political conditions in Zimbabwe on the establishment and sustainable growth of independent online media startups.
- III. To examine the use of social media strategies by online media startups to attain sustainability.
- IV. To explore the importance of individual innovativeness on online media startups in relation to sustainability.

## **1.5 Research questions**

- I. What is the impact of constantly changing technology on independent online media startups?
- II. How are the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions in Zimbabwe impacting the establishment and sustainable growth of independent online media startups?
- III. How are online media startups using social media strategies in their quest for sustainability?
- IV. What is the role of individual innovativeness in the pursuit of sustainability by online media startups?

## **1.6 Research methodology**

This research utilised a qualitative method anchored in the interpretivist paradigm, which was discussed in the methodology chapter of this study. The study used a case study method aided by a systematic inclusion and exclusion criterion to select content-rich case studies relevant to the study. The survey method was employed to collect data from twelve purposively sampled key participants using semi-structured interviews conducted virtually. The interviews were transcribed and then analysed using the Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic approach.

## **1.7 Significance of the study**

This study provides an exciting opportunity to advance our knowledge of independent online media startups in developing countries and the strategies that they are using to survive. The findings of the study will hopefully benefit other media startups that are facing similar challenges. The study's findings will be shared with policymakers and media advocacy groups and hopefully be used to formulate a conducive environment for online media to survive.

## **1.8 Delimitations**

This study involved four Harare based online media startups, and 12 participants were interviewed. As such, this may not reflect the findings of all media startups in Harare, to be specific, and Zimbabwe in general. More so, the study did not include online media startups that came into existence after 2016.

## **1.9 The organisation of this study**

This research study is organised into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the study, gave the background of online media startups, motivations of the study, aims of the research, research questions, delimitations of the study, methodology and significance of the study.

Chapter 2 reviews existing literature about online media startups, social media strategy and the diffusion of innovations theory.

Further, chapter 3 discusses the research methodology that was applied in this study, the research design used and an overview of the participants in the study. Chapter 4 comprises a data analysis section followed by a discussion section of the salient findings from the analysed data. The fifth and last chapter concludes and gives recommendations based on the findings of the study.



## **1.10 Conclusion**

By and large, this chapter has looked at the rationale and background of the study. It has also laid out the aim and the objectives of the study. The research paradigm and research methodology have also been revealed. The ensuing chapter presents the literature relevant to the online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This research intends to investigate the sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe. This literature review aims to analyse relevant and salient literature regarding online media startups' sustainability strategies in Harare, Zimbabwe. The literature review will set the foundation for answering the pertinent research questions about online media startups' innovative strategies to sustain the business existing in harsh socio-economic and political conditions. The literature will discuss Zimbabwe's political, social, and economic situation and how that creates a conducive environment for the sprouting of online media startups. An attempt will also be made to discuss the challenges facing these online media startups to survive and become sustainable. In addition, the literature review also explains the relationship between social media strategy and sustainability in the online media business. This chapter also provides an insight into the Diffusion of Innovations Theory to understand the role of individual innovativeness in the pursuit of sustainability by online media startups.

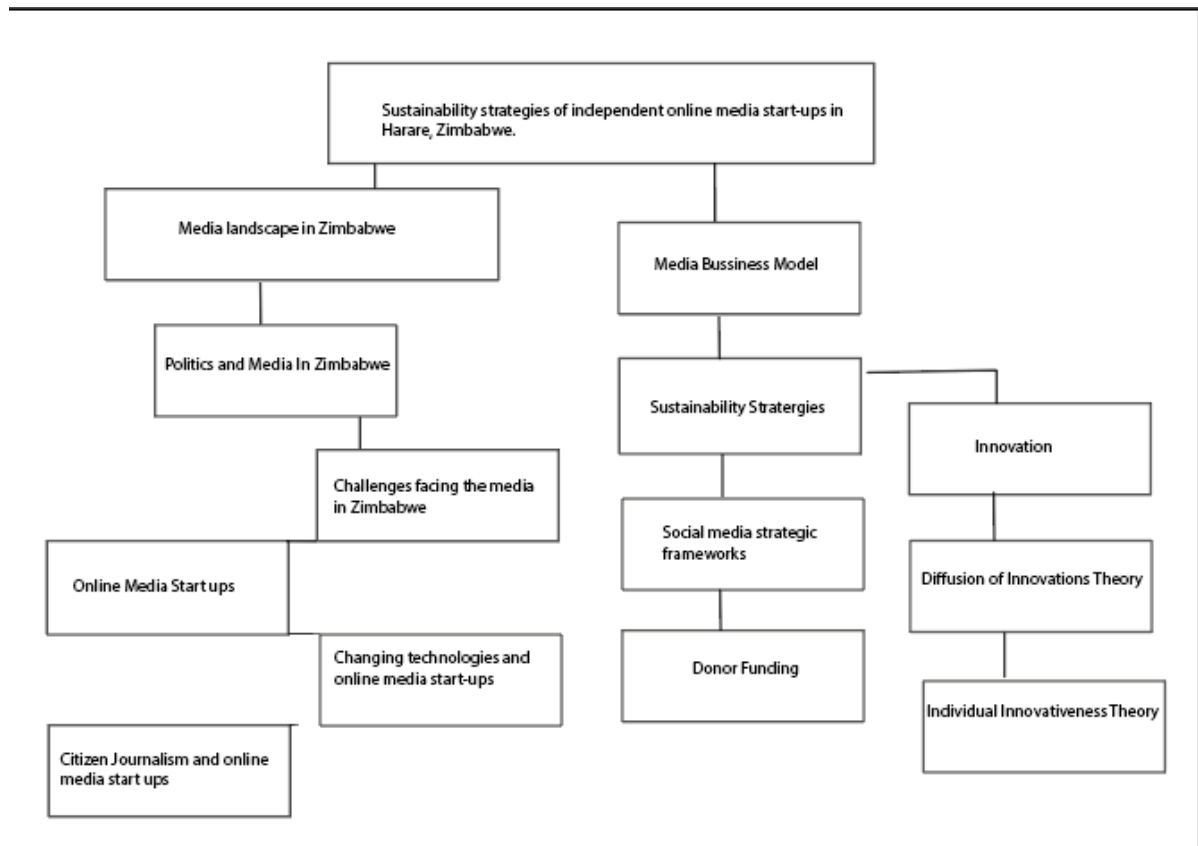


Figure 2-1: Flowchart showing the direction of chapter two

## 2.2 The media landscape in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country found south of the African continent, and for nearly two decades, the country's political environment has been hurling the economic and social conditions into the abyss (Makombe 2017: 32; Mutero 2017: 25). The deteriorating state of affairs has left the country polarised. Most of its institutions are divided with state-owned enterprises that largely root for the ruling party, while most privately-owned institutions root for alternative opposition parties (Makombe 2017: 17). The media fraternity is one such institution that has been affected by the ongoing polarisation, subsequently leading to alternative digital-based media platforms. This research study explores the sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Zimbabwe. This section of literature dissects the dynamics in the media industry in Zimbabwe, the legislation, the challenges and how these factors have contributed to the rise of independent media startups.

## 2.3 Mainstream media

The two main forms of legacy media in Zimbabwe that this section focuses on are broadcast media and print media. Since the attainment of independence from the British government, the broadcasting arena in Zimbabwe has been monopolised by the state-owned and controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) (Mano 2016: 17; Mutsvairo 2016: 252; MISA 2018: 14; Mboti 2019: 20).

For a country that has been independent for over 40 years, Zimbabwe has one television station called ZBC TV, which is run by the state and six radio stations (Mano 2016: 8). Another state-controlled enterprise Zimbabwe Newspapers (Zimpapers 1980) Ltd, began expanding into broadcast media in the year 2011 and has since launched one national radio station, three provincial radio stations as well Zimpapers TV network, which operates online (Mhiripiri and Ureke 2018: 9; Mboti 2019: 25). The government issued radio licenses to private players, including AB Communications, which owns radio stations like ZiFM, Hevoi FM and 98.4 Midlands and Alpha Media Holdings, which houses Heart and Soul Radio (Mano 2016: 15; MISA 2018: 11). However, there have been some controversies surrounding the manner in which the operating licenses were issued to these 'private players'. Mano (2016: 17) argues that partisanship and political influence rather than merit or the need for media pluralism saw the private players getting operating licenses. Therefore, this means that the broadcast arena in Zimbabwe is tightly controlled by the state and is not diverse, nor is it plural. Thus, it could be argued that it has created a gap for independent online media startups to mushroom.

According to Jakaza (2019: 104), print media in Zimbabwe can be categorised using different variables, which include ownership (government/independent), geographical coverage (national/regional/community), frequency of publication (daily/weekly/monthly) and language (English/Ndebele/Shona). However, this categorisation's fundamental basis is not to do with diversification or pluralism but rather direct and indirect state control of the media (Mpofu 2017: 105). The largest and oldest print media stable in the country is the state-owned and controlled Zimbabwe Newspaper (Zimpapers 1980) Ltd, which houses 13 newspaper titles that include Sunday Mail, Sunday News, The Herald, H-Metro, B-Metro, Kwayedza and The

Chronicle, amongst others (Mano 2016: 17; Mpfu 2016: 6; Mhiripiri and Ureke 2018: 94).

Some independent players have stakes in Zimbabwe's print media. The major ones that are currently operating include NewsDay (daily and weekend), Zimbabwe Independent and The Standard, all under Alpha Media Holdings and The Mirror and Financial Gazette (Makombe 2017: 64; Jakaza 2019: 105). However, the independent status of some of the non-government media owners has been under heavy criticism from scholars such as Jakaza (2019: 63), who have asserted that it was because of their political connections with the ruling party that landed them license to operate, meaning that there is a high possibility of indirect state control.

## **2.4 Legislation that controls the media in Zimbabwe**

They are laws that have also been passed in Zimbabwe to license, regulate, and control media. The laws include the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Broadcast Services Act (BSA) the Official Secrets Acts (OSA) (Mpfu 2017: 106; MISA 2018: 2). In addition, there are also legislation like the Censorship and Entertainment Controls Act (OSA) and the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act designed to censor artistic expression and to detain media practitioners and citizens who criticise the state (MISA 2018: 2). The legislation that governs the media in Zimbabwe has been reported to be draconian in nature aimed at protecting the interest of the ZANU-PF led government by tightening control of the democratic space leading independent voices to move away from the tightly controlled spaces to digital spaces (Mare 2019: 100; Mboti 2019: 43). This study subscribes to the notion that the tightening of media spaces by the government has contributed to an increase in online media startups in Zimbabwe. Therefore, the research focuses on investigating the sustainability strategies of some of these independent online media startups operating in Zimbabwe.

## **2.5 The relationship between politics and media in Zimbabwe**

The political arena in Zimbabwe has been on a downward spiral for decades. This is primarily due to internal problems rather than external ones. Makombe (2017: 5) notes that the political arena in Zimbabwe became more volatile in the year 2000, resulting in polarity existing between the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) [Zanu (PF)] together with public media and the civil society, opposition political parties and some privately owned independent media. It has already been alluded to in this study that the public media institutions in Zimbabwe remain an instrument of propaganda for the ruling party, Zanu (PF), just as they were during the colonial era with no space for opposing voices (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015: 64). To this end, the polarised state of affairs in Zimbabwe and the subsequent need for a neutral view has made the internet popular, with citizens seeking alternative information even though the costs are high (Makombe 2017: 15).

Since the attainment of independence and even before, the manifestation of politics in Zimbabwe's media industry has been through tight media control. According to Darnolf and Laakso (2016: 198), the government in Zimbabwe always had vested interests in controlling the media, as evidenced by measures that were put in place in 1981 to stifle the media space with the establishment of the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT) in response to the threats which were coming from the National Press. This view is also shared by Mpofu (2017: 105), who noted that the incumbent government wanted to control the people, so they inherited the oppressive colonial media system and sugar-coated it by allowing private media to operate. The politically motivated control of the media is not only for independent players but also for the government-owned and controlled media. Darnolf and Laakso (2016: 200) record a long list of editors from the state-owned newspaper, The Herald, who have lost their jobs based on publishing cautiously independent reports on issues in the country.

In addition, from 1980, the broadcast arena in Zimbabwe has also been a politically contested space (Masuku and Dube 2017: 111). A report by MISA (2018: 12) draws attention to the fact there has not been any political will to transform the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation or to issue licenses to community radio stations that have gone unlicensed for the past 17 years, with the government citing that there is a limited number of frequencies available because the digitisation process is not complete. This

delay in digitisation has led organisations such as MISA Zimbabwe to appeal for the expeditious conclusion of this process to further open the broadcasting field to private players and community-based broadcasters (MISA 2018: 15). This can be the reason why online media startups are on the rise in Zimbabwe.

In the same avenue of thought, the Zimbabwean government has also used legislation to control the media. According to Mpofu (2017: 106) some of the notorious mechanism of media control by the Zimbabwe government has been derived from a piece of legislation called the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) which came to effect in 2002. AIPPA was adequate, but not for long. The advent of the internet posed a different threat to the government, and a new way had to be established to deal with the impending disaster emanating from the internet. This is why in the year 2016, the then-president, Robert Mugabe, announced that Zimbabwe would be implementing the same internet restrictions that are used in China in reaction to critics who were publishing articles painting his government in a bad light using various internet-based platforms (Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa 2016). The evidence presented in this section suggests that in an attempt to keep a tight hold on the media, the government of Zimbabwe ended up creating a conducive environment for online media to thrive, and now the government is contemplating introducing measures to regulate digital media.

## **2.6 Challenges facing the media in Zimbabwe**

This section discusses the challenges faced by the media in Zimbabwe. It highlights the impact of the political and economic conditions in the country on the entire media industry.

### **2.6.1 Persecution of the media by the state**

Apart from tight control, there have been reports of persecution of media houses, journalists and media personalities in Zimbabwe (MISA 2018: 7). The frequency of arrests, threats, and harassment of journalists has been more common amongst

independent media than the state-owned media. Darnolf and Laakso (2016: 204) traced the state's hostility towards independent media to 1992 when Zimbabwe's first independent daily newspaper, *The Daily Gazette*, was shut down after being in operation for under two years. The newspaper faced a lot of financial and sustainability challenges despite challenging the monopoly of state-controlled media. Most notably, the critical content that *The Daily Gazette* was publishing was not welcomed by the government, and therefore stringent measures were taken to ensure the newspaper died a premature death (Darnolf and Laakso 2016: 205). As a consolation, it can be argued that even though the newspaper's existence was short-lived, it still managed to break new ground by setting a new precedent that would give birth to independent media in Zimbabwe. Therefore, it can be argued that establishing an independent news organisation in Zimbabwe has been historically marred by a lot of resistance and persecution by the state, and even for online media startups, the same hostile situation might still persist.

However, by going out of its way to control the media, the Zimbabwean government seems to have forgotten how momentous the media is. Chitanana and Mutsvairo (2019b: 66) are convinced that the media plays an essential normative democratic role when it comes to holding powers to account by keeping the different government arms in check, thereby nourishing a conducive democratic and transparent space. Nevertheless, this is something the Zanu PF government is not interested in. Also, the failure to push towards advancement and development by the state-controlled mainstream traditional media in Zimbabwe can be argued to be not coincident but rather an intentional move by the powers. As a result, scholars like Darnolf and Laakso (2016: 197) have noted that what is transpiring in Zimbabwe is a well-thought-out plan that started right after Zimbabwe attained its independence from British colonial rule in the year 1980. This plan aims to control the media by whatever means necessary as a means to remain in power. But be that as it may, the tight control of the media by the state has managed to benefit mostly the state but not the media, which is now weakened to the extent of failing to effectively carry out its mandate and to generate sufficient revenue because of a plethora of ripple effects emanating from this interference (M'kumbuzi, Ibsen and Halvorsen 2015: 177).



### **2.6.2 Economic challenges**

The business end of most media houses across the globe has been rapidly deteriorating due to many factors (Robinson, Grennan and Schiffrin 2015: 18). Due to the internet's developments in communication technology, there has been a global decrease in advertisement revenue resulting in the closure of media houses worldwide (Richardson 2017: 5). The media in the Southern African region is also facing similar challenges. A report by Roper, Newman and Schulz (2019b: 10) highlighted that over the past decade, there has been a sharp decline in newspaper circulation due to the decline and paradigm shift in the economy. The evidence above points to the fact that the linear business media model is no longer applicable because advertisers and content creators now have access to audiences without going via the media as such; the advertising revenue that used to go towards sustaining the media is no longer going directly to the media. This, therefore, means most media houses that mainly relied on advertising revenue are highly likely to struggle or even shut down.

In addition, political interference has also hindered media entities from accessing and exploiting markets that differ in views with either politicians or their owners. According to Adebayo (2015: 60), a biased form of media and journalism has been known to have colossal effects on media business and media consumers. This is the case in Zimbabwe, where the unstable political environment has negatively impacted the socio-economic conditions of people and businesses (Kelly *et al.* 2017: 11).

In addition, Kelly *et al.* (2017: 377) have also observed that data tariffs in Zimbabwe are expensive because internet service providers have to constantly invest due to economic hardships and lack of reliable and constant power supply, which thus calls for alternative power sources. These increases in operating costs threaten viability for both internet service providers operating in Zimbabwe and media startups generating revenue one way or the other from the internet (MISA 2018: 17).

## **2.7 The rise of online media in Zimbabwe**

In the new internet age, online media has become central in distributing news and information online. Over the past century, there has been a dramatic increase of online

media startups due to a multiplicity of factors, including economic, political as well as the advancement of technology. As Bruno and Nielsen (2012) state: "It is well known that media blossoms during times of political upheaval or technological innovation, and we are living in a period of both". This section discusses the rise of online media startups globally, with more emphasis on Zimbabwe.

The term media has been defined differently by various scholars as well as media users alike. Montgomery (2018: 76) defines media (traditional) as technologies including television, DVD and information and communication (ICT), printed communication such as newspapers and magazines; visual media such as film; and aural communication such as radio that are used to disseminate information from a sender to a recipient. Further, a new form of media dubbed new media has emerged to serve the same purpose but on a different platform. New media is defined as the communication disseminated using internet-based platforms that include Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and online news publishing that allows users to interact (M'kumbuzi, Ibsen and Halvorsen 2015: 166). The consensus here is that the process may vary, but the fundamental principle of sending a message from one point to another remains the same. What then changed and continues to change is the process involved in communication due to technology (Uddin, Chowdhury and Mamun 2017: 2).

