



# The Uptake of Live-streaming Technology among Zimbabwean Musicians and their Audiences

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## Abstract

The advent of digital technology has resulted in new possibilities in the music industry as concerts are now accessible from any connected location on the globe. In recent years this has been coupled with the COVID-19 crisis that had a catastrophic impact on the music industry that sustains millions of employees such as performers, recording studios, and publishing companies. The purpose of this study was to examine the acceptance of live-streaming technology among Zimbabwean musicians and their audiences during and soon after the pandemic. This was qualitative research in which respondents were purposively selected. Netnography was used in which the study observed the use of live-streaming on digital platforms such as Gateway Stream, YouTube, and Facebook. Interviews were used to collect primary data, which was triangulated with observation and document analysis. Findings reveal that music live-streaming in Zimbabwe has network challenges and artists and fans end up preferring live performances. Collaboration between the music and IT industries can create Zimbabwe-owned platforms and software for affordability, compatibility, and ease of use. The researchers argue that artists should actively embrace technology to grow their fan bases and benefit from online presence. The study also recommends live-streaming physical performances for wider reach. Further research is needed to determine the income and effectiveness of live-streaming platforms.

## Introduction

Digital technology has transformed the way business is conducted, particularly in the global music industry. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, artists heavily relied on live performances for their income. When the pandemic hit, they quickly had to prepare for unforeseen circumstances that required them to adapt to stay relevant. Unfortunately, most Zimbabwean musicians were not used to aggressively marketing their own work prior to the outbreak. The COVID-19 pandemic, from late 2019 to early 2022, led to global panic and national lockdowns enforced to control the virus's spread. To adjust, musicians and their supporters utilised online platforms to hold concerts. Brooks et al. (2022) reveal that artists' careers were fraught with anxiety and uncertainty. Some artists and their fans embraced live-streaming services during the pandemic. Vandenberg et al. (2020) state that live music became crucial for fostering social cohesion and resilience as it facilitated communication and emotional reciprocity.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a new dilemma because live performances require large audiences, which became impossible due to movement restrictions and the prohibition of mass



gatherings. The cancellation of public events in Zimbabwe particularly impacted musicians who rely heavily on live performances to make a living (Kamara and Mpfunya, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, only workers in essential services like retail and health were allowed to make monitored movements. However, some online spectators expressed feelings of loneliness, indicating that live-streamed music lacked the atmosphere of a live performance. Despite this, musicians continued to turn to live-streaming during the pandemic to sustain their careers and maintain their presence. The study focuses on how live-streaming technology contributed to the survival strategies of musicians in Harare, Zimbabwe, from the COVID-19 pandemic era to 2024. It highlights how artists and producers were affected by the crisis and the strategies used to overcome challenges. The specific objectives of this study are: (1) To examine how artists and their audiences have leveraged live-streaming technology to maintain their presence in Harare; and (2) To determine whether the COVID-19 pandemic has paved the way for a new paradigm in Harare's artistic landscape.

The advent of technology has ushered in an era of digital entrepreneurship across the global village. Gillespie (2021) refers to music streaming platforms as content intermediaries, while Hjörth et al. (2020) discuss their facilitation of daily social interaction. They are also regarded as innovations (Hutter et al., 2018) that empower artists to reach wider audiences regardless of location. Gopaldas (2022) examines the impact of digital technology, questioning whether it leads to digital democracy or digital dictatorship in Africa. The researchers have noted that while digital technology has liberalised communication, authorities also utilise digital platforms to spread both positive and propagandist ideology. It is up to artists to capitalise on digital technology to disseminate their music and gain rewards. While music live-streaming platforms have revolutionised the music industry for a couple of decades now, the infrastructure and their uptake in some parts of Africa still lag.

Robinson (2021) suggests that musicians should embrace the messiness and vulnerability of social media as a studio practice, experimenting and improving their work. Since the onset of COVID-19, artists have used creative techniques to connect with fans and spread positive vibes. Celebrity musicians like Lizzo and John Legend have surprised fans with live virtual performances on Instagram and Facebook Live. Although different from in-person performances, live-streaming offers a rewarding way for musicians to connect with audiences and generate revenue from their musical content. Elkins (2019) notes that artists considering the incorporation of live-streaming into their business strategy should recognise that interaction with the audience is the key to ensuring success. He asserts that the most valuable asset from live-streaming is the community created. He further encourages resilience and engagement with the audience, as fans find value in original performances. The author also recommends finding a balance between live-streamed and recorded content, as fans appreciate the opportunity to get to know the performer both on and off the stage.

