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Accessing and navigating reliable health-related information for African SMEs during the pandemic

Insights from an empirical study in 5 African countries

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic posed formidable challenges for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) globally, with distinct impacts on those in Africa. This empirical study, conducted across five African countries, delves into the critical question of how African SMEs perceived, navigated, and implemented health-related information amidst the complexities of the pandemic. The study reveals multifaceted challenges faced by SMEs, emphasizing the importance of reliable information for their growth and resilience. Drawing from a diverse set of survey respondents, the research explores SMEs' responses to public measures, the clarity of messages, and the implications for public policy. Findings indicate that while technology plays a crucial role, challenges persist in accessing business information. The study also evaluates SMEs' perceptions of government communication, their responses to pandemic measures, and their trust in information sources. The nuanced insights contribute to discussions on effective governance, communication strategies, and technology use, providing valuable considerations for supporting SMEs in navigating crises. Despite limitations stemming from aggregated responses across diverse regions, this study offers key empirical evidence specific to COVID-19, shedding light on the intricate challenges faced by African SMEs and underscoring the need for targeted interventions to enhance their resilience.

Keywords: Information Governance, Access to Information, Covid-19 pandemic, Health-Information Reliability, African SMEs.

Accessing and Navigating Reliable Health - Related Information for African SMEs during the pandemic Insights from an empirical study in 5 African countries

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges to the global economy, with significant implications for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) worldwide, including those in Africa. SMEs have faced a myriad of challenges during this crisis, including reduced sales turnover, increased bankruptcy rates, and substantial revenue declines (Sudarmiatin et al., 2023; Van Tien, 2022). Statistical analyses have demonstrated the marked difference in SME performance before and during the pandemic (Deyshappriya & Padmakanthi, 2022).

Amidst these challenges, the role of innovation practices and external support, particularly through information technology and infrastructure, has become increasingly crucial in assisting SMEs to navigate the complexities of the COVID-19 crisis (Adam & Alarifi, 2021). Access to reliable information emerges as paramount for the sustainability and resilience of African SMEs. However, the pandemic has exacerbated the lack of reliable information, underscoring the need for support in managing economic disruptions (Fubah & Moos, 2022).

This paper addresses the fundamental question of how African SMEs have perceived, navigated, and implemented health-related information amidst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we explore their responses to public health measures and restrictions, as well as the clarity of public health messages and dashboards. In doing so, we aim to fill a critical gap in the literature by examining the implications of these dynamics for public policy and future actions.

The subsequent sections will review existing literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs in Africa and their interactions with COVID-19-related information. We follow this by a theoretical framing anchored in TMIM (Theory of Motivated Information Management) (Afifi and Weiner's, 2004). Then we explicit the research methodology, followed by the empirical study results and interpretation. We conclude with a discussion highlighting main research contributions and limitations.

2. Literature Review

SMEs encounter challenges in accessing reliable information globally, as evidenced by studies in Spain and the UK (Pedauga et al., 2022; Pavic et al., 2007). Emphasizing the vital role of SMEs in economies, these studies stress the need for reliable information to spur growth and resilience. In Africa, the lack of dependable information impedes access to finance, hinders economic navigation, and impacts competitiveness. The study of Bunyasi et al. (2014) for instance show the influence of business information on SME growth in Kenya.

2.1 SMEs and the COVID-19 pandemic

Louis-Jean et al. (2020) shed light on the detrimental impact of limited access to quality healthcare and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially affecting communities with unreliable health information, like African American communities.

2.2 African SMEs

Fubah & Moos (2022) explored challenges and coping mechanisms for SMEs in the South African entrepreneurial ecosystem during the pandemic, revealing a research gap in addressing COVID-19 challenges in the broader African entrepreneurial ecosystem. Acquaaach et al. (2021) contributed a managerial perspective on the pandemic's implications for African SMEs.

2.3 eHealth and Healthcare information

The internet is crucial for healthcare information dissemination, yet challenges persist due to the complexity of the topics and the numerous unfamiliar sources (Chi et al., 2020). This complexity is compounded in the context of COVID-19, with challenges including novelty, lack of expertise, delayed misinformation removal, and algorithmic bias favoring sensationalist content (Fan et al., 2020; Gisoni et al., 2022; Morrow et al., 2022). Seytre (2020) highlighted erroneous COVID-19 communication messages in Africa, emphasizing the importance of adherence to prevention recommendations and insights into health communication challenges during the pandemic.