Online media startups have been increasing in popularity and numbers in Zimbabwe. This increase in the numbers and popularity of online media can be attributed to the government's control of traditional media. According to Kelly *et al.* (2017), traditional media operations in Zimbabwe are restrictive and are meant to control the media space through state-backed monopolisation. This view is supported by Makombe (2017: 31), who writes that, amongst other things, it is the restrictive traditional media environment dominated by the state-owned media outlets that are making the internet more popular, thus indirectly forcing citizens to seek alternatives.

However, the media industry is also polarised. Commenting on the divisions in the media in Zimbabwe, Mhiripiri and Ureke (2018: 95) argue that there are at least two distinct entities in most societal structures in Zimbabwe comprising of a faction that is pro-Zanu (PF) and another faction that is against Zanu (PF). This has had significant implications, as posited by Mutsvairo (2018: 4), who notes that restrictive media conditions in Zimbabwe are creating a new wave of information sharing and

simultaneously creating a niche for substitute forms of communication to prevail. Given the above, the researcher believes that by monopolising the media space in Zimbabwe, the authorities have inadvertently created polarisation and a conducive environment for independent media to bloom.

The rise of online media can also be attributed to the advancement of internet technology. Subsequently, the rise of online media in Zimbabwean is also being influenced by global trends resulting from these global advancements of information and communication technologies (Chang, Yen and Han 2015: 3). This view is also supported by Statista (2021), who has reported that the internet is fast becoming the biggest community globally, with around 3.97 billion people actively using the internet as of June 2019; this is around 56% per cent of the global population. In Zimbabwe, 56.5% of the population are on the internet, while internet penetration is estimated to be around 51 % (CIPESA 2017: 18; GlobalStatsCounter 2019).

In addition, social media applications are being used more frequently than others in Zimbabwe, and digital content creators are aware of this. According to a report by MISA (2018: 16), WhatsApp is the most used application at 32% of the total data usage, adding that non-traditional models have been innovatively making use of this application to reach this growing audience. This confirms an observation by Dahlgren (2014: 66), who noted that the advent and subsequent advancements in social media and social media technologies are giving alternative platforms used to distribute news, information, advertisements and also provide a space for real-time engagements. The evidence presented in this section suggests that a sizable number of people in Zimbabwe are on the internet and that advances in technology are creating new platforms for people to engage and share content.

However, some scholars are of a slightly different view. After conducting a study about social media and marketing in Zimbabwe and South Africa, Matikiti, Kruger and Saayman (2016: 741) noted that the political and economic environment in Zimbabwe has dramatically slowed down the significant development of communication technology, leaving the country with expensive, slow and unreliable internet bandwidth. They argue that even though the number of people accessing the internet is high, what they can do while on the internet is very limited because of the high costs as well as the slow speed of the internet connectivity that's available to them. Given

this, the researcher believes that despite challenges of internet connectivity, the fact that the government is still trying to regulate, points to a different story as pointed out by CIPESA (2017: 22); MISA (2018: 18), who notes that the potential and the power of the internet and social media is something the Zimbabwean government is aware of as evidence by its desire to also control the internet space.

The rise of online media in Zimbabwe and globally can be attributed to the development of the internet and internet-related technology. It is the internet that has given not just online media but also other aspects of human lives. As noted by Krotov (2017: 3), the internet is now an oasis of opportunities that impact how people and organisations interact, behave and do business globally. This, therefore, substantiates that no matter how slow and expensive the internet might still be in most of the developing world, including Zimbabwe, as stated by (Matikiti, Kruger and Saayman 2016: 741), its impact is now significant and should be taken into consideration by all the stakeholders. This is because push factors from the market are now forcing organisations to establish a presence on various social media channels because their stakeholders expect them to be present (Werder, Helms and Jansen 2014: 3).

This view is also cemented by Scott (2015: 37), who postulates that before the advent of the web, organisations could only attract attention by advertising in the media, but now that has changed as the internet allows organisations to interact directly with the consumers through social media. Overall, there seems to be some evidence to indicate that the advancements in technology and social media technologies globally are critical factors to the rise of online media in Zimbabwe and globally. This study argues that there might be a correlation between the rise of online media startups in Zimbabwe and the advent and advancement of the internet.

Further, as briefly alluded to in this study before, the government is currently using many tactics to clamp down on the internet space. This might be because the government is threatened by it. There is a consensus among social scientists like Mutsvairo (2016: 57); Gukurume (2017: 51); Makombe (2017: 11) that the reason for the clampdown is that in Zimbabwe, the internet has given ordinary citizens a discursive space to discuss their woes and openly criticise the government and the consequences of such actions have been dire. The Zimbabwe government responds by developing a potpourri of legislation to control media based on its access to

information systems (Mpofu 2017: 107). In recent years, the government has taken extreme measures to control the internet, as highlighted in a report published by the Kalemera *et al.* (2019: 42), which noted that the government of Zimbabwe is now resorting to shutting down the internet partially and in some cases, total or complete shutdowns.

Given the evidence presented in this section, it could suggest that many factors have necessitated the rise of online media in Zimbabwe, but the main ones are political and technological. The position by Bruno and Nielsen (2012) that the media flourishes during periods of political upheaval or technological innovations was also confirmed. As such, the researcher believes that a polarised and chaotic political environment and the advent and advancement in technology are the two major factors contributing to the rapid rise of online media in Zimbabwe.

## **2.8 Citizen journalism and online media startups**

The advancements in technology have made it easy for anyone with access to a smartphone and an internet connection to publish content on the internet giving rise to new forms of journalism, and the most notable one is citizen journalism (Lindner 2017: 1179). This section looks at citizen journalism and its relationship with online media startups.

The past decade has seen many scholars researching and writing about citizen journalism, but there is no clear and universally agreed-upon definition (Roberts 2019: 2). Some scholars like Noor (2017: 55) define citizen journalism as ordinary citizens with no journalism training who, using a smartphone, incidentally witness, captures and shares exceptional occurrences. This view is shared by Roberts (2019: 2), who writes that citizen journalism is when news is gathered, analysed and distributed by people who are not trained media professionals. A comparison of the two definitions suggests that the media industry and profession, in general, now has other players who are not journalists and are not bound by any ethical or professional code and who can establish a media house and carry out journalistic duties. Thus, it could be argued that the media industry, both traditional and online, could face possible competition in

an already competitive industry. Their survival might, to some extent, depend on how they relate to citizen journalists.

In Zimbabwe, citizen journalists became more pronounced in 2012 as necessitated by the economic and political meltdown and citizens' subsequent harnessing of social media platforms to voice their frustration (Chitanana and Mutsvairo 2019b: 68). Citizen journalists, particularly in Zimbabwe, have also had an impact on the country's politics, as noted by Mpofu (2013: 2), who argues that citizen journalists have been upsetting the elite and politically dominated public spheres, mostly due to the advancements in media technology that have made it possible for audiences to be consumers of media content and at the same time, be producers of media content. In light of this, this researcher believes that this is likely to cause a problem within the media industry as previously, the media (both online and traditional) had the monopoly of publishing content, whereas now, citizen journalists have, to some extent, taken the role of both traditional and new media: - that of gathering and distributing information. This could heavily impact the new media business model. As such, this research also aims to understand the role of citizen journalism as it investigates the sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe.

A qualitative study by Mutsvairo and Columbus (2012: 127) acknowledged the role technology has played in empowering citizen journalists and actors in some first-world countries and then noted that a similar trend permeates the sub-Saharan Africa media scene. Similarly, Tshabangu (2019: 40) contends that digital technology has made it possible for non-media professionals to thrive and even provide an independent media view that professional media personnel and outlets, both traditional and online, might not be able to report on because of ethical reasons. This, therefore, means that citizen journalism is giving voices to a broader and unconventional group of people who are not governed by any ethics. As such, it could be argued that depending on how citizen journalists are viewed, they can either be a competition or a complement to not just online media startups but also to mainstream media as well.

In addition, apart from ethical and evasion of government control, citizen journalists arguably have an advantage over traditional and professional online media startups when it comes to reaching a broad audience. Mutsvairo and Columbus (2012: 129), after highlighted that access to information and communication technologies play a

huge role in the distribution of content, argued that in a country like Zimbabwe, where data is expensive, many citizens are not in a position to access information on some of the data demanding social media applications that most professional media players are using. As such, this has created an opportunity for citizen journalists to reach audiences using reasonably cheap and typical chat applications to share information. This is something that some professionals are not keen to use because of standards and social media regulations. Further, the idea of citizen journalists capitalising on cheap and user-friendly platforms is also a trend in developing countries. Goldstein and Rotich (2008: 8) study on Kenya's digital network and Mutsvairo (2016: 48) highlighted that bloggers and citizen journalists alike are using cost-effective means of communication online to reach out to audiences in a country where media is tightly controlled.

However, citizen journalists' effectiveness and success are yet to be established, especially in developing countries where internet access is beyond many. Chitanana and Mutsvairo (2019a: 75) state that technology and access to social media are the most significant factors threatening startups' success. This position is affirmed by Akinbobola (2015: 50), who observed that the limited access to technology in sub-Saharan Africa remains the biggest hurdle for internet-based media organisations. The author pointed out that the continent of Africa might be experiencing a rise in mobile phone technology, but it still has an acute shortage of ICT infrastructure, which has resulted in very high internet costs and, consequently, the subsequent underutilisation of the existing infrastructure. Since this study is set to investigate the sustainability strategies of independent media startups, it acknowledges that availability and the internet's affordability are probably among the most critical factors that can impact everything that takes place online, including online media startups and citizen journalism.

## **2.9 The impact of constantly changing technologies on independent online media startups**

Social media is fast becoming the biggest community in the world. According to Statista (2021), around 3.97 billion people were actively using the internet as of December

2020; around 56 per cent of the global population. This speaks to the power and potential that the digital age is making available to various stakeholders, including the media industry. The innovation which is the internet is not inert, rather it is ever-improving and evolving at alarming rates and the consumer behaviours when it comes to technology are ever-changing, forcing organisations to continuously innovate and adopt new technologies if they are to remain competitive (Kiron *et al.* 2012; Harrison and Barthel, 2009). Therefore, this could mean that their survival now depends on their ability to embrace and integrate the ever-changing technologies and make them an integral part of their daily activities.

Since the advent of ICT technologies in the 1990s, technology has been the backbone of most startups, and media startups have played critical roles in supporting economies (Ibrahim and Jebur 2019: 53). Consequently, Moroni, Arruda and Araujo (2015: 2201) are convinced that the use of ICT technology by startups has paved the way for efficiency as decision-making processes. Similarly, Ibrahim and Jebur (2019: 54) have noted that online media start using efficient communication technologies that will allow them to adopt and implement needed changes and innovations at the speed at which the ever-changing technological and market demands.

Media startups are also impacted negatively and positively by the rapid technological advancements of infrastructure, gadgets and software upgrades. According to Francis and Willard (2016: 42), new technology has brought with it tools and ways that create ease and efficiency in the way businesses operate, grow and evaluate their growth and impact. The authors noted that when the internet was new, a few had access to it and what could be done on the internet was very limited compared to the current situation. However, the speed at which some of these advancements are taking place can be a challenge to small organisations. Akinbobola (2015: 61) noted that most small organisations could not keep up with the changing technology trends and infrastructure compatible with new technologies because of restrained budgets and sometimes limited human resources. In the same avenue of thought, Francis and Willard (2016: 44) have echoed similar sentiments citing that small organisations sometimes cannot chase new technological developments and systems demands because they will be focusing on other essentials.



In Zimbabwe, the internet was introduced in 1997, and only two service providers NetOne and TeleCel had licences to operate, and later Econet Wireless joined the fold (Kelly *et al.* 2017: 383). The internet has opened a plethora of opportunities, with over 6 million active internet users in Zimbabwe (Counter 2019). The number of internet service providers has also increased to cater for this growing internet demand (Kelly *et al.* 2017: 384). Given the evidence presented, it could be argued that changes and advancements in technology have destroyed the changed traditional media business models by giving consumers an equal opportunity to share content – a duty that was previously reserved for legacy media.

Globally, the consequences of the advancements and changes in technology have resulted in declining circulation, viewership and listenership figures because consumers now have a cheaper and easily accessible alternative, the internet (Leminen *et al.* 2018: 750). In the developing world, research done on the South African media landscape by Roper, Newman and Schulz (2019b: 10) revealed that newspaper circulation in South Africa has declined by 49% in the past decade while online statistics have been increasing sharply. This, therefore, indicates that due to technological advancements, online media platforms are now assuming the role and space that was once solely occupied by traditional media. However, in filling this void, online media startups are likely to face challenges regarding economic viability. As noted by Moroni, Arruda and Araujo (2015: 2200), the biggest hurdle for startups is finding new methods of operating that are different from traditional media, whose media business models were designed to work in static environments and not for the internet technology-based environments that are constantly changing and there is no guarantee for success. The studies presented thus far support the notion that constantly changing technologies can impact media startups in different ways. To remain afloat, media startups should also be constantly changing and adapting to new opportunities that come with these changes.

## **2.10 Media business model**

Cooper (2016: 7) defines a business model as an all-encompassing concept that presents the way in which a business is envisioned to make profits through selling

either goods or services to customers. The author is convinced that incentives for growth and performance, empowered leadership capable of implementing long term goals, and sufficient capital are the pillars that are needed for a business to become sustainable.

Business models are constantly changing to various environmental and even internal conditions. According to Cooper (2016: 31), business models change because of evolving customer preferences, new technology, and sometimes even changes in the rules governing the business's environment.

In the last decade, the media business model has been going through radical changes. The media business model has shifted from a linear to a more non-linear model, which has resulted in the dwindling of revenue necessitated by the loss of advertisers who, because of technology and social media, can now directly advertise and engage with their customers (Satell 2016; Schmidt 2019). The media industries are constantly searching for new content, markets, and business models to ensure sustainability (Krumsvik *et al.* 2019: 193). However, in trying to come up with a new online-based business model, online media startups face yet another set of challenges. Commenting on changes media startups in Europe are facing, Bruno and Nielsen (2012: 8) noted that the business model familiar with traditional media is not working with online startups because Google dominates the internet, Yahoo, Microsoft, and Facebook who have already ring-fenced the way adverts and advertisers behave. This, therefore, could mean that for online media startups to become sustainable, they have to find other strategies. Because of the evidence noted above, this study aims to investigate the strategies online media startups in Zimbabwe are using to survive.

## **2.11 Sustainability and media startups**

The last four decades have seen the concept of sustainability in business attracting a considerable amount of attention from various stakeholders, including scholars (Imbrogiano 2020: 4). The attention is being facilitated by several market pressures pushing businesses to be sustainable (Hoffman 2018: 5). According to Tur-Porcar, Roig-Tierno and Llorca Mestre (2018: 2), sustainability is the ability to meet the needs

of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This definition is all-encompassing, and as such, there is a need to be specific to business and organisational sustainability. Tur-Porcar, Roig-Tierno and Llorca Mestre (2018: 2) have further broken down sustainability to an organisational level and defined it as the ability of an organisation to contribute to sustainable development while simultaneously making an impact on the economic, social and natural environment in which the business is operating. Similarly, Akaeze (2016: 26) postulated that in business terms, sustainability refers to the ability of the organisation's leaders to proactively make swift decisions and actions on the changes in the internal and external environments. Further, Imbrogiano (2020: 5) believes that sustainability performance in businesses is the connection between business-internal practices and their sustainability outcomes and impacts.

However, the definitions above all point to the superficial scenario that can only be attained after a business has realised profits. For most media startups, this has not been the case, as the majority of them are struggling to make a profit. According to Cooper (2016: 8), the chances of survival for startups have always been limited, with only 50 % of startups companies surviving past the five-year mark in the United States of America, while in Africa, the number is even lower given the myriad of challenges the continent is facing and also the fact that most of them come short when it comes to setting up and implementing long term sustainability plans.

8Given this, the evidence presented in this section suggests that sustainability is vital for survival for most businesses, including startups. As such, this research seeks to investigate some of the sustainability strategies that the independent online media startups in Zimbabwe are employing to survive.

## **2.12 Social media strategy and media startups**

The use of a strategy is not new to social media or business, but it is a borrowed concept, as noted by Nickols (2016: 1), who traced the concept of strategy formulation and implementation to the military and claims that it is from there that the business fraternity got the idea from and started using it to bridge the gap between policy and

tactic. Ng, Wang and Yu (2013: 3) define a strategy in general as the pre-planned decision that considers a variety of variables that include organisational objectives, targeted audiences and the resources needed to establish a unique and advantageous beneficial position. Nickols (2016:6) defines strategy in the business sense as a plan of decisions that a company formulates after considering the company's objectives, goals, human and financial capital, operating environment, and how to achieve profits and even interact with its stakeholders. Similarly, Akaeze (2016: 10) defines a strategy as a plan of action to be followed to achieve set goals. In the same light, Effing and Spil (2016: 3) have taken this definition further by including social media and proceeded to define social media strategy as "a goal-directed planning process for creating user-generated content, driven by a group of Internet applications, to create a unique and valuable competitive position". From the definitions above, it could be argued that a strategy, even in social media terms, is beyond just a plan but the momentous aspect of it is the plan's implementation.

Further, businesses that plan and follow through with their action plan will achieve a competitive advantage and can ensure sustainability by reducing the risk of failure (Barnes 2019: 41). However, for a majority of startups, this has not been the case as most of them are falling short when it comes to formulating and implementing strategies even on social media, yet research has established that organisations that make use of strategies have better chances of becoming profitable and subsequently sustainable (DiStaso and McCorkindale 2013: 8). Given all that has been mentioned so far, one may suppose that sustainability is not an event but a process that involves strategic and intentional planning.

### **2.12.1 Importance of having a social media strategy**

For most organisations, being on social media is no longer a matter of preference given that competitive pressures and customer expectations are also forcing companies to establish a presence on various social media as more than half of the global population is now on social media (Nyangau 2018: 4). The enormous number of people on social media heavily impacts how people and organisations behave and use social media (Werder, Helms and Jansen 2014: 5; Statista 2021). This is why most social media handlers around the globe believe that online presence must now be used more strategically for users to be competitive and realise sustainability (Looy 2016: 50;

Maxwell and Carboni 2016: 251). Given this, one can argue that the need for organisations to prioritise creating and implementing a working social media strategy is now an urgent matter as it plays a crucial role in the sustainability of independent online media startups.

