Online newspaper reading patterns of a university community before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: the case of the University of Venda

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Abstract

Rationale of Study – For years, academics have been concerned with the quality of assignments, particularly at the undergraduate level, due to low reading cultures among students. However, the reading culture of university staff members also needs to be considered, as well as how it can influence students to read for leisure, remain informed about various aspects, and incorporate it into their academic writing. This study explored the reading culture in university communities that access and read online newspapers through the PressReader Database before and during the COVID-19 pandemic at the University of Venda (UNIVEN).

Methodology – A quantitative approach was conducted using descriptive analysis of PressReader usage statistics for online newspapers. PressReader usage statistics were used in the data collection process and analysed using EXCEL to investigate the reading culture and identify the online newspaper most consulted by UNIVEN users from UNIVEN before and during COVID-19.

Findings – The study findings revealed that the use of online newspapers decreased during the pandemic and showed that Sunday Times (3047 views), Sowetan (1559 views), Mail and Guardian (1261 views) and Business Day (1131 views) were the most famous newspapers between July 2018 and July 2021 at UNIVEN. This usage was moderate, and libraries must create awareness of the existence of online newspapers and provide a digital infrastructure for users to access and read these newspapers.

Implications – The findings of this study can be valuable to media organisations, helping them adapt their content and delivery methods to meet changing needs.

Originality – This original study was conducted at UNIVEN in Limpopo province, South Africa.

Keywords

Academic libraries, Internet, COVID-19 pandemic, user preferences, media consumption

1 Introduction

The advent of the Internet has fundamentally transformed how information is disseminated and consumed, and this transformation has been especially pronounced in news media (Goran et al., 2017). With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019 and continued to impact global communities until 2021 and beyond, the reliance on online news sources for information intensified significantly. As the pandemic altered daily life, including how people work, study, and interact, it became crucial to examine the evolving reading patterns of online newspapers in the university community. As hubs of learning and research, universities provide a unique and insightful context to explore these evolving patterns.

The rationale for this study:

- **Pandemic-induced change in information consumption**: The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed how people sought information. University libraries, as centres of education and research, play a central role in disseminating information. Understanding how the university community's reading patterns evolved in response to the pandemic can shed light on broader societal shifts in information consumption during times of crisis (Parent, 2008; Percheski & Hargittai, 2011; Goran et al., 2017).

- **Impact on academic communities**: Universities faced significant disruptions during the pandemic, with many institutions transitioning to remote learning. As such, students, faculty, and staff relied heavily on digital sources for academic and pandemic-related information. Studying online newspaper reading habits within a university community can help gauge how much academic environments were affected (Naik et al., 2021).

- **Media engagement and trust**: Online newspapers serve as sources of credible information. By investigating how university community members interacted with these sources, researchers can assess the impact of online news media on trust and reliance during times of crisis. This study can provide information on media literacy and the factors that influence the trustworthiness of news sources (Krishnamurthy & Awari, 2015).

- **Adaptive changes in content and delivery**: Newspapers adapted their content and delivery strategies in response to the pandemic, focusing on related topics.

Understanding how these adaptations influenced readers within a university community can provide valuable insights into the role of media outlets in shaping public opinion and responding to societal challenges (Korobili et al., 2006; Nakiganda, 2008).

- **Long-term implications**: Although the pandemic was a singular event, the habits formed during this period could have lasting effects on information consumption. Exploring how reading patterns evolved before and during the pandemic can offer valuable data for long-term media studies and strategic decision-making for media organisations (Patrick, 2017).

In summary, this research topic focused on understanding the reading patterns of online newspapers among university communities, exploring how these patterns evolved in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and providing valuable information on media consumption, trust, and adaptation during times of crisis. This research is relevant to academia and media organisations, policymakers, and the broader community, offering a comprehensive perspective on the dynamics of news consumption in the digital age. It is also essential for newspaper organisations or media in general to discover their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the market place and to provide possible means of surviving the challenge, especially in the area of new revenue streams on the Web (Diri, 2014).