While valuable insights exist on SME challenges during the pandemic, there's a gap in research relating to the African SMEs' specific need for reliable information, particularly regarding COVID-19 (Kuckertz and Brändle, 2021). Limited research has explored how African SMEs access health-related information during the pandemic, and empirical evidence on their specific health information needs is lacking. Regional studies can offer nuanced insights into how SMEs in different African contexts navigate health information disparities, crucial for informing policy recommendations to improve information dissemination and support SMEs in crises. Addressing these gaps through empirical studies can enhance SME resilience in navigating health crises effectively.

3. Theoretical Framing

Drawing on Afifi and Weiner's (2004) Theory of Motivated Information Management (TMIM), which addresses the relationship between uncertainty and the information seeking process, this study seeks to theoretically frame the management of health-related information seeking by African SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theory proposes a three-phase process of information management, highlighting the role of efficacy and the interactive nature of information management. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, characterized by widespread uncertainty regarding health risks, government measures, and economic impacts, the theory offers insights into how African SMEs may strategically seek, interpret, and utilize information to mitigate uncertainty and make informed decisions. Although not interpersonal in nature, by applying this theoretical framework, the study aims to elucidate the motivations and strategies underlying African SMEs' management of health-related information during times of crisis, aligning with Afifi and Weiner's call for a comprehensive understanding of information management processes in uncertain contexts.

4. Methodology

During the Coronavirus pandemic, The African Union, UNDP, and AfriLabs collaborated to launch the Rollo Africa program for African SMEs. Initiated in August 2020 and concluded in January 2021, the program focused on capacity building and gathering information on SME challenges through surveys. With a goal to offer evidence-based policy guidance for impactful stimulus packages, the Rollo Africa Program selected 120 enterprises with 360 participants across 5 countries. Engaging in 10 online bootcamps, the program addressed diverse

challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, positioning itself as a valuable resource for shaping post-pandemic public policy pathways.

This report centers on data from SMEs in the Rollo Africa Program. The associated research aimed to comprehend evolving challenges faced by African SMEs during the pandemic. Beginning with a literature review identifying 12 specific challenges, the research developed a comprehensive survey tool to assess their topicality and explore SMEs' strategies in addressing them. Administered on three separate days, the survey covered various topics (see Table 1 for survey topics), unveiling persisting challenges and strategies employed by SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The surveys' findings and recommendations intend to guide policy supporting SME businesses in Africa.

Bootcamp	Survey	Topics
Day 1	Survey 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to Finance
	Survey 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electricity & Power. • Internet usage, bandwidth and stability
Day 2	Survey 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cybersecurity and security of digital tools
	Survey 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human resources • Taxes and government duties • Business continuity plans
Day 3	Survey 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lockdown and pandemic control measures • Access to health and safety information & services
	Survey 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative Perception • Access to reliable information • Government Support

Table 1: Surveys' Topics

In this paper, we focus on results obtained from Surveys 5 and 6 relating to accessing reliable information and particularly those pertaining to health and safety during COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1 Lack of Adequate Business Information

A primary challenge for African SMEs is the insufficient availability of business information from governmental and service-provider sources (Olawale & Garwe, 2010; Muriithi, 2017). Rooted in underdeveloped technological and communication infrastructures, coupled with inadequate business support systems, this issue impacts SMEs' ability to make informed decisions, especially during events like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Supplementing Literature with Real-time Challenges

Augmenting existing literature with insights from texts and articles during the pandemic, we aimed to capture recent and pandemic-specific challenges faced by SMEs. This approach provides a comprehensive view of challenges that emerged or intensified due to the unique circumstances of the ongoing global health crisis.

In the upcoming sections, we detail challenges identified through this combined approach, shedding light on their nature and implications. Our objective is to unravel how African SMEs grappled with accessing crucial health-related information during the COVID-19 pandemic and how these challenges influenced their perceptions, navigation, and responses.

4.2 Lack of consistency and clarity in confinement measures

Initially, the lack of consistency and clarity in confinement measures, operational hours, curfews, and criteria for closing and reopening establishments were prominent challenges

during the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous changes introduced by governments stirred controversy, with examples like the selective closure of businesses. Our surveys ultimately assess the impact of these lockdown and confinement measures on African SMEs.

Recent research has formalized the view that the level of rationale clarity, or shared understanding of a decision's basis, affects project performance (Haymaker et al., 2011). While the Rationale Clarity Framework (RCF) was mainly used in architecture projects, it could apply to governments' measures and decisions and aid SMEs in predicting their actions.

