



A stakeholder approach to the membership challenges faced by a trade union in the mining industry

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DECLARATION

I, TL Lesabe, hereby declare that this mini-dissertation, entitled “A stakeholder approach to the membership challenges faced by a trade union in the mining industry”, which I submit to the North-West University, is my own original work, has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university, and that all sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

I further declare that I have followed the ethical guidelines and principles for research as prescribed by the North-West University. The required ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate university committee(s) prior to the commencement of the data collection.

I am a registered student for the degree of Master of Business Administration (MBA) at the North-West University.

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ABSTRACT

Title: A stakeholder approach to the membership challenges faced by a trade union in the mining industry

This study investigated the factors contributing to the membership decline within the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and explored potential strategies for revitalisation through a stakeholder-oriented lens. The mining sector in South Africa is undergoing profound transformation driven by technological change, shifting worker expectations, inter-union competition, and evolving governance demands. These dynamics necessitate an in-depth examination of how different stakeholders experience, interpret, and influence the union's membership trajectory.

A qualitative research design was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with ten purposively selected stakeholders, including current and former NUM members, shop stewards, officials, and external actors familiar with the union's organisational environment. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis framework, enabling the identification of patterns across narratives and the construction of themes grounded in participant experiences.

Six major themes emerged: (1) leadership and governance challenges; (2) organisational weaknesses and service delivery gaps; (3) member perceptions of representation and shifting worker expectations; (4) technological disruption, digitalisation, and automation; (5) political affiliation and identity tensions; and (6) inter-union rivalry, especially in relation to AMCU's growth. The findings demonstrate that NUM's membership challenges stem from a complex interplay of internal inefficiencies, external pressures, and changing generational and technological contexts. The results confirm global literature on union decline, while contributing a contextualised understanding of organisational legitimacy, identity reconstruction, and strategic adaptation within the South African mining sector.

The study concludes that revitalising the union requires governance renewal, improved workplace visibility, service-oriented organisational culture, digital transformation, targeted youth engagement, and strategic positioning within a competitive labour relations environment. Recommendations are presented for strengthening leadership accountability,

enhancing digital communication, repositioning NUM's identity, and responding proactively to inter-union dynamics. The study contributes to existing scholarship by offering a stakeholder-informed analysis of union resilience in a rapidly evolving industrial landscape.

Keywords: National Union of Mineworkers (NUM); trade union decline; membership challenges; digitalisation; automation; stakeholder theory; inter-union rivalry; AMCU; thematic analysis; qualitative research.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NUM	NATIONAL UNION OF MINEWORKERS
ANC	AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS
AMCU	ASSOCIATION OF MINEWORKERS AND CONSTRUCTION UNION
NWU	NORTH WEST UNIVERSITY
COSATU	CONGRESS OF SOUTH AFRICAN TRADE UNIONS
IoT	INTERNET OF THINGS
POPI	PROTECTION OF PERSONAL INFORMATION ACT
SATRI	SAM TAMBANI RESEARCH INSTITUTE
MIT	MINEWORKERS INVESTMENT TRUST
AI	ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE
MIC	MINEWORKERS INVESTMENT COMPANY
SWOT	STRENGTH, WEAKNESS, OPPORTUNITIES, THREATS
PMG	PLATINUM METAL GROUP

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CHAPTER 1: NATURE AND SCOPE OF STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

According to Visser (2019:7), trade unions are challenged with two main issues: the digital economy and the transformation of jobs and employment relations. Furthermore, Visser (2019:9) highlights that there is uncertainty about the future of trade unions. That is why there is a need for trade unions to widen their constituency and revitalise themselves in the contemporary environment to stay relevant (Webster *et al.*, 2022:1). Some of the key roles trade unions play in an economy includes collective bargaining, advocacy for workers' rights, education and training, social and economic policy influence and solidarity and collective action (U-Filing Guide, n.d.). A simple definition of a trade union is that it is an organisation that organises a group of workers who collectively advocate for their rights and interests in the workplace within a legal framework (Luzan, n.d.). Ultimately, trade unions must protect workers' rights first and foremost.

According to Flores-Castaneda *et al.* (2024), the integration of artificial intelligence in the mining sector is embraced for two reasons: first, to enhance production and, second, to improve ethical practices through the reduction of environmental implications. Moreover, Flores-Castaneda *et al.* (2024) predict that about 80-90% of the mining industry will have integrated digital technologies within the operations by the year 2050, and these technologies will include AI, IoT, machine vision and unmanned equipment with aims to address energy, environmental and social issues.

Trade unions are affected by the changing working environments caused by technological advancements, and one in particular is the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which organises workers in the South African mining industry. It is important for trade unions to find ways to strategically position themselves favourably in the modern era by sufficiently dealing with the challenges and opportunities brought about by technological advancement and digitalisation (International Labour Organisation, 2023).

As a leading trade union in the mining industry, the NUM has, over the past decade, seen a loss in membership, which has resulted in questioning the long-term sustainability of the organisation (NUM Secretariat Report, 2022:14). The study aims to examine factors that have contributed to the NUM's membership decline, analyse the impact of digitalisation and automation and explore strategies to revitalise the organisations.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was established on 4 December 1982 in Klerksdorp under the leadership of Cyril Ramaphosa as General Secretary and James Motlatsi as President. The union quickly became one of the fastest-growing in South Africa, amassing over 300,000 members within a short period (NUM News Special Edition Magazine, 2022). The NUM also played a pivotal role in the formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985, reinforcing its influence in the broader labour movement (NUM News Special Edition Magazine, 2022).

Since its inception, the NUM has established several entities to provide a range of services to its current and former members. These include the Mineworkers Investment Trust (MIT), established in 1995; the Mineworkers Investment Company (MIC), formed in 1995; NUMPROP (Pty) Ltd, formed in 1993; the South African Trade Union Research Institute (SATRI), established in 2012; the Mineworkers Development Agency (MDA), formed in 1987; the Elijah Barayi Memorial Training Centre, formed in 1993; and the JB Marks Education Trust Fund, established in 1997 (NUM News Special Edition Magazine, 2022).

While the NUM's legacy is significant, the union has also faced serious challenges that have contributed to a steady decline in its membership. The Marikana incident in 2012 was a particularly defining moment, resulting in the deaths of mineworkers and triggering a wave of related strikes (Alexander, 2013:606). Many of these workers were previously organised under the NUM, and dissatisfaction arose from perceptions that the union had become too closely aligned with management (Alexander, 2013:608). According to the NUM Membership Report (2022), the union experienced a decline in membership in the period following Marikana.

Nationally, trade unionism in South Africa has been declining sharply. According to the South African Government (2023), union density fell to 23% by 2023. This trend reflects not only structural changes in the labour market but also the need for a more agile policy and organisational environment that can adapt to rapid workplace transformations (South African Government, 2023). The global context mirrors this pattern. The International Labour Organisation (2021) reports that trade union membership has been declining worldwide, while Visser (2019:12) observes that global trade union density dropped from approximately 33% in 1970 to 20% by 2018. This indicates that the NUM's challenges, although shaped by local dynamics, form part of a broader global trend of declining union relevance in the 21st century (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2022:45).

The mining sector remains a critical component of South Africa's economy. According to the Minerals Council South Africa (2023:15), the sector contributed R493 billion to the GDP in 2022 and employed approximately 475,000 people. However, this represents a sharp decline from the 800,000 employed in the 1990s, reflecting deep structural and technological shifts within the industry (Minerals Council South Africa, 2023:22). The contraction of mining employment directly affects unions like the NUM, whose membership base is closely tied to workforce levels in the sector.

The NUM therefore faces a dual challenge: first, to maintain its relevance amid a shrinking traditional membership base, and second, to reposition its value proposition to appeal to a younger generation of mineworkers who are more educated, technologically inclined, and less ideologically aligned with the union's historic political identity (Webster, 2023:85). This calls for a fundamental re-evaluation of the union's service offerings, communication strategies, and organisational culture to ensure sustained influence in a transforming labour landscape.

The International Labour Organisation (2021) underscores the need for trade union revitalisation through youth engagement, inclusion of informal workers, regional and global collaboration, and sound governance supported by effective social dialogue. Against this background, there is a growing need to understand the specific causes of NUM's membership decline and to identify strategies that can enhance its revitalisation and future sustainability.

Despite the importance of these issues, limited empirical research has examined the internal and external factors influencing NUM's membership trends in the post-Marikana period. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by analysing the key determinants of membership decline and exploring practical strategies for union renewal. The research is guided by the following questions:

- What internal and external factors have contributed to the NUM's membership decline?
- How do generational and structural changes in the mining sector affect the NUM's relevance?
- What strategies can be implemented to revitalise the NUM and attract new members in the current labour environment?

By framing these questions, the study aims to provide an evidence-based understanding of the NUM's membership challenges and offer actionable recommendations for its organisational renewal and long-term sustainability within South Africa's evolving labour context.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) is one of the most influential trade unions in South Africa and at one point had a membership base of over 300,000 members (NUM Secretariat Report, 2022:12). However, the organisation's membership had declined to 172 224 by 2020 (NUM Secretariat Report 2022:12). Figure 1 below shows a clear illustration of the decline which reflects the shifting labour dynamics, political fragmentation and significant issues facing trade unions globally. Moreover, Flores-Castañeda *et al.* (2024:5) finds that automation, artificial intelligence and digitalisation are enhancing employment frameworks which are changing traditional roles and increasing unionised workers.

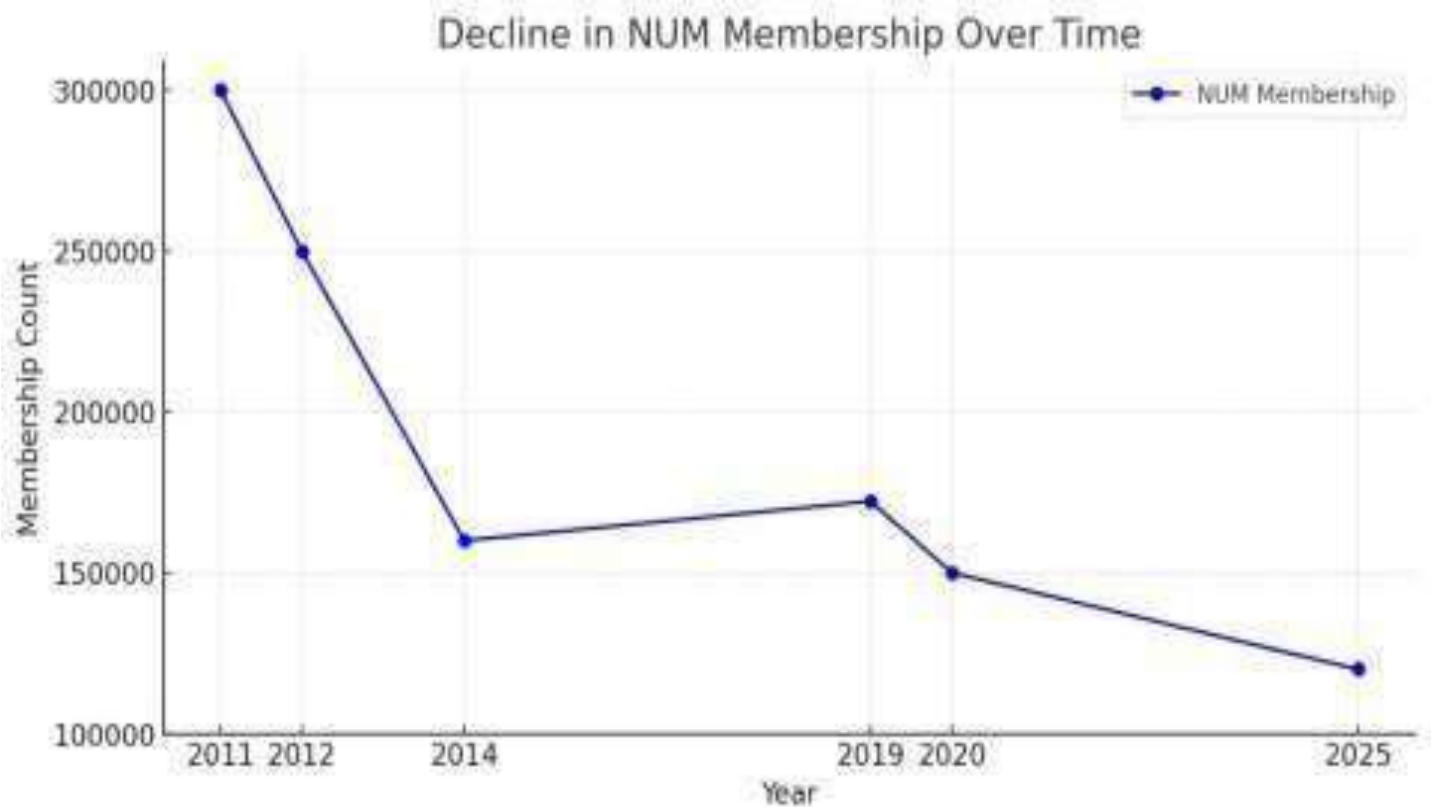


Figure 1: NUM's membership decline (NUM Membership Report, 2025)

The NUM also faces internal challenges that are in part a result of weakened advocacy due to its relationship with the African National Congress (ANC) and rival unions such as the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) which took advantage of the Marikana incident (Buhlungu 2020:78; Chinguno 2023:45). Additionally, research indicates that there are overall declines in unionism around the globe (ILO 2021:3; Visser 2019:9). However, there is limited empirical research on how trade unions in South Africa are navigating digital disruption.

The research is to investigate the fundamental problems that have led to the NUM's membership decrease and determine how the organisation might change to be relevant in this day and age. The research will investigate if internal inefficiencies, shifting labour dynamics, technology developments, or more general international trade union movements are to blame for these underlying problems. In actuality, trade unionism has

changed, and there isn't any current research examining how these developments affect trade unions.

1.4 RESEARCH AIM & OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1.4.1 AIM

The aim of this study is to examine the factors contributing to the decline in NUM's membership and to identify strategies that can revitalise the union's relevance in the modern era.

1.4.2 PRIMARY OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of this study is to analyse the key drivers of NUM's membership decline and to evaluate strategic interventions that could support the revitalisation of the union.

1.4.3 SECONDARY OBJECTIVES

To achieve the aim of the study, the following secondary objectives are set:

- ✓ To examine how globalisation, digitalisation, and automation have affected NUM's operational model and member engagement.
- ✓ To assess the perceptions of current and former NUM members regarding the union's service delivery and representational effectiveness.
- ✓ To analyse the impact of inter-union rivalry particularly with AMCU on NUM's membership decline.
- ✓ To investigate the influence of NUM's political affiliations and internal governance structures on its organisational effectiveness.
- ✓ To explore innovative strategies that NUM can adopt to strengthen membership recruitment and retention.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study is guided by the following research questions, each aligned directly with the secondary objectives:

1. How have globalisation, digitalisation, and automation influenced NUM's operational model and its engagement with members?
2. How do current and former NUM members perceive the union's service delivery and effectiveness in representing workers?
3. How has inter-union rivalry, particularly with AMCU, contributed to the decline in NUM's membership?
4. What role do NUM's political affiliations and internal governance structures play in shaping its effectiveness as a worker representative?
5. What innovative strategies can NUM implement to improve membership growth and retention in the modern era?