The study was conducted at the University of Venda (UNIVEN), located in Vhembe, one of the rural districts in Limpopo province of South Africa. "It was established as a campus of the University of Limpopo, formerly known as the University of the North, on 18 February 1981" (Ndou, 2021, p. 43). UNIVEN was established to serve the black population, in its case, Tshivenda speakers in particular (Edwards, 2015). Ramabina & Kleinveldt (2018, p. 2) summarised the historical background of the institution:

> The University of Venda subscribes to the PressReader database that provides its university community access to online magazines and online newspapers nationally and internationally, which was previously not possible with print-only subscriptions. On print-only subscription days, users were limited to accessing newspapers in the physical library's reading room on a first-come-first-serve basis.
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> Considering the number of students enrolled at this institution (17,000 in 2019) versus the limited number of print newspaper subscriptions meant that users may

need to wait for access to an issue if it was currently in use when they arrived at the library. Therefore, subscription to PressReader by this institution will reach a much wider audience, and users will have the convenience of access to newspapers anytime and anywhere. The shift to online newspaper subscriptions was a solution to address print subscriptions' limitations, but overall, it was to promote and build a more robust reading culture.

The study explored the reading patterns in university communities accessing and reading online newspapers through the PressReader database before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (2018-2021) at the University of Venda. The specific objectives of this study were to investigate and compare the reading culture and behaviour of the UNIVEN community regarding online newspapers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on identifying changes, trends, and factors influencing information consumption and identifying the most consulted or popular online newspaper by UNIVEN users before and during COVID-19.

2 Literature review

The literature review is structured according to key concepts in the research objectives. Newspapers are an important and unique collection of library materials that can be used for entertainment and research purposes (Upham, 1988; Nakiganda, 2009). Bangani et al. (2022, p. 10) argue that "newspapers are the dominant source compared to magazines, radio and TV media, especially in the South African context. Possible reasons include that newspapers are the fastest media publishing breaking news. Unlike magazines, newspapers are more readily available in database sources, such as SA Media and free newspaper websites, such as Independent Newspapers Online". To answer the main research objectives of this study, the first phase was to review the literature on the current state of online newspaper reading patterns in Africa, highlighting research findings from South African, Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Ugandan university libraries. The literature review discussed the following themes: Access to information online by academic libraries, usage statistics of electronic resources, marketing of online newspapers by academic libraries and reading patterns from the coronavirus pandemic lockdown.

2.1 Online information provision by academic libraries

Kobusingye (2016, p. 725) argued that "students at universities must prove their academic levels to society not only by emulating the knowledge they acquire at university,

but should also be very informed about the political activities, policies, and so on, of the country to intrigue their desire for further research. Critical thinking skills are emphasised in higher education to help students coordinate complex and competing activities and solve problems.

> Thus, newspapers give intuitive knowledge to the student community to brush up on their intelligence quotient (IQ) and social awareness. They also provide current information to students preparing for competitive examinations and interviews (Aggarwal & Akhter, 2015, p. 371).

Consequently, newspapers play critical roles in informing, educating, entertaining the public, and supporting students' academic work (Kobusingye, 2016). Erdem (2015) discovered that students at Ankara University and Erciyes University read novels, newspapers, and magazines in their spare time for leisure purposes, while findings in a study by Njeze (2013) revealed that students consult newspapers more on general information, such as Sports, Current Affairs, and Politics.

In her study findings 2016, Kobusingye found that library users read newspapers for various reasons. The majority (20%) read to get information on current affairs, politics (16%), leisure [fashion, lifestyle, dating] (16%), jobs (12%), education or academics (12%), business (10%) and others (16%). Patrick's (2015) study found that staff and students read newspapers in some Nigerian Universities to visit the job vacancies portal, stay abreast of local and internal events, and research purposes. It is important to note that some users prefer to read newspapers for leisure and relaxation from their demanding coursework, making all newspapers relevant in an academic environment irrespective of the content they deliver (Kobusingye, 2016). The findings align with Ugah's (2009, p. 2) assertion that 'newspapers play an essential role in the academic, social, and cultural life of members of the academic community in their information seeking behaviours'.