4.3 Accessing health and safety information.

Accessing health and safety information and services emerged as a significant challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recommended measures, coupled with region-specific restrictions, raised questions about information dissemination for African SMEs. Our research aimed to understand what information and health services were available to them and how these resources benefited or hindered SMEs during the outbreak.

4.4 Reliability of health-related information

Concerns arose regarding the reliability of data in some African countries. Factors like limited detection capacity and concerns about testing equipment added complexity to the information landscape. Additionally, attitudes toward COVID-19 best practices and public trust were shaped along partisan lines by the news media (Zhao et al., 2020).

Survey Builder: Questionnaires developed around different challenges were peer-checked for validity and comprehension by academia colleagues and experts from UNDP and the African Union. Translated into French, the surveys were built using the online tool Alchemer (www.alchemer.com), allowing gathering feedback from respondents in various formats.

5. Empirical Study Results and interpretation

Table 2 details the respondents' numbers across the 5 countries. It also presents how many completed responses per survey were collected. The data used for analysis is the data collected from completed surveys 5 and 6.

Country / Survey	1	2	3	4	5	6
Egypt	66	42	45	52	51	44
Sudan	62	57	57	57	55	57
Cameroon	49	36	38	33	37	34
Senegal	57	60	48	35	53	34
Zimbabwe	61	57	54	49	52	53
Completed	295	252	242	226	248	242
Partial Responses	72	42	9	40	20	21

Table 2: Survey Respondents' Numbers per country

5.1 Access to information and the information infrastructure

In this survey, we try to establish whether the access to information is a remaining challenge as indicated by previous literature reviews on African SMEs, and how the challenge is routed. Table 3 shows results obtained from SME respondents across the 5 participating countries.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
My business lacks access to adequate business information Count	16	72	65	71	18
%	6.6%	29.8%	26.9%	29.3%	7.4%
Presence of appropriate technology and associated support systems like hardware and software make it easier for businesses like mine to be efficient and effective which in turn lowers costs of production and operations Count	4	12	47	106	73
%	1.7%	5.0%	19.4%	43.8%	30.2%
My business has a poor information environment resulting from underdeveloped technological infrastructures. Count	12	69	70	75	16
%	5.0%	28.5%	28.9%	31.0%	6.6%
My business has a poor information environment resulting from underdeveloped communication infrastructure Count	10	69	85	61	17
%	4.1%	28.5%	35.1%	25.2%	7.0%
My business has a poor information environment resulting from inadequate business support systems Count	8	55	86	69	24
%	3.3%	22.7%	35.5%	28.5%	9.9%
I believe that it is the role of the official authorities to facilitate access to reliable information for businesses like mine Count	4	19	62	109	48
%	1.7%	7.9%	25.6%	45.0%	19.8%

Table 3: Access to Information (N = 242)

The survey's first question on information challenges among African SMEs yielded nuanced results. Responses to "My business lacks access to adequate business information" were evenly split, indicating a lack of unanimous awareness of this challenge. Notably, 43.8% agree, and 30.2% strongly agree that technology and support systems contribute to efficiency, emphasizing technology's recognition by 74% of respondents.

Concerning technological and communication infrastructures, only 36.6% express concerns about a poor information environment due to underdeveloped technological infrastructures. Similarly, for communication infrastructure, 32.2% agree that their business has a poor information environment, suggesting some concern but not serious malfunctioning.

Regarding the business support system, the survey results show a balanced perspective. Notably, 22.7% disagree, and 3.3% strongly disagree, while 28.5% agree, and 9.9% strongly agree that their business has a poor information environment due to inadequate business support systems. This distribution suggests that overall, surveyed SMEs do not perceive significant issues with their business support systems.

A consensus emerges regarding the role of authorities in supporting information access, with an overwhelming 66% of participants agreeing that it is the role of official authorities to facilitate access to reliable information for businesses like theirs, underscoring the perceived responsibility of authorities in enhancing information access for SMEs.

Regarding information sources, respondents predominantly rely on social media and digital press for obtaining information about their sector or activity, indicating a significant trend toward digital channels. Reliable sources mentioned include FAO OP, SocialnetLink, Euro News, Jeune Afrique, France 24, 3FPT, Seneweb.com, leral.net, and ANSD.