However, most organisations struggle to maximise the benefits of having an online presence because most of them are operating without a strategy (Maisiri, Mupaikwa and Ngwenya 2015: 252). A study by Matikiti, Kruger and Saayman (2016: 743) about the usage of social media as a marketing tool in two Southern African countries found that many organisations are operating with inadequate information and skills about how to use social media effectively. It is in this light that scholars like Carvill (2018: 35) have warned that using social media randomly is not sustainable, rather, organisations should be using social media strategically in order to reap the benefits that come with it. Further, Matikiti, Kruger and Saayman (2016: 745) advise that the best way that organisations can engage with audiences is through having a viable online presence by efficiently using social media, adding that it is also essential for organisations to create strategies around online platforms that are used mainly by their targeted audiences, noting that platforms such as Twitter have only recently become popular in Africa and large numbers of Zimbabweans are using it but what they normally use it for is still a mystery. Taking this into account, it could therefore be argued that it is the prerequisite that organisations should have a strategy in order to attain sustainability on social media that has led scholars like Culnan, McHugh and Zubillaga (2010) and Dawson (2009) to develop social media frameworks comprising of different variables to assist organisations to come up with strategies they can use to sustainably use social media. This, therefore, cements the idea that if organisations and individuals alike intend to be sustainable from their online endeavours, they should have a more organised and coordinated social media presence. As will be discussed below, for a strategy to work, it must address some key areas. This research, therefore, argues that organisations and individuals alike intending to be sustainable from their online endeavours should have a more organised and coordinated social media presence.

## 2.12.2 Social media strategies in business

For a strategy to work, it must address some key areas, including specific and attainable objectives and a targeted audience accompanied by sufficient resources (Ng, Wang and Yu 2013: 3). This section will discuss some three social media strategy frameworks, their characteristics, similarities and differences.

Dawson (2009) developed a Social Media Strategy Framework, which uses a checklist of eight key components (Learn, Listen, Engage, Strategy Development, Prioritise Objectives, Develop Capabilities, Establish governance, Measure and Refine) that he proposes organisations must consider and implement when venturing online.



Figure 2-2: Social media strategic framework

Source: Dawson (2009)

Dawson (2009) notes that the individual or organisation that wishes to venture online should first learn how to use various online platforms, understand case studies, and study trends. Secondly, the author listed listening as the next critical strategic step. This; as highlighted by Dawson (2009), involves choosing the social media monitoring

tools and how to utilise them. More so, streamlining topics and discussions that the organisations intend to be involved in and who will be taking the lead will also be identified at this stage.

Thirdly, Dawson (2009) noted that the organisation can now engage online audiences by entering conversations, providing up-to-date content, and responding positively to issues raised.

The fourth strategic step that the author recommends involves measuring and refining goals through using monitoring tools and capturing success stories. The areas found wanting should be revisited and refined.

Dawson's (2009) fifth social media strategy step is about the prioritisation of objectives. This includes improving audience relations, managing and improving brand and hiring skilled human resources that are going to yield positive results innovatively.

According to Dawson (2009), the sixth social media strategy step should see the organisations develop progressive policies around governance. This includes social media policies that the organisations should implement.

The author's seventh social media strategy step is the definition of activities. It includes the subsequent phases of the strategy and the resources required. The last social media strategy step, according to Dawson (2009), is for the organisation to develop capabilities by training staff and subsequently develop a culture of transparency.

In the same vein, Culnan, McHugh and Zubillaga (2010: 251) proposed a social media strategy comprising three elements: Mindful Adoption, Community Building, and Absorptive Capacity. These are accentuated individually below. Like Dawson (2009), their strategy framework aims to assist organisations in formulating sustainable social media strategies that can be tailor-made to suit the organisation's needs, as illustrated and explained below.

**Table 2-1: Culnan, McHugh and Zubillaga (2010) social media strategy. Part A**

<b>Mindful Adoption</b>
-------------------------

Match your adoption of social media platforms to your organisation's culture, your customers, and your business objectives

Make applications easy to find:

- Maintain an inventory of all social media applications
- Provide links from the firm's homepage or an accessible "community" or gateway page
- Provide easy cross-navigation between your social media applications
- Make sure the links between your social media sites or links back to other websites work

Develop quantitative and qualitative metrics for measuring the value of your social media applications:

- Design metrics to measure community outcomes (e.g., size of the community, frequency of participation, sharing of content with other social media sites)
- Design metrics to measure traditional outcomes (e.g., revenues, cost savings, increased customer satisfaction)

Address risk management issues, including security and privacy issues: - Create a formal policy for employee use of social media

- Post a privacy notice and "house rules" for participants
- Train employees
- Monitor social media applications for potential problems

Culnan, McHugh and Zubillaga (2010: 251) view that organisations must first reflect upon their digital needs, audience needs, and resources (both human and financial) before adopting social media platforms that they must then keep a record of. The authors added that organisations must then develop a monitoring and evaluation strategy that will be used to track the progress of the various online platforms adopted by the organisation, develop in-house policies on social media use and train relevant employees on how to make use of the various platforms.



**Table 2-2: Culnan, McHugh and Zubillaga (2010) social media strategy. Part B**

### **Community Building**

- Continually populate the site with engaging content:
  - Assign formal responsibility for creating content
  - Have executives or other company "celebrities" post and interact with community members
- Provide incentives for participation (e.g., recognition)
- Don't mention the company in every conversation
- Balance freedom with control and accountability; be selective in deleting content
- Be sensitive to the norms and policies of any public platforms you use

The second element of the social media strategy proposed by Culnan, McHugh and Zubillaga (2010: 251) alludes to the importance of building a social media community on their chosen social media network(s). The authors mention that there might be costs related to community building that the strategy must be mindful of.

**Table 2-3: Culnan, McHugh and Zubillaga (2010) social media strategy. Part C**

### **Absorptive Capacity**

Assign responsibility to designated employees or departments for monitoring social media based on the objective(s) of the social media application

Build on your organisation's existing processes and expertise in public relations, customer service, product development, or elsewhere for processing customer communications received via other media.

To structure messages, where feasible, integrate your social media applications with your existing web services (e.g., link to existing web customer support application)

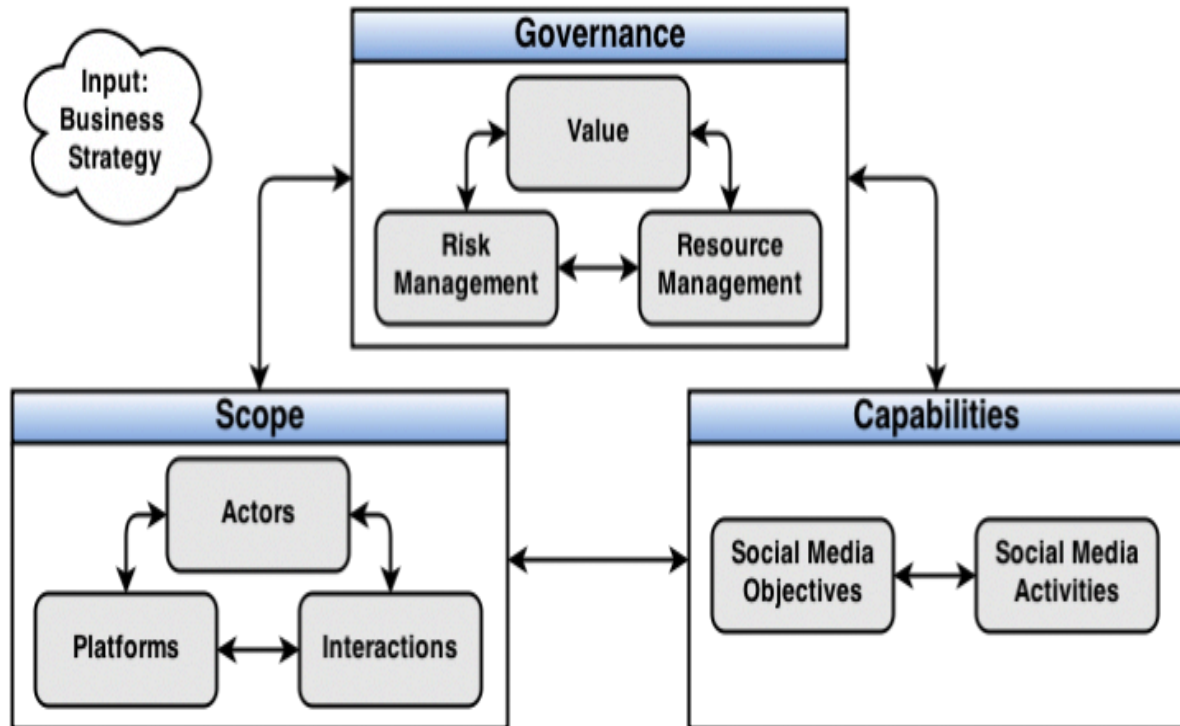
Develop new procedures for message processing as needed for:

- Identifying and responding to both routine and urgent messages
- Exception-handling
- Answering messages on a timely basis
- Integrating social media with your existing related applications

To share knowledge across the firm, develop procedures and metrics for reporting.

Culnan, McHugh and Zubillaga's (2010: 251) last element focuses on the organisational absorptive capacity in relation to their financial and human resources. It also speaks to integrating all social media platforms on the organisation's website and the importance of a systematic response system that links the internal and external environments.

Werder, Helms and Jansen (2014: 5) also published a paper that proposed their version of a social media strategy. The authors noted that social media should now not only be an essential department in an organisation but should also be linked to other departments. However, this is not the case in most organisations because social media is still treated as an afterthought with no structure or strategy, prompting Werder, Helms and Jansen (2014: 5) to formulate a three components basis social media strategy explored below.



**Figure 2-3: social media strategic framework**

**Source: Werder, Helms and Jansen (2014)**

According to Werder, Helms and Jansen (2014: 5), the scope comprising of Actors, Platforms and Interactions is the first step organisations should take before going online. The second step suggested by the authors is Capabilities, a section that looks at the organisational social media activities juxtaposed with the organisation's social media objectives for monitoring and evaluation purposes. The third aspect of this strategy is Governance and speaks to how the organisation is structured and how duties, responsibilities and resources are distributed.

The three social media strategies articulated above may differ in wording and some components or aspects they cover. However, there are some critical points that Dawson (2009), Culnan, McHugh, and Zubillaga (2010: 251), and Werder, Helms, and Jansen (2014: 5) all agree on, notably, that for any business that wishes to have a long-term online presence, it is critical to have a strategy that will guide and monitor the organisation's growth and governance.

## 2.13 Diffusion of Innovation Theory

This research study is anchored by the Diffusion of Innovation (DoI) theory and its sub-theory, the Individual Innovativeness Theory, which E M Rogers propounded in 1995 (Rogers 2010: 56). The reasoning behind the use of this theory is linked to the economic and technological environment in which the online media startups subsist in. The following discussion will elaborate on the influence of context in informing the choice of the Diffusion of Innovation theory.

In the information era, innovations have become key in the growth of small businesses, but for them to happen, there should exist an understanding of what innovations are and also a lot of monetary resources (Zhang and Chen 2019: 13). Krumsvik *et al.* (2019) have defined innovation as introducing and implementing a new idea or product into an environment. Likewise, according to Barnett (1953) as cited by Zolkepli and Kamarulzaman (2016: 2214), innovation is defined as “any thought, behaviour or thing that is new because it is qualitatively different from existing forms perceived as new”.

However, some people are inclined to view innovation as a synonym of invention, prompting scholars like Krumsvik *et al.* (2019: 194) to clarify the differences by stating that an invention is a new idea or a theoretical model that would still need innovation in order to be implemented. The definitions mentioned above point out that for a product or service to be labelled innovative, it must be unique and of practical value to both the consumers and the innovators.

Innovations, no matter how great and valuable, for them to work, require organisations and consumers to make an effort in ensuring that the innovation is implemented and utilised, respectively (Cooper 2016: 7). This view is supported by Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen (2018: 2208), who assert that if employees and consumers are educated on how to interact with innovation, not only will they be motivated to make use of it but also, the organisation and consumers are likely to benefit in the long run.

Consequently, in the case of Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs), including startups, embarking on training employees and raising awareness to consumers about innovation is usually beyond their financial reach (Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen 2018: 2208). In addition, the duo highlighted that most startups have a minimal staff

complement and thus cannot afford to close business for a day or a week attending training because that would mean losses in income. Given this predicament, it could be noted that startups find themselves having to choose between concentrating their efforts on immediate financial needs at the expense of futuristic sustainability possibilities through successful implementation of innovations and this can be detrimental in the long run.

To this end, Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen (2018: 2209) have argued that the advent of digital media and the unpreparedness of some media organisations and media startups are taking the defensive, reactive and pragmatic approach instead of the innovative route to the rapid technological changes. Simply put, the risks of not prioritising innovations can have far-reaching effects, especially if taking into account an observation by Kogan *et al.* (2017: 1) that global economies are now being driven by technological innovations and organisations that are innovative are most likely to experience higher growth of 2.5 to 4.6 per cent over five years, and the opposite is true for organisations that do not focus on innovations. Collectively, these studies outline a critical role for business innovation and the advantages of innovating and adapting innovations early. This research argues that media startups that innovate or adopt innovations early have better chances of surviving in this digital era and becoming sustainable. Commenting on innovation, (Mutero 2017: 114) argues that individuals and organisations who actively innovate and implement innovations have a better chance of surviving even in harsh environments. Therefore, for this study, the innovation theory of Rogers (2010) was used to explore and try to understand the relationship between innovation and sustainability amongst online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Moving on to the actual theory, it is important to first look at the diffusion process as this will assist in understanding the origins and progression of the Diffusion of Innovations theory. Rogers (1995: 10) defines diffusion as “the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system”. Kaminski (2011: 1) has proposed a slightly different definition noting that diffusion of innovation refers to the process that occurs as people adopt a new idea, product, practice and philosophy. Likewise, Minishi-Majanja and Kiplang'at (2005: 212) are of the view that the diffusion of innovation (DoI) is a “social process in

which subjectively perceived information about a new idea is communicated. Even though the above-given definitions are differently phrased together, they highlight that for innovation to happen, there must be four main points that make up the DoI theory, namely innovation, communication channel, time, and social system.

According to Martins (2018: 364), the four salient pillars of the DoI Theory can be illustrated as follows:

**Table 2-4: The four salient pillars of the Diffusion of Innovations Theory**

The innovation	“An idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption.”
A communication channel	“The means by which messages get from one individual to another”.
Time	The innovation-decision process (from knowledge to adoption or rejection), to the innovativeness of the individual (how early or late he will adopt the innovation), and also to the innovation’s rate of adoption.
The social system	The social context where innovation diffuses.

Minishi-Majanja and Kiplang'at (2005: 213) have noted that the aforementioned four salient points of the DoI theory were borrowed from other theories and merged by Rodgers, leading to the formulation of a 'meta-theory of diffusion'. This meta-theory consists of several sub-theories, four of which are commonly used (Surry and Farquhar 1997: 2; Albirini 2004: 28). These are Innovation Decision Process, Individual Innovativeness; Rate of Adoption; and Perceived Attributes.

**Table 2-5: Meta theories that make up the Diffusion of Innovations Theory**

<p>The Innovation Decision Process Theory</p>	<p>In the Innovation Decision Process theory (Rogers 1995) states that diffusion is a process that occurs over time and can be seen as having five distinct stages. The stages in the process are Knowledge, Persuasion, Decision, Implementation, and Confirmation. According to this theory, potential adopters of innovation must learn about the innovation, be persuaded as to the merits of the innovation, decide to adopt, implement the innovation, and confirm (reaffirm or reject) the decision to adopt the innovation (Surry and Farquhar 1997: 2).</p>
<p>The Rate of Adoption Theory</p>	<p>Rate of Adoption theory states that innovations are diffused over time in a pattern that resembles an S-shaped curve. Rate of Adoption theorises that innovation goes through a period of slow, gradual growth before experiencing a period of relatively dramatic and rapid growth. The theory also states that following the period of rapid growth, the innovation's adoption rate will gradually stabilise and eventually decline (Surry and Farquhar 1997: 2).</p>

<p>The Perceived Attributes Theory</p>	<p>The Perceived Attributes Theory states that potential adopters judge an innovation based on their perceptions regarding five attributes of the innovation. These attributes are Trialability; Observability; Relative Advantage; Complexity; and Compatibility. The theory holds that innovation will experience an increased rate of diffusion if potential adopters perceive that the innovation: 1) Can be tried on a limited basis before adoption; 2) Offers observable results; 3) Has an advantage relative to other innovations (or the status quo); 4) is not overly complex, and 5) Is compatible with existing practices and values (Surry and Farquhar 1997: 4).</p>
<p>The Individual Innovativeness Theory</p>	<p>Individuals who are predisposed to being innovative will adopt an innovation earlier than those who are less predisposed. On one extreme of the distribution are the Innovators. Innovators are the risk-takers and pioneers who adopt an innovation very early in the diffusion process. On the other extreme are the Laggards who resist adopting an innovation until relatively late in the diffusion process, if ever (Surry and Farquhar 1997: 4).</p>



Table 2.5 (above) highlights the different metatheories found within the diffusion of innovations theory. Surry and Farquhar (1997) draw our attention to the characteristics and application of each of these meta-theories. Important to note is the fact that the Diffusion of Innovations Theory is relatively new as such; it has not yet fully developed into a stand-alone theory but is made up of different elements that have been used differently by Diffusion of Innovations researchers (Surry 1997: 4; Albirini 2004: 31; Minishi-Majanja and Kiplang'at 2005: 212; Martins 2018: 363). The meta-theory (Diffusion of Innovations Theory) therefore consists of different elements of the diffusion process that researchers use differently to test or investigate different components of this compartmentalised theory.

The first three meta theories (The Innovation Decision Process Theory, The Perceived Attributes Theory and The Rate of Adoption Theory) focus more on consumers of innovations, how quickly they adapt to innovations and what they consider before adopting an innovation. The Individual Innovativeness theory, on the other hand, speaks directly to innovation. This study argues that online media startups, especially in developing countries like Zimbabwe, exist in harsh economic conditions and constant technological advances. Given this, for survival, there is a need for individuals and organisations who innovate.