2.2 Statistics of the use of electronic resources

Many organisations rely heavily on statistics to make informed decisions about policy implementation and maintaining subscriptions to electronic resources. Academic libraries rely on the usage statistics of electronic databases and journals to determine whether to continue subscribing to a title. Botchkarev (2017) found an increasing demand by employees in organisations for access to electronic resources such as databases and newspapers. Furthermore, analysing usage statistics of electronic resources forms an

integral part of knowledge management processes in the organisation (Botchkarev, 2017, p. 114). Exploring library users' most popular online newspaper access is helpful in collection development (Patrick, 2015; Kobusingye, 2016; Owusu-Ansah et al., 2017).

Findings from Patrick's study (2015, p. 41) found that.

> The Vanguard was the most common newspaper among university staff and students in Nigeria, with 86 respondents (85.2%) indicating that they are familiar with it and 76 (75.3%) saying it is one of their most-read online newspapers. The data further indicated that the online versions of Punch Newspaper, Guardian Newspaper, Sun Newspaper, and Nation Newspaper made it into the first five most common and read online newspapers among staff and students of universities in Nigeria. The online versions of Advocate, Oracle, Daily Journal, Business Day, Daily Post, Financial Standard, PM News, Daily News, Champion Newspaper, News Online, and Daily Sports were indicated as least expected, as each of them had only one respondent mentioning them among the online newspapers known. None of the respondents indicated that any concerned online newspapers fall among the most read within the period under review.

Njeze (2013) discovered that the newspapers most consulted by male and female students at Covenant University in Nigeria were the Punch, the Nation, Guardian and Complete Sports.

The study by Owusu-Ansah, Yebowaa, and Katsekpor (2017) at the two Satellite University Libraries in Ghana found the following newspapers to be the most preferred. It read Daily Graphic, Ghanaian Times, Graphic Showbiz, BF&T, Graphic Sports, Junior Graphic, Weekly Mirror, The Finder, Weekly Spectator, and Ghanaian Lens. Kobusingye's 2016 findings at Makerere University in Uganda showed that New Vision (43%) and Monitor Newspapers (38%) (Compact/Black tops) were the most preferred compared to Tabloids (Red pepper) with 10%, mainly due to their comprehensive coverage and objectivity.

2.3 Marketing of online newspapers by academic libraries

Librarians should continue to search for ways to make newspapers and their content more accessible to researchers and the public. User feedback is vital to improving service provision, especially in academic libraries. One of the findings of Kobusingye's study (2016) was that users advised the library to increase awareness of the existence of newspapers for library users. Joshua (2014) found that students barely used electronic

resources due to inadequate awareness and mobilisation. Similarly, at UNIVEN, postgraduate students confirmed that they were unaware of the electronic resources available. The implication is that training was not fully publicised and marketed (Tlakula & Fombad, 2017). Ahmadianyazdi and Chandrashekara (2019) assert that more than half of the scholars at the University of Mysore, India, were unaware of the available electronic resources. Msagati (2014) noted the unawareness of electronic resources by some of the scholars at Dar es Salaam University College of Education (DUCE), and so did some scholars at Kuwait University (Hendal, 2020). Awareness of electronic resources to users is critical because they cannot be accessed if users do not know about them.

Libraries must regularly market electronic resources' access, use, and availability to their community. Awareness of available e-Newspapers can help improve reading habits and knowledge (Owoso-Ansah et al., 2017). Libraries must also provide a digital infrastructure for users to access and read these online newspapers (Kobusingye, 2016). Libraries must market the availability of online newspapers during Information literacy courses, database training, and orientation programmes. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube Shorts, TikTok, and others can also be used to promote the availability of online newspapers. Learning management platforms like Blackboard, Moodle, and libguides are powerful marketing platforms.

