Readers' perceptions and preferences for online and print newspapers in South Africa

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This study examines readers' perceptions and preferences for online and print newspapers in four South African legacy newspapers. Specifically, the study aims to: i) determine the influence of whether or not a print newspaper succeeded in the 4IR; ii) examine the challenges and opportunities that print newspapers in South Africa face; and iii) examine the influence of customer satisfaction on customer perceptions of print newspapers. The study employed a quantitative methodology, and data from readers of the Daily Maverick 168, the Mail and Guardian, Isolezwe, and Grocott's Mail were gathered and analysed using a descriptive survey method. A sample of 249 readers made up the study's participants, and the technique for gathering data was a standardised questionnaire. The findings show that readers' perceptions and preferences influenced their decision to read a particular newspaper. The study recommends that all key players in the South African newspaper sector make use of the findings to enrich strategies and policies for the adoption of news materials in the sphere of digital business.

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Introduction

The print media sector has undergone changes as a result of new technologies and the rise of digital and social media at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The change in the print media sector is more obvious now than it has ever been in the history of print media worldwide (Nelson, 2019). Numerous difficulties have been posed to print newspapers in the twenty-first century by new technologies. Some print newspapers are published daily or once a week, and their purpose is to enlighten the public about current issues, particularly public affairs. Newspapers publish local, national, and international news, along with editorials, advertisements, sports and entertainment features, and opinion pieces. According to Bell (2016) and Waterson et al. (2021), before the advent of digital and social media in the late 1990s, which was prompted by both media convergence and digitalization, the print newspaper had been around for decades and served as the primary source of information.

With the introduction of the economics of "media abundance" and news choice for readers, as well as innovation, new media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, Google's Accelerated Mobile News Pages, Apple's News Pages, and many others have wreaked havoc on the circulation and readership of the printed newspapers. Sambrook (2017) made note of this when he observed that social media entrants are stealing readers and income from newspapers as a result of technology-induced traps, which are altering consumer behaviour. The communication landscape has been strongly dominated by new information processing, storage, and retrieval techniques, as well as changing readership patterns. In the modern age, newspapers can be in the form of online and print. Print newspapers refer to newspapers that are produced in the form of hard copies using paper and ink. Online newspapers refer to web newspapers that are published and read over the internet, or World Wide Web.

Levine (2017) noted that the internet had simultaneously triggered an ‘information overload’ and an ‘information explosion', respectively, which are more efficient in the dissemination of information and have continued to replace print methods of information.
delivery more rapidly. In the digital age, online and mobile news is instantly disseminated, posing challenges to print news. In the context of this study, Alexander et al. (2016) explained that readers are defined as any individual or group of individuals who read a specific newspaper. Newspapers have created value for readers for centuries by compiling important news and information that their editors and reporters carefully sorted through, chose the appropriate content using journalistic judgement and values, and edited for truthfulness, accuracy, balance, and impartiality (Picard, 2017). However, internet news providers break down this value by giving readers access to isolated news items, which might or might not be interesting to a variety of readers. Additionally, compared to newspapers and other media, the internet provides infinite room, which diminishes the value of single-story information that is uploaded there (Rainie et al., 2017).

The most important question raised by the decline in print newspaper readership around the world is why people continue to read or stop engaging with print media. It was noted that fewer people are reading newspaper print editions (Hassan et al., 2018). On the other hand, audiences are expanding on new media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, Google's Accelerated Mobile News Pages, Apple's News Pages, and many others. In light of this, this study seeks to analyze readers' perceptions and preferences, as well as the factors that motivate them to read their preferred print newspapers in South Africa.

Newspapers have faced some significant problems in terms of readership since the introduction of digital and social media, thanks to the platforms made possible by information and communication technologies (ICT). If action is not taken, this development has the potential to drive print media out of business. In a study conducted by Hassan et al. (2018), it was discovered that internet technologies, which are more efficient and effective in the dissemination of information, are continuing to replace print methods of information delivery more rapidly. This resulted in most newspapers adopting the new media for accessible and quicker news. The number of people who read print newspapers has declined markedly in the past few years, while the number of people who frequent online and mobile news overall is rising. Thus, in order to enhance service delivery and readership in the newspaper sector, it is crucial to look at reader preferences and perceptions as stakeholders who purchase and consume news.