The split responses regarding access to adequate business information may stem from variations in SMEs' reliance on different sources of information and their perceptions of the

sufficiency of available data. Those who agree or strongly agree that technology and support systems contribute to efficacy likely have access to robust technological infrastructure and support networks, enabling them to gather and utilize information effectively. Concerns about poor information environments due to underdeveloped technological and communication infrastructures may reflect challenges faced by SMEs operating in regions with limited access to technology and reliable communication networks. The balanced perspective on the role of authorities in supporting information access suggests that while SMEs recognize the importance of government support, they may also rely on alternative sources for information due to perceived limitations in official channels.

5.2 Perception of the government's Covid-19 related communication and ensuing pandemic measures

In this section we wanted to investigate how the policies and measures to combat the Covid-19 were perceived by African SMEs. Table 4 shows results obtained on this subject.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have been clear to me	Count 15 6.0%	Count 29 11.7%	Count 41 16.5%	Count 119 48.0%	Count 44 17.7%
The communication undertaken about the measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have been effective	Count 17 6.9%	Count 41 16.5%	Count 63 25.4%	Count 100 40.3%	Count 27 10.9%
In general, in my company, there was consensus about the measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic	Count 6 2.4%	Count 24 9.7%	Count 56 22.6%	Count 112 45.2%	Count 50 20.2%
The authorities changed often the measures taken in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic	Count 10 4.0%	Count 30 12.1%	Count 59 23.8%	Count 117 47.2%	Count 32 12.9%
Announcements regarding measures taken by the authorities in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic were announced relatively late.	Count 9 3.6%	Count 68 27.4%	Count 74 29.8%	Count 76 30.6%	Count 21 8.5%
The measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have been reasonable	Count 9 3.6%	Count 39 15.7%	Count 65 26.2%	Count 113 45.6%	Count 22 8.9%
The measures taken by the authorities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have taken into account social factors	Count 16 6.5%	Count 47 19.0%	Count 70 28.2%	Count 90 36.3%	Count 25 10.1%
The measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have taken into account economic factors	Count 24 9.7%	Count 65 26.2%	Count 62 25.0%	Count 79 31.9%	Count 18 7.3%
The measures taken by the authorities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have taken into account health and safety factors	Count 14 5.6%	Count 21 8.5%	Count 57 23.0%	Count 120 48.4%	Count 36 14.5%
In general, I believe there was a lack of consistency in the measures taken by the authorities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic	Count 9 3.6%	Count 42 16.9%	Count 75 30.2%	Count 100 40.3%	Count 22 8.9%
In general, I believe the authorities will not impose very strict measures in case of a second COVID-19 or pandemic wave	Count 19 7.7%	Count 46 18.5%	Count 83 33.5%	Count 79 31.9%	Count 21 8.5%

Table 4: Governments' policies and measures to combat the Covid-19 (N = 248)

Analyzing the survey data reveals a notable consensus on perceptions of clarity in response measures to the Covid-19 pandemic. A substantial 65.7% of respondents agree (48%) or strongly agree (17.7%) that these measures have been clear. Similarly, the majority, comprising 51.2%, either agree or strongly agree that communication about these measures has been effective, indicating a positive reception to pandemic-related announcements.

The timing of these announcements remains inconclusive from the data, as responses to the statement "Announcements regarding measures taken by the authorities in reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic were announced relatively late" do not provide a decisive trend.

Acceptance of the measures taken by government officials is widespread, with 65.4% expressing agreement (45.2%) or strong agreement (20.2%) that there was consensus within their companies. The perceived reasonableness of these measures is echoed by 64.8% of respondents, who agree (45.7%) or strongly agree (19.1%) with the statement "The measures taken in response to the Covid-19 pandemic have been reasonable."

Concerns arise about the consistency of these measures, with nearly half of the respondents (49.2%) indicating agreement (40.3%) or strong agreement (8.9%) that there was a lack of consistency in the authorities' responses. Notably, only 20.5% did not feel this inconsistency.

In terms of considerations for social, economic, and health factors, a mixed sentiment prevails. While 46.4% agree (and strongly agree) that social factors were considered, 39.1% hold a similar view for economic factors. The majority (62.9%), however, concurs that health and safety factors were taken into account by authorities.

Despite the perceived consideration of health and safety, there is an indication of relaxed implementation, as suggested by 47.2% who disagree (35.5%) or strongly disagree (11.7%) that the measures were strictly followed.

