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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Mixed Blessing: Impact of Covid-19 on Authors and Libraries in Zambia

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Abstract

The study examines the impact of Covid-19 on authors and libraries in Zambia. Data were collected for three weeks through in-depth interviews via WhatsApp platform and phone calls with the participants. Being a qualitative study, 15 participants were randomly selected from a sampling framework of 157 respondents. Ten participants were authors while five were librarians. The phenomenological approach was found apposite for this study because it involved collecting, describing, and examining participants' individual lived experiences about a particular phenomenon, in this case, the Covid-19 pandemic impact. The data were analysed thematically according to the general steps for analysing phenomenological data as presented by LoBiondo and Hube (1988). The study shows that the impact of Covid-19 on authors and libraries is something of a double-edged sword. While on the downside, it has reduced book sales, increased the cost of publishing, and threatened job security and access to resources, on the upside it has challenged authors and libraries to think outside the box. Authors are challenged to maximise digital resources while libraries should invest in digital resources and virtual libraries. The study concludes that the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted negatively as well as positively on the book industry in Zambia.

Keywords: Authors, book industry, challenges, Covid-19 pandemic, libraries

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in February 2019 has largely disrupted every aspect of human life (Husain, 2020). As Covid-19 spreads across the globe, alarm bells are sounding not only in the education sector but also in all other spheres of life. The book industry has equally received a fare of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Probbhan (2020), bookshops have suffered during the pandemic while Ncube and Nyabadza (2020) opine that libraries have been closed all over the world. Zambia has not been spared by the covid-19 global pandemic as many aspects of life have been upset by the ravaging impact of this pandemic. The purpose of this paper, therefore, was to establish the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the book industry and libraries in Zambia.



2. Literature Review

Several studies have been done on the impact of Covid-19 on the book industry and the Library. For instance, Probbhan (2020) collected the views of young writers on the effect of Covid-19 on the book industry. His findings revealed that the book industry has suffered during the pandemic which has been termed tragic. The study also revealed that the pandemic has given rise to captive readers because the lockdown has forced people to remain indoors for much longer periods than ever before. On the positive side of it, many people have been turned into captive readers as there is little else to do besides house chores. Ultimately, it means people are reading more than usual and that is great news for authors. Also, virtual interviews and discussions are reaching a lot more people in this pandemic era which gives writers great visibility. The study further revealed that the digital domain being popularized in the pandemic era has made it much easier to select and order books from the comfort of one's home. This is good for authors with an innate flair to bring forth awareness, hope, happiness, and prosperity in life through their writing. The study also indicates that as work from home becomes a new norm, writers may also bloom though the economic aspect of writing may take more time to come forth. The study revealed that the lockdown gave some writers time to complete their books and release them all over the world through Amazon self-publishing.

A survey by Winata et al, (2020) involving 126 university libraries in Indonesia revealed that libraries in Indonesia have experienced a service transformation implementing the Covid-19 health protocols. The study indicates that almost all university library services became virtual. Hence, there were several challenges faced by libraries and users in carrying out virtual activities in the library. As for Ncube and Nyabadza (2020), their study of Zimbabwean libraries revealed that the sudden standstill in service provision arising from the lockdown caused immediate confusion and uncertainty to all. This led to thinking outside the book by focusing on electronic communication. The study further revealed that many library services such as story reading sessions, and library day activities which were dedicated to the promotion of the reading culture were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The shutting down of the libraries forced library staff and clients to rely on WhatsApp and Telegram platforms to communicate. The possibility of not only book losses but also a financial loss to those types of libraries that depend on subscriptions and or membership fees were cited as some of the challenges faced by libraries.