The researcher's main argument is that the innovators and early adapters have more survival chances than those who lag or focus on marketing or competition. According to Krumsvik *et al.* (2019: 194) the vital proponent to long term economic transformation is innovation and new technologies that enables new forms of competition and not primarily a competition between companies. This view is supported by Minishi-Majanja and Kiplang'at (2005: 213), who write that people or organisations that innovate or adopt an innovation or a product early have better prospects than people or organisations that adopt later or fail to adopt. As such, the study focuses much on the Individual innovativeness aspect of this meta-theory to understand the advantages of innovating and the risks of lagging (Hashim 2007: 221). This study aims to investigate the sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe. Given that the success rate of startups is low Cantamessa *et al.* (2018: 2), could innovating or adapting to innovations quickly by online media startups be the

solution to this problem? This is the question that this study sought to answer using the Individual Innovativeness theory.

## **2.14 The Individual Innovativeness Theory**

The Individual Innovative theory assumes that some individuals are more innovative than others, resulting in adopting innovations earlier or faster than most of their counterparts. To emphasise his point, Rogers (1995: 11) came up with a continuous variable made up of 5 adopter stages which are: (1) innovators, (2) early adopters, (3) early majority, (4) late majority, and (5) laggards (Kaminski 2011: 3; Martins 2018: 364).

Rogers argues that these five categories had different values and characteristics, as summarised below:

**Innovators** - These are people who want to be the first to try the innovation. They are venturesome and interested in new ideas. These people are very willing to take risks and are often the first to develop new ideas. Very little, if anything, needs to be done to appeal to this population.

**Early Adopters** - These are people who represent opinion leaders. They enjoy leadership roles and embrace change opportunities. They are already aware of the need to change and so are very comfortable adopting new ideas. Strategies to appeal to this population include how-to manuals and information sheets on implementation. They do not need the information to convince them to change.

**Early Majority** - These people are rarely leaders, but they adopt new ideas before the average person. That said, they typically need to see evidence that the innovation works before they are willing to adopt it. Strategies to appeal to this population include success stories and evidence of the innovation's effectiveness.

**Late Majority** - These people are sceptical of change and will only adopt an innovation after the majority has tried it. Strategies to appeal to this population include information on how many other people have tried the innovation and have adopted it successfully.

Laggards - These people are bound by tradition and very conservative. They are very sceptical of change and are the most challenging group to bring on board. Strategies to appeal to this population include statistics, fear appeals, and pressure from people in the other adopter groups (Rogers 2010: 8).

Martins (2018: 364) describes the five categories differently.

Innovator (venturesome)

- Adventurous, eager for new ideas, a risk-taker.
- Controls a considerable amount of financial resources to absorb possible losses due to unprofitable innovations.
- Disposition to accept occasional setbacks when innovation is unsuccessful.
- Ability to understand and apply complex technical knowledge.
- Capacity to deal with a high degree of uncertainty about an innovation.
- Plays an essential role in the diffusion process, launches the new idea in the system.
- Gatekeeping role in the flow of new ideas.

Early adopter (respect)

- More integrated part of the local system: localities.
- Greatest degree of opinion leadership in most systems.
- Speeds the diffusion process.
- Not too far ahead of the average individual in innovativeness: serves as a role model.
- Embodies successful use of new ideas.
- Makes judicious innovation decisions.

Early majority (deliberate)

- Adopts new ideas just before the average member of a system.
- Interacts frequently with peers.
- Rarely holds positions of opinion leadership in a system.

- Important link between the very early and the relatively late in adoption.
- Relatively longer innovation-decision period than the innovator and the early adopter.

#### Late majority (sceptical)

- Adopts new ideas just after the average member of a system. Adoption is the result of economic necessity and pressure from peers.
- Approaches innovation sceptically and cautiously.
- Adopts only when most others have adopted an innovation.
- Adoption only happens when uncertainty is removed, has to feel safe.

#### Laggard (traditional)

- The last to adopt an innovation.
- No opinion or leadership.
- The reference is the past.
- Interacts primarily with others who also have relatively traditional values.
- Suspicious of innovations and change agents.
- Relatively lengthy innovation-decision process.
- Rational resistance to innovations: limited resources (Martins 2018: 364)

From the above, it can be noted that both Martins (2018: 363) and Kaminski (2011: 3) have explained Rogers five categories of innovation differently, but they agree on the fundamentals of each of the categories. However, it should be noted that as much as scholars agree on the applicability and use of Roger's five-category innovative continuum, it also has its shortcomings. Martins (2018: 363) has argued that in as much as the five categories provide a general basis of distinguishing between adopters and the reasons behind innovations and adoption in individuals and organisations, it assumes that organisations and individuals are homogeneous and, therefore, can be boxed into just five categories. In addition, the author noted that their categorisation sometimes leads to the loss of new information because it was never included in the criterion in the first place. Martins (2018: 364), has, however, resolved that the simplicity and the general applicability of this adopter categorisation, though a weakness to some extent, is the reason why the theory is commonly used.

The individual innovativeness theory has been used by various scholars from different disciplines (Rogers 2010: 10). The theory has been adopted by Ali (2019: 39) in a study of how personality traits impact human behaviours in different situations. The study concluded that the theoretical model, which is the individual innovativeness approach, was relevant and applicable.

Similarly, Akdevelioglu and Kara (2020: 73) have used the individual innovativeness theory in an investigation of opinion leadership and social media and one of their findings alluded to the idea that individual innovativeness is an important aspect of a leader and people who are innovative or adopt to innovations fast make a successful leader.

Rogers (1995) five adopter categories of innovation will be used to divide the sample in relation to their individual, organisational innovativeness. This categorisation aims to find out if a relationship exists between sustainability and the rate of innovation and or adoption. Martins (2018), upon being influenced by several studies by scholars like Butler and Sellbom (2002); Mahajan, *et al.* (1990); Rogers (1995) and Wilson *et al.* (2001) used the diffusion curve to compare the individual innovativeness amongst different members of a system. However, Martins (2018) went on to warn that even though the categorisation provides a reasonable distinguisher of meaning and has a collection of other advantages, its downside is that it is heavily reliant on almost standardised labels, and this can cause problems as it might lead to loss of critical information outside the scope of the categorisation criterion. According to Martins (2018) this view was debunked by Mahajan *et al.* in 1990, who argued that the categorisation made it possible for results from different organisations or individuals to be compared, generalised and replicated in different scenarios and studies.

In this study, the application of the Individual Innovativeness theory is based on the belief that sustainability is highly likely to be attained due to the online media startup's ability to anticipate change through understanding trends and then positively adapt accordingly.

The ideas of this metatheory also informed this study about why individuals and organisations need to be innovative to survive in a harsh environment like Zimbabwe and the constantly changing digital space. Further, the five different adopter stages

that make up this theory will also help to understand the attitude of individuals and organisations participating in the study towards innovation. The proclivity to adopt innovations will then subsequently be linked to sustainability.

## **2.15 Conclusion**

This literature review has shown that media is going through a paradigm shift globally due to the opportunities and threats presented by the advancement of communication technologies. The chapter also zoomed in on the media landscape in Zimbabwe, the politics and the challenges that the media industry is facing in Zimbabwe. The researcher then discussed the rise of online media in Zimbabwe and the different modalities that are linked to online media. Also, the changes around the business media model and how that is threatening the element of sustainability was also discussed. The researcher then argues that to survive, online media startups should make use of social media strategies and innovate or adapt to innovations early. The following chapter details the design of the study and the procedures that were employed to respond to the research questions.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter discussed the literature on the state of media in Zimbabwe. In this chapter, the methodology pursued in this study, together with the research paradigm, the research approach, the data collection method, tools and analysis methods used, are outlined. Furthermore, a detailed discussion on trustworthiness and how it was achieved, and the ethical considerations taken in this study, are discussed. All these methodological tools are used to address the overall objective of the research, which is to investigate the sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe.

### **3.2 Underlying research paradigm**

According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017: 26), the word paradigm refers to the researcher's philosophical way of thinking or, simply put, how the researcher views and relates to the world. Similarly, Rehman and Alharthi (2016: 52) described a paradigm as a way of making sense of the reality of the world. They saw it as a basic system of beliefs that is anchored by a theoretical framework working together with ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods. Given this, it could be noted that a paradigm alludes to the researcher's perspective, or way of thinking, or school of thought, or set of shared beliefs that influence how the researcher draws meaning and interprets research data. Therefore, this means that researchers should understand the paradigm they align themselves with and why they align themselves with that particular paradigm. However, subscribing to only one paradigm can have a detrimental impact on the research outcome, as noted by Mutero (2017: 138), who suggests that researchers should be cautious not to allow paradigms to limit the depth of their research. In the same vein, Rehman and Alharthi (2016: 53) note that the choice of a research paradigm or paradigm(s) should be informed by the needs of the research rather than the researcher's allegiance to a particular paradigm. For this

study, the researcher took the above into consideration as well as introspection and chose an interpretivist paradigm route. The justification for this choice is explained below.

### **3.3 Interpretivist paradigm**

According to Ryan (2018: 8), interpretivism is a paradigm that centres on the idea that knowledge and truth are subjective due to the researcher's culture, experiences, and upbringing. In the same vein, Kivunja and Kuyini (2017: 27) state that the interpretivist paradigm seeks to understand the subjectivity that makes up human experiences focusing on participants and how they see and experience the world in which reality is socially constructed. Rehman and Alharthi (2016: 55) have also argued that interpretivist researchers subscribe to the notion of socially constructed multiple realities where reality and truth are created and mediated by human senses. This is why Du Plooy-Cilliers and Cronje (2014: 19) concluded that human beings cannot be separated from the environment they subsist in to be studied in a laboratory the way positivist researchers subscribe to and advocate for in their bid to discover and explain the causes and effects of various variables.

Ryan (2018: 9) and Alharahsheh and Pius (2020: 47) have pointed out four different approaches within the interpretivist paradigm- Hermeneutics, Verstehen, Symbolic interactionism and Phenomenology, whose use is linked to the type of question the researcher seeks to find. Given this, since this study seeks to investigate the sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe, a Verstehen approach is most appropriate. This is because the Verstehen approach allows the researcher to explore and understand a phenomenon from the participants' perspective and why they have chosen to do things the way they are doing them (Ryan 2018: 9). Considering this, for this study, participants' opinions and sustainability strategies were probed to understand how online media startups in Zimbabwe are surviving.

The study used a relativist ontology that upholds the idea that realities are socially constructed based on diverse variables, including culture and language (Alharahsheh



and Pius 2020: 42). For this study, the rationale behind this is that the people managing various media startups have different realities that should not be generalised. Subsequently, a subjectivist epistemology that focuses on participants' stories, narratives and interpretations (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017: 33; Alharahsheh and Pius 2020: 42) was chosen as it allowed the researcher to explore the different stories of sustainability that different media startups are using.

### **3.4 Research approach**

Wallace and Wray (2016: 92) defined methodology as a systematic process in which knowledge is discovered, acquired, and analysed. Equally, Dawson (2019: 12) notes that a methodology is a philosophy that the research follows from the topic, the constraints and the ethical decisions made to answer the research problem at hand. This study made use of a qualitative methodology. Creswell and Creswell (2017: 173) define qualitative methodology as a holistic process of inquiry that seeks “to understand a social or human problem” rather than being “based on testing a theory composed of variables, measured with numbers and analyzed with statistical procedures.” In the same light, King, Horrocks and Brooks (2018: 7) have described qualitative research as a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world they live in. This study investigated sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe, by engaging and directly hearing the realities, views, and experiences behind carefully selected online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe. This made qualitative research approach appropriate for this research.

In addition, the choice of using a qualitative research methodology was arrived at after considering and understanding that an interpretivist qualitative approach allows a thorough investigation into a phenomenon that has limited existing research by exploring people's experiences around their natural environment (Jack 2010: 128). Since the study aims to investigate how media startups are innovatively sustaining their organisations in the digital age, their interpretation and experience are therefore the key factors that need to be investigated.

### **3.5 Research design**

Yin (2009: 18) defines a case study as "an empirical inquiry that seeks to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, usually given that the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident." In explaining a case study, Hardwick (2016: 6) suggests that a case study method is "the study of a single instance or several instances of a particular phenomenon to explore the context of that phenomenon". Likewise, Heale and Twycross (2018: 7) see case studies as a rigorous study on an individual or an organisation or a group of people or a selected group of organisations to develop generalisations about people or groups. The general agreement amongst the scholars above is that case studies focus on individuals or groups representing or involved in a phenomenon being studied in its natural context within a specified space and time.

The use of a case study method in research is guided by various factors, including the nature of the problem (Noor 2008: 1602). As alluded to before in this chapter, this research is situated within the bounds of an interpretivist paradigm as such, a case study method was found to be best suited because constructivist-interpretivist paradigms are best suited to accommodate the demands of a case study method (Cresswell 2009: 4). The other reason is that interpretivist paradigms are anchored in the idea that reality is socially constructed while simultaneously acknowledging the subjectivity that makes up human experiences and how they see and experience the world (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017: 27).

Stake (1995) listed three genres of case studies, namely, Collective case study, which is similar to Yin's (2003) description of a multiple case study, Instrumental case study -which is commonly used when the research is aimed at formulating a theory while the case itself is used to play a secondary role and the Intrinsic case studies which rest upon the idea that the researcher is earnestly interested in the case and not set on formulating a theory (Stake 1995: 3; Baxter and Jack 2008: 549).

The choice of which case study or cases to use rests upon the nature of the research being undertaken and the number of cases being used in a study, for example, a single

case study or multiple case study (Yin 2003: 6). Given that this study seeks to investigate different sustainability strategies employed by independent online media startups in Zimbabwe, an intrinsic multiple case study method was used. This type of case study allowed the researcher to better understand, from the cases under study, the various sustainability strategies being used for survival by independent online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe.

The depth of the study is also another factor to consider, as indicated by Baxter and Jack (2008: 551) and (Heale and Twycross 2018: 7), who states that depending on the aim of the research, a case study can focus on the entire case or cases (holistic) or a certain aspect of the case or cases (embedded). In taking this into account, this study mainly focused on issues related to sustainability. As such, an embedded approach was employed as it made it possible for the researcher to focus on the sustainability aspects of the media organisations under study.

In addition, a case study method is commonly used when venturing into new or little-known research territories, as confirmed by Yin (2003: 3), who states that one of the salient goals of a case study is to give the researcher a chance to discover new knowledge that can be used as a basis for the acquisition of new knowledge. In the same avenue of thought, other scholars like Crowe *et al.* (2011: 3) and Heale and Twycross (2018: 7) also point out that a case study method is beneficial to employ when there is a need to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event or phenomenon of interest, in its natural, real-life context. As has been alluded to by the researcher in the preceding chapters, there has been little research around sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Zimbabwe; it could therefore be noted that the case study method was the most appropriate to use to discover and understand new knowledge about this phenomenon.

One of the most notable advantages of using a case study is that a researcher can have much control over the individuals, organisations, or groups to participate in the study. Yin (2003: 4) notes that by using a case study, a researcher can use a criterion to purposefully select participants that are best suited for the study. Therefore, for this research, six Harare based independent online media startups were initially sampled, and of the six, four were subsequently used as cases using the inclusion and exclusion criteria elaborated in this chapter.

Instead of studying a single case, this research used a multiple case study method. According to Hancock and Algozzine (2017: 15), this approach is advantageous because it allows the use of multiple sources whose experiences can also be critical when describing ideas raised using quotes and anecdotes to create vivid images of a phenomenon under study. Even though the total number of online media startups is not clear, scholars like Kelly *et al.* (2017) and Makombe (2017: 31) have indicated that the number of independent online media startups focusing on different issues is rising. Given this, this study used a multiple case study, gathering opinions and strategies from four different media startups experiencing diverse challenges. This then gives a broader understanding and perspective to the challenges and the sustainability strategies that different startups are using.

Be that as it may, case study method has shortcomings. According to Heale and Twycross (2018: 7), the data from the multiple cases can be inundating and thus challenging to process, make sense of and find links within the data if a well thought out data analysis strategy is not used. Also, Crowe *et al.* (2011: 8), describing another pitfall of case study, highlighted the lack of scientific rigour that most arguments against the use case study method rest on. This research used a systematic thematic data analysis framework and an inclusion and exclusion criteria to sample cases to mitigate this. All the necessary steps taken to justify the actions taken were explained for clarity and rigour.

### **3.6 Target population**

Murphy (2016: 7) defines a population as an entire group of people that the researcher wishes to investigate. Likewise, Maina and Bula (2019: 246) explain that a target population is a prearranged number of individuals set aside from the total number of the entire population of a research study. Fink (2019: 84) has noted that a target population includes not just individuals but also institutions, problems, and even systems to be made use of in the study. Given this, the population for this research study was made up “of rapidly increasing online media startups operating in Zimbabwe”, (Kelly *et al.* 2017). Making institutions or organisations a target population

is supported by scholars like Fink (2019: 84), who state that institutions or systems can be studied as a target population.

### **3.7 Sampling method**

As defined by Sekaran and Bougie (2016: 235), a sample is a "subset of the population", which consists of individuals selected from the population. In the same light, Fink (2019: 84) has defined a sample as a smaller group that is carefully selected from a much larger group called a population. Given this, the research comprised of the crucial personnel from four carefully selected online media startups based in Harare, Zimbabwe. The sample of the study consisted of three key participants from each of the four organisations under study. The participants included the founding director, social media manager, marketing manager, finance and administration and a reporter.

The study used purposive sampling. Pascoe (2014: 144) describes purposive sampling as a technique that allows the researcher to select "information-rich" cases to answer the research questions. Similarly, Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016: 2) note that this technique which is also called judgment sampling, the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities they possess and value that they will add to the research from their involvement or experience in the subject matter under study. Purposive sampling is not random but involves careful consideration by the researcher guided by the research as far as identifying who should participate in the research, unlike probability sampling, where any member of the targeted population has an equal opportunity to participate in the research (Dawson 2019: 39). By using the purposive sampling method, the researcher sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2010: 35; Kivunja and Kuyini 2017: 33). Given this, the researcher purposively chose participants playing critical roles involving social media in their organisations coupled with the potential to give rich information because of their involvement in the production and/or distribution of media content online.