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The trade union environment in South Africa is undergoing major transformation due to rapid technological advancement, globalisation, and evolving labour laws. Traditional methods of worker organisation are becoming increasingly ineffective, and trade unions such as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) must adopt new approaches to remain relevant and sustainable. The decline in NUM's membership highlights the urgent need for renewal within both the organisation and the broader labour movement.

This study is significant for several reasons.

- Firstly, it contributes to the limited body of empirical research on how South African trade unions are navigating digital disruption and organisational decline.
- Secondly, it bridges the gap between traditional economic frameworks such as the monopoly model and socio-political realities that include political alliances and technological transformation.
- Thirdly, it advances discourse on digital unionism in the Global South, offering a conceptual model for understanding how trade unions can adapt to the digital era.
- Furthermore, the findings of this study will have practical implications. For the NUM, the research will offer evidence-based strategies for revitalisation, including innovative recruitment approaches, digital advocacy, and youth-focused

engagement models. For policymakers and labour institutions, the study will provide insights on balancing technological progress with the protection of workers' rights.

- Lastly, for academia, this research enriches contemporary debates on the sustainability and evolution of trade unions in a rapidly changing world of work.

1.7 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope of this study is limited to the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) as a case study within South Africa's mining sector. The analysis focuses primarily on the period 2012 to 2025, which encompasses the post-Marikana era, the intensification of automation and digitalisation in mining, and the continued membership decline within the union.

The study draws on the perspectives of NUM's current and former members, officials, and industry experts to explore internal and external factors influencing membership trends. While the NUM also operates in energy, construction, and metal sectors, this study focuses mainly on the mining sector, which represents the largest proportion of its membership base.

The research adopts a qualitative approach, with emphasis on thematic analysis derived from interviews and document analysis. The findings are context-specific and therefore not intended to be statistically generalised to all unions but to offer analytical insights applicable to trade unions facing similar challenges in South Africa and other developing economies.

1.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which is appropriate for research aimed at understanding participants' lived experiences and subjective meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2023:18). Qualitative approaches enable the researcher to explore how NUM members, shop stewards and officials perceive organisational change, leadership practices, and membership dynamics within the union (Hammarberg, Kirkman & De Lacey, 2016:499). A case study design was selected because it allows for an in-depth examination of a specific organisation within its real-life

context (Yin, 2018:15). Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection tool, as they provide flexibility while ensuring consistency across interviews (Adams, 2015:495; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021:7). Participants were purposively selected based on their knowledge, experience, and involvement in NUM structures.

The study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006:79) six-phase thematic analysis to identify patterns and interpret meanings emerging from the data. This method is widely recognised for its clarity, rigour and suitability for analysing qualitative interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2022:55). The data collection and analysis processes were guided by established qualitative research procedures that emphasise credibility, dependability and conformability (Shenton, 2004:64; Denzin, 2022:112). A detailed discussion of the research design, sampling, data collection methods, data analysis procedures and quality assurance measures is presented in Chapter 3.

1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study adhered to ethical principles that protect the rights, dignity and well-being of all participants. Prior to engaging in the research, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences (Kallio *et al.*, 2016:2956). Informed consent was obtained in writing, ensuring that participation was voluntary and based on a clear understanding of the research process (Flick, 2023:42). Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed by removing identifying information and assigning codes to participants during data processing and analysis (Shenton, 2004:66). All data were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher to ensure compliance with institutional data protection requirements.

The study further complied with the ethical standards set by the University and the broader guidelines for conducting research involving human participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection, ensuring that the study met all professional, academic and legal requirements (Denzin, 2022:89). Additionally, measures were taken to minimise any potential psychological or emotional

discomfort, especially given the sensitivity of discussing internal union dynamics and organisational challenges. A full and detailed account of all ethical considerations including confidentiality procedures, consent management, risk mitigation strategies and ethical approval documentation is provided in Chapter 3.

1.10 STUDY'S LIMITATION

There are certain limitations to the study despite the study aiming to provide an in-depth insight on the membership decline of the NUM while also proposing revitalising strategies to overcome its challenges. The study's focused examination of NUM's membership dynamics prioritises depth of understanding within the practical research constraints. The deliberate concentration on mining sector participants, which represent 78.4% of NUM's membership, ensures methodological coherence while acknowledging potential variations in other sectors. The 2012-2025 timeframe captures the most salient period of membership transformation, with methodological choices including semi-structured interviews and document analysis carefully selected to yield rich qualitative insights. These defined parameters strengthen the study's internal validity while establishing clear pathways for future complementary research.

1.11 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The mini-dissertation is organised into five chapters, each addressing a specific aspect of the research process:

Chapter	Title	Purpose and Key Focus Areas
Chapter 1	Introduction and Nature of the Study	Introduces the research topic and context, outlines the background of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), presents the research problem, aim, objectives,

		and questions, and explains the study's significance and scope.
Chapter 2	Literature Review	Critically reviews relevant theoretical and empirical literature on trade unionism, including historical, international, and South African perspectives. It explores key models such as the Monopoly and Social Justice theories, trade union revitalisation debates, and the effects of digitalisation and automation on union relevance.
Chapter 3	Research Methodology	Describes the research design, philosophical foundation (pragmatism), methodological approach (qualitative and inductive), case study strategy, sampling, data collection, and analysis procedures, ensuring methodological rigor and validity.
Chapter 4	Findings and Discussion	Presents and analyses the empirical results derived from thematic analysis. Links the findings to the literature and theoretical framework, identifying key themes influencing NUM's membership decline and revitalisation strategies.
Chapter 5	Conclusions and Recommendations	Summarises the study's findings, draws final conclusions, and proposes practical recommendations for NUM and other trade unions. It also highlights implications for policy, theory, and future research.

(Source: Own compilation, 2025)

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter introduced the research problem by outlining the critical challenges facing the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in the contemporary era. It highlighted the significant membership decline from over 300,000 members to approximately 172,224 by 2020 (NUM Secretariat Report 2022:12), and situated this trend within broader global patterns of trade union deterioration, including the decline in South Africa's union density from 45% in 1997 to 23% by 2023 (South African Government, 2023).

The chapter further discussed the dual impact of technological disruption specifically digitalisation and automation in mining, where 80–90% of the industry is projected to integrate digital technologies by 2050 (Flores-Castañeda *et al.* 2024:7) and internal organisational dynamics, exemplified by the pivotal Marikana incident, as key factors necessitating investigation. The background also contextualised NUM's historical significance as a former vanguard of labour rights and political struggle (Buhlungu 2010:45), illustrating why its current decline is particularly consequential for the South African labour landscape.

The problem statement clearly outlined the research gap relating to how South African unions are navigating digital disruption while managing complex political affiliations and internal governance challenges. The chapter concluded by presenting the research aim, objectives, and research questions that will guide this investigation into revitalisation strategies for NUM's sustainability, aligned with global calls for union adaptation (International Labour Organisation 2021; Visser 2019:9). To build on this foundation, the next chapter (Chapter 2) presents a detailed review of the relevant literature. It examines the historical evolution of trade unions in South Africa, the dynamics of stakeholder theory, global patterns of union decline, and the internal and external factors affecting union membership, thereby providing the theoretical framework for the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Trade unions have historically played a central role in shaping labour relations, advocating for workers' rights, and promoting social justice. The concept of trade unionism, as articulated by Sidney and Beatrice Webb (1894;1897), views unions as democratic institutions that mediate between the interests of labour and capital, while Marx (1867:22) positions them as tools for class struggle against capitalist exploitation. Within the South African context, unions such as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) exemplify these dual functions: advancing worker solidarity and participating in broader socio-political struggles. However, post-1994 institutionalisation and political entanglements, particularly with the African National Congress (ANC), have challenged NUM's ability to maintain its original democratic and radical ethos (Buhlungu, 2020:78; Satgar, 2022:56).

Globally, trade unions face structural transformations resulting from economic restructuring, flexibility of labour market, and technological change (Visser, 2019:5; Bryson *et al.*, 2021:15). Developed economies have witnessed declining union density, while Nordic countries maintain high levels through coordinated labour institutions (OECD, 2025:12). In developing regions, informal labour markets and limited regulatory enforcement constrain union growth, yet federations such as the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) continue to promote fundamental labour rights (ILO, 2022:13). Digitalisation and platform-based employment further complicate traditional union models, demanding innovative approaches to organising, representation, and advocacy (Panagiotopoulos & Barnett, 2019:5; Kochan, 2020:36).

In South Africa, the trade union movement has evolved through complex historical and political dynamics. From the early struggles of FOSATU in the late 1970s to the establishment of COSATU in 1985, unions have been instrumental in the anti-apartheid struggle and in shaping post-apartheid labour legislation (SA History Online, 2019; Wits Research Archives, 2025:2). Yet contemporary challenges, including declining

membership, political entanglements, and generational shifts in worker identity, underscore the need for unions to rethink organisational strategies and adopt innovative forms of engagement (Statistics SA, 2023:46; Healy *et al.*, 2020:115).

The NUM, as a historically dominant union in the mining sector, embodies these tensions. While it achieved significant social, economic, and political influence, events such as the Marikana massacre in 2012 accelerated membership losses and highlighted organisational weaknesses (Alexander, 2013:610; Chinguno, 2013:35). Its rivalry with the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) illustrates the consequences of failing to adapt to workers' evolving needs and expectations (Sinwell & Mbatha, 2016:44; Botiveau, 2015:134). Contemporary theoretical frameworks, ranging from Marxist and pluralist-institutional perspectives to stakeholder theory and social movement unionism, provide critical lenses to analyse NUM's trajectory, strategic positioning, and challenges in the digital and post-Marikana era (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004:24; Freeman, 1984:46; Waterman, 1993:255).

This chapter therefore situates the NUM within the broader discourse on trade unionism, tracing historical foundations, international trends, theoretical underpinnings, and contemporary challenges. By doing so, it lays the groundwork for understanding the union's declining membership patterns, organisational dynamics, and prospects for revitalisation within both the South African and global labour landscapes.

2.2 THE CONCEPT OF TRADE UNIONS

Sidney and Beatrice Webb (1894) are considered to have played a key initial role in the study of trade unionism. Their reflection of trade unions as mechanisms against the exploitation of workers brought about by capitalism remains a recurring theme to date. Marx (1867:22) believed trade unions were tools for class struggle, while the Webbs (1897:144) found trade unions to be democratic institutions. Trade unions like the NUM are part of the broader class struggle against capital and are a vehicle to worker solidarity and empowerment. The NUM school of thought is known to embody Marxist principles. However, post-1994, institutionalisation seems to have diluted radicalism (Buhlungu,

2020:78). Satgar (2022:56) finds that the NUM's close ties with the ANC are a departure from Webb's democratic ideals.

According to Bryson *et al* (2021:15), trade unions generally function as labour monopolies that utilise collective bargaining mechanisms to improve employee wages and working conditions. However, the implication is that trade unions' power may result in wages rising over competitive levels, thus being too much for employers to apply, resulting in unemployment. However, Bryson *et al.* (2021:15) find that the rise of automation and gig work has decentralised labour power, and this has resulted in the erosion of union monopolies. Moreover, rivalry unions to the NUM, like AMCU, have accelerated this fragmentation as workers find alternative ways to centralise bargaining mechanisms (Ngoepe & Van der Walt, 2023:112).

Trade unions also exist to advocate and amplify the voices of workers, workers who would not ordinarily speak up about injustices and exploitation due to fears of victimisation. Furthermore, Kochan (2020:34) reflects on one of Germany's unions using its app for regular feedback; meanwhile, the NUM in South Africa still relies on traditional operations. This highlights that one has embraced digitalisation to some extent while the latter is slow to change, which is a disadvantage to the organisation. Chinguno (2023:45) states that post the Marikana incident, the NUM's weakened participatory channels failed them as more workers felt the NUM leadership was disconnected from the reality of workers and worker mandate.

The digital divide in the union's capabilities has created a significant strategic disadvantage for traditional unions like the NUM. Digital tools are not merely supplementary; they are transformative, enabling what is termed "e-advocacy", which is the use of digital platforms for rapid mobilisation, real-time communication, and public campaigning (Panagiotopoulos & Barnett, 2019:5). The failure to adopt these tools can lead to what Kochan (2020:36) describes as a "representation gap," where the formal structures of the union are no longer the primary channels through which workers voice their concerns. The NUM's reliance on traditional methods in the wake of Marikana meant it was unable to counter narratives or organise effectively in a rapidly changing information environment, ceding this space to informal leaders and rival unions.

More studies have since confirmed Hyman (2007:5) view that trade unions are vehicles to the justice of society (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2022:34; Kelly, 2023:15). Moreover, Wood and Wright (2018:89) attest this to intersectional equity, advocating for policies addressing race, gender, and class. However, these earlier views by Hyman (2007:10) found that the NUM's ties to the ANC hinder the NUM's role in social justice efforts as it prioritises political goals. Bezuidenhout and Tsoaedi (2019:203) critique the NUM for neglecting women in the mining sector and focusing on male mineworker representation, particularly because NUM advocates for equity. However, the NUM has seen a growth in women's activism and has a women's structure within its organogram that focuses on women's advocacy (NUM Membership Report, 2022).

2.3 INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON TRADE UNIONS

To contextualise NUM's challenges within broader global trends, this section examines international patterns in trade union evolution, focusing on how unions in different regions have adapted to changing labour markets, political shifts, and technological transformation.

2.3.1 Overview: Global Patterns and Regional Variation

Trade unions across the world have undergone significant structural transformation over the past four decades. In many developed economies, union membership and collective bargaining coverage have declined since the 1980s, primarily due to industrial restructuring and neoliberal labour reforms (Visser, 2019:5). However, this decline is not uniform. The Nordic countries, such as Sweden, Denmark and Finland, continue to maintain high levels of union density and bargaining coverage through coordinated labour market institutions and strong welfare systems (OECD, 2025:12). In contrast, countries like the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan have experienced sharp declines in union membership due to market liberalisation and employer resistance (Baccaro & Howell, 2017:8).

In developing economies, including much of Africa, Asia and Latin America, the structure of the labour market characterised by large informal sectors has constrained trade union

growth (ILO, 2019:22). Despite this, global labour federations such as the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) continue to promote international labour standards, particularly the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining (ILO, 2022:13).