The study by Bergman-Tahon (2020) reveals that the lockdown resulted in the closure of books shops in several countries in Europe leading to a drop in sales in bookshops between 75% and 95% in most countries. The study also indicates that the loss of the main channel plus the restrictions to movement and activities meant for many publishers a massive reduction in the level of work and numerous cases a total cessation. The study further revealed that the downside of the situation was the impossibility to organize public events such as book fairs, public readings, festivals, and other events that are key for authors' revenues and sales of books. At the peak of the Covid-19 crisis book sales drastically in Portugal, Italy, and in Slovenia. Similar losses were experienced all over Europe while online sales saw sharp growth as did digital sales. The study reveals further that there was a massive shift in lending in libraries, from physical to digital, and that 33% of the people worldwide read more books / listened to more audiobooks while at home during the crisis.

3. Research Method and Materials

The current research in its nature is qualitative and employs a thematic analysis of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the book industry, focusing on authors and Libraries. Data were collected over three weeks through in-depth interviews via WhatsApp platform and phone calls with the participants. Being a qualitative study, 15 participants were purposively selected from a sampling framework of 157 respondents. Of the 15 participants, 10 were authors while the rest (5) were librarians. The phenomenological approach was found apposite for this study because it involved collecting, describing, and

examining participants' individual lived experiences concerning a particular phenomenon, in this case, covid-19 pandemic impact. The data were analysed thematically according to the general steps for analysing phenomenological data as presented by LoBiondo and Hube (1988) and quoted in Patricia J. Connell's Ph.D. Thesis entitled *A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Adult Caregiving Daughters and Their Elderly Mother*, pp.36-37.

4. Results and Discussion

The main objective of the present research, however, was to establish the impact of Covid-19 on authors and libraries in Zambia. The findings of the study revealed many issues about how the pandemic has affected both the authors and libraries in particular and the book industry in general. The themes that emerged from the study indicate something of a double-edged sword. On the downside, the study revealed the following:

4.1. *Reduced Book Sales*

The current study revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic affected book sales negatively by reducing sales. This was necessitated by the lockdowns that were put in place. One respondent (RK) said:

"I was supposed to release my third book early this year as we had also arranged the Zambian Book Exhibition but I couldn't because most events, reading sessions, and workshops could not take place because these events were cancelled due to wanting to reduce the spread of the pandemic. Mid this year...I released my third book but my sales were affected, very few people would risk meeting me for their deliveries. It also affected the book signing I was supposed to have immediately after releasing my book, even radio and TV interviews were sometimes cancelled or postponed due to how the media houses were operating."

The above finding is in agreement with Bergan-Tahon's (2020) study which revealed that the downside of the Covid-19 situation was the impossibility to organize public events such as book fairs, public readings, festivals, and other events that are key for authors' revenues and sales of books.

4.2. *Increased Cost of Publishing*

The advent of Covi-19 pandemic has seen a rise in the cost of publishing and printing books while book sales have also been affected. This has been necessitated by some economic factors that have played negatively on the local currencies thereby increasing the cost of publishing and shipment of books as well. One respondent (RI) submitted that:

"My greatest challenge during the Covid-19 pandemic is printing books since I use Amazon. Amazon is not shipping to Africa until further notice. The weakening of our Zambian currency against major convertible currencies has affected me a lot. It means I need more money to print books unlike one year ago. Essentially, it is the funds to print more books as few people are buying books. All opportunities have been moved to next year because they involved traveling. Despite the challenges, I remain hopeful."

Another respondent (RS) added:

"My main challenge has been trying to get information together on stories I collect from children. Also, publishing is all-around expensive now due to the Covid-19 pandemic."

These challenges have not only been unique to authors but have also impacted the library industry as the cost of resources and equipment has gone up because of the high exchange rate propelled by the covid-19 pandemic.

One librarian respondent (RN) said:



“It is difficult to procure equipment and other requisites needed to respond to the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic because of the rising cost of resources driven by the high exchange rate. The need for a blended library model calls for more funds which are not easy to find against other competing needs.”

The above finding shows that Libraries have challenges in implementing library services due to the high cost of procuring equipment and other Library services which is attributed to high exchange rates in the currency due to the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. There is a need for Library management to consider increasing funding for Libraries to implement blended library model calls to meet the competing demands which have been caused due to the pandemic.