Hesmondhalgh et al. (2021) suggest that live-streaming platforms can be used to fulfil a playful creative process, joy, authenticity, or vision. They argue that each platform has its own language, style, and intention, and that the choice should consider whether the work requires a known audience or an anonymous one, whether the work benefits from live or saved screening, and the monetary value of streaming. Several live-streaming platforms are available to musicians. However, Robinson (2021) and Johnson (2022) recommend Twitch Music, Instagram Live, Facebook Live, Twitter Live, Uscreen, Live-stream, StageIt, Mixcloud, and YouNow. Chen and Liao's (2022) study on live-streaming reveals that a sense of community, interactivity, and emotional support positively affects viewers' social presence, leading to participation in live-streaming. Additionally, streamer attractiveness moderates this relationship. The study suggests that live-streaming can be viewed as equally valid as physical performances, bridging the gap in research on these two types of performances. Wang et al. (2021) discuss live-streaming events or businesses as complementary to physical presence. They state that



live-streaming physical events increases future attendance, targets dormant members, reaches a larger audience, allows the event to be archived, boosts the bottom line, is more affordable, and enhances social media presence.

Bienvenu (2020) argues that live-streaming is not a new phenomenon in the music industry, as it dates back to 1994. The industry had already utilised the internet for marketing and music promotion, with platforms like Twitch, YouTube Live, Facebook, and Instagram introducing live features in 2011. Prior to COVID-19, live-streaming was employed to reach larger fan bases, with successful examples such as Coachella's 2019 edition attracting over 82 million views online. China was among the first countries to create a live-streaming platform, Bilibili, which catered to 70 bands. Europe also employed live-streams for concerts during the three main lockdowns between March 2020 and early 2022. Bienvenu's study suggests that live-streaming technology has become widely accepted by musicians to expand their fan base and reach broader audiences. Onderdijk et al. (2021) found that live-stream concert organisers need to promote audience members' feelings of presence, with virtual reality enhancing physical presence and reducing negative feelings like loneliness.

However, these studies do not focus on the experiences of African artists and their audiences, which highlights the gap for this research. Previous studies in the domain of music live-streaming in Zimbabwe have been sparse, and this paper seeks to fill that gap. Notably, online music streaming platforms are international, including Spotify, YouTube, TuneCore, Apple Music, and Vimeo. Retail sites such as Africassette, Amazon, CD Now, HMV Online, Barnes & Noble, and Brown Sugar Web also exist, allowing musicians to conduct business online. Kamara and Mpfunya (2023) reported that the Covid-19 pandemic pushed music consumption even further online, including the viewing of streamed live performances. Zimbabwe currently has Gateway Stream, which still needs to be embraced by more local artists. Sound Diplomacy recommended developing the local digital infrastructure, providing an internet grant programme for musicians and organisations, and supporting homegrown streaming services ("Do streaming services provide", 2025). Nyahuma (2020: 14) confirms this when he states there "is a limitation to the acquisition of music by many Zimbabweans as they do not have credible online facilities to acquire the music." The lack of literature on music live-streaming in Zimbabwe motivated the researchers to undertake this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study adopted the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis (1989), which focuses on user acceptance and usage of technology based on perceived ease of use and usefulness. Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) refers to the degree of ease with which a user can interact with technology, while perceived usefulness (PU) denotes the extent to which technology enhances the user experience. This study aims to understand the attitudes of Zimbabwean musicians towards live-streaming technology, considering factors such as data costs, devices, and internet service availability. The research also utilised social presence theory to examine the impact of the coronavirus on the arts industry, particularly in Zimbabwe. This theory emphasises the perceived human presence in computer-mediated or virtual environments (Bickle, 2019). Live-streaming enhances viewer interaction and product experience, promoting continuous viewing and influencing purchasing decisions. However, the study also highlights the importance of physical presence in society, as humans naturally crave physical interaction in social settings such as bars and music venues.