2.3.2 Causes of Union Decline and Resilience

The literature identifies several interrelated causes of trade union decline internationally:

- **Economic Restructuring:** The shift from manufacturing to service economies reduced traditional bases of unionisation (Silver, 2003:71).
- **Labour Market Flexibility:** The rise in casual, temporary and part-time work has fragmented worker identities and weakened collective action (De Stefano, 2016:478).
- **Political and Institutional Factors:** Neoliberal reforms, privatisation, and labour law deregulation weakened collective bargaining institutions (Baccaro & Howell, 2017:15).
- **Organisational Challenges:** Some unions have failed to recruit younger and precarious workers, relying instead on servicing models rather than active organising (Visser, 2019:18).

Despite these challenges, unions remain resilient in countries with strong institutional frameworks for social dialogue and where union renewal strategies such as community alliances and digital organising are effectively implemented (ILO, 2022:27).

2.3.3 Global Typologies and Scenarios

Visser (2019:33) identifies four global scenarios for the future of trade unions: marginalisation, dualisation, replacement, and revitalisation.

- **Marginalisation** implies continued decline in membership and influence.
- **Dualisation** describes the persistence of union strength among core, permanent employees while precarious workers remain excluded.
- **Replacement** envisions new worker organisations such as platform collectives taking over traditional union roles.

- Revitalisation refers to successful renewal through strategic innovation, coalition building, and institutional support.

This typology offers a useful framework for comparative analysis of trade union trajectories across regions.

2.3.4 Digitalisation, Platform Work, and Union Responses

The digitalisation of work and the rapid expansion of platform-based employment have reshaped labour relations globally. Platform workers such as drivers and delivery couriers are frequently classified as independent contractors, excluding them from collective bargaining rights and social protection (De Stefano, 2016:482). However, there is evidence of emerging resistance and collective organisation among these workers, particularly in Europe, Latin America and parts of Asia (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018:9; Umney *et al.*, 2022:4).

According to the ILO (2018:40), unions are responding by experimenting with digital organising tools, online campaigns, and hybrid membership models to reach dispersed workers. Examples include Germany's IG Metall and Spain's Comisiones Obreras, which have established digital membership portals and legal support platforms for platform workers (Haipeter, 2020:58).

2.3.5 Strategies for Revitalisation

Empirical evidence highlights several strategies contributing to trade union revitalisation internationally (ILO, 2022:33):

- Organising Model: Unions have shifted from a servicing model to a grassroots organising approach to recruit and empower members (Visser, 2019:21).
- Sectoral Bargaining: Multi-employer bargaining has extended collective agreements to precarious workers in certain European countries (Eurofound, 2020:16).
- Coalitions and Social Movement Unionism: Partnerships with community and civil society organisations enhance social legitimacy and reach (Tattersall, 2018:64).
- Digital Tools: Social media and online platforms are used for mobilisation and worker education (Haipeter, 2020:63).

- Legal and Policy Advocacy: Campaigns for legislative reform have advanced worker protections in non-standard employment (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018:15).

2.3.6 Comparative Insights and Implications

Comparative studies confirm that institutional context determines union strength. Countries with bargaining systems, legal extension mechanisms sectoral, and strong labour rights enforcement maintain higher bargaining coverage (Visser, 2019:28). Conversely, countries with fragmented labour markets and weak enforcement face declining membership and diminished influence (Baccaro & Howell, 2017:25).

These findings are relevant for the South African context, where unions such as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) must adapt to similar pressures of technological change, in formalisation, and political contestation. International evidence suggests that revitalisation depends on combining organising innovation, digital transformation, and policy advocacy suited to local institutional realities (ILO, 2022:40).

2.4 SOUTH AFRICAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

2.4.1 Historical Background and Origins

The South African trade union movement has a long and complex history, deeply intertwined with the country's political struggles, particularly the fight against apartheid. Although racially divided unions were a part of early labour organising, robust, autonomous black unionism reappeared in the late 1970s (Schoeman, 2011: 45). The 1973 Durban strikes were a pivotal moment, sparking a wave of worker activism among black workers who had been largely excluded from formal union structures (SA History Online, 2019).

A key development came in 1979 with the establishment of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), which represented a non-racial, worker-controlled model of unionism. FOSATU emphasised worker education, strong shop-floor organisation, and independence from political parties (Wits Research Archives 2025:2). By 1982, FOSATU's

membership had grown significantly, and it played a central role in laying the groundwork for greater unity (Wits Research Archives 2025: 3-4).

2.4.2 The Formation and Rise of COSATU

The establishment of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) on 1 December 1985 constituted a critical institutional turning point in South African labour history. COSATU did not emerge in isolation; its formation reflected more than a decade of intensified worker militancy, beginning with the Durban strikes of 1973, the rise of independent black unions, and the organisational and ideological influence of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) (Baskin, 1991:23). As Baskin (1991:23) argues, COSATU represented the consolidation of a new model of worker-controlled unionism that fused democratic shop-floor practices with a political vision aligned to the broader liberation struggle.

COSATU's founding principles of non-racialism; worker control, industrial unionism, and organisational independence were rooted in the practices of the shop-steward councils and worker forums that emerged in the early 1980s (SAHA, 2025). The principle of "One Industry, One Union" was not only an organisational preference but a deliberate strategy against employer fragmentation and the racially segmented labour system. Through a coordinated process of mergers, COSATU reduced its 33 initial affiliates to 13 industrial unions within five years, significantly strengthening its collective bargaining and organisational coherence (Buhlungu, 2010:112).

Another factor underpinning COSATU's rapid rise was its dual identity as both an industrial organisation and a political actor. Its early campaigns including the national anti-VAT strike (1991), the living wage campaign, and the call for the release of political prisoners demonstrated an integrated form of labour activism combining workplace bargaining with community-based mobilisation (Webster, 2007:14). With membership exceeding 700,000 by 1990, COSATU became one of the most influential actors within the anti-apartheid coalition (SAHA, 2025).

COSATU also innovated strategically, developing a decentralised but highly responsive organisational infrastructure centred on elected shop stewards. These structures enabled

rapid mobilisation and facilitated horizontal linkages between workplaces, allowing local disputes to escalate into national action, a characteristic often described as “social movement unionism” (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004:238).

However, COSATU’s development also introduced enduring tensions. The federation’s alliance with the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) expanded its political influence but raised concerns about the balance between worker independence and partisan loyalty (Buhlungu, 2010:144). Additionally, while industrial unionism strengthened organising in the 1980s and 1990s, it later posed challenges as South Africa’s labour market shifted toward formalisation, subcontracting and atypical forms of work.

For the NUM, COSATU’s formation was transformative. NUM benefited from COSATU’s political legitimacy, organisational model, and ability to coordinate across sectors. Yet COSATU’s later challenges, in particular alliance politics, membership stagnation, and organisational fragmentation have had direct implications for NUM’s contemporary recruitment, representativity, and bargaining power.

2.4.3 Role in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle

COSATU was never merely an industrial federation; from its inception it assumed a central role in the anti-apartheid struggle by locating workplace exploitation within the broader political economy of racial domination. The federation argued that apartheid was fundamentally a system of racial capitalism, in which the super-exploitation of black workers underpinned the profitability of mining, manufacturing and agricultural capital (SAHA, 2025). This framing allowed COSATU to integrate economic and political struggles, asserting that the liberation of workers and the dismantling of apartheid were inseparable historical projects.

COSATU’s slogan, “An injury to one is an injury to all”, became the moral and political foundation of a new type of worker solidarity that cut across racial and industrial divides (SAHA, 2025). The slogan also played a strategic role: it mobilised workers not only around workplace grievances but around community and national struggles, reinforcing a collective consciousness of shared oppression. This solidarity was expressed through a

repertoire of coordinated mass actions, including national stay-aways, consumer boycotts, factory-floor strikes and support for township uprisings. These actions imposed increasing economic and political costs on the apartheid regime, demonstrating COSATU's capacity to disrupt production and influence political events at scale (Webster, 2007:14).

A defining feature of COSATU's anti-apartheid engagement was its adoption of social movement unionism, a model in which unions actively link workplace struggles with community-based movements (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004:238). This approach enabled COSATU to operate simultaneously in factories, mines, schools, townships and civic platforms, positioning the federation as a key factor in the United Democratic Front (UDF) aligned resistance networks of the 1980s. It was COSATU's ability to mobilise workers across sectors, from mining to manufacturing, construction, and public services that made it one of the most powerful internal forces confronting apartheid (Baskin, 1991:145).

Although COSATU did not initially affiliate to any political party, it forged strong alliances with civic organisations, youth structures, student movements, women's organisations and community campaigns, enabling broad-based resistance to state repression (SAHA, 2025). This alliance-building strategy increased COSATU's political visibility and influence, while maintaining the formal independence needed to protect its organisational integrity during a highly repressive period. COSATU positioned itself as a worker-led political force, exercising autonomous political agency while synchronising its strategic objectives with the broader liberation movement (Buhlungu, 2010:120).

Importantly, COSATU's anti-apartheid activism also shaped its internal identity and culture. The federation developed a leadership tradition grounded in collective decision-making, political education, and democratic participation — practices that would later influence the post-1994 labour landscape and the structure of major affiliates such as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). COSATU's political centrality during the struggle therefore laid the foundation for its later role in shaping national policy and participating in the Tripartite Alliance after the democratic transition.

2.4.4 Post-Apartheid Transformation and Influence

After the fall of apartheid in 1994, COSATU transitioned from a mass-based liberation movement into a central institutional actor within South Africa's democratic framework. The federation leveraged its historical legitimacy and organisational capacity to influence the design and implementation of new labour legislation, most notably the Labour Relations Act (1995), which codified workers' rights to collective bargaining, strikes, and union recognition (Southern African Times, 2024:4). Beyond formal legislation, COSATU continued to champion social justice initiatives, advocating for policies that addressed structural inequality, poverty alleviation, and enhanced protections for vulnerable workers, including domestic and informal sector employees (Buhlungu, 2010:120).

COSATU's strategic influence extended into macroeconomic and social policy through its sustained participation in the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), a tripartite forum designed to facilitate negotiation between government, organised labour, and business (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004:238). Within NEDLAC, COSATU has historically sought to ensure that labour perspectives are integrated into national development strategies, including debates around minimum wages, social grants, and public-sector reforms. The federation's dual focus on industrial representation and broader socio-political advocacy illustrates its enduring role as both a labour organisation and a key stakeholder in shaping post-apartheid governance, highlighting the continuity of its activist ethos in a formalised political environment (Buhlungu, 2010:121).

By positioning itself at the intersection of workplace representation and national policy discourse, COSATU has maintained its relevance as a formidable actor in South Africa's labour relations landscape. Its historical experience in mass mobilisation continues to inform its strategies, allowing it to leverage collective worker power not only to negotiate better conditions but also to influence legislative and socio-economic outcomes at the national level (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004:240).

2.4.5 Key Federations and Alternative Union Organisations

While COSATU is the most prominent federation in South Africa, other key players exist:

- NACTU (National Council of Trade Unions): Founded on 5 October 1986 following the merger of CUSA and AZACTU, NACTU emphasised black consciousness and worker autonomy (SA History Online, 2024).
- Newer federations and independent unions: Over time, other federations and unions have emerged, representing different constituencies and at times competing with COSATU-affiliated unions for membership and influence (SA labour literature).

2.4.6 Challenges and Contemporary Issues of South African trade unions

The South African trade union movement faces several serious challenges in the post-apartheid era:

- Declining membership and fragmentation: Despite its historical strength, COSATU and its affiliates have experienced significant membership decline and fragmentation. According to COSATU's organisational report, total membership fell from 1,923,436 in 2015 to about 1,605,973 in 2018, representing a drop of roughly 317,463 members (SA Labour News, 2018). Between 2018 and 2022, the federation reportedly lost a further 60,000 members (SA Labour News, 2022). National data from Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) also show that trade-union density dropped from 29.5% in 2018 to 27.6% in 2023, indicating a broader decline in unionisation across the formal labour market (Statistics South Africa, 2023). This decline has been linked to structural economic changes, including deindustrialisation, automation, and rising informal employment, which have disproportionately affected traditional industrial sectors such as mining and manufacturing, where COSATU historically had strong representation. The contraction in membership and falling union density highlight on-going challenges to COSATU's organisational strength, bargaining power, and ability to represent workers effectively in the post-apartheid era.
- Political ties and autonomy: COSATU's close alliance with the ANC and SACP raises questions about its independence and ability to prioritise worker interests over political loyalty (Southern African Times 2024:5).

- Worker education and internal democracy: The tradition of union education especially politically and culturally rooted schooling for shop stewards remains vital, but faces resource constraints and changing worker demographics (South African Labour Bulletin, 2006:10-11).
- Representation of the unorganised: Organising precarious workers, the unemployed, and informal sector workers remains a central challenge. COSATU has made efforts through cooperatives and worker-community alliances, but sustaining these in an unequal economy is difficult (SAHA 2025:4).

2.4.7 Achievements and Impact

Despite the numerous challenges faced by South African trade unions, the movement has achieved substantial and enduring gains that have reshaped the country's labour and socio-economic landscape. COSATU's campaigns during the 1990s played a decisive role in labour law reform, culminating in the Labour Relations Act (1995) and related legislation, which enshrined the right to collective bargaining, strike action, and union recognition which are foundational protections that continue to underpin industrial relations in the country (Southern African Times, 2024:4). These legislative victories were not merely technical; they represented the institutionalisation of workers' rights in a post-apartheid state and laid the groundwork for more equitable labour relations.

Beyond legislative reform, COSATU has demonstrated an exceptional capacity to mobilise workers on a mass scale, leveraging its organisational networks to influence national debates on wages, social protection, and economic transformation. Through coordinated campaigns, stay-aways, and sectoral negotiations, the federation has contributed to policy shifts in areas such as minimum wage regulations, public-sector compensation, and social grant expansions, illustrating the enduring link between union activism and social policy outcomes (Buhlungu, 2010:120).

Moreover, COSATU's sustained engagement in the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) has positioned the federation as a key actor in South Africa's tripartite policy-making framework. By representing labour interests in dialogue with government and business, COSATU continues to influence macroeconomic and social policy, ensuring that the concerns of workers including the marginalised and precarious

are considered in national decision-making. This role underscores the union's dual function as both a workplace advocate and a strategic participant in shaping the country's broader economic trajectory (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004:238).

Collectively, these achievements illustrate that, despite on-going challenges such as membership decline and fragmentation, the South African trade union movement remains a central force in advancing labour rights, social justice, and participatory governance, bridging the gap between grassroots worker mobilisation and national policy influence.

In summary, the South African trade union movement spearheaded historically by COSATU has been a powerful political and social force. Its roots in the anti-apartheid struggle, combined with strong institutional capacity, have made it a major player in post-apartheid governance and labour relations. This context is critical for understanding NUM: as an affiliate of COSATU, NUM's history, strategies, and challenges cannot be fully understood without situating it in the broader dynamics of the South African trade union movement. The political economic power of COSATU, its institutional leverage, and its social mission all shape NUM's role, strategies, and capacity to mobilise workers.