The high percentage of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that measures taken by authorities have been clear indicates a positive perception of government communication efforts. This clarity likely contributes to SMEs' understanding of pandemic-related regulations and their ability to comply with them. Similarly, positive perceptions of the effectiveness of communication about these measures suggest that government announcements and campaigns have effectively reached SMEs and conveyed relevant information. However, the inconclusive data regarding the timing of announcements may reflect varying experiences among SMEs regarding the timeliness of government communication, indicating potential room for improvement in the speed and frequency of information dissemination.

5.3 African SMEs' response and ability to navigate the Covid-19' measures.

In this survey segment, we aim to assess how African SMEs navigated and responded to the challenges posed by Covid-19 measures. Table 5 presents the data obtained on this section.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Implementation of the measures taken by the authorities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was strictly followed Count %	29 11.7%	88 35.5%	69 27.8%	51 20.6%	11 4.4%
In general, the hours of functioning for my business were reasonable and allowed us to continue offering our service / product Count %	14 5.6%	43 17.3%	64 25.8%	109 44.0%	18 7.3%
Personally, I feel I have gained a learning that would allow me to function reasonably in case of rising COVID-19 numbers and / or a second wave Count %	5 2.0%	11 4.4%	67 27.0%	133 53.6%	32 12.9%
In my company, we knew exactly how to deal with the safety hazards related to Covid-19 Count %	9 3.7%	7 2.9%	54 21.7%	129 52.0%	49 19.7%

Table 5: African SMEs response and ability to navigate COVID-19 measures (N=248)

Survey data indicates that nearly half of SMEs (47.2%) did not strictly adhere to authorities' measures, leading to increased in-office employees and non-compliance with curfew measures. Only 4.4% showed complete adherence, while 20.6% expressed their adherence with the measures. The neutrality of 27.8% prompts a closer look at their adherence context.

Respondents' express satisfaction with their business hours, with 51.3% finding them reasonable. Additionally, 66.5% believe they've gained valuable insights for future crises. Regarding future measures, 40.4% are confident that authorities will not impose stringent measures in the event of a second Covid-19 wave. These nuanced responses offer a comprehensive understanding of how African SMEs perceive, navigate, and implement measures amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Most SMEs (71.7%) displayed a commendable understanding of Covid-19 safety protocols, ensuring their companies were well-prepared to address safety hazards related to Covid-19.

The data showing a lack of strict adherence to authorities' measures by nearly half of SMEs suggests various factors influencing compliance. Potential explanations include challenges in implementing measures due to operational constraints or conflicting priorities, differing interpretations of the necessity of certain restrictions, or perceptions of government measures as overly burdensome or ineffective. Satisfaction with operating hours may stem from SMEs' ability to adjust schedules to meet changing demands while balancing health and safety considerations. The high percentage of respondents believing they have gained valuable insights for dealing with future health crises suggests a proactive approach to learning from current challenges and adapting strategies accordingly.

5.4 Covid-19 information circulation

In this section we needed to know how effective the authorities were in circulating information about Covid-19 and raising awareness against the virus and what could be done as precautionary measures. Table 6 shows data collected on the subject of COVID-19's information circulation.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The information about the physical distancing, barrier gestures and other Covid-19 prevention actions were circulated regularly %	3.6%	8.5%	24.7%	42.9%	20.2%
There were systematic awareness campaigns about the actions needed to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 %	4.5%	6.1%	23.5%	47%	19%

Table 6: COVID-19 Information Circulation (N=248)

Authorities effectively communicated preventive actions, with only 3.6% strongly disagreeing and 8.5% disagreeing. Awareness campaigns about Covid-19 prevention received positive responses "The information about the physical distancing, barrier gestures and other Covid-19 prevention actions were circulated regularly". The majority acknowledged systematic awareness campaigns by officials.

Additionally, most respondents confirmed the use of a daily dashboard by their country's officials for COVID-19 information as indicated in Table 7.

	Yes	No	I don't know
There was a daily dashboard of new COVID-19 contracted cases, deaths and other vital information	180	26	42
Count	72.9%	10.5%	16.6%
%			

Table 7: Daily dashboard of vital COVID-19 Information (N=248)

Surprisingly, 16.6% are unsure about dashboards, and 10.5% believe there are none. Effective communication of preventive actions by authorities likely boosts SMEs' compliance with Covid-19 measures. Regular dissemination of information about preventive actions shows proactive efforts. However, uncertainty about dashboards indicates potential awareness gaps. Trust in health-related information may hinge on messaging consistency and transparency. Conflicting information underscores the need for clear communication to build trust.