### **3.8 Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

According to Patino and Ferreira (2018: 1), “Inclusion criteria are the key features of the target population that the investigators will use to answer their research question”. Further, the authors also note that the choice of an inclusion and exclusion criteria has a bearing on the entire outcome of the research, and as such, it must be carefully considered. To this end, key research components such as considering the study's general aim and the research questions should be used to make informed decisions on whom, within the population and within the confines of the sample, can participate in the study (Connelly 2020: 125). A criterion was formulated in relation to the research aim and questions to streamline the sample size for this study and increase the chances of getting information-rich responses from participants. The below explained inclusion criteria is based on the tenets of purposive sampling.

For this study, the criterion for the sample selection used was:

- Location- The online media startup must be based in Harare.
- Date of Inception- The online media startup must be at least three years old.
- Publishing frequency-The online media startup must be producing content at least once a week,
- Social Media Presence- Online media startup must be actively using at least four social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, SoundCloud and a website.
- Publishing Platform- Media startup must only be based online.

### **3.9 Data collection**

Fink (2019: 106) has described data collection as the ‘soul of the study’. This means data collection is an integral part of research that should be treated with accuracy. The method used to collect data for this study, the instrument used to collect data, and the recruitment process used will be discussed in this section.

### **3.9.1 Data collection method**

A research method is described by Chu and Ke (2017: 284) as a systematic protocol followed when solving a research problem. In the same vein, Singh (2006: 99) explains that the method used in a study is determined by the characteristics of the problem under investigation. Quoting George J. Mouly, Singh (2006: 101) explains that research method can be categorized into three genres: Survey Method, Historical and Experimental method. This study focused on the Survey method because it involves finding the meaning of a contemporary phenomenon (Singh 2006: 101) which, in this case, are the sustainability strategies that independent media startups are using in Harare, Zimbabwe. Thus, interviews were used to probe the different strategies being used and the rationale behind this choice are elucidated below.

### **3.9.2 Data collection instrument**

Research is all dependant on the accuracy of the data collected and the processes involved in collecting the data (Flick 2017: 7). Given the aim of the research, the relativist nature of the study, the subjectivist epistemology, the relativist ontology and the naturalist qualitative methodology that this study is pivoted on, the data for the study was collected using the interviews. Dikko (2016: 523) described interviews as a way of getting relevant information regarding the participants' experiences or how they understand a particular subject. Similarly, Alshenqeeti (2014: 40) defines an interview as a discussion between two or more people to acquire information about experiences, interpretations, and descriptions of events or phenomena. There are advantages to using interviews. According to Gill *et al.* (2008: 292 ), interviews help the researcher to explore the views, experiences, beliefs and motivations of individuals on a particular occurrence. The allowance to dig deeper to unearth meaning from respondent reasoning provided by this data collection method makes it the most preferred choice. In addition, interviews are often used to collect non-numerical information involving peoples behaviours and experiences using various forms of interviews (Alshenqeeti 2014: 40).

Data collection has drastically changed in recent times due to the advances in technology as well as unplanned natural disasters and diseases such as the Covid-19

pandemic. Some researchers are now using synchronous and asynchronous ways of collecting data via internet-based platforms like Zoom, Skype and Email and other social media platforms (Archibald *et al.* 2019: 1; Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman 2020: 1). In as much as virtual data collection methods are now becoming popular in qualitative research, King, Horrocks and Brooks (2018: 120) have warned that the use of such internet-based method of collecting data is reliant on a variety of factors, including suitable gadgets, relevant applications, user familiarity with applications together with the availability and speed of internet for both the researcher and the participant. For this study, and after consultations with the purposively selected online media startups, Zoom and Skype were chosen and used in the process of collecting data. These choices were informed by the participants' indication of which platform they were familiar with. Another reason for choosing these platforms was that Zoom and Skype have a record function that makes it possible for the interview to be recorded and then transcribed later.

Before the commencement of the interview, a letter of information (Appendix B) detailing the gist of the study and the procedure of the interview was shared with the participants. The interviews were then conducted either via Zoom or Skype, depending on which application the participant had access to and was also familiar with. The interviews lasted an average of 50 minutes and were recorded using the application's record function. The researcher ensured that he was in a private and quiet place and encouraged the participant to be in a quiet place and to be relaxed.

### **3.9.3 Recruitment process**

Online media startups were purposively sampled online. A Google search of the keyword Online media in Zimbabwe led the researcher to the Media Institution Of Southern Africa-Zimbabwe (MISA-Zim) website <https://zimbabwe.misa.org/media-directory/> where a list of some of the major players in the media industry is found. In addition, the search also led the researcher to various statistics and reports related to online media in Zimbabwe, which helped the researcher to refine the search.

The researcher is also a practising freelance journalist and therefore used his media background and knowledge to narrow down and refine the search of online media



startups that would, in the researcher’s informed opinion, be the most appropriate for this study by looking at websites, social media handles and the type and frequency of publishing of different online media startups. Using the inclusion and exclusion criteria above, the researcher short-listed six possible cases and then proceeded to make contact and express interest in having them participate in the study. In the end, the final four online media startups were chosen to participate in the study according to their availability and willingness to avail themselves to participate in the study. The process described above is in line with what Heale and Twycross (2018: 7) alluded to when they note that the first step is identifying homogenous individuals or groups with common characteristics and then reviewing the literature, reports, and other sources of information.

### 3.9.4 Data analysis

Harding (2018: 104) posits that data analysis is an organized process that allows the researcher to systematically group, examine, evaluate, reflect and reach a conclusion using the data collected. For this study, data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework (Braun and Clarke 2006: 5). Thematic analysis (TA) is a method of analyzing qualitative data through identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes'), (Terry *et al.* 2017: 2; Clarke and Braun 2018: 107). Taking this into consideration, the following steps were taken to analyse data for this study.

**Table 3-1: Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework**

Phase	Procedure
Phase 1: Familiarising myself with the data	After conducting the interviews, the researcher listened to the recorded audio and then transcribed the data. The

	researcher proceeded to read the transcripts at least two times.
Phase 2: Coding	The researcher then took note of the ideas, interesting information that came out of the transcribed interviews.
Phase 3: Searching for Themes	The codes generated were reviewed and grouped into various categories.
Phase 4: Reviewing Potential Themes	The researcher then proceeded to review the short-listed themes and also combined some that were linked.
Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes	The refined themes were then defined and given names that best summarised them.
Phase 6: Producing the Report	Based on the defined and named themes, a report was produced.

The above table briefly explains how the collected data was analysed using Braun & Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework (Braun and Clarke 2006). The processes will be described in detail in chapter five.

### **3.10 Delimitations**

The study was carried out on only four Harare based online media startups, and 12 participants were interviewed. As such, this may not reflect the findings of all media

startups in Harare, to be specific, and Zimbabwe in general. More so, the study does not include online media startups that came into existence after 2016.

### **3.11 Trustworthiness**

Caldwell and Hayes (2010: 500) define trustworthiness as “a mediating construct that is subjectively assessed based on one's individual experiences, interactions, and perceptions of individuals, organisations and institutions”. Stewart, Gapp and Harwood (2017: 9) are adamant that qualitative researchers commonly use trustworthiness to convince readers that their research findings are worthy of attention. In most qualitative studies, authenticity, dependability, conformability, transferability and credibility are strategies that are employed to measure trustworthiness (Nowell *et al.* 2017: 3; Stewart, Gapp and Harwood 2017: 10). There have been debates amongst methodologists around issues of determining quality when it comes to judging quality in qualitative research (Hadi and Closs 2016: 641). As such, the duo has suggested that at least two of these strategies (authenticity, dependability, conformability, transferability and credibility) should be used to establish trustworthiness) in any particular qualitative study. Given this, the researcher recorded, transcribed, and checked the interview for errors before data was analysed to ensure authenticity and credibility upon receiving permission from the participant. In addition, member checking was used wherein the researcher shared the transcribed interviews and interpretations construed with participants to verify whether the information captured is a true reflection of their views and experiences as per the interview (Creswell and Creswell 2017: 195).

### **3.12 Anonymity and confidentiality**

Because of the volatile political situation in Zimbabwe, the participants' names and their organisations were not identified in the study. Instead, code names were assigned to the four organisations. Code names were also used in place of the participants' real names for their safety. Also, for further protection of the participants' reputation and competitive advantage, all the information collected during the study was only used by

the researcher and will be treated confidentially as well as stored securely. Both the soft and hard copies of stored data will be deleted after five years.

### **3.13 Ethical considerations**

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. More so, participants were asked to complete informed consent forms (Appendix C) and were assured and empowered to withdraw at any time of the data collection process. The researcher also abided by the Durban University of Technology's ethical guidelines and institutional review process (ethical clearance).

A gatekeeper's letter (Appendix D) was sent to the owner of each of the online media startups that took part in this study, permitting his or her organisation to be used as a case in this study. By participating in this study, participants' names and confidential information of participants were not given to people outside of the study, and the data collected is being stored under lock and key in the supervisor's office, whilst soft copies have been encrypted and saved using code names only known to the researcher. Both the soft and hard copies of stored data will be deleted after five years.

### **3.14 Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the research design, including the fundamental principles that guided the study and the actual steps taken to gather data, including the selection of a sample, the sample size and sampling techniques. The following chapter focuses on the presentation and interpretation of the data collected and the discussion of the results.

# CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

## 4.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter presented and justified the research methodology and the research design employed in this study. In this chapter, the data collected using semi-structured interviews was analysed in line with the research's aim and objectives. The chapter begins by giving an overview of the participants who took part in the study, the steps the researcher undertook to interpret the data and then the findings from the interviews will be presented and interpreted.

## 4.2 Profile of participants

For this study, six media startup organisations were sampled, and from these, four media startup organisations were then purposefully chosen to participate in the study. The participants who took part in the study include founders and senior media practitioners within the organisations who are also involved in formulating and implementing various strategies. Additionally, all the participants who took part in the study are registered media practitioners. Given this backdrop, the researcher hopes the experience these media practitioners have, can bring to the study valuable insights that are weighty, relevant and current.

For confidentiality, safety, and protection of the business interest, the names of the organisation and the participants were protected by using pseudonyms.

**Table 4-1: Illustrated summary of the participants**

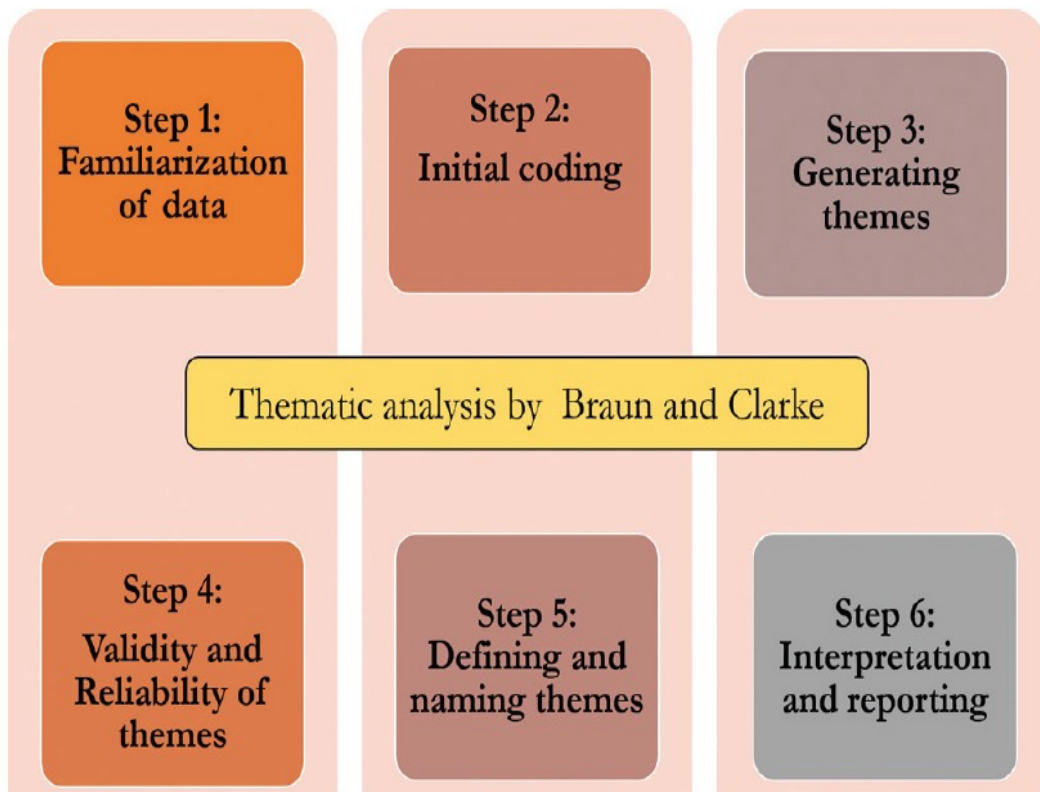
Media Organisation	Participant Number	Pseudonym
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Media Organisation 1 (MO1)	Participant 1 (P1)	MO1_P1
	Participant 2 (P2)	MO1_P2
	Participant 2 (P3)	MO1_P3
Media Organisation 2 (MO2)	Participant 1 (P1)	MO2_P1
	Participant 2 (P2)	MO2_P2
	Participant 3 (P3)	MO2_P3
Media Organisation 3 (MO3)	Participant 1 (P1)	MO3_P1
	Participant 2 (P2)	MO3_P2
	Participant 3 (P3)	MO3_P3
Media Organisation 4 (MO4)	Participant 1 (P1)	MO4_P1
	Participant 2 (P2)	MO4_P2

For this study, 12 participants had been anticipated, however in the end only 11 participated, thus giving a participation rate of 92 per cent. The researcher believes that data saturation was achieved with this participation rate, and the absence of one extra participant does not impact the data presented.

### 4.3 Thematic data analysis

This study used a six phases approach to thematic analysis propounded by Braun and Clarke (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012). This section discusses how the researcher followed the approach as mentioned earlier.



**Figure 4-1: Thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006)**

**Source: Braun and Clarke (2006)**

### **Step 1: Familiarisation of data**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom. The Zoom platform has a video option and a video and audio recording feature that made it possible for the researcher, upon given consent by the participant, to record the interview (Archibald *et al.* 2019: 1; Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman 2020: 1). After the interview, the researcher extracted and watched the video and then proceeded to transcribe the audio. This process allowed the researcher to become thoroughly familiar with the content and with the voices and gestures of each participant, making it possible for the researcher to take note of exciting ideas connected to the study (Braun and Clarke 2012: 61).

## **Step 2: Initial coding**

The researcher then moved on to the coding of the data which, according to Braun and Clarke, is the tagging of data and organising it into logical groups (Braun and Clarke 2012: 61). For this process, the researcher printed the transcripts and used different coloured highlighters to flag codes based on their potential relevance to the study, the theoretical framework and general intriguing ideas the participants shared. The researcher then used different coloured sticky notes to tag and label the emerging codes by writing a word or a short phrase summarising the idea or concept that the participant would have mentioned. A total of 110 codes (see addenda 3) came out of the transcribed data. The themes for the study were then generated from these codes.

## **Step 3: Generating themes**

After coding all the interview transcripts, the researcher embarked on a theme generating exercise by going through all the codes and observing similarities, differences and even exciting ideas. These coded ideas were then organised into different categories. These categories were generally influenced by the coded data's connection to the research questions (Braun and Clarke 2006: 82). The researcher then used sticky notes to create a visual board. This gave the researcher a vantage point to look at the codes from a bird's eye view and subsequently to organise them into themes. The initial themes that were generated from the coded data were broad and needed to be narrowed down. Some needed to be merged, while others, though necessary, were not part of the research scope entirely. The researcher initially identified the following ten themes.

- Passion
- Policy
- Economy
- Human Resources
- Social Media Strategy
- Revenue generating strategy
- Cost Cutting strategies
- Innovation adoption
- Attractiveness (merits) of Technology
- Cost implications (demerits) of Technology



#### Step 4: Reviewing potential themes

As alluded to above, the themes were generated primarily based on the coded data. The researcher then went back to the original data to ensure the themes represent the initial data. This phase of data analysis is essential as it ensures quality is maintained (Braun and Clarke 2012: 65).

#### Step 5: Defining and naming themes

The naming of themes is not random, but a well thought out process that involved grasping the salient aspects of the main idea embedded in a group of codes (Friese, Soratto and Pires 2018: 23). For this study, the named themes are tabulated below.

**Table 4-2: Themes derived from semi structured interviews**

Research Objective	Thematic Group	Theme
I. To find out the influence of the socio-economic and political conditions in Zimbabwe on the establishment and sustainable growth of independent online media startups.	Negotiating the Media Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Passion and Belief</li><li>• Policy</li><li>• Economy</li><li>• Talent</li></ul>
II. To understand the impact of constantly changing technologies on independent online media startups.	Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Attractiveness of Technology</li><li>• Cost implications of Technology</li></ul>
III. To examine the use of social media strategies by online media startups to attain sustainability.	Strategic planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Revenue generating strategy</li><li>• Cost Cutting strategies</li><li>• Social Media Strategy</li></ul>

IV. To explore the importance of individual innovativeness on online media startups in relation to sustainability.	Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovation adaption</li> </ul>
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### **Step 6: Interpretation and reporting**

The sixth and final step discussed, in detail, the themes tabled above. The culmination of this process resulted in the presentation and discussion of the findings of the study.

## **4.4 Negotiating the media environment**

The environment in which every business operates will highly likely determine whether the business survives and becomes sustainable and profitable. Under this thematic group, the researcher will analyse and discuss the media environment-related strategies that independent online media startups are taking to survive. This group of themes answers the question about the impact of Zimbabwe's socio-economic and political conditions on the establishment and sustainable growth of independent online media startups.

### **4.4.1 Policy**

Controlling and regulating are some of the main reasons for the introduction of policies to any environment. This theme looks at the impact of some significant policies on online media startups, as noted by the participants.

Nine of the eleven participants who took part in this study believe that policies are created and consequently implemented primarily for control – at least for the traditional media in Zimbabwe.

MO4 P2, like several other participants, noted that the policies governing the media spaces in Zimbabwe are restrictive and intended to control the media by censoring them rather than regulate.

*Also, the issue of regulation. There's a lot of regulation in the mainstream media, noted (MO4\_P1).*

The strict government control of the media was also confirmed by several scholars in the literature reviewed for this study, amongst them Mpofu (2017: 106), who notes that some of the notorious mechanism of media control by the Zimbabwe government has been derived from a piece of legislation called the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) which came to effect in 2002. This draconian law has created a stunted traditional media space and inadvertently paved the way for online media.