2.5 THE NATIONAL UNION OF MINeworkERS (NUM)

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), established in 1982, has historically been a central actor in organising workers in the mining, construction, energy, and allied industries (NUM Secretariat Report, 2022). Over the years, the NUM concluded numerous wage and workplace agreements that significantly improved the lives of hundreds of thousands of mineworkers (Buhlungu, 2022:460). It has also produced notable political and business leaders, including former South African presidents Cyril Ramaphosa and Kgalema Motlanthe, businessman Marcel Golding, and the current Minister of Mineral Resources, Gwede Mantashe (Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2023:120). Politically and economically, NUM expanded its influence during the anti-apartheid struggle, leveraging its alignment with the African National Congress (ANC) to gain significant bargaining power; however, this close integration also laid the groundwork for later challenges concerning

organisational autonomy and rank-and-file engagement (Satgar, 2022:56; Webster & Buhlungu, 2004:24).

A critical juncture in NUM's trajectory occurred with the 2012 Marikana incident, which exposed deep fractures between the union and its membership. Even before Marikana, tensions existed as some mineworkers perceived NUM leaders as corrupt and too closely aligned with employers, undermining the union's credibility (Alexander, 2013:608; Chinguno, 2013:30). The Marikana strike, along with incidents at Lonmin, Impala, and Gold One operations, catalysed a shift in union loyalties, with the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) emerging as a militant alternative unencumbered by political compromise (Botiveau, 2015:130; Twala, 2012:63). Scholars describe Marikana as a "rebellion of the rank-and-file" against a tripartite authority of the mining company, the government, and NUM, which many workers perceived as colluding to suppress their demands (Alexander, 2013:610).

The organisational fallout was profound. NUM faced immediate membership losses, declining legitimacy, and intensified competition from AMCU, which capitalised on NUM's perceived bureaucratisation and political entanglements (Ngoepe & Van der Walt, 2023:115; Sinwell & Mbatha, 2016:44). Attempts to modernise, including strengthening branch structures, enhancing communication, and rebuilding trust in high-risk workplaces, have had limited success in reversing membership decline (NUM Secretariat Report, 2022:12; Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2023:118). Scholars argue that NUM's on-going challenge lies in reconnecting with the lived realities of younger workers and embracing innovative organising models to restore confidence and relevance (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004:24).

AMCU's rise reshaped the mining union landscape. Between 2010 and 2014, AMCU capitalised on worker dissatisfaction with NUM, particularly among rock drill operators (RDOs), and grew rapidly, surpassing 120,000 members by 2014 to achieve majority status in major platinum mining operations (Sinwell, 2015:38). Its militant, responsive approach to immediate workplace grievances contrasted with NUM's perceived alignment with management and the Tripartite Alliance (Alexander, 2013:607; Webster, 2013:89). The 2014 platinum strike, lasting five months, further consolidated AMCU's reputation as a

defender of worker interests, though it also revealed the organisational and financial pressures associated with sustained industrial action (Capps, 2015:27).

Following this period, AMCU's growth plateaued due to structural declines in mining employment, mechanisation, retrenchments, sectoral limitations, and internal governance challenges (Chinguno, 2015:104). Both NUM and AMCU continue to contend with the broader contraction of the mining workforce, highlighting that the struggle for union relevance now centres not only on expansion but also on retention within shrinking industrial sectors.

In summary, the post-Marikana period illustrates the dynamic, competitive, and politically complex nature of South African mineworker representation. NUM's decline and AMCU's rise underscore the consequences of perceived bureaucratisation, political entanglements, and failure to respond to rank-and-file grievances, while highlighting the need for unions to balance organisational professionalism with responsiveness to members' immediate concerns.

2.6 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS OF TRADE UNION

Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises trade unions not merely as workplace organisations, but as dynamic socio-political actors navigating complex economic, social, and political environments. While classical frameworks provide useful analytical foundations, their contemporary relevance lies in explaining how unions adapt to evolving challenges, maintain legitimacy among members, and operate within broader societal structures. This perspective is particularly valuable for understanding unions such as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which continues to balance collective bargaining, political engagement, and worker representation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Marxist perspectives historically conceptualised unions as instruments for resisting structural exploitation under capitalism (Marx, 1867:312-315; Engels, 1881:56). Today, this lens remains relevant for understanding unions as political actors that extend beyond workplace negotiation, engaging in broader advocacy and empowerment strategies. In

South Africa, unions such as COSATU and NUM have historically linked workplace mobilisation with national liberation efforts, and contemporary union engagement continues to reflect these broader socio-political functions. Marxist insights help explain why workers perceive unions as platforms for collective empowerment, advocacy, and social transformation, highlighting the enduring tension between labour, capital, and state structures.

The pluralist–institutional perspective, articulated by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, views the workplace as an arena of legitimate but competing interests between employers and employees (Webb & Webb, 1897:4-6). Unions are positioned as lawful representatives of workers, responsible for securing improved wages, benefits, and conditions through collective bargaining. Conflict is regarded as normal and manageable via institutional mechanisms, legislation, and negotiation, promoting industrial democracy (Webb & Webb, 1902:15). In the South African post-apartheid framework, this perspective is particularly applicable: the Labour Relations Act (1995) formalised collective bargaining, dispute resolution, and institutionalised worker representation, positioning NUM as a recognised mediator between labour and capital while facing contemporary challenges such as declining membership, mechanisation, and competition from emerging unions like AMCU.

From an economic and rational-choice perspective, neoclassical theory conceptualises unions as agents operating within labour markets to maximise the economic welfare of their members (Dunlop, 1944:12; Ross, 1948:35). This lens explains union participation as a response to material incentives such as wage premiums, improved working conditions, and benefits, while recognising that institutional, political, and social pressures also shape union behaviour. In modern South Africa, this perspective helps analyse why workers may choose alternative unions or remain loyal to NUM based on perceived effectiveness in negotiating tangible gains and protecting workplace interests, particularly in sectors such as mining where economic vulnerability is high.

Beyond these classical perspectives, contemporary frameworks emphasise social, political, and community dimensions of unionism. Social movement unionism, for example, conceptualises unions as part of broader struggles for social justice, human rights, and democratic governance, often operating in coalitions with NGOs, community organisations,

and activist networks (Waterman, 1993:255). In South Africa, unions historically linked workplace mobilisation with anti-apartheid activism and today continue to address socio-economic inequality, labour protection, and policy advocacy. Together, these contemporary lenses provide a robust framework for analysing NUM's strategies, challenges, and societal role, highlighting its evolving function as both a bargaining agent and a broader socio-political actor.

2.7 Major Theoretical Perspectives

Trade union theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding why unions emerge, how they operate, and what motivates workers to join or disengage. Classical perspectives, including Marxist, pluralist-institutional, and neoclassical economic theories offer distinct explanations of union formation and function, reflecting broader socio-economic and political conditions.

Marxist theory emphasises structural exploitation and class conflict, explaining union emergence as a reaction to systemic inequality and the extraction of surplus value by capital (Marx, 1867:312-315; Engels, 1881:56). From this lens, the primary motivation for worker membership is not merely economic gain but collective empowerment and participation in a broader struggle for social justice. In contrast, the pluralist-institutional perspective frames unions as intermediaries within a system of competing but legitimate workplace interests, where membership is motivated by pragmatic concerns such as wage improvement, job security, and workplace consultation (Webb & Webb, 1897:4-6; 1902:15). The neoclassical economic perspective adds another dimension, portraying unions as rational agents operating in labour markets, with membership driven by perceived personal and collective economic benefits, such as higher wages and better conditions (Dunlop, 1944:12; Ross, 1948:35).

Taken together, these classical theories illuminate both the structural and individual drivers of union formation. They provide analytical tools to assess the NUM's historical and contemporary dynamics, including its membership patterns, organisational identity, and strategic positioning in response to socio-political and economic pressures. By

understanding these foundational perspectives, the subsequent analysis can explore how NUM has negotiated its role within South Africa's unique post-apartheid labour environment, the factors influencing its declining membership, and the rise of rival unions such as AMCU. These theoretical insights will also inform an evaluation of the union's strategies to balance worker advocacy, political engagement, and institutionalised representation, bridging classical theory with contemporary organisational practice.

2.7.1 Marxist Theory

While Marxist theory historically conceptualised trade unions as instruments for resisting structural exploitation under capitalism (Marx, 1867:312-315; Engels, 1881:56), its contemporary relevance lies in highlighting how unions operate as political actors beyond workplace bargaining. Marxist analysis posits that unions emerge from structural inequalities and the systematic extraction of surplus value by capital, framing conflict as both inevitable and necessary for social transformation. In South Africa, this perspective illuminates the historical and on-going engagement of unions such as NUM with broader socio-political movements, including their alliance with the anti-apartheid struggle and the Tripartite Alliance. It also explains why workers may perceive unions as platforms for collective empowerment, advocacy, and social transformation, rather than merely agents for negotiating wages and conditions. Contemporary scholarship shows that Marxist-informed activism continues to underpin union campaigns for social protection, poverty alleviation, and labour rights (Buhlungu, 2010:120), highlighting the persistent tension between labour, capital, and the state, especially in sectors like mining where power asymmetries remain pronounced.

2.7.2 Pluralist–Institutional Theory (Webbs' Theory)

The pluralist–institutional perspective, articulated by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, conceptualises the workplace as an arena of legitimate but competing interests between employers and employees (Webb & Webb, 1897:4-6). Unions are regarded as lawful representatives of workers, responsible for improving wages, benefits, and working conditions through collective bargaining. Conflict is normal but manageable through legislation, negotiation, and institutional mechanisms, promoting industrial democracy (Webb & Webb, 1902:15). In post-apartheid South Africa, this perspective is highly

relevant because it underpins the Labour Relations Act (1995), which formalised collective bargaining, dispute resolution, and worker representation. NUM's role in mediating between workers and mining companies reflects this framework, particularly in structured negotiations around wages, occupational health and safety, and employment equity. However, the theory also helps explain some of NUM's challenges: when unions are closely institutionalised, they risk losing responsiveness to rank-and-file members, creating opportunities for alternative unions like AMCU to position themselves as more militant and grassroots-focused (Sinwell, 2015:32).

2.7.3 Neoclassical Economic Theory

Neoclassical theory treats unions as economic agents operating within labour markets to maximise the welfare of their members (Dunlop, 1944:12; Ross, 1948:35). Union participation is framed as a rational decision, influenced by tangible benefits such as wage premiums, improved working conditions, and shorter working hours. This perspective is particularly valuable in understanding membership dynamics in competitive or precarious labour markets, where workers assess union effectiveness against alternative organisations. In South Africa, NUM and AMCU provide contrasting case studies: NUM's historical institutional strength sometimes fails to translate into perceived value at the shop-floor level, particularly in platinum mining, whereas AMCU's rapid growth in the 2010s demonstrates how effective mobilisation and perceived benefits can sway worker allegiance (Alexander, 2013:608; Chinguno, 2013:30). This perspective also draws attention to the impact of economic insecurity, mechanisation, and retrenchments on union loyalty, showing that rational-choice calculations remain a key driver of worker behaviour.

2.7.4 Theories Explaining Union Formation and Worker Motivation

Building on the classical perspectives, it is essential to understand why trade unions emerge and what motivates workers to join. Union formation is rarely the result of a single factor; rather, it reflects a combination of structural, economic, political, and social forces. Classical and contemporary theories provide explanatory frameworks for both the organisational logic of unions and the individual rationales of workers.

From a structural perspective, Marxist theory positions unions as a response to systemic exploitation, where worker motivation stems from the need to resist oppressive labour practices and to challenge broader socio-economic inequalities (Marx, 1867:312-315; Engels, 1881:56). Union membership, in this view, is driven by solidarity, collective empowerment, and the pursuit of social justice, rather than purely economic incentives. In contrast, pluralist-institutional theory emphasises unions as institutional mediators between workers and employers, where formation arises from the need to secure fair wages, safe working conditions, and legally recognised rights (Webb & Webb, 1897:4-6; 1902:15). Workers are motivated to join unions primarily to protect individual and collective interests within structured industrial frameworks, highlighting the practical, negotiated nature of labour representation.

The neoclassical economic perspective complements these views by framing union formation as a rational response to market conditions. Workers join unions to maximise economic returns, including higher wages, benefits, and better working conditions, while unions themselves operate as strategic economic actors navigating supply-demand dynamics within the labour market (Dunlop, 1944:12; Ross, 1948:35). Worker motivation under this framework is therefore both instrumental and strategic, shaped by the perceived ability of unions to influence employer behaviour and labour market outcomes.

Contemporary theories, such as social movement unionism, extend these classical perspectives by situating union formation within broader socio-political struggles. In the South African context, NUM's emergence and historical militancy were not only responses to economic exploitation but also mechanisms for political mobilisation and community solidarity, reflecting a combination of economic, social, and political motivations. Worker membership is thus shaped by both immediate material concerns and identification with the union's broader mission, including collective empowerment, political advocacy, and social justice.

By integrating these perspectives, it becomes possible to analyse NUM's membership trends, organisational identity, and strategic choices in a nuanced way. These frameworks explain why some workers remained loyal, why others shifted allegiance to rival unions such as AMCU, and how unions navigate the tension between bureaucratisation, political

alignment, and rank-and-file responsiveness. Theories of union formation and worker motivation therefore provide the critical analytical lens for understanding the complex dynamics of South African mineworker representation.

2.7.5 Alienation Theory

Alienation theory posits that workers are motivated to join trade unions as a response to workplace dissatisfaction, constrained autonomy, and experiences of marginalisation, which can generate feelings of powerlessness and estrangement from their labour (Seeman, 1959:784). Within this framework, unions serve as critical mechanisms for collective voice, participation, and empowerment, enabling workers to influence decision-making, negotiate improved conditions, and assert their rights within hierarchical or bureaucratic organisations.

Beyond economic incentives, union membership provides psychological and social benefits, including a sense of belonging, solidarity, and shared purpose. These benefits are particularly salient in contexts where workers experience alienation due to routine, dangerous, or exploitative work, as well as limited decision-making authority. In South Africa, this perspective is highly relevant to the mining sector, where historical labour practices, unsafe working environments, and low autonomy have shaped worker engagement with unions such as NUM. The alienation framework helps explain why workers often seek organisational platforms that offer both advocacy and social cohesion, highlighting the intersection of structural, economic, and psychosocial drivers of union membership.

Moreover, alienation theory illuminates the broader consequences of disconnect between unions and rank-and-file members. Events such as the 2012 Marikana massacre demonstrate how perceptions of union collusion with management or the state can exacerbate feelings of alienation, driving members to seek alternatives like AMCU, which promise greater responsiveness to workplace grievances. Thus, understanding alienation is crucial for analysing membership trends, union legitimacy, and strategies for rebuilding trust within historically exploited sectors (Seeman, 1959:784; Chinguno, 2013:30).