### **Methodology**

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach to generate a nuanced understanding of the uptake of music live-streaming by Zimbabwean artists. Qualitative research methods were chosen because they seek to answer questions by probing social settings and the entities that operate within them (Berg, 2009). Qualitative research in this study enabled the researchers to understand, discover, explore, and



elucidate the local musicians' situations, feelings, perceptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, and experiences with digital music live-streaming (Kumar, 1999). This was coupled with a quantitative methodology because the combination of both approaches provides a better understanding of the research problem than either approach alone (Cresswell, 2009). This research targeted musicians and producers based in Harare, Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was employed by the researcher to select experts in the research area, ensuring the most relevant data was collected and useful conclusions drawn for future studies. There were two main sample categories: the artists and their fans. A total of ten musicians were approached, and 20 fans of these artists were selected for the study. To select fans, the researchers visited the artists' Facebook page and identified those classified as top fans by Facebook. The study utilised interviews, observations, and document analysis to gather insights on the uptake of live-streaming technology in Harare during and after the Covid-19 pandemic period. The data was summarised into relatable themes and subjected to coding, classification, and tabulation. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, respect, beneficence, and non-maleficence were observed.

## **Results and discussion**

### *Challenges faced by musicians in Harare due to Covid-19 restrictions*

It is common knowledge that most sectors of the economy were adversely affected by COVID-19, although those involved with technology-related products experienced growth. This section discusses how COVID-19 impacted the operations of performing artists. The pandemic significantly affected live music performances in Harare, yielding both positive and negative effects. The initial stages were largely negative, as people opted to stay home instead of attending live performances. Regarding the pandemic's impact on human interaction, studies such as one conducted by Teixeira et al. (2021) indicate that fewer than 50% of respondents were willing to return to live music performances, contingent on a vaccine being developed. Music serves a crucial role as a social art that unifies communities, and the researchers point out that, henceforth, music operations could benefit from embracing live-streaming technology to maintain a presence in the Zimbabwe music industry.

Lockdown restrictions imposed by the Zimbabwean government severely impacted live music performances, resulting in musicians staying at home and not earning money from live shows. Seven out of the ten interviewed musicians reported a significant drop in their monthly earnings, with some making less than half of their pre-pandemic income due to the cancellation of scheduled monthly shows. The suspension of live music performances affected the livelihoods of the musicians' dependents, as eight of the ten interviewed musicians had no other source of income. The pandemic also hindered creative output, leading to limited or no rehearsal and recording sessions, which diminished the frequency of new musical releases. Additionally, we noted that the economic downturn resulting from the restrictions left bouncers, vendors, crew members, music promoters, and other supporting sectors in the music industry without alternative income sources.

We observed that the Zimbabwean government implemented COVID-19 measures to curb the spread of the virus and flatten the infection curve. This resulted in a nationwide lockdown, leading to staff retrenchments and low revenue collections. The music industry experienced negative effects, with studio owners and sound engineers feeling hopeless. The pandemic highlighted the inequality between music categories and the precarious nature of careers for non-established musicians. Experienced musicians had to manage social media campaigns and marketing efforts, while less established musicians faced difficulties in finding alternative income sources. Lockdown regulations disrupted production operations, limiting band members' movement to studios and imposing police roadblocks. As the demand for music grew, families and corporations held functions with limited





attendees, resulting in acoustic performances instead of live music performances. For instance, Zinhuku (2021: 01) noted in respect of Zimbabwe that:

Covid-19 brought about suffering due to loss of revenues as live performances were banned resulting in financial distress. Also, music artists faced social challenges in relation to family dynamics as they tried to cope with the pandemic and its effects. Music artists ended up depressed and stressed as a result of quarantining and social distancing rules. A number of music artists succumbed to coronavirus robbing the music industry of talented artists.

Artists employed various coping strategies to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. For example, Master KG, a South African musician, released the gospel-influenced house song "Jerusalema" in November 2019. The song gained popularity due to the #JerusalemaChallenge, which went viral and reached number one in Belgium, the Netherlands, Romania, and Switzerland. It also garnered over half a billion views on YouTube by the end of 2020 (Baxter, 2021). Additionally, it was picked up by radio stations worldwide, with Italy, France, and Germany having the highest number of plays. Master KG's song earned him USD235, 000 by the end of September 2020, despite the pandemic's impact on many musicians (Chirisa, 2020). Such coping strategies may have helped Zimbabwean musicians reduce the pandemic's effects on their income streams.