Like most other participants, MO4\_P2 also reported that the move to control the media by the state is leading to many media practitioners opting to embark on online media startups because there is no control, at least for now.

*I think it's best, or it's better to operate in the online space because there's limited, not limited per se, but there's less gagging. There are no laws that govern the internet right now, although we have this whole cyber bill coming up (MO4\_P2).*

Similarly, MO1\_P1 also echoed similar sentiments,

*The issue was that of control and monopoly of mainstream media by the state. For instance, we only have one TV station. So, for us to create content and give them to air they would not because the content they prefer is that which is biased towards the state. So that influenced online media to thrive, even us to use it the way we do because we have control of telling our stories without being censored and having our editorial policy compromised (MO1\_P1).*

This was also mentioned in the literature; for instance, Mare (2019: 100); Mboti (2019: 43) highlighted that the legislation that governs the media industry in Zimbabwe has been reported to be draconian and are aimed at protecting the interest of the ZANU-PF led government by tightening control of the democratic space leading independent

voices to move away from the tightly controlled spaces to digital. In the same avenue, Makombe (2017: 31) wrote that, amongst other things, it is the restrictive traditional media environment dominated by the state-owned media outlets that are making the internet more popular, thus indirectly forcing citizens to seek alternatives.

One participant, M03\_P2, raised concerns that even though the lack of regulations and control is encouraging the online media startup community to grow, it has also given rise to fake news, which is damaging the industry and strengthening the state calls to pass the cyber bill.

Be that as it may, the absence of policies to control and regulate the online media space could be argued to be an advantage to online startups and a huge factor that is ensuring sustainability. The cost and requirements to register a media house are arguably designed to deter aspiring media houses to operate formally. However, this is not the case for online media startups. They do not have to apply for registration and go through the restrictive process. Just an online presence and content is enough to start an online media. This means they can save money they would have used to register, for other things such as the purchase of equipment.

In addition, not being registered means online media startups have an independent editorial policy, at least from the restrictive government policies. This, in turn, makes online media startups an alternative information source, something that is lacking in Zimbabwe due to monopolisation and strict control of the media by the state. As such, online media startups could be argued to be at a vantage point to attract large numbers of online audiences and subsequently become sustainable from the proceeds of having a considerable following.

#### **4.4.2 Economy**

The economy can play a considerable role in the survival of online media startups. This theme discusses the views of the participants on how the economic environment impacts online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe.

The literature discussed in this study argued that the economy plays a fundamental role in the online media startups sustainability agenda. Kelly *et al.* (2017: 377) noted that due to economic hardships and lack of reliable and constant power supply, data tariffs in Zimbabwe are beyond the reach of many because internet service providers have to factor in the costs of alternative power sources. These increases in operating costs are a threat to viability for both internet service providers operating in Zimbabwe and media startups generating revenue one way or the other from the internet (MISA 2018: 17).

All the participants surveyed highlighted that the economy is harming their startup one way or the other.

*It is actually harder to run a media business in Zimbabwe than in many other parts of the world because of the economic challenges, the socio-political environment and the immense brain drain (MO2\_P1).*

The ailing economy means that many organisations, not just online media startups, are most likely struggling to operate profitably and fulfil their mandate. This was confirmed by MO1\_P1, who indicated that even paying salaries and rentals can be daunting at times.

*Also, rentals are very expensive because the economy is not performing and to pay salaries as well, we are barely afloat (MO1\_P1).*

To cope with the economic challenges, 9 out of 11 of the participants surveyed indicated that they had to develop cost-cutting measures. Most participants shared concerns about unreliable and expensive data prices. They linked this to power shortages and the general economic outlook of the country. This is a double jeopardy as it makes it difficult for them to upload content on various web-based platforms and their audiences to access and engage with the content.

*In terms of data, look, data is too expensive and it's a challenge. It's something that we have to find ways to navigate, but data is still expensive (MO3\_P1).*

Given these challenges that online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe, are facing, most participants have indicated that they have to find strategies to ensure their

content reaches the intended audiences. Interestingly, two participants mentioned the economic impact that the paradigm shift of the media business model has on their operation, MO2 P1 stated that:

*Around the world, news-based companies are struggling to create business models that work. Zimbabwe is no exception (MO2 P1).*

This view was also shared by MO3\_P1, who noted that advertisers are opting to use different means other than the media to advertise. This has hugely affected cash flow in the media industry as advertising was the most significant revenue earner.

In the literature reviewed in this study, this view is supported by Satell (2016); Schmidt (2019), who note that the media business model has shifted from a linear to a more none-linear model, which has resulted in the dwindling of revenue necessitated by the loss of advertisers who, because of technology and social media, can now directly advertise and engage with their customers.

#### **4.4.3 Talent**

Another factor that can impact online media startups is human resources. This theme looks at the talent or the people with unique skills they bring to an organisation that can be key to the survival of any media organisation.

A majority (7 out of 11 participants) noted an abundance of human resources due to high unemployment within the mainstream media space. This makes online media a go-to place for young people wanting to establish careers in the media space. This was highlighted in the literature by Mutsvairo and Columbus (2012: 127), who noted the role technology has played in empowering citizen journalists in some first world countries and then argued that a similar trend is permeating into sub-Saharan Africa media scene. This confirms the position that citizen journalists have anchored the online media space. According to most participants, citizen journalists are not posing threats to online media startups but instead offer critical complementary services to online-based media organisations.

*Well, we are open to working with citizen journalists. We ourselves started off as citizen journalists (MO2\_P3).*

The hand-in-glove relationship between online media startups and citizen journalists can be argued to be a mutually beneficial relationship. This is because citizen journalists and young journalists are always looking for platforms to publish their content. On the other hand, online media startups are getting stories that they would probably not cover because of the lack of financial and human resources.

MO1\_P3 greatly values citizen journalists.

*We need them. We cannot be everywhere all the time. We do not have resources for that and also with how fast news stories are breaking. By the time we get to the story, it might be too late if not for the Citizen Journalist so we highly value them (MO1 P3).*

From the above, it could be noted that what most of the participants agree on is the idea that citizen journalism is working in collaboration with independent online media startups by providing content to online media startups who, as a result of limited funds, cannot afford to have a wide network of reporters. Whether formal or informal, this collaboration can be argued to be a mutually beneficial relationship and a sustainability strategy on the part of online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe. This is because by using citizen journalists, they can get content without having to pay as much as they would pay if they had obtained the content themselves.

However, it is interesting to note that 3 out of the 11 participants feel some citizen journalists have mastered the social media algorithm and have amassed a significant number of followers. This has resulted in these citizen journalists establishing themselves as fully-fledged journalists and thus become significant competitors. For instance, MO2\_P2 is convinced that:

*Citizen journalism is an interesting development that's been happening. There are some who are more consistent at it, but there are some that are not. So, I don't think most of them are journalists but they have the passion, the gadgets and they know how to use them. Some of them have even mastered playing*

*around with algorithms. Now, if you know these systems, you can make a lot of money out of it (MO2\_P2).*

In the excerpt above, the participant acknowledged that some citizen journalists have mastered using social media algorithms and now command a considerable following. This has resulted in them pocketing some money, which some online media startups desperately need to survive.

By and large, it seems most independent online media startups prefer working formally or informally with citizen journalists. This strategic move ensures that media startups, most of whom are trying to be sustainable, do not have to spend much money and human resources trying to get stories from across the breadth of Zimbabwe. However, some citizen journalists are threatening media startups as they are now competing for the same advertisers and audiences.

#### **4.4.4 Passion and belief**

When the initial driver for any endeavour is passion, then logical reasoning becomes a secondary factor. Given the challenges Zimbabwe's political, economic and social situation brought about, it could be argued that if people followed logic, then the chances are high that there will not be as many startups today. This theme discusses the role of passion and belief amongst the people involved in online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe, concerning the establishment and growth of the online media industry.

Passion was a common theme that led most participants to either start an online media startup or be involved with one. Of the 11 sampled participants, ten indicated that growing up, they always had an inexplicable desire to create content in different formats. Some participants even linked their passion to their love of telling stories and telling them differently and freely. Interestingly but no surprise, some participants noted that their passion was ignited by the decline in the number of people that traditional media can absorb.



Like most participants, a participant code-named MO3\_P1 traced his involvement with online media back to when the participant was still in high school. Participant MO3\_P1 recalled,

*Originally, I had this idea when I was still in high school of wanting to have a magazine because I grew up consuming a lot of celebrity news, especially People magazine... That is the vision that I had in the early 2000s when I was still in high school. So, upon graduating high school and then coming to college, I already knew what exactly I wanted to do (MO3\_P1).*

Some participants even noted that mainstream media neglected content that they were passionate about. This leads them to form online media startups that focus mainly on this 'neglected' content. MO2\_P1 recalled how in 2008, the economic crises saw newspapers downsizing staff, printing fewer pages and neglecting the arts. This did not sit well with the participant, who is passionate about the arts and was concerned for the artist.

*But even though the country was going through such an economic crisis and even though the arts pages shrunk, artists were still making music, writing books and paintings. So, we started our organisation to tell this part of the story (MO2\_P)1.*

As can be deduced from MO2\_P1 and MO3\_P1, the inherent passion for starting something can go a long way in establishing and running a sustainable organisation. It can therefore be argued that establishing a media startup requires more than just capital. This is because the social-political environment in Zimbabwe is unstable, which has negatively impacted the socio-economic conditions of the lives of people and businesses (Kelly *et al.* 2017: 11).

## **4.5 Technology**

Digital technology, be it the internet or the gadgets used in creating and sharing content online, can impact a media organisation. According to Francis and Willard (2016: 12), new technology has brought tools, and ways to create ease and efficiency in the way

businesses operate, grow, and evaluate their growth and impact. This group of themes examines how the constantly changing technology is positively and negatively impacting media startups. It answers the research question about the impact of constantly changing technologies on independent online media startups.

#### **4.5.1 The attractiveness of technology**

An attractive thing is usually liked by most and is considered to have positive attributes. This theme, tilted 'Attractiveness', is informed by the idea that constantly changing technology has positively impacted the sustainability of media startups.

The idea of technology and how it is advancing and constantly changing came out in the study as both attractive (something that is pleasing) and a burden (a load which usually is heavy). What is surprising is that all the 11 participants narrated both the pros and cons of how technology is used in their organisations. Under this theme, the attractive aspects of technology will be presented first, followed by the burden.

All the 11 participants, one way or the other, indicated that the advent and the constantly changing technology had positively impacted their organisations and work. One of the participants, MO3\_p2, described how they had incorporated technology into the way they gather news. The participant said:

*We used to go directly to people to record interviews, but we moved away from that and started doing everything on skype or zoom (MO3\_p2).*

Another participant, MO1\_P1, also spoke about how, because of the internet ability to centralise the media functions, they can digitally optimise and distribute the same content to different audiences and platforms efficiently.

*It is basically the same information that we are optimising for different platforms and format so as to cater for everyone. Just to disseminate information in an interesting way, we have a news website, a radio project, we also produce visual content (MO1\_P1).*

This means they can attend a press conference and record a video; from the video, they can use the audio for radio or podcast, small videos for social media, and pictures for web articles.

The constant changes in technology have also happened to the equipment used to gather and edit content and news. One of the participants, MO4\_P2, highlighted how they use smartphones to do most of their content creation.

*Most of the content on our YouTube channel now is made using smartphones. We took that route, and it works for us (MO4\_P2).*

This, arguably, could not have happened a decade ago because technology had not advanced to that extent.

#### **4.5.2 Cost implications of technology**

In as much as technological advancements are making some areas of online media startups operations easy, there are also shortcomings. Like a heavy load, these shortcomings can have huge financial implications on online media startups that are struggling to survive because of the ailing economy.

Participants, MO2\_P1 and MO1\_P3, revealed that the more advanced the equipment they use become, the more expensive it becomes.

*It is good to always upgrade your gear (equipment), but it is very expensive to do, so we cannot. We are not making enough money to be buying new gear frequently (MO2\_P1).*

This view is also shared by MO1\_P3, who said:

*Our work is technological-based we use a lot of technology-based gadgets. For example, we buy equipment from outside the country and buying it shipping it and then having to pay duty for it not only takes longer but is very expensive (MO1\_P3).*

The idea of online media startups failing to keep up with technological advancements was confirmed in the literature reviewed for this study by Francis and Willard (2016: 44), who indicated that small organisations sometimes could not chase new technological developments and systems demands because they will be focusing on other essentials. This could mean that, though online media startups understand the importance of advancing and keeping up with technology, they are also not unmindful of the reality that they have limited resources.

Participant MO1\_P3 indicated that they are concerned about how some of their audiences cannot access content online because they do not have compatible devices.

*When phones are updated, some become absolute, and for our audience, it means they won't be able to access the other social media platforms, and then we end up just posting our content online for a limited audience. So, you need to really think about all that. It makes sure you find ways for everyone to have access (MO1\_P3).*

## **4.6 Strategic planning**

The global economic and technological developments are negatively impacting the media industry (Richardson 2017: 5). For instance, there has been a sharp decline in newspaper circulation in the Southern African region over the past decade. Media organisations are trying to find new strategies to sustain their business (Roper, Newman and Schulz 2019a: 10). This thematic group titled, Strategic Planning discusses the strategies that the participants are using to survive. The first theme will focus on social media strategies. The second theme will focus on the revenue-generating strategies and, finally, cost-cutting strategies that the online media startups are using.

#### 4.6.1 Social media strategy dilemma

Effing and Spil (2016: 3) define social media strategy as "a goal-directed planning process for creating user-generated content, driven by a group of Internet applications, to create a unique and valuable competitive position". The initial point of departure for this study is based on the idea that online media startups that followed a strict social media strategy had a better chance of survival. This theme is titled social media strategy dilemma because what came out of the data is a quandary.

Two divergent and almost conflicting discourses emerged when participants discussed social media strategies. 7 out of 11 participants believed that the online media space is highly unpredictable as such. They noted that a 'skeletal' social media strategy is a critical pillar to surviving online.

*We don't have a typical social media strategy like most organisations purport to have yet they do not have the widest reach and audience. We saw it not really necessary to have a strategy because we feel they are not very effective. When we have something to post, we post, we do not wait for 10 AM or a specific time unless it is a specific show. We post anything that adds value to our readers and our brand. So, as far as a social media plan, that is the one we have, we do not have it written but that is it. On social media, people want to see content all the time and when we get content, we post anytime. Even at night because people are always online (MO2\_P1).*

Participant MO3\_P2 also noted that:

*The best strategy now is good content. Content that is appealing to the audience packaged in the most convenient way. For a media organisation to schedule posts and follow a strict strategy might not work because things are always changing. The audience looks for the most recent and trending stories and issues. These are things you cannot predict and be fully prepared for, but you handle them as they come (MO3\_P3).*

Intriguingly, 4 out of 11 participants feel that having and following a social media strategy can be beneficial if viewed from a number's perspective.

*Through a strategy, you can learn through the analytics to kind of guide you as to when to post on social media, what to post on social media and whom you are posting to. So, we rely on Facebook insights, and we rely on Twitter insights. They tell us when and what posts get the reach and what times you get the highest reach (MO2\_P3).*

This study has presupposed that a strategy, even in social media terms, is beyond just a plan, but the critical aspect is implementing the plan. The literature reviewed in this study which supports this assertion, speaks of a strict strategy that needs to be followed biblically for best results. For instance, Dawson (2009) Social Media Strategy Framework uses a checklist of eight key components (Learn, Listen, Engage, Strategy Development, Prioritise Objectives, Develop Capabilities, Establish governance, Measure And Refine) that he proposes organisations must consider and implement when venturing online. However, it seems social media strategies have since evolved, as will be highlighted by the following themes.

#### **4.6.2 Multiple streams of income**

The online media startup industry worldwide is facing unprecedented challenges when monetising the products and services they offer. Among other things, the difficulties in raising funds to sustain the business have been linked to changes happening to the media business model. As such, this theme was informed by the idea that to survive, online media startups should have multiple streams of income embedded in their strategy. The need to have various revenue streams was cited by 10 out of the 11 participants as a critical strategy to ensure the business stays afloat.

MO4\_2, like most participants, shared how their online media startup has diversified to generate revenue.

*There is a lot that the company does in as much as survival is concerned, especially in terms of its workforce and stuff we have, because online itself, especially when you are just getting started. You cannot get revenue from it, but you need to survive as an organisation. So, you need to find other ways and*

*means to adapt. This is why we have established things like operating an online shop – a grocery shop, that's only meant to finance the organisation (MO4\_P2).*

Participants from other organisations also spoke about different strategies related to the media work they are already doing.

*We offer live streaming services. Let us say there's a company that has a function; we go there and live stream for them. We also do social media management for different organisations (MO4\_P1).*

The above substantiates the notion that the media business model has changed and is impacting traditional media houses and online media startups. Media organisations now have to come up with ways other than advertisement revenue to survive. This can include offering digital media-related skills they already have such as photography, live streaming services, video and audio editing and social media management, to other businesses for a fee. Further, others have chosen to create a viable side business like an online grocery shop to rope in the much-needed capital into their online media business. Doing all this is to ensure survival in an uncertain and complex environment such as Zimbabwe.

Interestingly, a few participants spoke of having grants and donors funding them to keep the online media startup afloat as far as generating revenue is concerned.

*We also get grants from Development partners because adverts only cannot sustain an online media startup. It is not a realistic businesses model to use if you want to sustain an online business because corporates do not want to pay. Even Google ads do not really pay because we do not have companies in Zimbabwe that advertise online (MO1\_P1).*

Another participant, MO3\_P3, indicated that even though they are not donor-funded yet, the participant noted that they are open to donors and seriously considering applying for a grant because they are barely managing to sustain the online media startup financially.

*If a donation is to come and the conditions of that donation suit our values, we are going to accept it because it is something that we definitely need (MO3\_P3).*

Surprisingly, some participants found the idea of being funded by a donor or obtaining a grant detrimental to the work that journalists and media organisations are supposed to do.