2.7.6 Scarcity Consciousness Theory

Scarcity consciousness theory posits that workers are more likely to join trade unions when they perceive job insecurity, economic vulnerability, or limited access to stable employment opportunities, particularly in industries characterised by cyclical or precarious work, such as mining (Kerr, 1954:32-34). In these conditions, unions serve as strategic instruments for protecting scarce economic resources, enabling workers to collectively negotiate for job security, fair wages, and improved working conditions.

Beyond immediate material concerns, scarcity consciousness also influences worker perceptions of solidarity, mutual dependence, and collective efficacy, reinforcing the union as both a protective institution and a platform for collective action. In the South African mining sector, this framework helps explain NUM's historical success in mobilising workers under conditions of high employment volatility, while also shedding light on contemporary membership challenges. Mechanisation, retrenchments, and intensified competition from emerging unions such as AMCU have increased perceptions of scarcity and uncertainty, requiring NUM to adapt its strategies to retain members and maintain legitimacy (Alexander, 2013:608; Chinguno, 2013:35).

This theory underscores the interdependence between economic conditions and union membership behaviour, highlighting that worker engagement is not purely ideological or social, but often a rational response to structural insecurity. It also explains why unions that fail to address these vulnerabilities risk losing members to alternative organisations perceived as more responsive to immediate economic threats. In this sense, scarcity consciousness provides a vital lens for understanding both historical union mobilisation and the contemporary dynamics of worker loyalty, competition, and strategic union adaptation in South Africa's mining sector.

2.7.7 Wheeler's Model

Wheeler's framework posits that a worker's decision to join a trade union is primarily influenced by the perceived utility or tangible benefits of membership, particularly in terms of comparative wages, working conditions, and access to benefits between unionised and non-unionised workplaces (Wheeler, 1980:25). Central to this perspective is the worker's confidence in the union's effectiveness in representing their interests, negotiating

favourable outcomes, and enforcing labour rights. Union membership, therefore, represents both a rational and strategic choice, shaped not only by material incentives but also by the perceived capacity and credibility of the union.

In the South African mining context, Wheeler's model is particularly insightful for understanding variations in union density across sectors and companies, as well as the competitive pressures faced by unions like NUM. The rapid rise of AMCU illustrates how workers may shift allegiance to unions perceived as more effective in delivering immediate or visible benefits, particularly for marginalised worker categories such as rock drill operators in the platinum belt (Sinwell & Mbatha, 2016:51; Chinguno, 2013:35).

Beyond economic considerations, Wheeler's framework highlights the critical role of perceived legitimacy, organisational trust, and credibility in motivating and sustaining membership. A union that fails to maintain these qualities risks declining influence, even in contexts where material benefits remain significant. For NUM, this explains the challenges of retaining members in a competitive and rapidly evolving labour landscape, where worker loyalty is contingent on both practical gains and confidence in the union's capacity to advocate effectively for their interests. In this sense, Wheeler's utility model bridges the rational-choice and socio-political dimensions of union membership, demonstrating the complex interplay between economic incentives, organisational performance, and worker perceptions.

2.7.8 Socio-Psychological Theory

Socio-psychological theory posits that union membership is motivated not solely by economic incentives, but also by social and psychological needs, including belonging, solidarity, companionship, and personal security (Kelly, 1998:15). Unions function as social institutions, offering members a sense of community, shared purpose, and collective identity, particularly in workplaces where stress, isolation, or alienation is prevalent.

In the South African mining sector, these psychosocial motivations have historically played a crucial role in the appeal of unions such as NUM. Beyond providing wage protection and negotiating workplace improvements, NUM offered mineworkers a platform for social cohesion, political engagement, and emotional support, particularly during periods of

historical exploitation, unsafe working conditions, and limited worker autonomy. The union thus became a conduit for both collective advocacy and the fulfilment of social and emotional needs.

Understanding these non-economic drivers is particularly important in the contemporary context, where unions like AMCU compete with NUM not only by offering material benefits, but also by appealing to worker identity, empowerment, and activism (Chinguno, 2013:30; Sinwell, 2015:32). Socio-psychological theory underscores that membership decisions are multidimensional, shaped by a combination of tangible gains, organisational legitimacy, social belonging, and trust. For unions navigating complex labour environments, addressing these psychosocial aspects is critical to sustaining engagement, maintaining credibility, and retaining members in a competitive and evolving sector.

2.7.9 Social Movement Unionism

Modern perspectives increasingly recognise unions as social, political, and community actors, linking workplace mobilisation to broader struggles for social justice, human rights, and democratic governance (Waterman, 1993:255). In South Africa, this approach is particularly relevant, as unions historically connected labour activism to national liberation, anti-apartheid resistance, and post-apartheid policy advocacy. Social movement unionism highlights how unions engage with communities, NGOs, and activist networks to amplify their influence beyond wage bargaining, addressing structural inequalities, unsafe working conditions, and social policy issues. For example, COSATU and NUM have historically mobilised workers in campaigns around housing, healthcare, and education, reinforcing their role as agents of social change while maintaining industrial representation. Contemporary scholarship suggests that unions adopting this approach are better positioned to retain membership, maintain legitimacy, and influence policy in rapidly changing labour markets (Engelbrecht & Omar, 2022:58).

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive analytical lens for understanding the formation, function, and evolution of trade unions in South Africa. They situate NUM's strategies, challenges, and membership dynamics within broader historical,

socio-economic, and political contexts, highlighting the interplay between workplace representation, political engagement, and social mobilisation in shaping contemporary labour relations.

2.7.10 Modern Theories of Trade Unionism

The rise of globalisation, technological change, new labour market forms, and demographic shifts has required trade union theory to evolve. Modern theoretical contributions extend beyond classical frameworks by integrating digital transformation, identity politics, precarious work and new models of collective bargaining.

Contemporary scholars argue that unions must respond to overlapping identities such as youth, gender, migration status and other demographic dynamics to remain relevant (Healy *et al.*, 2020: 112). However, Statistics South Africa (2023:46) finds that NUM, similar to many traditional unions, is struggling to attract young workers, exposing it to competition from rival unions. Inclusive organising strategies are therefore essential for sustaining membership growth (Joynt & Mbatha, 2022:88).

Digital transformation has become a critical dimension of modern union theory. Visser (2023:17) argues that unions must adopt AI-enhanced recruitment and leverage digital communication platforms to reach new worker groups. NUM's limited digital footprint contrasts sharply with examples such as Brazil's Unified Workers' Centre, which increased membership by 20% through Whatsapp-based campaigns (Silva, 2022:34). Transparent leadership and strong internal democratic processes are also essential to enhance member participation and accountability in the digital era (Visser, 2019:9).

The "future of work" literature adds further complexity. The emergence of platform-based work, algorithmic management and remote working challenges traditional definitions of "the workplace" and "the worker" (De Stefano, 2021:3). As a result, unions must develop new bargaining models that move beyond the standard employer–employee relationship. These may include portable benefits, sector-wide standards and worker protections applicable regardless of employment status (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2021:14).

For NUM, these modern theories are directly relevant. Automation and mechanisation in the mining sector have reduced traditional labour intensity, creating a smaller skilled

workforce and expanding a peripheral layer of contract and gig-type workers. This requires a strategic shift towards diversified organising models, digital recruitment strategies and broader social movement mobilisation to remain effective in a rapidly changing labour landscape.

2.8 GENERATIONAL SHIFTS AND CHANGING WORKER IDENTITIES

Generational change has emerged as a major driver of transformation within trade unions, reshaping both membership patterns and organisational strategies. Millennials and Generation Z differ markedly from older cohorts in terms of identity, political engagement, communication styles, and expectations of workplace participation (Twenge, 2017:89). Data from Statistics South Africa (2023:48) indicates that younger workers in the mining sector exhibit weaker ideological attachment to traditional, hierarchical unions, often favouring flexible networks, digital engagement, and issue-based activism over long-standing union loyalties.

Scholars emphasise that modern workers possess overlapping and fluid identities, digital, cultural, professional, and social that traditional unions frequently fail to address (Preece, 2016:112). This mismatch between union structures and contemporary worker identities limits the appeal of conventional organising methods and reduces engagement. Webster (2023:88) notes that class-based union identities, which historically mobilised workers around collective struggle, are increasingly less relevant for younger cohorts who prioritise career mobility, personal development, work-life balance, and immediate workplace outcomes.

Healy *et al.* (2020:115) further argue that unions that fail to redefine their value proposition for younger generations risk long-term membership decline and erosion of legitimacy. In response, unions such as NUM are compelled to adapt by incorporating digital communication platforms, flexible membership models, targeted skills development, and issue-based advocacy. Understanding generational shifts is therefore crucial for designing engagement strategies that bridge historical union identities with contemporary worker

expectations, ensuring unions remain relevant, resilient, and capable of mobilising across age cohorts in a rapidly evolving labour market.

2.9 THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MINING AND UNION POWER

NUM's trajectory is closely intertwined with the political economy of South Africa's mining sector, which has undergone significant restructuring since the 1990s. The decline of gold mining, the expansion of platinum production, the rise of subcontracting, and widespread mechanisation have fundamentally altered workforce composition, labour relations, and the balance of power between capital and labour (Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2023:120). Automation, in particular, reduces reliance on manual labour and diminishes labour's structural power, limiting workers' ability to disrupt production through strike action which is a key leverage historically used by NUM to negotiate wages and conditions (Crouch, 2017:55; Silver, 2003:45).

Complicating this dynamic is the state's dual role as both regulator and significant beneficiary of mining revenues. NUM's historical and on-going alignment with the African National Congress (ANC) creates inherent tensions, particularly when worker demands conflict with broader state objectives such as attracting investment, ensuring macroeconomic stability, or pursuing sectoral policy goals (Satgar, 2022:60). These structural pressures constrain NUM's bargaining strength and strategic autonomy, highlighting the delicate balance unions must maintain between representing worker interests and navigating political and economic imperatives.

Understanding NUM's position within this restructured mining landscape is crucial for analysing contemporary challenges, including declining membership, competition from rival unions such as AMCU, and the need to adapt strategies for a workforce shaped by mechanisation, subcontracting, and generational change. It also underscores why unions in South Africa must continually negotiate their role as both political and labour actors, balancing advocacy for members with engagement in national economic and industrial policy.

2.10 MEMBERSHIP TRENDS OVER TIME

Understanding NUM's membership trajectory is critical for contextualising the challenges the union currently faces and justifying the problem statement. Historically, NUM experienced rapid growth during the 1980s and 1990s, consolidating its position as the dominant union in South Africa's mining sector and reaching a peak of over 300,000 members in the early 2000s (NUM Secretariat Report, 2022:12). This period of expansion reflected NUM's ability to mobilise workers around collective bargaining, political engagement, and social advocacy, particularly during a time of significant transformation in the post-apartheid labour environment.

However, NUM's membership has steadily declined over the past two decades, highlighting structural and organisational challenges. By 2010, membership had decreased to approximately 250,000, and following the 2012 Marikana incident and the rapid rise of AMCU, it fell further to around 200,000 members between 2012 and 2014 (NUM Secretariat Report, 2022:12; Alexander, 2013:608). By 2020, NUM's reported membership stood at 172,224, with continued decline noted in 2023, particularly among younger workers who exhibit weaker ideological attachment to traditional unions (Statistics South Africa, 2023:50).

This long-term decline underscores the importance of examining theoretical, structural, and organisational dimensions of union membership. It suggests that purely economic explanations such as wage differentials or collective bargaining outcomes are insufficient for understanding worker loyalty and engagement. Factors such as generational shifts, changing worker identities, perceptions of union legitimacy, political alignment, and competition from rival unions like AMCU play a critical role in shaping membership dynamics. Analysing these trends provides a framework for understanding not only NUM's historical strength but also the contemporary pressures affecting union sustainability, relevance, and strategic adaptation in South Africa's mining sector.

2.11 FUTURE TRENDS IN THE GLOBAL TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

A future-focused perspective is essential to frame NUM's strategic direction. International literature identifies several emerging global trends:

2.11.1 Digital Unionism and AI-Enhanced Organising

Modern unions are increasingly leveraging digital platforms and artificial intelligence for recruitment, communication, and bargaining processes (Visser, 2023:22). Tools such as Whatsapp campaigns, algorithmic organising, and virtual bargaining meetings enable unions to reach workers who are geographically dispersed or employed in non-standard arrangements. Experiences from Latin America suggest that digital mobilisation can contribute to membership growth and sustained engagement, highlighting opportunities for NUM to enhance its outreach, particularly among younger and digitally literate workers.

2.11.2 Platform Worker Organising

The rapid expansion of gig and platform work globally has prompted unions to adopt sectoral and transnational bargaining models (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2021:14). These hybrid approaches move beyond traditional employer-employee relationships, addressing the precarity and fragmentation inherent in the platform economy. For NUM, the increasing use of subcontracting and casualisation in the mining sector underscores the relevance of these strategies, as they provide avenues to organise workers outside conventional employment arrangements.

2.11.3 Revival of Social Movement Unionism

Unions are increasingly aligning with broader social movements, including climate justice, feminist initiatives, migrant advocacy, and community campaigns (Webster, 2022:67). This trend highlights the potential for unions to expand their political influence beyond the workplace, reinforcing NUM's historical role as a politically engaged actor while addressing contemporary social and economic injustices.

2.11.4 Youth-centric Unionism

International studies shows that the future sustainability of unions depends on effectively engaging younger generations through digital communication, transparent leadership, and flexible participation models (Healy *et al.*, 2020:118). For NUM, this requires reconciling traditional hierarchical structures with the expectations of Millennials and Generation Z, who value agency, personal development, and meaningful workplace participation.

2.11.5 Sector-Wide and Transnational Bargaining

In Europe and Asia, unions are adopting sectoral bargaining frameworks that protect workers in fragmented and precarious labour markets (Eurofound, 2022:32). As subcontracting and mechanisation reshape South Africa's mining workforce, NUM may need to consider similar approaches to maintain bargaining power and ensure representation across the entire value chain.

2.11.6 Trade Union Revitalisation

Trade union scholars emphasise that unions must regenerate their structures and strategies to remain relevant in rapidly changing labour environments (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004:237–238; Webster & Buhlungu, 2023:89). This involves moving from a traditional “servicing” model, where unions primarily provide services to passive members, to an “organising” model, which mobilises members, strengthens collective power, and fosters internal democracy (Heery, 2022:115; Tattersall, 2018:102).

Visser (2019:68) highlights that targeted recruitment of young and female workers, alongside early engagement with students, can sustain membership pipelines and facilitate transitions from education to the workforce. In the South African context, revitalisation must be contextually sensitive, accounting for informal employment, state capacity, and local socio-economic realities (Webster, 2023:85).

For NUM, Bezuidenhout (2023:125) conceptualises this as “strategic hybridity”, whereby the union simultaneously maintains its traditional industrial focus while developing innovative approaches to organise workers in adjacent sectors and non-standard employment. This could include creating support structures for retrenched mineworkers,

providing services for subcontractors within the mining value chain, or partnering with community organisations to address broader social and developmental needs (Tattersall, 2018:105).