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

**Print Newspapers Vs Online Newspaper**

In order to study and forecast the future of print media, particularly newspapers, in the age of digital and social media, a thorough assessment of numerous studies from around the globe has been undertaken (Hassan, 2018; Rusha & Pooja, 2019; Anyim, 2021). These studies concentrate on the preferences, acceptance, duration, and interaction of online news readers. The majority of research concluded that the internet drastically reduced the number of people who read print newspapers; as a result, publishers must use new technology to survive. It was posited that internet newspapers might slightly substitute their counterparts; however, they do not seem to replace the entire potential of the print newspaper version vis-à-vis information and news contents (Anyim, 2021).

To evaluate the effects of the internet on traditional media in Sweden and the Nordic nations (Finland, Denmark, Iceland, and Norway), for instance, Springer (2021) used a quantitative approach. According to the study, the internet has had a significant impact on print media use in some nations but has only served as a supplement in others, where traditional media use has remained mostly unchanged. These results suggest that traditional media in these nations is being impacted by the internet differently. The Nordic nations are said to have a particularly strong heritage of newspaper reading (Springer, 2021). Despite this widespread reading habit, newspaper readership declined from 1996 to 2002 and again from 2005 to 2006. In Sweden, however, reading habits for print newspapers have barely changed since the internet's inception. Daily newspaper circulation fell across the board in the other Nordic nations, most noticeably in Norway and Denmark, and less noticeably in Sweden and Finland. In Nigeria, the news media has continued to grow so much that it is no longer difficult to access information.

Nigerian Guardian Newspaper (www.ngguardiannews.com) have already established a strong presence in cyber space amongst the pioneers, Independent Newspaper (www.newageon-line.com) and This Day Newspaper group (www.thisdayon-line.com) and so on (Anyim, 2021). It was discovered that the Nigerian media are measuring up with their counterparts in other parts of the world by maintaining strategic planning presence on the information super high way.

There was ample proof that the growth of the internet and new media was responsible for the drop in newspaper readership. According to Anyim (2021) “Reader's Perception and Preference for Online and Print Newspapers in the University Library,” most of them favour reading online news publications over offline or printed ones. The Internet World Stats of 2017 denote that Nigeria, with 91.6 million social media users, is ranked the largest Internet country in Africa (Hassan et al., 2018). In South Africa, online newspapers are read by many individuals; nevertheless, some readers might choose the paper version that is printed. Because they are unfamiliar with the newest technologies, older people, in particular, prefer to use exclusively printed materials. Springer (2021) undertook a long-term study to determine the demographics, reading preferences, and opinions of the Swedish local newspapers' online audience.

In order to examine the uniqueness of the content and information, Rusha & Rana (2019) conducted a content analysis to compare the content of print and online newspapers. Included in the additional or alternative content could be images, graphics, multimedia, or interactive elements. The analysis discovered that while most items, save for a few, had essentially the same text, a larger percentage of them appeared with different headlines in print and online versions. The headlines for pieces published online and in
print varied. Online newspapers contained certain distinctive components that were not possible to offer in print, such as comment sections and videos. The research revealed that, despite the significant digital revolution, the circulation of print media and online news is rising.

Additionally, Lucena (2011) investigated the alleged causative relationship between the rise of the internet and the apparent drop in print newspaper circulation with regard to global economic downturns between 2000 and 2009. The following six nations were chosen for analysis: Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, Japan, Brazil, and India. The results showed that, with a more year-by-year emphasis, the steady growth in internet penetration rates in Canada and the United States is mirrored by the consistent fall in newspaper circulation. Even though there was a substantial correlation generally between newspaper circulation and internet penetration for the time period in the Netherlands, internet penetration rose there as well between 2002 and 2005 with little impact on newspaper circulation. Inverse relationships similar to those shown in other industrialised nations were also seen in Japan; however, they lacked clarity. With the exception of 2005, Brazil's internet penetration appears to have had an adverse effect on newspaper circulation across the whole period. Even with the large population taken into account, India's poor internet penetration may prevent a substantial year-to-year fluctuation from signifying significant growth.