According to MO2\_P2:

*A lot of things in Zimbabwe are backed by a lot of donor funding. So, the content is skewed towards a certain angle to push a certain agenda. So that is why you find that the government has been coming up with a lot of ways to manage and control the operations that take place in the civic society space because they feel, whilst the civil society is important in keeping government on its toes, it also is working against the government's sovereignty. And the challenge of the donor funding is, you know they tend to change the modelling of, or how you curate your content to suit their agenda (MO2\_P2).*

Similarly, MO4\_P1 noted that their organisation is not in any way donor-funded because of the risk of having their editorial policy compromised,

*We are not donor-funded at all. We do not accept any donor funds. That is not how we roll. It also jeopardises our work (MO4\_P1).*

The views that MO2\_P2 and MO4\_P2 raised of media organisations accepting donor funds or grants compromising editorial independence and or influencing a particular agenda are reasons some participants are still unsure whether or not to venture into the grants and donor territory. The dichotomy that is coming out in the discussion above can be traced back to ethics. Though interesting, it is not within the scope and bounds of this study. Be that as it may, the preceding discussion highlighted that online media startups are not getting enough revenue from digital platforms they are operating from as provided for by the social media strategy as the media business model has drastically changed.

### **4.6.3 Cost-cutting strategies**

Further, it has been established that the media business model has changed, and consequently, both traditional and new media businesses are struggling to raise



enough revenue to sustain the enterprises (Davis 2018). Given this, this theme looks at the strategies that online media startups are using to cut costs. All the 11 participants who took part in this study indicated that another survival strategy they have been using is finding ways to limit their spending.

According to MO3\_P3,

*The online media industry can sometimes require high tech equipment to record, film, edit content, compress and also sharing that particular content online required a lot of data. So, we decided to go the smartphone route. Most of our content now, we create using smartphones. We do not use professional equipment anymore like recorders and professional cameras because they are expenses, we cannot afford (MO3\_P3).*

Another participant, MO2\_P3, also shared similar sentiments.

*Well, the organisation has had to scale down a lot. We are mainly relying on a few individuals that are working and they are doing so on a voluntary basis because we cannot pay them. We've shut down the offices and started working from home. This could also be from not just the cost of doing business, but also with the COVID influx that's been happening (MO2\_P3).*

Further, some participants also noted that they have had to change even the way they produce content to cut costs.

*You don't need to do face-to-face interviews. That's something we abolished a long time ago, just interview people via WhatsApp and you save a lot of money you were going to use to go and meet with people (MO4\_1).*

Most of what was brought to light by the participants corroborate with the literature reviewed in this study. Cooper (2016: 31) noted that business models change because of evolving customer preferences, new technology, and sometimes even change in the rules governing the business's environment. This is a valid account of what has been happening to the media industry in the last decade. The media business model has transformed from a linear to a haphazard model. This has resulted in the dwindling of revenue necessitated by the loss of advertisers who, because of technology and social

media, can now directly advertise and engage with their customers (Satell 2016); Schmidt (2019). This has pushed the media industry to come up with new strategies to create content, new markets, and business models to attain sustainability (Krumsvik *et al.* 2019: 193).

## **4.7 Adaptability**

The last thematic group looks at adaptability, which is the ability of an organisation to transform in response to a stimulus in the operating environment. This ability to adapt can, sometimes, determine which online media startup to survive or crumble. As alluded to in the literature, the business end of most media houses across the globe has been rapidly changing and deteriorating due to many factors (Robinson, Grennan and Schiffrin 2015: 18).

### **4.7.1 Adoption of innovation**

Another theme that came out from the data relates to how an online media organisation adopts and uses innovations in pursuit of sustainability. Nearly all the participants (10 out of 11) referenced innovating and making use of innovations both technological and even financial to survive. Most participants noted that because of the fast pace the online industry is moving at, they tend to be very quick to innovate and hop on to innovations.

*The world is moving at a very fast rate. There are new technologies coming up and once you're left behind you will be lagging and for you to catch up, it will be a challenge. So, it's very crucial for us to adapt to the latest technologies and the latest platforms that are made available so that we learn fast. We adapt to people's needs or what people would have adapted to and we adapt as fast as possible (MO4\_P2).*

Similar sentiments were also noted by MO4\_P1, who said that:

*As an organisation, we are very swift to jump on to new things and ways of doing things. In this industry it's a race, so you either innovate or you die. We are the first to come up with the ePaper. I think we take credit in that, it was an innovation (MO4\_P1).*

Another participant, MO1\_P2, also cited that it is expedient to be the first one to try out new things.

*It is also good to experiment and be quick to experiment because by experimenting you have a good chance of being the first and setting the trend (MO1\_P2).*

Participant MO1\_P1, also echoed the same sentiments.

*It's good to be the first to experiment with new ideas because if you are first, you have the advantage. You can make many mistakes without being judged. That is the major advantage of being a trendsetter. That is why you see now there are a lot of media startups that are coming up but because we established way before they did, we are not even worried, we do not even compete with them. We cannot post anything for two weeks but because we were the first to do this online media startup business, people will not forget us, they actually plead with us to release more content. But that is not the case with people who are following a trend that was set by others. They are always trying to prove a point that they are better and end up doing unnecessary and expensive things just to get attention (MO1\_P1).*

MO1\_P3 raised a critical point noting that being the first to innovate also places an organisation at a vantage position with clients.

*It's advantageous to be the first because then the audience swarms to you and the corporates too would be keen to advertise with you. They will not come to you because you have the business. You have to be the best in the business. You cannot slack (MO1\_P3).*

What most of the participants alluded to was confirmed in the literature. Rogers (1995: 11) meta-theory, individual innovativeness theory, under the Diffusion of Innovations

theory, states that some individuals are more innovative than others, resulting in them adopting an innovation earlier or faster than most of their counterparts. Most participants indicated that they are innovating and adapting to innovations as soon as they are introduced, and it has been yielding positive results for them.

Rogers' theory put forward five adopter stages which are: (1) innovators, (2) early adopters, (3) early majority, (4) late majority, and (5) laggards and argues that those that innovate and adapt to innovations early stand a better chance of success (Kaminski 2011: 3; Martins 2018: 364). These participants' narratives about how they are constantly focusing on innovation and adopting innovations place them in the innovators and early adopters categories. According to Rogers (2010: 8), "Innovators are people who want to be the first to try the innovation. They are venturesome and interested in new ideas. These people are very willing to take risks and are often the first to develop new ideas. Early Adopters are people who represent opinion leaders. They enjoy leadership roles and embrace change opportunities. They are already aware of the need to change and so are very comfortable adopting new ideas".

As predicted by Rogers' theory, a few participants (2 out of 11) indicated that they are not always keen on jumping to innovations unless they are sure that it works.

*We tend to be early adopters on some innovations, but our key aspect is whether it works for our right type of market (MO3\_P2).*

Likewise, another participant, MO3\_P1, also alluded to how cautious they are in adopting innovations.

*We have to also maintain a certain approach that does not change unless it enhances or makes our work. We also consult and research before committing to new innovations (MO3\_P1).*

Given the above, it can be noted that this study found out that some participants do not prioritise innovations or adopt innovations early. This assertion holds true to the literature. It seems these participants fall within the early majority or even the late majority category. According to Rogers (2010: 8), Early Majority "are rarely leaders, but they adopt new ideas before the average person. They typically need to see evidence that the innovation works before they are willing to adopt it.

Captivatingly, the data from the study did not have any characteristics of the last two stages of Rogers's continuum under the Individual Innovative theory: Late Majority and Laggards. According to Rogers (2010: 8) Late Majority are usually people who are "sceptical of change and will only adopt an innovation after the majority has tried it, while Laggards, on the other, hand are bound by tradition and very conservative. They are very sceptical of change and are the most challenging group to bring on board.

This is highly likely necessitated by the general and shared understanding by the participants of the need to innovate and adapt innovations as fast as possible. Another possibility might be linked to the fact that sometimes, the need to innovate and adopt innovations is dictated by the environment. Given the Zimbabwean economic, political and social environment that these startups exist in, many things are beyond the control of many. Therefore, it could be noted that innovating and adapting innovations are the best ways to survive and be sustainable.

#### **4.8 Discussion of the findings**

The aim of the study was to investigate the survival strategies that online media startups are using in pursuit of sustainability. This section focuses on a discussion of the research findings in relation to the focal objectives that are outlined below:

- I. To understand the impact of constantly changing technologies on independent online media startups.
- II. To find out the influence of the socio-economic and political conditions in Zimbabwe on the establishment and sustainable growth of independent online media startups.
- III. To examine the use of social media strategies by online media startups to attain sustainability.
- IV. To explore the importance of individual innovativeness on online media startups in relation to sustainability.

In this study, online media startups have been found to be impacted by the tense and polarised political situation in Zimbabwe, the underperforming economy and the declining social conditions.

Politically, the research confirmed that the government seems to feel threatened by online media because, for now, it has very little control over most online publishers. The unwillingness of the state to open up the media space is arguably intentional, maybe because the status quo, to a larger, directly benefits the incumbent regime as it gives them the power to control the narrative.

Paradoxically, this study also confirmed that the state's desire to monopolise and control the media in the country, as noted by Chari (2009: 381) and Mpofu (2016: 3) has inadvertently created a conducive environment for online media to be established and to thrive. In other words, it could be argued that if it was not for the monopolisation and control of the traditional media by the state, online media in Zimbabwe would most likely be not as popular as it is today. The need for a variety of content and different views, which the state-controlled media has failed to provide, created a void that online startups are now filling.

However, there seems to be a quagmire within the online media fraternity. Some participants who took part in this study noted that even though they are still enjoying freedom from being controlled, they are concerned about what might happen to their organisations if the Cyber Bill is passed in its current form. Given the history of the government's desire to control the media and how far they might go to pass and implement repressive policies, these shared concerns are justified. The problem with this cyber bill is that it can end this growing online community of online media startups. On the other hand, the advantage is that most of the independent online media players are aware of the government intentions to control and even eliminate them. Therefore, there is a need for online media startups to have an alternative plan should the bill be signed into law.

In the same vein, this study also revealed that the economy is also a significant variable impacting online media startups. The most exciting finding around the economy was that, due to the change in the media business model, many media players face challenges keeping their publications afloat. Participants noted that the revenue they generate from platforms like Google, YouTube, and Facebook is not enough to make a difference in their baseline. This is coupled with the fact that in Zimbabwe, the economy has, for over two decades, been on a downward spiral. One participant even spoke about how rare it is to find local companies advertising with Google or Facebook

because they cannot afford it. Further, some of them cannot advertise with some online media startups for fear of being victimised by the state, making it even more difficult for online media startups to stay afloat and become sustainable.

In addition, another important finding was that online media startups are affected by the social conditions in Zimbabwe. With the economy underperforming and a high unemployment rate, many people in Zimbabwe are struggling to afford necessities. It was revealed also that data bundles are regarded by most as a luxury. This, coupled with long power cuts, negatively impacts the business, making it difficult for online media startups to thrive because their primary target market cannot access content online. This leaves online media startups with a limited audience and a limited bottom line. Thus, there is a need to find ways to cater to the data strapped potential audiences in Zimbabwe or even tap into international markets.

Moving on, the results of this study indicate that the constant changes in technology are, on the one hand, advantageous and, on the other, disadvantageous to online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe. This finding corroborates the ideas of Kiron *et al.* (2012), who argued that “as the internet audience increases so does the technology transform and improve. Sometimes, technology tend to evolve at alarming rates resulting in the widening of the technological gap. The consumer behaviours when it comes to technology are ever-changing, forcing organisations to continuously innovate and adopt new technologies if they are to remain competitive”. However, as the study has revealed, not all online media startups have the financial muscle or human resources to keep up with the ever-changing technology. This resonates with Akinbobola (2015: 61), who noted that most small organisations could not keep up with the changing trends of technology and infrastructure compatible with new technologies because of restrained budgets and sometimes limited human resources.

The study also revealed a desire amongst participants to move in synch with technological changes. However, the harsh economic and political reality from the environment they are operating in forces them to prioritise the basics and technological advancements are not always on top of that priority list. This position is in harmony with that held by Francis and Willard (2016: 44), who state that small organisations

sometimes cannot chase new technological developments and systems demands because they will be focusing on other essentials. These essentials include salaries, rentals, data and even transport costs.

On the other hand, the study also revealed that online media startups have constantly changing technologies to thank for their existence. According to Statista (2021), around 3.97 billion people were actively using the internet as of December 2020: around 56 per cent of the global population. Since online media startups are based on the internet, these internet users, which are still on the rise, could indicate that the future is digital and possibly guaranteed existence, growth, and sustainability.

In relation to social media strategies, this study, contrary to antecedent expectations, did not find a significant and constant implementation of a pre-planned social media strategy. The study citing the works of (Dawson 2009 ; Culnan, McHugh and Zubillaga 2010; Effing 2013) had propounded and predicted that by following a pre-planned social media strategy, online media stood a better chance of increasing reach and followers. However, most participants noted that social media has evolved and a lot, and to keep up, they have to evolve with it. The study revealed that a pre-planned strategy is now difficult to put into practice as the dynamics of social media now require a different approach.

This study exposed the present weakness of the social media strategies proposed by Dawson (2009 ); Culnan, McHugh and Zubillaga (2010); Effing (2013). Their proposed strategies were designed for an environment that existed nearly a decade ago. A few people then were not on social media, and a lot has changed since then. Harrison and Barthel (2009) and Kiron *et al.* (2012) predicted some of these changes and developments, noting that innovation around the internet is not inert. Instead, it is ever-improving and evolving at alarming rates. When it comes to technology, consumer behaviours are ever-changing, forcing organisations to continuously innovate and adopt new technologies to remain competitive.

For this study, this could mean that the survival of independent online media startups is to some extent dependant on their ability to embrace the ever-changing technologies and make them an integral part of their daily activities. The data show that most participants have no strict strategies they follow, as suggested by some proponents of



various social media strategies discussed in this study. Instead, they follow the trends and focus more on the content that pushes traffic to their social media pages.

Another critical revelation that came out of the data is that media startups are adjusting their social media strategy in response to the changing media business environment. In the literature discussed in this study, this idea was confirmed in a report by Roper, Newman and Schulz (2019b: 10), which highlighted that in Southern Africa, over the past decade, there has been a sharp decline in newspaper circulation due to the decline and also paradigm shift in the economy. They argued that the linear business media model is no longer applicable because advertisers and content creators now have access to audiences without going via the media. Given this, the online media startups that took part in this study have, to some extent, adjusted their social media strategies to enable them to generate revenue from their online presence. In addition, the data brought to light the notion that online media startups have also considered the costs that come with creating content and how their audiences can access that content, given the high cost of data and the high cost of living in Zimbabwe. Taking this into account, some online media startups have thus formulated cost-cutting measures in their strategies to cushion them and their audiences.

The final objective of this study was to explore the importance of individual innovativeness on online media startups. The theory argues that individuals who are predisposed to being innovative will adopt an innovation earlier than those who are less predisposed and are highly likely to succeed as compared to the Laggards who resist adopting an innovation until relatively late in the diffusion process, if ever (Surry and Farquhar 1997: 4). The study results confirmed that innovation and early adaption have a bearing on the sustainability of online media startups. Most participants stated that they are constantly formulating new ways to deliver the best content to their stakeholders and adapt and incorporate innovations into their activities to keep up with the changing times and their audience demands. This is imperative because failure to innovate and adapt to innovations will likely result in losing audience and advertisers to the ever-growing pool of online media startups.

Interestingly, the data from the study did not have any characteristics of the last two stages of Rogers's continuum under the Individual Innovative theory: Late Majority and Laggards. According to Rogers (2010: 8), Late Majority are usually people who are

“sceptical of change and will only adopt an innovation after the majority has tried it, while Laggards, on the other hand, are bound by tradition and very conservative. They are very sceptical of change and are the most challenging group to bring on board. This is highly likely necessitated by the general and shared understanding by the participants of the importance and advantages of innovating and adapting to innovations swiftly. Another possibility might be linked to the fact that sometimes, the need to innovate and to adopt innovations is dictated by the environment they exist in. For instance, in Zimbabwe, the economic, political and social environment that these startups exist in, many things are beyond the control of many organisations and individuals alike. As such, it could be argued that innovating and adapting innovations are some of the best ways for online media startups to survive and be sustainable.

On the other hand, the study also revealed that sometimes, online media startups are keen and willing to innovate and adapt to innovations. However, the lack of funds usually restricts them. This is due to the limited revenue the online media startups generate due to an ailing economy and harsh political conditions in the country. As such, most of the revenue online media startups get is prioritised for critical running costs like salaries, rentals and data. This leaves some media startups torn between innovation and survival, between buying new gadgets to help them stream content online and paying rentals – a challenging position.

## **4.9 Conclusion**

This chapter presented and analysed the data gathered for this study. It focused on bringing out the sustainability strategies being employed by online media startups under study. A thematic analysis was used to group the data into four broad overarching thematic groups in line with the research questions. The thematic groups and the subsequent themes helped answer the main research question. The following chapter (chapter 5) will present the summary and recommendations of the study.

# **CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

## **5.1 Introduction**

The preceding chapter analysed and discussed collected data. This chapter concludes the study by discussing the contributions of each chapter in addressing the research questions. Based on the study results, recommendations will be given to other stakeholders, including policymakers and media advocacy organisations. The chapter will also discuss suggestions for future research.

## **5.2 Overview of the study**

The first chapter of the study discussed the backdrop of the study. The research problem was derived from studies that indicated an increase in the number of independent online media startups due to many factors, including monopolisation of traditional media by the state, advances in information and communication technology, changes in consumer behaviours and media business models. However, these mushrooming online media startups face a challenge in finding ways to remain sustainable in a politically, socially, and economically hostile environment. The chapter introduced four pillars (objectives) that form the foundation of the study, namely, changing technology, socio-economic and political conditions, media strategy implementation and innovation adaptation.

Chapter 2 reviewed the existing literature and then exposed gaps that this study then attempted to fill. The chapter began by giving a brief overview of the media landscape in Zimbabwe. The literature assessed the socio-economic and political conditions in Zimbabwe. It laid out a nexus of how a polarised society and an ailing economy has created conducive conditions for the sprouting of online media startups. The research argued that politically, the situation in Zimbabwe has resulted in most traditional media outlets being heavily controlled and monopolised by the state leaving minimal options to independent and critical voices resulting in them opting to occupy the online space.

In addition, a discussion on the impact of constantly changing technology on independent online media startups was also pursued in Chapter 2. The discussion highlighted how technological advancements have negative connotations like costs that come with buying compatible gadgets and applications and positive connotations like access to new and even international markets.