Collectively, these trends suggest that NUM's future relevance depends on its capacity to adapt organisationally, strategically, and culturally, integrating lessons from global union practice while remaining responsive to the unique political, economic, and social context of South Africa's mining sector.

2.12 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has provided a comprehensive and critical review of the literature relevant to understanding the membership challenges faced by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). The review established a multi-faceted theoretical and contextual foundation for the study, moving from broad historical and theoretical perspectives to specific contemporary challenges and potential revitalisation strategies.

The chapter began by situating the NUM within the historical context of South African trade unionism, tracing its evolution from a pivotal force in the anti-apartheid struggle and an exemplar of social movement unionism (Webster & Buhlungu 2004:230) to its current institutionalised form within the post-apartheid political landscape. The 2012 Marikana Massacre was identified as a critical juncture that starkly revealed the deepening fissures between the union's leadership and its rank-and-file membership (Alexander 2013:610), catalysing a significant loss of membership and legitimacy (Buhlungu 2016:145).

The exploration of theoretical foundations revealed that no single model sufficiently explains the NUM's complex challenges. The monopoly voice model (Bryson, Forth & George 2021:15) highlights economic pressures but neglects socio-political dimensions. The social justice model (Hyman 2007:5; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman 2022:34) underscores the union's broader mandate but reveals tensions with its political alliances. The servicing versus organising model debate (Heery 2022:115) provides a crucial framework for understanding internal organisational dynamics that may have contributed to member disengagement.

A significant portion of the chapter was dedicated to analysing the contemporary challenges reshaping the labour landscape. The disruptive impact of digitalisation and automation on the mining sector was examined (Flores-Castañeda *et al.* 2024:5), highlighting how technological adoption directly erodes NUM's traditional membership base and structural power (Silver 2003:45). Furthermore, profound generational shifts and the emergence of workers with multiple, intersecting identities (Preece 2016:112; Twenge 2017:89) were shown to create a representation gap that traditional union models struggle to bridge (Statistics South Africa, 2023). These challenges were framed within the broader political economy of South African mining, where industry restructuring and the state's dual role create a complex environment for union operation (Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu 2023:120; Satgar 2022:60).

The chapter also introduced stakeholder theory (Freeman 1984:46) as a valuable analytical lens, proposing that NUM's sustainability depends on its ability to effectively manage often competing interests from its diverse stakeholder ecosystem (Kochan & Rubenstein 2000:24). Finally, the literature on trade union revitalisation was reviewed (Webster & Buhlungu 2004:237; Visser 2019:68), highlighting potential pathways forward through digital transformation (Visser 2023:17), coalition-building (Tattersall 2018:102), and adopting an organising model.

This extensive review establishes the necessary foundation for the research methodology outlined in the next chapter, which is designed to empirically investigate these complex, interlinked challenges through a qualitative, stakeholder-focused approach.

CHAPTER 3: EMPIRICAL STUDY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the empirical investigation of membership challenges within the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research methodology employed to explore the complex factors influencing membership dynamics, including internal governance, technological disruption, competition from rival unions, and political affiliations. Guided by a qualitative research design, the study adopts a case study strategy, enabling an in-depth exploration of the NUM as a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2018:15).

The chapter begins by situating the study within the qualitative research paradigm, highlighting the use of semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection tool, supported by secondary data sources such as NUM reports and relevant academic literature. The research design follows Saunders *et al.*'s (2019) Research Onion framework, systematically addressing the research philosophy, approach, strategy, methodological choices, time horizon, and techniques for data collection and analysis.

The study adopts a pragmatist philosophy, which prioritises practical solutions to research questions and accommodates multiple stakeholder perspectives (Saunders *et al.*, 2019:144; Creswell & Poth, 2018:45). An inductive approach guides theory development from empirical data, allowing patterns, themes, and insights to emerge organically from participants' experiences (Bryman, 2016:27). Methodological triangulation, comprising interviews, document analysis, and academic literature, is used to enhance credibility and ensure the trustworthiness of the findings (Denzin, 2017:45; Saunders *et al.*, 2019:158).

This chapter also details the procedures for data collection, sampling, ethical considerations, and data analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with current and former NUM members, leaders, officials, and industry experts, with a purposive sampling strategy employed to select information-rich participants. Data analysis follows

Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) six-phase thematic analysis framework, facilitated by NVivo software, to systematically identify and interpret key themes. Rigorous steps were implemented to ensure analytical transparency, including peer debriefing, member checking, and the maintenance of a detailed audit trail.

By outlining the empirical methodology in detail, this chapter establishes a robust foundation for the presentation and interpretation of findings in Chapter 4, ensuring that the study's conclusions are grounded in systematic, credible, and ethically conducted research.

3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to Braun and Clark (2022:6), qualitative research aims to describe individuals in their natural environments by using words and observations to convey reality. The study will be a qualitative approach that will utilise a case study strategy grounded in semi-structured interviews as a primary data collection tool guided by an interview schedule. This methodology seeks to explore the membership challenges faced by the NUM in an exploratory and interpretive approach using thematic analysis. Moreover, the study follows Saunders' Research Onion Model (2019) to systematically structure the research design. It does this by illustrating a series of layers wherein each layer emphasises a key point that simplifies a broad philosophical consideration to a clear technique and procedure. There are six layers of the Saunders' Research Onion Model and they are:

- Research Philosophy – This layer provides fundamental assumptions about reality and knowledge that guide the overarching approach to the research.
- Research Approach – This layer outlines the overall strategy for developing the theory of the research.
- Research strategy – This layer guides the researcher on how the study will respond to research questions.
- Methodological Choices – This layer reflects on the decisions undertaken on how the research will be conducted.

- Time horizon – This layer determines if the study transpires over a long period of time or is cross-sectional.
- Techniques and Procedures – This layer provides clarity on the specifications of data collection and analysis methods undertaken.

Overall, these layers help break down abstract concepts to concrete applications that amplify the soundness of the methodology. Figure 2 below is a visual representation followed by a sequential unpacking of each layer:

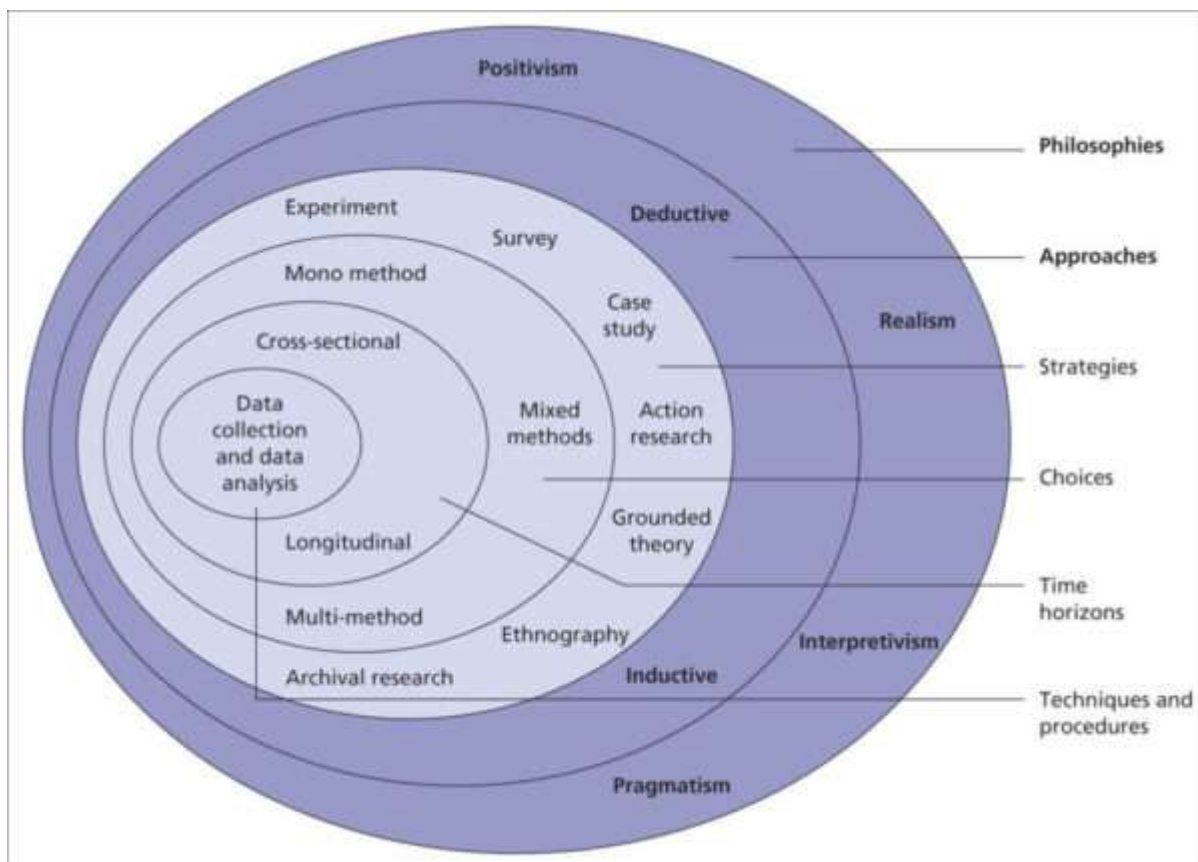


Figure 2: The Research Onion Model (Adapted from Saunders *et al.*, 2019:130)

3.3 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY: PRAGMATISM

The research study adopted pragmatism as its philosophy. A research philosophy is a set of beliefs and assumptions that a researcher has about the research process (Saunders *et al.* 2019:130). Pragmatism as the chosen philosophy is a problem-centred philosophy that aims to find practical workable solutions by prioritising research questions and values practically rather than focusing on abstract metaphysical debates about the nature of reality (Saunders *et al.* 2019:144). A pragmatist mind values the research problem and finds the best way to answer the question adequately (Creswell & Poth, 2018:45). This approach is in line with the study's aims of understanding the multiple complex realities of NUM stakeholders that include current and former members of NUM and former and current leaders and officials, as it relates to the organisation's membership decline instead of a single objective truth. The ultimate outcome is to identify revitalisation strategies that the NUM can employ to review its membership. It is for this reason, then, that pragmatism is suited, as it allows for the use of triangulation and the acceptance of multiple divergent subject views from stakeholders.

3.4 RESEARCH APPROACH: INDUCTIVE

The study employs an inductive research approach wherein the theories emerge from empirical data rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses. Theories will be built based on empirical data. As the researcher collects and goes over the information, the researcher identifies patterns and regularities, which then form the basis for developing broader theoretical conclusions and generalisations (Bryman, 2016:27). Meanwhile, a deductive approach starts with an existing theoretical framework and tests hypotheses derived from it through data collection (Saunders *et al.* 2019:155).

Therefore, the inductive research approach is well suited for this study for many reasons. Firstly, the multifaceted decline of the NUM's membership in the context of digitalisation, political dynamics and internal governance is highly complex and misunderstood. Pre-existing research of trade unionism is not sufficient to contextualise the contemporary

confluence of factors in the South African mining context. Secondly, the research questions require participants to explain their perception of reality; thus, the research remains open-minded to emerging themes and inputs received from the experiences of participants whilst documenting this data rather than being preoccupied by preconceived ideas. This open-ended exploration provides room for the discovery of context-specific factors and the development of grounded theory that is a result of the empirical reality of the case (Bryman, 2016:27).

3.5 RESEARCH STRATEGY: CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

According to Yin (2018:15), a case study is an empirical method that looks into a contemporary phenomenon in great detail and within its real-life context, particularly when there is no clear distinction between a phenomenon and the context. Moreover, Yin (2018:13) highlights that a case study effectively answers the 'how' and 'why' questions on difficult events which the researcher does not particularly have control over. This is the case with this study, as it explores the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). According to Bryman (2016:62), the NUM offers a good context for understanding the challenges of trade union revitalisation in South Africa. This is because the NUM, as a leading union in the sectors it operates in, has seen a loss of membership in recent times and its position at the intersection of technological change, intense rivalry and deep-seated political allegiances to the ANC make it a good choice for a detailed contextual analysis (Bryman, 2016:62). Therefore, the study seeks to break down these complex interrelated social phenomena.

The research will explore the interplay between internal governance, external competition like AMCU, Solidarity and many others, technological disruption and political affiliations more through the usage of surveys or experiments. Emphases of the study will reflect the period of 2011-2025, as this period captures the key junctures of the Marikana incident, continued membership decline and the increasing adoption of mechanisation and artificial intelligence in the mining industry, providing a bounded system for detailed investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018:98).

3.6 POPULATION & SAMPLING

Considering the qualitative and exploratory nature of this study, purposive sampling was selected as the appropriate method to ensure a data-rich sample. Purposive sampling involves the intentional selection of participants based on their specific knowledge, experience, or characteristics relevant to the research question (Campbell *et al.*, 2020; Etikan *et al.*, 2016). Unlike probability sampling, which aims for statistical generalisability, purposive sampling seeks analytical depth and is ideal for case study research where understanding complex phenomena from the perspective of those who have lived the experience is paramount (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002:230). Cilesiz (2011:492) emphasises that careful consideration of participant criteria is essential to select individuals with substantial experience of the phenomenon under study. Purposive sampling, according to Campbell *et al.* (2020:653–654), finds situations that optimise the use of few research resources while producing rich and significant data.

3.6.1 Target Population

The target population for this study comprises current and former members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), including leaders, officials, shop stewards, and industry experts with direct knowledge of membership dynamics. These participants provide insights into organisational governance, technological disruption, internal and external challenges, and political affiliations affecting membership trends.

Inclusion criteria:

- Affiliation
- Former or current members between 2012-2025,
- NUM officials and non-officials (leaders) involved in membership strategies.
- Diversity
- Atleast 40% female participants.
- Participants must come from across mining subsectors (PMG, coal etc.).

Exclusion criteria:

- Non-affiliation
- No current or historical ties to NUM.
- Has never worked in mining sectors.
- Ethical considerations
- Unwilling to provide informed consent.
- Employed by rival unions.

3.6.2 Sample size

The study aims to include up to 20 participants, or until data saturation is reached, which occurs when no new themes, patterns, or insights emerge from additional interviews (Saunders *et al.*, 2019:192). Research indicates that saturation in homogeneous groups often occurs within the first 12 interviews (Bunce & Johnson, 2006:65), while Creswell and Poth (2018:157) recommend between 5–25 participants for in-depth qualitative studies.

This sample size is consistent with qualitative research standards and ensures sufficient depth to explore membership dynamics, internal governance, and strategic challenges. Methodological triangulation (interviews, NUM documents, and scholarly literature) and member checking were applied to enhance validity, while ethical compliance with the POPI Act (4 of 2013) guided data handling.

The participant categories selected for this study are summarised in Table 1 below, which provides an overview of inclusion (✓) and exclusion (X) criteria applied to ensure a relevant, diverse, and data-rich sample.