Hassan et al. (2021) similarly used semi-structured interviews to look at how the internet affects the UK's newspaper creation and distribution processes. The results demonstrated that newspapers began proactively engaging with customers to create various forms of relationship value while using the internet as an operational resource. There is a significant impact of the internet on print newspapers. The research also showed that, despite the newspaper industry's shift towards co-creating values with its customers through online mechanisms like blogs and discussion forums, it was still firmly in the customization stage at that time. The study emphasised the contribution of consumers to news content creation and consumer-driven developments towards a multimedia distribution platform.

The impact of internet news on readers of print newspapers has been shown to be manageable in some nations (Hassan et al., 2018). Despite the availability of online media, Malaysians still read print newspapers. Salman et al. (2011) claim that although Malaysia's major newspapers face numerous challenges, they are still the country's citizens' primary source of reading content. Similarly, Everett (2011) discovered that while 32.7% of news consumers preferred reading print newspapers to their online counterparts, 50.5% of consumers preferred internet newspapers. A comparative longitudinal study on newspaper consumption in the information age was also carried out by Thurman (2014). The study focused on assessing brand popularity and multi-channel audience attention among UK print newspapers. According to the report, print newspapers are still widely read. Additionally, the results showed that readers spend roughly 96.7% of their time reading news in print.

Speakman (2011) investigated the veracity and accuracy of news sources, both print and online. The purpose of the study was to determine whether people who read online news more often will find print newspapers to be less reliable and accurate. The study found that, compared to those who read internet news less frequently, those who read online news more frequently thought print newspapers were less reliable and believable. The extent of audience preferences for print and online newspapers in Nigeria was also examined (Hassan et al., 2018). According to the research, users somewhat prefer online newspapers to print versions. Furthermore, despite the availability of online editions, readers expressed confidence in the future of print newspapers. Additionally, studies demonstrate that reader demographics have a crucial role in determining preferences for print and online media. Cherian and Jacob (2012) discovered a strong correlation between respondents' demographics and their preference for media. The readers, especially young people, prefer online media to print media, and they concur that print media must alter changes to some extent.

Another study (Hassan et al., 2018) looked at the relationship between reading online newspapers and using other information sources, primarily print newspapers, as well as how much online newspapers influence print newspaper readership. The study found that young people prefer reading online newspapers to their print counterparts, and as a result, online newspaper reading is only marginally and unfavourably related to print newspaper reading in terms of mere interaction and not reading time. The study came to the conclusion that print and online newspapers work best when used in tandem. However, there are signs that the viability of print newspapers as a source of information is in jeopardy. The emergence of online publications has added to the ongoing loss in print newspaper reading since the 1970s. In order to determine if the internet poses a threat to the existence of print newspapers, Char (2019) also used a survey method and in-depth interviews to study the reading preferences of newspaper readers in Zimbabwe. According to the report, print newspapers are still widely read. According to the study, many users printed news stories from websites to read them later, indicating that print newspapers were still the preferred medium. The research by Char (2019) also showed that the majority of Zimbabwe's print newspapers at the time did not provide online versions that are similar to the print editions. According to the author, there is no proof that readers would switch from print publications to their online counterparts. Santana et al. (2011) also looked at how different media affected newspaper readers' memories of news articles. The research showed that the popularity of print newspapers has not been significantly affected by the emergence of dynamic online publications.

Char (2019) denotes that the idea of replacing print newspapers in Africa seems remote due to a number of variables, such as the high cost of internet penetration, timeliness and convenience, interactivity, and lack of multimedia features, which create significant barriers to internet dissemination. The question remains unanswered. Print newspapers' future may be uncertain; however, internet publications won't totally supplant print publications. Publishers of print newspapers are currently reacting to the recent developments...
and complexity in the media sector. This is due to the fact that readers care about the content of both print and online newspapers (Hassan et al., 2018).