2.4 Reading patterns from coronavirus pandemic lockdown

2019 Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) was first identified in Wuhan, China, and it continued to ravage the entire planet. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) was founded based on the speed with which it spread and destroyed human lives worldwide (Mahaye, 2020). In March 2020, South Africa announced the first confirmed case of COVID-19, and consequently, the number of confirmed cases increased to 1,585. The confirmed cases increased to 3 953 on 23 April 2020, with 75 associated deaths. On 23 April 2020, nearly two million people were reported to be infected with the disease globally, with more than 182,000 associated deaths (Mahaye, 2020). Universities in developed and developing countries were forced to shut down due to the spread of this deadly pandemic. The government closed schools, colleges, and universities in India until the country found the COVID-19 vaccination (Naik et al., 2021). On 26 March 2020, the South African government also announced a country lockdown to avoid the spread of COVID-19.

As a result of the lockdown, UNIVEN management shut down the university for almost the rest of the 2020 academic year 2020. However, university scholars had to continue their academic and research activities through other means, such as online learning platforms. Alternative approaches, such as accessing the available electronic library resources (ELR), were appreciated strategies for searching for information for teaching and research activities. The university community was expected to use PressReader to access online newspapers for their studies and research. However, the use of ELRs was revealed to be positively affected by the perceived utility of the scholars and the ease of access to sources (Korobili et al., 2006). Furthermore, Izzeddin (2021) reveals that socioeconomic status and geographical area play a role in accessing electronic resources during the COVID-19 lockdown. Therefore, the UNIVEN library needs to know the reading patterns of their users' online newspapers before and during the COVID pandemic lockdown.

In reviewing the literature, research on online newspaper reading patterns within a university community before and during the COVID-19 pandemic is a relatively new and evolving field. Although numerous studies have explored aspects of media consumption and pandemic-related information seeking, there are still notable gaps in the literature. Several studies have shown a substantial shift from print to online news media consumption within the general population during the pandemic. Limited research has focused specifically on how this shift affected university communities. More in-depth research is needed to understand the nuances of this transition, including differences in age, academic level, and field of study. Research indicates an increased reliance on online newspapers for pandemic-related information during the COVID-19 crisis (Ijeh, 2008; Diri, 2014; Patrick, 2015; Aravind, 2018). Little research has delved into the reasons behind this shift in reliance and whether it has persisted post-pandemic. Furthermore, more studies could investigate how content preferences (e.g., news articles, opinion pieces, editorials) have changed within university communities.

3 Methodology

In this research, a quantitative approach was conducted, using a descriptive analysis of the PressReader usage statistics for online newspapers. The research design follows a case study of UNIVEN to explore access to online newspapers from July 2018 to July 2021. The study by Botchkarev (2017), which used a similar method, was adopted in this investigation. UNIVEN has started using the PressReader product since July 2018.

3.1 Delimitation

The research focused on a higher education institution (UNIVEN) in Limpopo province, South Africa. One of the limitations of this study was that it excluded the usage statistics of magazines accessed through PressReader. The study used the number of views to determine reading patterns and identify the most consulted newspapers. The researchers were aware that the number of views may not equal the actual use or satisfaction of the product (Botchkareve, 2017).

3.2 Data collection

Data on UNIVEN reading patterns of the university communities were collected using the PressReader Analytics database for 2018-2021 (PressReader, 2022). PressReader is a database that provides access to online newspapers and magazines through subscription.

> There is now a better way to access and read usage reports on PressReader. The new platform called PressReader Analytics was built to provide you with data that makes sense. It is a comprehensive dashboard designed to give you a better understanding of your customers and insights to help you improve PressReader usage. With improvements in features and functionality, combined with metrics and common terminology used in product and content analytics, reports measure overall usage and engagement within your PressReader HotSpot (PressReader, 2022).

PressReader Analytics is the software used to retrieve usage statistics through various indicators. When analysing the usage statistics for UNIVEN, the following indicators (Botchkarev, 2017) were used: newspaper titles, monthly/annual views/downloads, and top 10 newspaper titles. Data were analysed using EXCEL. The number of views indicates the number of times users accessed the newspaper during the period.