Table 1: NUM sample

Participant Category	Inclusive (√)	Exclusive (X)
Current shop stewards	√	
Former shop stewards	√	
Current NUM members	√	
Former NUM members	√	
NUM leaders and officials	√	
Directly involved with NUM before 2012 (when NUM had 300,000 members)	√	
Directly involved with NUM after 2012 (during membership decline)	√	
Both male and female participants	√	
Individuals who have never been members of NUM		√
Participants employed in Mining, Energy, Construction & Metal	√	
Individuals who were never shop stewards or NUM leaders		√

Participants with no direct involvement in NUM affairs pre- or post-2012		√
Participants unable to provide informed consent or unwilling to participate in a recorded semi-structured interview		√

(Source: Own compilation, 2025)

3.6.3 Recruitment

Participants were recruited through access to NUM membership databases, negotiated via formal organisational gatekeepers such as the NUM General Secretary, regional chairpersons, and regional secretaries. This process ensured compliance with the POPI Act (2013) and aligned with NWU Research Ethics Policy requirements (NWU Research Policy, 2023:9). Referrals from NUM officials provided additional participants, constituting an expert-led purposive strategy, commonly used in labour and trade union research contexts (Saunders et al., 2019:161; Buhlungu, 2010:92).

To include perspectives from former members, snowball sampling was employed, allowing initial participants to refer others within their networks until the sample size or data saturation was reached (Naderifar et al., 2017:1; Guest et al., 2006:60). While snowball sampling may introduce homogeneity bias, it remains appropriate for accessing hard-to-reach former members whose insights are critical to understanding membership decline and organisational challenges.

3.7 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection followed a phased, systematic approach to ensure rigor, reliability, and ethical compliance (Saunders *et al.*, 2019:192). Each phase was carefully planned to capture rich, contextually grounded data reflecting the perspectives of NUM members, leaders, and experts, while aligning with the study's research objectives.

3.7.1 Phase 1: Review of secondary data and refinement of interview guide

This phase involved a comprehensive review of secondary sources, including NUM annual reports, policy documents, meeting minutes, industry publications, and relevant academic literature, to identify key themes, historical trends, and knowledge gaps regarding membership dynamics, internal governance, technological disruption, and competition from rival unions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Insights from this review informed the development of a semi-structured interview guide; ensuring questions were relevant, clear, and contextually grounded. Pilot testing with two NUM members allowed refinement of questions for clarity, sequencing, and cultural appropriateness, thereby increasing the credibility of primary data.

3.7.2 Phase 2: Ethical clearance, recruitment, and interviews

Following ethical approval from the NWU Ethics Committee, participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure inclusion of data-rich respondents (Patton, 2002; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Interviews were conducted via MS Teams as per the participant's preference and accessibility, with sessions lasting 45–60 minutes. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility, enabling participants to expand responses or introduce perspectives not anticipated by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Detailed field notes captured non-verbal cues, contextual factors, and immediate reflections, complementing audio-recorded data to enrich analysis. Participants were briefed on confidentiality, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw, consistent with ethical best practices (Alase, 2017; Arifin, 2018).

3.7.3 Phase 3: Transcription and data familiarisation

All interviews were professionally transcribed to ensure accuracy and completeness. The researcher then engaged in immersive data familiarisation, repeatedly reading transcripts while making reflective memos to track initial impressions, potential codes, and analytical ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This process enhanced the researcher's intimate understanding of the data and captured subtle themes, nuances, and context-specific

meaning that might otherwise be overlooked which was important for laying a strong foundation for rigorous thematic analysis.

3.8 Data Analysis Procedures

The study employed thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006:10; 2022:4), supported by NVivo software, to systematically identify, interpret, and present patterns within the qualitative data. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows for flexibility in exploring complex social phenomena while maintaining methodological rigour. The analysis process involved multiple interrelated steps:

3.8.1 Data familiarisation

The researcher immersed themselves in the data by repeatedly reading and listening to the interview transcripts. Detailed analytical memos and reflexive notes were taken to capture initial impressions, emerging ideas, contextual observations, and potential coding categories (Braun & Clarke, 2022:7). This process ensured that subtle nuances, contradictions, and context-specific details were not overlooked, providing a rich foundation for systematic coding.

3.8.2 Initial coding

Key phrases, sentences, and paragraphs were systematically labelled with descriptive codes. NVivo software was used not merely for storage, but to facilitate the actual transformation of raw interview text into analytically meaningful codes and themes. This involved importing the transcripts into NVivo, creating initial node structures, and tagging text segments that reflected emerging ideas. Open coding techniques were applied to identify recurring concepts related to membership decline, technological disruption, internal governance, union rivalry, and political dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2023:134).

As coding progressed, NVivo's querying and node-comparison functions assisted in grouping similar codes, collapsing overlapping categories, and refining them into broader thematic clusters. In this way, codes were iteratively reorganised, merged, or expanded until coherent themes emerged that accurately represented participants' narratives, rather

than imposing pre-existing theoretical constructs (Braun & Clarke, 2022:43). The process ensured a transparent audit trail of how the data moved from raw text to initial codes and finally to higher-order themes.

3.8.3 Searching for themes

Following the completion of initial coding, the researcher examined the data for patterns, similarities, and relationships that could be clustered into broader candidate themes. This process involved moving from raw meaning units within transcripts to descriptive codes, and then grouping related codes into higher-order categories that captured shared concepts across participants (Creswell & Poth, 2023:134). This ensured that codes were grounded in the data rather than imposed from pre-existing theoretical assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2022:43).

NVivo was used to assist with the organisation of codes, but the transformation from data → codes → themes was conducted manually through repeated reading and interpretive comparison. Codes were reviewed for convergence and divergence across participant groups such as shop stewards, leaders, and former members to identify potential thematic clusters.

To support this process, a Word Cloud generated from all interview transcripts was used to visually identify the most frequently occurring words and expressions. This visualisation helped highlight dominant ideas such as “leadership,” “politics,” “youth,” “automation,” and “rivalry” which guided the grouping of related codes into provisional themes. NVivo further assisted with visualising relationships through hierarchical nodes and thematic maps, enabling systematic refinement of the final theme structure (Nowell *et al.*, 2017:4).

3.8.4 Reviewing themes

Candidate themes were critically evaluated in a two-stage process. First, themes were assessed against coded extracts to ensure internal coherence and conceptual consistency. Second, themes were reviewed against the full dataset to confirm that they accurately reflected the diversity and richness of participants’ perspectives. Themes that

were weak, redundant, or inconsistent were refined, merged, or discarded (Braun & Clarke, 2022:66).

3.8.5 Defining and naming themes

Each final theme was clearly articulated with a concise description of its scope and essence. Detailed definitions and supporting explanations were developed, linking each theme explicitly to the research questions and the broader context of NUM membership dynamics. For example, the theme “*Digital Disconnect*” captured technological barriers, generational gaps, communication challenges, and strategic deficiencies in using digital tools for engagement and advocacy (Braun & Clarke, 2022:79).

3.8.6 Reporting

The final phase involved integrating the thematic analysis into a coherent narrative for presentation in the findings chapter. Direct participant quotes were incorporated to substantiate each theme, ensuring interpretations remained grounded in the participants’ lived experiences. NVivo reports were exported to support transparency and allow external reviewers to trace the development of codes and themes (QSR International, 2020:12).

Table 2: Application of Braun and Clark’s (2022) Thematic Analysis Framework

Phase	Description	Application in this study
Familiarisation	Immersing oneself in the data by repeatedly reading transcripts and listening to recordings.	All interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The researcher then read each transcript multiple times while listening to the audio, making initial analytical notes and observations in a research journal.

Generating Initial codes	Systematically identifying interesting features and labelling them with concise codes.	Using NVivo software, significant phrases, sentences, or paragraphs were tagged with descriptive codes. This process was applied across the entire dataset.
Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.	Codes were examined for patterns and relationships. Similar codes were grouped into candidate themes.
Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset.	This involved a two-level review. At Level 1, the candidate themes were checked against the collated coded extracts to ensure they formed a coherent pattern. At Level 2, the validity of each theme was checked against the entire dataset to ensure it accurately reflected the full body of evidence.
Defining and naming themes	Developing a detailed analysis of each theme, determining its essence and scope, and assigning a	The core narrative and scope of each theme were clearly articulated. For example, the theme "Digital

	concise name.	Disconnect" was defined as encompassing not just a lack of technology use, but also a generational gap in communication preferences and a strategic failure to leverage digital tools for advocacy.
Producing the Report	Weaving the thematic analysis into a compelling narrative that includes vivid data extracts.	This final phase results in the Findings and Discussion chapters of this dissertation, where the themes are presented, supported by direct quotes from participants, and linked back to the research questions and literature

(Source: Own compilation, 2025)

3.8.7 Triangulation for validity

Methodological triangulation enhanced credibility and trustworthiness. Semi-structured interviews were cross-verified with NUM documents spanning 2012–2025, including policy reports, membership statistics, and Secretariat communications. Secondary academic literature on trade unionism, digitalisation, and labour dynamics was also incorporated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018:45). The integration of multiple data sources enabled confirmation of emerging patterns, identification of discrepancies, and a nuanced understanding of membership challenges.

Through this rigorous, multi-layered process, the study ensured that the resulting themes were empirically grounded, analytically robust, and methodologically credible, providing a

strong foundation for interpreting NUM's membership decline and informing strategic recommendations.

3.9 Ensuring Data Reliability & Validity

To maximise the trustworthiness of this qualitative study, the researcher employed multiple strategies grounded in established frameworks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These strategies addressed credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability, ensuring that the findings accurately reflect participants' perspectives.

3.9.1 Triangulation

Both methodological and data source triangulation were applied. Methodological triangulation combined semi-structured interviews, NUM documents (2012–2025), and academic literature to cross-validate emerging insights (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018:45; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019:158). Data source triangulation involved comparing responses from current and former NUM members, leaders, officials, and industry experts to capture multiple perspectives and reduce bias (Denzin, 2017:45). This multi-layered triangulation enhanced credibility and ensured that findings were not reliant on a single source or method.

3.9.2 Analytical rigor

The study implemented Braun and Clarke's (2022:35) six-phase thematic analysis framework, providing a structured, transparent roadmap from raw data to final themes. Reflexivity was maintained through a research journal, documenting observations, assumptions, and methodological decisions to minimise researcher bias (Braun & Clarke, 2022:91). Peer debriefing was conducted with two independent academic colleagues experienced in qualitative methods, who reviewed the codebook, challenged early interpretations, and audited a sample of coded transcripts to ensure logical coherence and alignment with the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018:259).

3.9.3 Audit trail

A detailed audit trail was maintained, documenting coding decisions, memos, thematic evolution, and analytic notes. This process followed Silverman's (2020:112) guidance and allowed external reviewers to trace the progression from raw data to interpreted themes, ensuring transparency and verifiability. NVivo software supported this process by providing centralised data storage, systematic coding, complex queries, and automatic logging of all analytical activities, further enhancing accountability and reproducibility (QSR International, 2020:12).

3.9.4 Member checking

Participants were invited to review transcripts and preliminary interpretations to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of the data (Babbie, 2021:204). This validation process ensured that the analysis accurately represented participants' lived experiences and mitigated potential misinterpretations by the researcher.

By combining triangulation, systematic thematic analysis, peer debriefing, a robust audit trail, and member checking, the study achieved a high degree of reliability and validity, producing findings that are both methodologically sound and reflective of the complex realities of NUM membership dynamics.

3.10 Ethical considerations

Ethical compliance was a central consideration in this study to protect participants' rights and ensure research integrity. The study received ethical approval from the North-West University Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) under ethics number NWU-00717-25-A4. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, in line with Alase (2017:14) and Arifin (2018:30), ensuring that participation was voluntary, that participants fully understood the purpose and procedures of the study, and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Comprehensive consent forms were provided, outlining the study's aims, potential benefits, and procedures for handling and reporting data.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. All personal identifiers were removed from transcripts, and anonymised codes were assigned to participants to safeguard identities. Digital data, including audio recordings and transcripts, were securely stored on a password-protected OneDrive account, with access restricted to the researcher. Data handling procedures complied with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act 4 of 2013) and the North-West University Research Policy (2023), including a secure 5-year retention period for research data.

To mitigate potential bias arising from the researcher's affiliation with the NUM, a neutral independent interviewer, external to the organisation and trained in qualitative research interviewing, conducted all semi-structured interviews. Participants were informed of the interviewer's independence to reduce any perceived power dynamics and ensure authentic, uninfluenced responses.

Additionally, participants were explicitly informed that their data would be used solely for research purposes, that their contributions would remain confidential, and that only anonymised excerpts would appear in reports or publications. Continuous ethical oversight was maintained throughout the research process, including alignment with NWU's ethical clearance procedures and POPI compliance, ensuring respect for participants' rights, autonomy, and privacy at all stages of the study.

By adhering to these rigorous ethical procedures, the study safeguarded participant welfare while maintaining the integrity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the research process (Babbie, 2021:204; Creswell & Poth, 2018:259).

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the empirical foundation of the study by outlining the research methodology used to investigate the membership challenges facing the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). The chapter adopted a qualitative research design, guided by pragmatism, an inductive reasoning approach, and a case study strategy, allowing for an in-depth exploration of complex organisational, technological, political, and competitive factors shaping NUM's membership dynamics. Using Saunders *et al.*'s (2019) Research

Onion, the chapter detailed the sequential layers of the research philosophy, approach, strategy, methodological choices, time horizon, and techniques employed in data collection and analysis.

The chapter further explained how purposive and snowball sampling were used to select data-rich participants, including current and former members, leaders, shop stewards, and experts with experience of NUM between 2012 and 2025. Semi-structured interviews formed the primary data collection tool, supported by document analysis and academic literature to enhance triangulation. Data collection procedures, including ethical clearance, recruitment steps, interview administration, and transcription, were discussed to ensure transparency and compliance with NWU ethical standards and the POPI Act.

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2022) six-phase framework and supported by NVivo software, was applied to analyse the data systematically. The chapter described how familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, and reporting were conducted to derive credible and meaningful insights. Measures to ensure trustworthiness including triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, reflexivity, and a detailed audit trail were also outlined to strengthen credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability of findings.