5.5 Trust in Government's COVID-19 circulated messages.

To dig further on the reliability and the usage of these dashboards, we probed our 72.9% (180 respondents) to answer a few more questions on their confidence and trust in the daily published Covid-19 cases". Table 8 hereunder shows gathered responses on that topic.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
We trust the veracity of the numbers reported on the daily circulated dashboard of new COVID-19 contracted cases, deaths and other vital information	21	43	63	41	12
Count	11.7%	23.9%	35.0%	22.8%	6.7%
%					
I believe the numbers reported on the daily circulated dashboard of new COVID-19 contracted cases, deaths and other vital information reflected in a transparent way the real situation	22	47	57	41	13
Count	12.2%	26.1%	31.7%	22.8%	7.2%
%					
There were contradicting information released from different sources regarding new COVID-19 contracted cases, deaths and other vital information	12	33	64	52	19
Count	6.7%	18.3%	35.6%	28.9%	10.6%
%					

Table 8: Trust and reliability of daily Covid-19 related information and dashboard (N=180)

Unfortunately, the collected dashboard information is inconclusive regarding its reflection of reality and public trust in the communicated numbers (39.5% agree/strongly agree on contradicting information). This may stem from misinformation and conflicting reports, fostering skepticism and confusion among SMEs. Factors such as government transparency, communication effectiveness, and past experiences may influence trust levels. The prevalence of contradicting information highlights challenges in ensuring consistency during a crisis, warranting further exploration to develop strategies for enhancing trustworthiness and transparency in authorities' information dissemination.

6. Discussion

In light of the Theory of Motivated Information Management, our discussion highlights challenges for African SMEs as active digital information seekers, with government authorities as providers. However, our study didn't specify SMEs' information-seeking behavior, aligning with TMIM's acknowledgment of varying cognitive engagement.

Our survey echoes global challenges, emphasizing reliable information's crucial role for SME growth (Bunyasi et al., 2014). The reliance on digital channels mirrors challenges in

navigating online health information (Chi et al., 2020), particularly significant for African SMEs and authorities.

Perceptions of government communication during Covid-19 were generally positive, but concerns about inconsistency suggest the need for clearer strategies (Louis-Jean et al., 2020). Mixed sentiments on policymaking factors mirror decision-making complexities during crises. Regarding SME responses to Covid-19 measures, our survey aligns with previous findings, emphasizing adaptability and resilience (Fubah & Moos, 2022). Examining authorities' effectiveness in circulating Covid-19 information suggests a positive reception, but dashboard uncertainty aligns with literature on misinformation (Fan et al., 2020).

Survey results on trust and reliability reflect challenges of contradicting information, highlighting the need for transparent communication (Seytre, 2020). These findings contribute to understanding SME challenges, emphasizing targeted interventions. Distrust in government response isn't unique to Africa, reflecting global trends (Rowe et al., 2020). Trust in health information may stem from combined local and international initiatives (Braa, et al., 2023).

7. Conclusion

The survey offers insights into African SMEs' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a modest contribution to scarce empirical evidence. Positive trends in information dissemination and response measures are evident, alongside challenges such as inconsistency in measures and concerns about data accuracy. These findings inform discussions on effective governance, communication strategies, and technology use for SMEs in Africa.

Study limitations include aggregating responses from diverse geographical locations, introducing complexity due to varying contextual factors and unique pandemic measures. Interpretation should consider nuances in regional responses and governmental strategies. Future research could benefit from a more granular examination, considering specificities of individual countries. Another limitation involves potential methodological bias associated with sample composition, influenced by SMEs' affiliation with the AfriLabs network, introducing selection bias towards high-tech SMEs.

Implications guide policymakers in formulating effective strategies for supporting African SMEs during pandemics. Insights into SMEs' access to information, perceptions of government communication, response to measures, and trust in information sources provide a comprehensive understanding of challenges. Policymakers can leverage these findings to tailor interventions conducive to SME growth and resilience, prioritizing robust information systems, transparent communication, and technology adoption.

Contemplating future research, the utilization of mixed methods emerges as promising. Triangulation with secondary sources such as the Rollo Africa expert panels would enrich analysis, highlighting the multifaceted nature of challenges. Future publications could benefit from a comprehensive mixed-methods framework, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative insights, contributing to a more comprehensive discourse on supporting SMEs in times of crisis and humanizing the digital age.

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