4 Findings and interpretations

The section presents the results for the reading behaviour of the UNIVEN community before and during the COVID-19 pandemic by showing the most popular online reading newspapers. The study concentrated on the top 10 popular newspapers from a report covering two full calendar years, 2018-2021, from UNIVEN. The top ten popular newspapers will likely have significant readership and influence in their community or region. Therefore, they provide a representative sample of the most widely consumed news sources, making the study relevant for understanding the news consumption habits of a broad audience. Figures one to three (below) show the top ten popular newspapers

accessed between 2018 and 2021 extracted from the UNIVEN PressReader database. The original PressReader statistics are in an additional file (Appendix I). The University of Venda ran a PressReader trial from February to March 2018 and subscribed to the product in July 2018. This section presents the results of the PressReader usage statistics for UNIVEN online newspapers from July 2018 to July 2021.

The results showed that Sunday Times (3047 views), Sowetan (1559 views), Mail and Guardian (1261 views) and Business Day (1131 views) were the most famous newspapers between July 2018 and July 2021 at UNIVEN. These newspapers are the country's national newspapers and have gained people's trust and credibility over the years (Owusu-Ansah et al., 2017). The Citizen (KZN), City Press, The Star Early Edition, Sunday World, and Pretoria News were the most popular titles among the UNIVEN community. It is interesting that Cape Times and Cape Argus, the newspapers of the Western Cape province, are also featured in the top 10 most popular newspapers at UNIVEN. There are few UNIVEN staff and students from the Western Cape. The Citizen (KZN) also appears in the top 10 due to the strong contingent of staff and students from KwaZulu Natal Province. The Washington Post and Financial Post are also featured in the top ten of the most-read newspapers at UNIVEN. In contrast, the findings of a study by Bangani et al. (2022) found that Mail & Guardian of South Africa was the top newspaper cited, followed by Business Day, then the Guardian Newspaper and the United States of America, while Cape Times (South Africa) and Punch Newspapers (Nigeria) were at the bottom of the list.

The Soccer Laduma, a sports newspaper focusing explicitly on soccer news worldwide, also appears in the top ten. It means that there are soccer fanatics on campus. Williamson et al. (2012) noted that young adult readers prefer sports, world news, local news and entertainment news, in that order. The Herald of Zimbabwe was another popular newspaper in the top ten on campus. The University of Venda has a strong contingent of staff and students from neighbouring Zimbabwe; the University is 150 kilometres from the Zimbabwean Beitbridge border post. This could mean that geography and loyalty are essential in newspaper readership. Put differently, citizens of a country are likely to read or cite their country's newspapers (Bangani et al., 2022).

Between July 2018 and July 2019, the most popular online newspapers at UNIVEN were read 4,665 times, and between July 2019 and July 2020, the usage statistics of the same top ten journals dropped to 3810. Another drop can be seen between July 2020 and July

2021, where usage statistics dropped to 2111, a worrying decline - Sunday Times decreased from 1,227 views in 2019 to 701 views during the pandemic, while Sowetan decreased from 771 views to 275 views during the same period. These decreases for periods have been used to reveal online newspaper reading patterns in the institution (Botchkarev, 2017). The last period was in the middle of the COVID-19 lockdown when the library was closed, and most users were away from campus. It could mean that most library users depend on the university network to access their online newspapers. However, the drop was visible even before the pandemic hit; it could also be issues of the relevance of the platform's content or marketing of these tools to the university community. Variations in reading patterns could be attributed to differences in digital literacy and access to online newspapers among students. This interpretation underscores the importance of digital literacy initiatives and equitable access to information resources within the university. Another reason for this drop could be the student's preference for credible sources of information. UNIVEN students may have preferred established and credible news sources during the pandemic, highlighting the importance of reliable information during a public health crisis. Poor networks, high cost of buying electronic gadgets, Internet connectivity, Internet illiteracy, and poor electricity power supply were some factors that discouraged staff and students from accessing online newspapers (Egberongbe, 2011). Ndou (2021) argues that academic libraries use the Internet as a gateway to accessing electronic resources.