**Research and Methodology**

The research used a descriptive survey methodology. In this study, the researcher polled 249 newspaper readers' opinions because they are the ones who choose whether or not to purchase a newspaper and why. A structured questionnaire was used to get the desired respondents from newspaper readers. Using IBM SPSS, version 27, readers' opinions were quantitatively examined. Google Forms, a reliable tool for online data collection, was used to collect responses from Daily Maverick 168 media group users (Sivakumar, 2019). The Daily Maverick's management graciously agreed to this researcher's request that the newspaper's online version publish the questionnaire and collect anonymous responses from readers in order to conduct the online questionnaire survey.

**Findings and Discussions**

The Daily Maverick 168 was read by 29.9% of readers who responded because of its credibility and by 24.2% because of what they perceived to be its high quality of news, according to an analysis of the readers' news consumption patterns and what they rated as important to them. According to the research, 29.9% of readers were interested in the newspaper's social, economic, and environmental reporting, while 34.6% were interested in the newspaper's current affairs. According to the analysis, 26.4% of readers said that the Daily Maverick 168 published news that was both informative 20.8% and promoted high-quality journalism.

According to the data, 16.7% of readers who took part in this study who read the Mail and Guardian did so because it was accessible and informative, while 33.3% did so out of habit. The newspaper was read for a variety of reasons by readers. For example, 16.7% of readers read it for the current affairs stories, 16.7% for the social, economic, and environmental news, and 16.7% for the sports stories. According to readers' perceptions of the newspaper's worth, 66.7% said it provided high-quality journalism, and 50% thought it was useful for delivering factual news material.

According to the study, 33.9% of readers agreed that print newspapers are simpler to read than their online counterparts, while 33.9% disagreed, and the remaining readers did not see any difference. The results also showed that while more than 80% of readers prefer the print edition of the newspaper, subscriptions to online newspapers climbed from one-fourth to more than half. However, the results showed that readers would be more interested in a future multimedia paper edition. This result demonstrates the growth of online newspapers at the time the study was conducted. According to an analysis of the IsiZulu readers who took part in the study, 50% of the readers thought the newspaper was approachable, and 33.3% read it because it helped them reset their cultural perspectives. According to the investigation, 50% of the research participants read IsiZulu because it covered current events; 66.7% did so since the news articles were written in isiZulu, their mother tongue; and 33.3% thought it provided “accurate and unfiltered information.”

66.7% of readers at Grocott's Mail said they read the paper because it covered current events, while 33.3% said they did so because it informed them and addressed local issues. Measures of central tendency were used to determine how central the distribution of the study's constructs was. The findings indicate that most survey participants (mean = 4.07) who read newspapers thought they were crucial because they helped readers feel more a part of their neighbourhood, South Africa, and the rest of the world. On a scale of 1 to 5, most respondents (41%) rated connectedness as 5, which is “very, very important,” while 32.5% thought newspapers were “a bit important” in helping them deal with problems in their lives and 49.8% thought they were “not important at all” in terms of assisting them in raising their families.

Additionally, 30.9% of the respondents said that newspapers were crucial in assisting them in resolving important matters, and 41% thought that newspapers were ‘a bit essential’ in assisting them in making key decisions on where to go or what to do with their lives. About 58% of the respondents said that newspapers had little influence on their ability to save money in their daily lives.

**Conclusions**

This survey looked at how South African readers felt about print newspapers and which ones they preferred. Readers' perspectives and preferences for reading a certain newspaper varied as a result of the findings. According to the study, consumers choose a certain newspaper for its credibility, excellent news quality, coverage of current events, and reporting on social, economic, and environmental issues. Others read newspapers for habitual reasons, accessibility, sports news, and high-quality journalism, finding the publications to be useful for factual news reporting. As many scholars have correctly stated, the development of information technologies may boost the popularity of online news sources but may not completely eliminate the use of print newspapers. Print newspapers appear most likely to continue to thrive in South Africa, especially among older users, because most of the elderly are less familiar with information technologies than the younger population.

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