Zimbabwe musicians indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected their show business in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwean popular musicians Albert Nyathi, Derrick Mpofu, Thembalami, Alick Macheso, and Sandra Ndebele all expressed concerns about their online presence and income. Macheso, a multi-award-winning sungura artist, believes that the public's criticism of musicians lacking savings is misplaced, considering the country's economic crises worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. He emphasised that his focus on live music performances is due to the limited presence of some of his fans on live-streams. Saxophonist and lead vocalist Tina Watyoka argues that live music performances attract more fans than online ones, and the slow response from arts organisations and low government funding has hindered the survival of upcoming musicians.

#### *The use of streaming platforms for live music performances*

Prior to COVID-19, many artists were unfamiliar with live-streaming services. However, artists reported that COVID-19 forced them to learn technology and earn money through online platforms. In Zimbabwe, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Gateway Stream are the most frequently used platforms by musicians. YouTube is by far the most popular platform for Zimbabwean music consumers: 78% use it at least once a week. The second most popular platform is Facebook Live, utilised regularly by 37% of consumers. Only 8% of respondents say they do not use any streaming platform regularly (Kamara & Mpfunya, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted Zimbabwean musicians, leading to economic and psychological hardships. Some artists whose names are withheld for ethical reasons announced early retirement from show business due to stress and pressure. 68% of musicians questioned in November 2020 declared they had made no revenue whatsoever from streaming in the past year, and only 2% reported earning more than USD5000 from streaming revenue in a year (Kamara & Mpfunya, 2023).

Live-streaming enables musicians to continue providing music, but high data costs and poor network connectivity in Zimbabwe hinder access. This presents a challenge for both artists and their fans. Musicians Albert Nyathi, Edith Katiji, Tina Watyoka, Respina Patai, and Sandra Ndebele have pursued educational careers to broaden their opportunities. They indicated that taking music courses equipped them with knowledge and skills in music technology and applied ethnomusicology, which are essential for survival in the digital age. There are artists who have turned to social satire through skits (Chiweshe et al., 2023) and comedy parodies to maintain their public visibility. These include



Fredo, Kapfupi, and The Comic Pastor, who film skits and short musical videos and circulate them online. This provides them with a chance to benefit from YouTube views.

Janet Manyowa (personal communication, 7 July 2022), a gospel musician, reveals that her music is more of a passion than a business, though she expects some financial return. She found that selling branded merchandise via online stores, conducting live music performances, and acting as a brand ambassador are the main sources of income for most artists globally. She invested in online platforms and grew her presence on Facebook and YouTube, holding live-streams to maintain contact with her fans. Gospel musician Pastor G, also known as Gwanzura, increased his content output through online stores and utilised WhatsApp broadcasts to create a personal connection with fans. During lockdown, audiences consumed music through radio, phones, online platforms, and live-streamed performances. Fans' satisfaction levels with their favourite artists' use of technology varied, with five being satisfied, 11 partly satisfied, and four very satisfied. Responses indicate that while artists attempted to engage through technology, satisfaction levels differed. More artists still need to embrace digital platforms.

The interviewed respondents indicated that most musicians initially struggled to embrace live-streaming performances due to a lack of experience and familiarity with online platforms. However, as live music performances were banned, artists began exploring and hosting them on platforms such as Instagram, which attracted over 10,000 fans. Fans favoured online music performances over crowded venues. In Zimbabwe, both artists and fans welcomed online music performances, although some reported network challenges. To mitigate this, musicians stated they used pre-recorded performances to ensure good sound quality and eliminate network challenges.

Manyowa stated that live-streaming events were expensive and required a good PA system, a venue, and recording equipment. She treated her live-streaming performances like physical performances, attracting large crowds. Gwanzura faced challenges with stable networks and monetisation, which discouraged many musicians from recouping expenses for the live feed. Music fans indicated that they were mainly familiar with YouTube and Facebook live-streams rather than the Gateway Stream. Fewer respondents indicated familiarity with Gateway Stream compared to Facebook and YouTube. These streaming platforms are, however, thought to be costly. In terms of community sense, 13 fans indicated that online platforms lack a sense of community, while seven thought otherwise. Manhenga, a musician, used social media to engage fans but never utilised live-streaming services.

#### *The uptake of live-streaming over live music attendance in Harare*

Artists indicated that physical performances are better than online ones, especially in rural areas. They also believe that unstable networks make access to the internet more expensive. In Zimbabwe, lockdown measures later allowed musicians to conduct live music performances, which increased ticket prices from USD 5 to USD 20. Despite these increases, artists' incomes have not risen. Zimbabwe Music Rights Association (ZIMURA) Board Chairperson Albert Nyathi (personal communication, 5 May 2022) reported that:

Some artists in Harare have embraced live-streaming, but the number is less than half of the artists in the city. The majority prefer live performances for better immediate feedback and the potential for disturbances. Musicians frequently perform live at corporate functions, bars, and alongside other artists, which ensures profit, unlike live-stream performances, where hosts may incur losses. This is the main source of income for most artists.