The University of Venda has introduced tablet provision to all registered students since 2017 (Egberongbe, 2011). However, most university communities had no Internet connection from home during the COVID-19 lockdown. As alluded to above, UNIVEN is a rural university, and the inaccessibility to computers and Internet connectivity in rural areas could lead to low usage of electronic resources (Dulle, 2015). The limitations experienced in accessing information in developing countries during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown could not be overlooked in rural universities in developing countries such as South Africa (Ndou & Ramabina, 2021). Furthermore, Izzeddin (2021) reveals that socioeconomic status and geographical area play a role in accessing electronic resources during the COVID-19 lockdown. Between July 2018 and July 2021, the usage statistics of the PressReader online newspapers were accessed 10786 times at UNIVEN, not enough for a student population of 17,000 in 2021. As mentioned above, the University library must do more to market this PressReader service to users. Libraries must market their services and provide a digital infrastructure for users to access and

read these online newspapers (Kobusingye, 2017). In summary, research interpretations of this topic can encompass changes in reading patterns, information needs, digital literacy, and broader implications for the university community, including educational strategies and the role of credible sources during significant events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Top 10 most popular online newspapers on PressReader from July 2018-July 2019

Newspaper title	Number of views
Sunday times	1227
Sowetan	771
Business day	588
Mail & Guardian	487
The Citizen (KZN)	434
City Press	395
The Star Early Edition	305
Cape Times	261
Sunday World	205
Pretoria News	192
Total	**4865**

Table 2: Top 10 most popular online newspapers on PressReader from August 2019-July 2020

Newspaper title	Number of views
Sunday Times	1119
Sowetan	513
Mail & Guardian	437
City Press	417
Business Day	335
The Citizen (KZN)	265
Sunday World	265
The Star Early Edition	201
The Washington Post	169
Financial Mail	89
Total	**3810**

Table 3: Top 10 most popular online newspapers on PressReader from August 2020 to July 2021

Newspaper title	Number of Views
Sunday Times	701
Mail & Guardian	337
Sowetan	275
Business Day	208
Sunday World	167
The Star Early Edition	165
The Citizen (KZN)	112
City Press	61
The Washington Post	61
Soccerladuma	24
Total	**211**

5 Conclusion

Most academic libraries have moved from paper to online newspaper subscriptions to reach users worldwide. The study examined the use of online newspapers at the University of Venda before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study findings showed that Sunday Times, Sowetan, Mail and Guardian, and Business Day were the most famous newspapers at UNIVEN between July 2018 and July 2021. The Citizen (KZN), City Press, The Star Early Edition, Sunday World, and Pretoria News were also the most popular titles among the UNIVEN community. Between July 2018 and July 2019, the most popular online newspapers at UNIVEN were read 4865 times, and from July 2019 to July 2020, the usage statistics from the same top 11 journals dropped to 3810. Another drop can be seen between July 2020 and July 2021, when usage statistics dropped to 2111. This last period was in the middle of the COVID-19 lockdown when the library was closed, and most users were away from campus. It could mean that most library users depend on the university network to access their online newspapers.

6 Implications and recommendations

Studying the reading patterns of a university community's online newspaper before and during the COVID-19 pandemic can provide valuable information with various implications. Understanding how the university community's online newspaper reading patterns evolved can provide insights into broader shifts in media consumption behaviour. This information can be valuable to media organisations, helping them adapt their content and delivery methods to meet changing needs (McQuail, 2010). Furthermore, identifying disparities in access to online news sources can prompt efforts to bridge the digital divide. Warschauer (2004) argued that universities and policymakers can use this information to ensure all community members have equal access to essential information resources. Another implication is that the study may reveal variations in the university community's digital literacy levels. This can highlight the need for media literacy programmes and interventions to help individuals critically evaluate online news sources and navigate the digital information landscape effectively. Media outlets and advertisers can use insights into changing reading patterns to refine their marketing and advertising strategies. They can tailor content and advertisements to align with the preferences and behaviours of the university community during difficult periods (Belch & Belch, 2018). Universities and libraries can use the insights from this study to enhance their emergency preparedness plans, ensuring that communication strategies are in place to disseminate information effectively during future crises. Libraries are recommended to

raise awareness of the existence of online newspapers and provide a digital infrastructure for users to access and read these online newspapers. Considering these implications, the research study on the reading patterns of a university community before and during the COVID-19 pandemic may have a broader impact on the media, education, policy, and community well-being. It can help stakeholders make informed decisions, adapt to changing circumstances, and improve information dissemination strategies.

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