4.3. Limited Access to Resources

The study revealed that the shrinking of the economy due to limited activities during Covid-19 has adversely affected access to finances for necessities of the authors' life. Writers sometimes engage in commissioned work such that limited activities entail no commissions coming their way. Because Covid-19 measures prohibited gatherings, commissioned writers had to bear the brunt of dry pockets. One respondent (RB) lamented that:

“The inability to gather physically with like-minded people whether for small informal meetings or actual festivals and conferences has reduced access to networking opportunities which ultimately bring money in our pockets.”

The banning of physical gatherings did not only affect the authors but also affected the libraries seriously. One respondent (RCM) said that:

“As libraries, some of the challenges the Covid-19 pandemic has posed include inadequate ICTs and the difficult to convince users to use e-resources as they are comfortable using physical books in a physical library.”

Another respondent (RN) added that:

“Low budget allocations as a result of the impact of Covid-19 have impacted negatively on library operations. Libraries have shut down and this has resulted in the loss of revenue for those libraries that thrive on subscriptions.”

The finding above is in tandem with Ncube and Nyabadza's (2020) study which revealed that the possibility of not only book losses but also the financial loss to those types of libraries that depend on subscriptions and or membership fees were cited as some of the challenges faced by libraries. On the upside, the pandemic has created many opportunities for authors and libraries alike.

4.4. Challenged Authors and Libraries to Think Outside the Box

Most authors took advantage of the lockdown by maximizing the time spent at home. Authors had to embrace creativity to survive the harsh reality of the Covid-19 pandemic. One respondent (RM) submitted thus:

“For me, the Covid-19 quarantine gave me more time to write and create content. It also allowed me to develop creative and innovative ways to share my content.”

Most authors used the locked-down time and the work-from-home measure to create content as well as take advantage of the online resources for their research and referencing. One respondent (RB) added that:

“As a creative, my personal experience during the Covid-19 pandemic time has been that, as a result of time spent alone, I have been able to tap into inner resources and create in a manner that has not been possible in the past because I didn't have the time to mine within. The partial lockdowns have created these opportunities for me. Also, I have realized that sometimes I don't always require buying materials

for me to be creative. My immediate environment provides necessary resources or at least alternatives to improvise. As a creative writer, I have had the privilege of taking advantage of online resources for my research and free online courses for creatives.”

Another author (RP) added:

“To me, the Covid-19 period gave me enough time to work on the unfinished work because of less pressure and working from home. Despite the pandemic having affected sales especially, it opened back plans and also brought in the importance of epub (electronic publishing).”

The findings are echoing Probbhan's (2020) study which revealed that the pandemic has given rise to captive readers because the lockdown has forced people to remain indoors for much longer periods than ever before. Probbhan (2020) further revealed that the lockdown gave some writers time to complete their books and release them all over the world through Amazon self-publishing. The findings clearly show that the Covid-19 pandemic has not only provided an opportunity for authors to be creative but also created opportunities for them to work on pending book projects. Further, Covid-19 has not only laid new strategies for writers to be able to conduct meetings, workshops, and discussions virtually but also enabled them to discover new strategies to brand and market themselves even though it came with its challenges.

4.5. Challenged Authors and Libraries to Invest in Digital Resources

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has seen a surge in the use of digital resources and platforms such as Telegram, WhatsApp, and others. The current study revealed that Covid-19 has created opportunities for both libraries and authors alike. For libraries, one respondent (RCM) submitted that:

“Opportunities that have come with Covid-19 include users, who are now able to access e-resources remotely outside the university, availability of open access materials that enable users to have a wide range of information to choose from, and to market library services to users through online platforms.”

The above findings are in line with Ncube and Nyabadza (2020) who revealed that the shutting down of Zimbabwean libraries forced library staff and clients to rely on WhatsApp and Telegram platforms to communicate.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted both negatively as well as positively on the book industry in Zambia. Both authors and Libraries have been challenged in one way or the other. Therefore, authors and librarians need to embrace innovation to cope with the current Covid-19 pandemic era to remain afloat in the book industry.

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