Of the twenty fans who were asked whether they prefer a live-streaming performance or a physical performance, sixteen (80%) indicated that they prefer a physical performance, while four (20%) stated that they are comfortable with a live-stream. The 80% cited lack of internet connectivity and the unaffordability of data as the main hindrances to live-streaming music. This aligns with the position



of Kamara and Mpfunya (2023), which states that most online music consumers are accessing music for free, with only 27% of Zimbabweans reporting having a paid subscription to a streaming platform. It is confirmed that challenges such as internet costs persist in Zimbabwe (“Do streaming services provide,” 2025).

The Covid-19 pandemic has shifted operations for musicians in Harare, with eight of the ten interviewed artists expressing a strong need for music in the company of others. Live-streaming platforms have created a 'third space' for artists and fans to share emotions and support one another. However, concerns have been raised about the exclusive use of live-streaming internet platforms, particularly regarding limitations, privacy, intimacy, and the suitability of different music genres for online live-streaming (Kanga, 2022). Despite these challenges, Dereck Mpofu (personal communication, 8 July 2022) states that the live music performance industry in Zimbabwe should continuously embrace digital advancements to promote local music brands worldwide.

Observations made by researchers regarding the possibility of musicians and followers in Zimbabwe adapting to the use of live-streaming technology align with observations made by cited scholars. For example, Nyahuma (2020) says, “there is a need, therefore, by Zimbabwean musicians and producers to explore other online platforms such as Spotify, TuneCore, Apple Music and Vimeo to reach a wider audience.” Already, live-streaming without physical performance has decreased drastically. A few musicians who are still doing live-streaming do so to complement live performances rather than to perform independently. The research shows that while some artists accept live-streaming, a larger number of their fans prefer live performances. Kamara and Mpfunya (2023) confirm this, indicating that only 34% of Zimbabweans today consume music primarily through streaming, while another 23% primarily through WhatsApp transfers. Some artists believe that physical performances provide better feedback and are more satisfying than live-streams. Additionally, some musicians expand their income streams by performing at corporate functions.

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the Zimbabwe music industry, with Harare-based artists struggling to reach new followers through live-streaming. As the capital city, Harare enjoys better connectivity than remote towns. A hybrid strategy involving physical performances and pay-per-view platforms is essential. Technology evolves, and during lockdown, many artists retreated from adopting new technologies. However, this change is permanent, with most Zimbabwean artists returning to traditional methods. Live-streaming music performances can increase revenue, but may yield less than the costs incurred. Network instability and electricity issues have also adversely affected the industry. The COVID-19 pandemic has permanently altered the music landscape, leading to the integration of live-streaming and live performances. This strategy allows fans to follow artists' performances, even if they are not in their home cities, and enables them to watch online music performances they would have otherwise missed. However, this could potentially harm musicians.

## **Conclusion**

A significant paradigm shift has been experienced by popular musicians and their audiences, as evidenced by the way both have taken advantage of live-streaming technology to maintain their presence in Harare since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some artists in Harare have utilised technology to sustain their presence in the industry by engaging with fans through online performances, live-streaming, and social media, while others have struggled to do so. A few have invested in online stores and social media to foster a strong connection with their fans. This has increased content marketing through online stores and WhatsApp broadcasts to keep fans updated. During lockdown, fans consumed music via radio, phones, and online platforms. Connectivity and monetisation issues are resolved before recording live-streams. Fans are more familiar with YouTube and Facebook live-streams than with Gateway Stream. The research concludes that the music business



in Zimbabwe has partially adopted live-streaming, but this change requires infrastructure to become permanent. We argue that live-streaming should be combined with live performances to maximise income by allowing fans to follow artists even when they are not performing in their home cities. Artists should actively embrace technology at all times to avoid being caught off guard should another pandemic arise. Embracing technology will also ensure that artists expand their fan bases and online presence, ultimately resulting in increased income. Physical performances alone have limitations. In Zimbabwe, there is a need to develop local music streaming platforms. Relevant authorities should establish digital democracy training programmes for artists in Zimbabwe.

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