The literature review, basing on the propositions by scholars like Dawson (2009 ); Culnan, McHugh and Zubillaga (2010); Werder, Helms and Jansen (2014), argued that; to increase the chances of becoming sustainable, online media starts-ups ought to have clear strategies that inform how they manage social media.

The final part of chapter 2 addressed the role of innovation in the attainment of sustainability. The Individual innovativeness theory; a meta-theory found under the Diffusion of Innovations theory, was used as a theoretical lens. The Individual Innovative theory argues that some individuals are more innovative than others, resulting in adopting an innovation earlier or faster than most of their counterparts (Rogers 1995: 11). Based on this, the researcher argued that because of the hostile environment in which online media startups are operating in Zimbabwe, the ability for an organisation to innovate or, at least, adapt to innovations fast is essential for sustainability.

Chapter three outlined the interpretivist paradigm that forms the basis of the research. It also highlighted the relativist nature of the research and how that influenced the use of a subjectivist epistemology, a relativist ontology, a naturalist methodology and a balanced qualitative axiology. Further, the chapter also justified the choice and use of a case study method, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the ethical considerations applied in this study.

In Chapter Four, the research findings were interpreted using Braun and Clark's thematic analysis. A total of 10 themes were identified and grouped into four thematic groups. The presentation and analysis of the data were followed by a critical discussion of the findings, which are summarised below.

### **5.3 Summary of findings**

The first chapter of the study highlighted the problem and then raised pertinent questions aimed at investigating the sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe. This subsection revisits the research questions and links them to the findings that emanated from the analysed data. The most significant findings to emerge from this study were grouped into four thematic groups in relation to the research questions.

#### **How are the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions in Zimbabwe impacting the establishment and sustainable growth of independent online media startups?**

The answers to this question can be found throughout the entire study but with a particular interest in chapter 4. This study has shown that there are limited barriers to entry into the Zimbabwean online media startup space. The major challenge, though, is that of limited resources for the online startup to become sustainable.

In addition, the issue of policy emerged to be a factor impacting the establishment and growth of independent online media startups. It was revealed that to become sustainable, online media organisations have to find ways around the harsh media environment in which they operate. Some online media organisations have resorted to cutting down on rentals, day to day running costs and using the cheapest newsgathering or content creation gadgets like smartphones. The study also found that the decision by some media organisations only to publish content online can be argued to be a strategy for survival in response to the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions in Zimbabwe. This is possible because by only existing in digital format, online media startups can bypass strict control and regulation imposed on traditional mainstream media by the state.

It was also shown that a careful selection and use of human resources could assist online media startups in navigating the socio-economic and political environment in Zimbabwe. Most of the online media startups that took part in the study are using this abundance of human resources to their advantage in that they can get stories at

relatively competitive prices or sometimes free. Further, there are also citizen journalists who sometimes supply online media startups with content. This possibility of accessing and making use of cheap content could be argued to be a sustainability strategy. This is because it makes it possible for the online media startups to have a wider reach while not having to meet the cost they would incur if they were sending a team to gather stories from across Zimbabwe.

One of the most surprising findings to emanate from this study is that of passion and belief. It seems there is an immeasurable desire amongst the participants to tell stories independently and differently. This character trait can be said to be a strategy in itself in that given the harsh conditions online media in Zimbabwe subsist in, to survive, one should be motivated beyond immediate results and immediate returns. Most media startups started with limited funds or no funds, but because the founders and their team had a passion, they did not give up and kept telling their stories and creating content until their numbers grew.

### **What are the impacts of constantly changing technologies on independent online media startups?**

This question was mostly answered within the second thematic pillar which looked at the impact of constantly changing technology on online media startups. The results showed that technology impacts online media positively and negatively. The study found that most media startups are keen to move along with technology, making their work much more manageable. In addition, the study revealed that online media startups that are constantly evolving with technology are better positioned to attract advertisers and grow and retain audiences. However, there are some challenges that online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe, face as a result of constantly changing technology. The most prominent one is linked to the economy, with most startups have limited funds for constant technological upgrades or upskill. In addition, some participants shared concern that they might lose some of their audiences if they move too fast technologically as some might not have compatible gadgets.

## **How are online media startups using social media strategies in their quest for sustainability?**

In a quest to investigate the sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Zimbabwe, the third thematic group zoomed in on the use of social media strategies by online media startups. It brought to light the idea that organisations must have a skeletal social media strategy that can change in response to the constantly changing consumer needs.

Other themes that came under this thematic group include revenue-generating strategies and cost-cutting strategies. To increase the chances of becoming sustainable, the study showed that online media startups should develop and implement creative revenue-generating strategies. Some of the revenue-generating strategies that the participants alluded to include offering journalistic skills such as video filming and editing, professional photography services, online grocery shops, social media management and even engagement with donors. The funds coming in from such ventures could complement the little revenue coming in from the dwindling advertisers.

## **What is the role of individual innovativeness in the pursuit of sustainability by online media startups?**

The last research question looked at the significance of individual innovativeness in relation to sustainability. It brought to light the idea that the rate at which media organisations adapt to innovations could be a key determinant factor on whether the online media startups become sustainable or otherwise. The study also reinforced a meta-theory embedded within Rogers (1995) Diffusion of Innovations theory. The results show that most online media startups aspire to adapt to innovations early because experience has taught them that being first can go a long way in the race for survival. However, some online media startups, because of inadequate resources and fear of failing, prefer being early majorities – meaning they are deliberate in adopting innovations.

## **5.4 Contributions of the study**

This study set out to investigate the sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe. Subsequently, the study has extended our knowledge in various ways. This section highlights such contributions of this study.

The research has gone some way towards augmenting our understanding of independent online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe. There is an increase in the number of online media platforms not only in Zimbabwe but also in Africa, yet there has been limited research to explain and understand this phenomenon. Further, the limited research related to online media startups, especially in Zimbabwe, has not included the sustainability element to which this study makes several noteworthy contributions.

The research's empirical findings provide a new understanding of the use of social media strategies by online media startups. The study, informed by the works of scholars like (Dawson 2009 ; Culnan, McHugh and Zubillaga 2010; Werder 2013), initially argued that organisations with clear and carefully set out social media strategies have better chances at succeeding online. However, the findings of the study pointed to a strategy almost opposed to this. The study's findings suggest that the best strategy is not having a pre-planned strategy but one that can adapt to the ever-changing social media environment.

## **5.5 Recommendations for future practice**

The study results and critical findings suggest considerable room for growth and sustainability of online media startups in Harare and worldwide. However, several hurdles inhibit online media startups from reaching their full potential, and these include a hostile political and socio-economic environment. This section will outline the recommendations that emanated from the findings.

The recommendations targeted three distinct groups:

- Media Professionals both already operating online and those aspiring to join the online space



- Media Advocacy Organisations
- Government and policymakers

### **5.5.1 Recommendations for media professionals**

Traditional media dominate the media in Zimbabwe, but the world is fast changing to digital. Most traditional media have not invested a lot in online media. This is a gap that online media should take advantage of and establish reputable brands. Some online media startups are taking advantage of this already, and there is still an opportunity for new players.

Another reason for this recommendation is that even platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram adjust according to trends. Facebook, for instance, has a new policy and an algorithm that suppresses content and page activities unless payment is made directly to the platform. This started recently, and who knows, stricter policies might even be implemented shortly. As such, the time for online media players to establish and grow their audiences is now.

This study also highlighted that for online media startups to grow and become sustainable, they should have multiple revenue streams. Revenue generated from advertisements has significantly dropped because the media no longer is the first stop for most advertisers. Therefore, media personnel should consider commercialising media services like photography, videography, web and social media management, as well as proofreading.

In addition, other online media startups are using donor funds to supplement their revenue. There might be ethical considerations to be taken into account as donors might influence the editorial policy of recipient organisations. Be that as it may, for sustainability, donor funds are playing a crucial role in ensuring the survival of some online media organisations.

This study also revealed that most online media startups have a small team, yet they can still achieve more. This is possible because they are multi-skilled – they can write, copy, take and edit pictures and videos and manage social media. This can be critical for survival and sustainability, considering the media industry is already facing a hard

time generating revenue and thus cannot hire many people. As such, it is recommended that journalists learn new skills and also upskill themselves to be all-rounders.

In the study, participants spoke about the high prices of data. A logical recommendation is that online media startups consider their audiences, most of whom live below the poverty line, when creating their digital content. Online media startups should consider making their content accessible cheaply by compressing or even using WhatsApp to share content.

Online media practitioners ought to motivate the establishment of an independent regulatory body that registers and keeps track of the online media industry. This will regulate the online space and minimise and discredit fake news peddlers, misinformation and online disinformation sources, constantly putting the online media startup industry into disrepute.

### **5.5.2 Recommendations for media advocacy organisations**

The study revealed that online media startups are not taken seriously by most stakeholders. It seems there is very little attention given to them, even in academic spaces. The researcher had a hard time getting statistics specific to online media startups. It is recommended that media advocacy organisations invest more resources in curating information relating to online media startups. They are doing a momentous service to the media industry especially considering that traditional media is tightly controlled and regulated by the state. Thus, there is a need for alternative voices.

More broadly, media advocacy organisations should continue pushing for favourable media policies and regulations. Some participants expressed uncertainty, fearing that the government might crack down on them and develop legislation like the proposed cyber bill, which might render the online media industry illegal. Given this, media advocacy organisations should continue pushing back and advocating for free media.

Media advocacy organisations should also consider equipping media practitioners with digital skills, digital laws, and the business side of managing media. The media

business model is changing, thus allowing people with limited business knowledge to start and own a media organisation. Having basic business knowledge will increase the chances of success and sustainability within this sector.

### **5.5.3 Recommendations for government and policymakers**

The government and various policymakers should consider creating a conducive environment that promotes the growth of online media startups. This is necessary because Online media has absorbed many media practitioners, and since the government is committed to reducing the unemployment rate; it should promote and create a favourable environment for this sector to grow.

The government and policymakers should consider passing responsible laws that genuinely protect the citizens and the media industry. That the government wants to regulate the sector cannot be entirely dismissed; however, the legislation, especially the "Cyber bill", should deal with fake news, misinformation and disinformation. In addition, in formulating this legislation, the government should engage and consult media advocacy organisations and media practitioners to ensure that their interests are also protected and considered.

The government should also consider creating a generally conducive business environment. The more business opportunities there are in a system, the more chances there are for online media to succeed.

## **5.6 Suggestions for future research**

This study successfully investigated the sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe. However, some areas emanating from the research's limitations might be of interest for future studies.

The research study has only investigated the sustainability strategies of four independent online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe. There is a possibility that if the same study is done in other cities or even on different online media startups, new

information may be revealed. Taking this into account, it is therefore, recommended that for future research, investigations should be carried out on different online media startups and or in different cities.

The second limitation is also linked to geographical location. This dissertation attempts to investigate the sustainability strategies of independent online media startups in Harare, Zimbabwe. The strategies emanating from the case studies herein are, to some extent, tailor-made to suit the country's unique socio-economic and political environment. The strategies might not be transferable to online media organisations operating in developing countries. As a result, it is recommended that it is interesting to expand the scope of the study to include online media startups from different countries for future studies. This could expand our knowledge about online media startups operating from and in a socio-economic and political environment from that of Zimbabwe.

Further research could be a comparative study of online media startups in developing countries and developed countries. This may provide the former with ideas, lessons, and possible solutions to some problems they are likely to experience as they expand.

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# APPENDIX

## Appendix A: Letter of Permission



### LETTER OF PERMISSION

Faculty of Arts and Design

Department of Media Language and Communication

Date:

Online Media Startup Founder/Manager

Dear Sir/ Madam

#### **Request for permission to conduct research at your media organisation**

My name is Tony Manyangadze, a Masters student at the Durban University of Technology. The research I wish to conduct for my Masters dissertation involves an investigation into the innovative strategies of independent online media start-ups in Harare, Zimbabwe.

I am hereby seeking your consent to give me permission to use your organisation as a case study and interview people at your organisation.

I have provided you with a copy of my proposal which includes copies of the data collection tools and consent and/ or assent forms to be used in the research process, as well as a copy of the approval letter which I received from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC).



If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me on my cell number +27737316972 and on my email [tonytendai@yahoo.com](mailto:tonytendai@yahoo.com) Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Yours sincerely

Tony Tendai Manyangadze

Durban University of Technology

## Appendix B: Letter of Information



### LETTER OF INFORMATION

Dear Participant,

Thank you for voluntarily agreeing to participate in this study.

**Title of the Research Study:**

An investigation into the sustainability strategies of independent online media start-ups in Harare, Zimbabwe.

**Principal researcher:** Tony Manyangadze

**Co-Investigator/s/supervisor/s:**

Felix Awung (PhD) and Ayesha Mall (MA)

**Brief Introduction and Purpose of the Study:**

This interview aims to collect information which may inform me about your experiences in creating and implementing sustainable strategies by an online media start-up in Zimbabwe. This study aims to investigate the survival strategies that online media start-ups based in Harare, Zimbabwe are using in pursuit of sustainability.

**Outline of the Procedures:**

You are kindly requested to participate in an interview that will last between 45 minutes to an hour. The researcher will make an appointment to meet with you preferably at your offices or any other suitable venue at a time that suits you. A week before the proposed day of the meeting, the researcher will contact you to confirm. The researcher will also contact you a day before the proposed meeting just to remind you.

Please note that the interviews have to be recorded in a digital format by either a voice recorder or a smartphone for transcription and data analysis purposes, and by signing the consent form below you are willing and agreeing to be recorded. Recordings will be stored for five years at the Durban University of Technology in a safe facility of the Media, Language and Communication Department, thereafter the data will be destroyed.

Validation (member checks) will be done upon completion of data analysis to help improve accuracy and to ensure that your views were captured accurately.

**Risks or Discomforts to the Participant:**

There are no risks whatsoever involved in this study.

**Benefits:**

The information collected will be used to understand the survival strategies of online media start-ups in Harare Zimbabwe and make recommendations around innovation and comprehensive strategies that can help media start-ups to be sustainable in this technological era.

**Reason/s why the Participant May Be Withdrawn from the Study:**

The protection of human rights is momentous, as such, the research is be guided by the principles of respect for people, beneficence, and justice. You have the right to be informed about the study, the right to freely decide whether to participate in the study and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

**Remuneration:**

You will receive NO remuneration for participating in this study.

**Costs of the Study:**

None.

**Confidentiality:**

Data collected will remain confidential and will only be shared with myself and my supervisor until the research is published. You or your organisation will not be identified or named. Instead, codes will be used instead of your names.

**Research-related Injury:**

None

**Persons to Contact in the Event of Any Problems or Queries:**

Please contact researcher, Tony Manyangadze on [21143586@dut4life.ac.za](mailto:21143586@dut4life.ac.za) or my supervisor Dr F. Awung on email: [felixa@dut.ac.za](mailto:felixa@dut.ac.za) tel: +27 31 373 6738, co-supervisor Ms B.A. Mall on email [ayesham@dut.ac.za](mailto:ayesham@dut.ac.za) tel: +27 31 373 6614 or the Institutional Research Ethics Administrator on +27 313732374. Complaints can be reported to the DVC: Research, Innovation and Engagement Prof S Moyo on 031 373 2577 or [moyos@dut.ac.za](mailto:moyos@dut.ac.za).

## Appendix C: Letter of Consent



### LETTER OF CONSENT

#### Statement of Agreement to Participate in the Research Study:

- I hereby confirm that I have been informed by the researcher, Tony Manyangadze, about the nature, conduct, benefits and risks of this study - Research Ethics Clearance Number: IREC 014/20,
- I have also received, read and understood the above written information regarding the study.
- I am aware that the results of the study, including personal details regarding my sex, age, date of birth, initials and diagnosis will be anonymously processed into a study report.
- In view of the requirements of research, I agree that the data collected during this study can be processed in a computerised system by the researcher.
- I may, at any stage, without prejudice, withdraw my consent and participation in the study.
- I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and (of my own free will) declare myself prepared to participate in the study.
- I understand that significant new findings developed during the course of this research which may relate to my participation will be made available to me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Full Name of Participant.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Time

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature/Right Thumbprint

I, \_\_\_\_\_ herewith confirm that the above participant has been fully informed about the nature, conduct and risks of the above study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Full Name of Researcher**                      \_\_\_\_\_ **Date**                      \_\_\_\_\_ **Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Full Name of Witness (If applicable)**    \_\_\_\_\_ **Date**                      \_\_\_\_\_ **Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Full Name of Legal Guardian (If applicable)** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date**                      \_\_\_\_\_ **Signature**

## Annexure D: Interview Schedule



### INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

An investigation into the sustainable strategies of independent online media start-ups in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Date:

Time:

Code name of organisation:

Code name of participant:

Introduce myself and the purpose of the interview. Thank participants for availing themselves. Outline the ethical considerations and ask for permission to tape record the session. State that the tapes will only be listened to by the researcher (myself) and that the tapes will be stored in a secure place and will be destroyed after 5 years.

1. What influenced or what is influencing the establishment and the growth of this media start-up?
2. What are the challenges you are facing as someone who is involved in online media start-ups in Zimbabwe?
3. What are the advantages of being an independent online media start-up operating in Zimbabwe?
4. How are the prevailing socio-economic conditions impacting your organisation?
5. As an online-based media start-up, how have internet partial and total shutdowns impacted on your organisations?

6. As an internet-based organisation, describe how are internet cost impacting on your organisation both for you and your stakeholders?
7. With the prevailing economic hardship, what are some of the cost-cutting measures that you have taken and how has it impacted the business?
8. How are you navigating around this (what innovative measures have you taken to cushion both you and your stakeholders?)
9. What technological innovations have you come up with or what innovations have you adopted to remain relevant?
10. How swift are you in adopting innovations?
11. How advantageous is it to innovate or adopt innovations early for an online media start-up in Zimbabwe?
12. Do you have a social media strategy?
13. What do you consider before making use of various social media applications?
14. Is it important to have a social media strategy?
15. Do you have any other revenue stream apart from producing online media content?
16. Are you donor-funded and if yes, how is that impacting on your work?
17. Citizen journalism is on the rise, are you utilising them or are they a competition?

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY. YOUR CONTRIBUTION IS GREATLY APPRECIATED**