Overall, this chapter established the methodological rigour underpinning the study's empirical investigation. It provides the analytical and ethical foundation upon which Chapter 4 presents the findings that emerged from the thematic analysis

Chapter 4: Thematic Analysis & Discussion

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings and discussion of semi-structured interviews conducted with ten participants representing diverse stakeholder perspectives within and around the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006:77) six-phase thematic analysis framework, which involved familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, theme identification, review, definition, and reporting.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify key patterns that explain the membership challenges and potential revitalisation opportunities of NUM within the contemporary mining sector. Findings are presented theme by theme, supported by verbatim participant excerpts and integrated with relevant academic literature. Eight themes emerged from the data, providing insights into both internal and external dynamics influencing NUM's membership trajectory, including:

- Leadership and governance challenges
- Political affiliation dilemmas
- Digitalisation and automation
- Youth engagement
- Union rivalry
- Revitalisation opportunities
- External support
- Organisational identity

The thematic description below highlights the interconnectedness amongst the emerging themes. The themes can be quantified as follows:

Table 3: Internal & External Factors

Internal factors	External factors
Governance integrity	Political alignment
Leadership ethics	Automation
Communication	Rivalry
Generational inclusion	Institutional support
Organisational identity	Revitalisation opportunities

(Source: Own compilation, 2025)

These factors need revitalisation strategies that will allow for the incorporation of digital adaptation, training and collaboration to restore trust and relevance of the organisation. Effective revitalisation may help rebuild the internal capacity of the organisation and restore external credibility.

To contextualise the qualitative findings, it is important to present the demographic and organisational characteristics of the respondents. Visual representations of the sample distribution are provided below to illustrate key attributes such as gender, age, organisational role, years of experience within NUM, and industry representation. These charts enhance the clarity of the sample profile and support the credibility of the thematic analysis that follows.

The age distribution presented in Figure 12.1 shows that the sample includes a mix of younger and older participants, with the largest proportion (50%) falling within the 30–39 age category. This provides a balanced view of perspectives across different generational cohorts within the mining workforce.

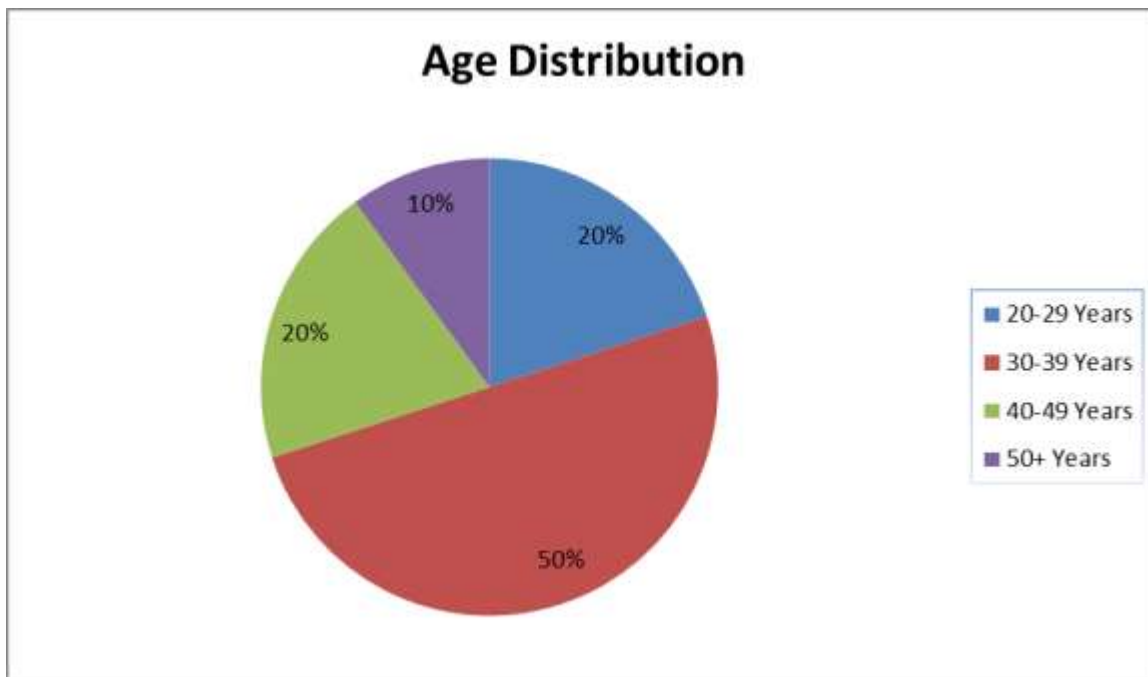


Figure 12.1: Age Distribution of Respondents

(Source: Own compilation, 2025)

Figure 12.2 depicts the organisational categories represented in the study, including leaders, current NUM members, officials and external stakeholders. This diversity strengthens the analysis by integrating viewpoints from decision-makers, workers, and expert observers.

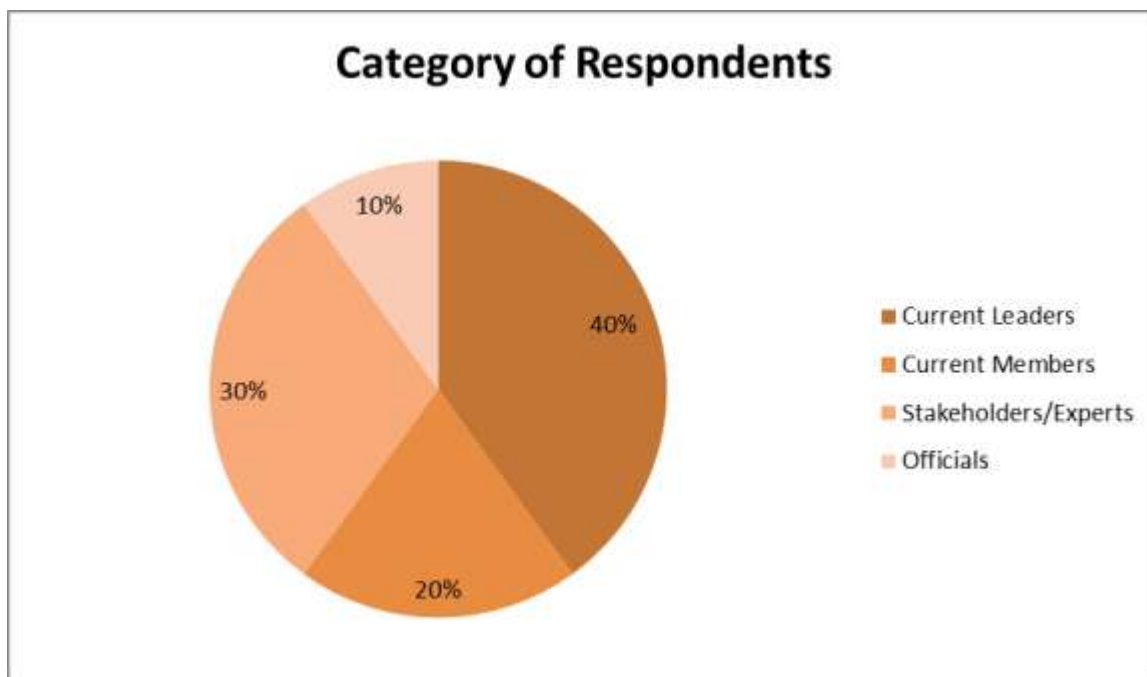


Figure 12.2: Category of Respondents

(Source: Own compilation, 2025)

Figure 12.3 presents the Industry in which participants operate, including platinum, energy, and other mining-related activities. This variation supports a sectoral broad understanding of NUM's membership dynamics.

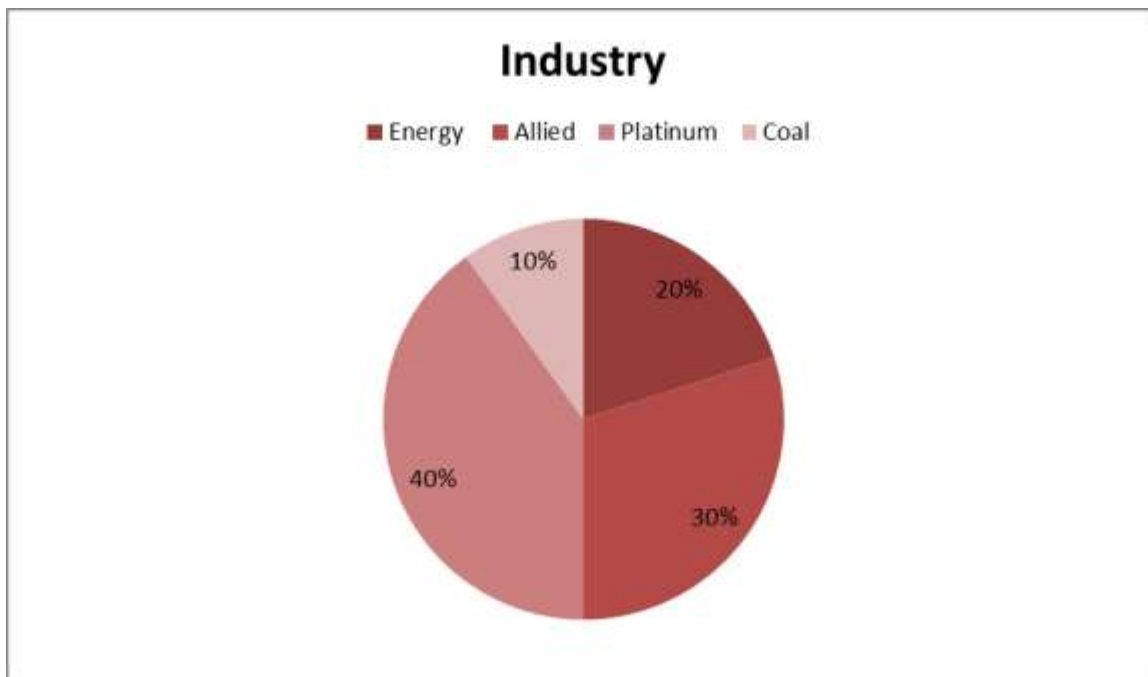


Figure 12.3: Industry

(Source: Own compilation, 2025)

As shown in Figure 12.4, respondents had significant organisational experience, with 50% having between 10–20 years in NUM and the remaining 50% having more than 20 years. This long-term membership contributes rich historical insight into NUM's organisational trajectory.

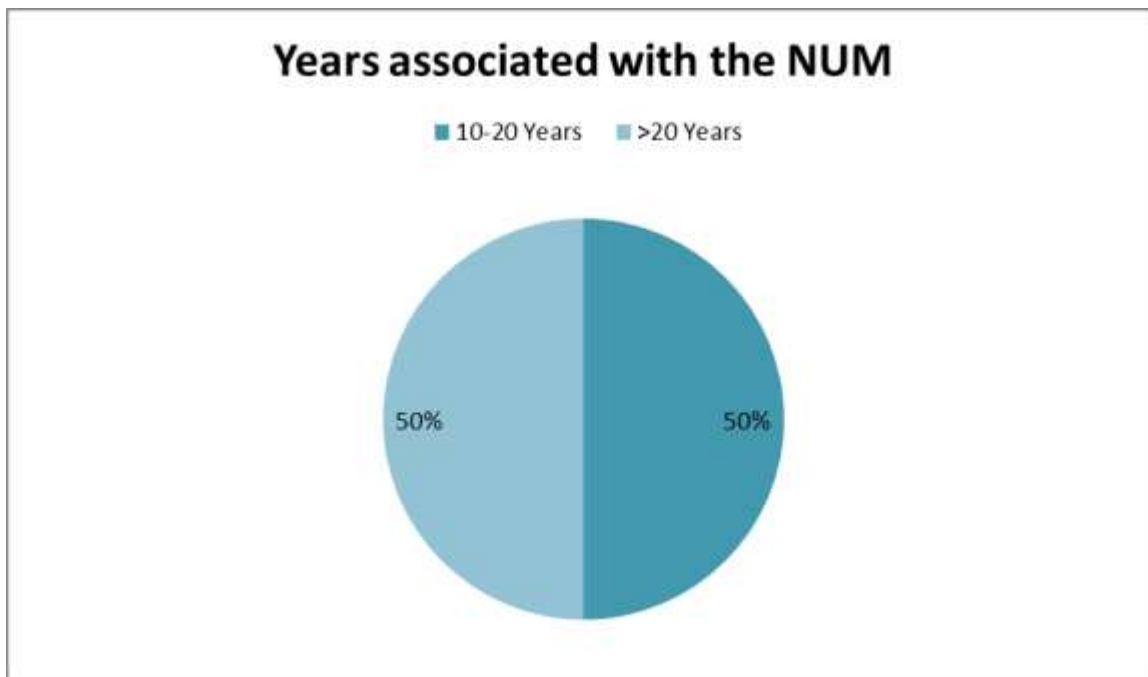


Figure 12.4: Years of Experience with the NUM

(Source: Own compilation, 2025)

Figure 12.5 illustrates the gender composition of the study's participants. The sample consisted of 60% male and 40% female respondents, which reflects the broader gender dynamics of the mining sector, where men continue to constitute the majority workforce.

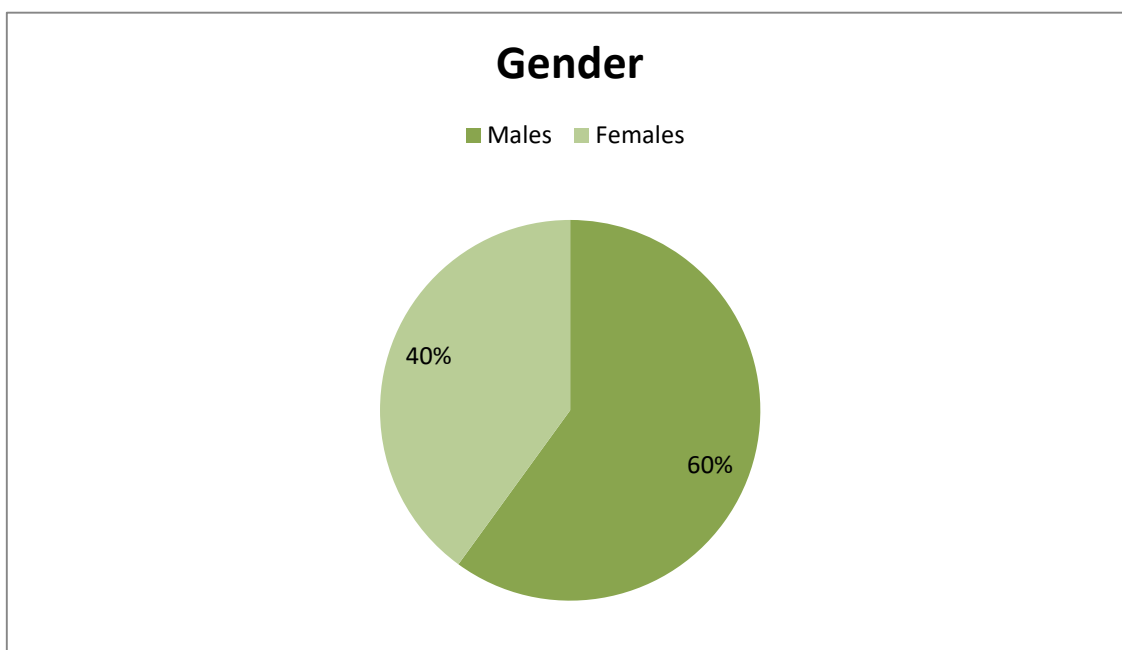


Figure 12.5: Gender

(Source: Own compilation, 2025)

4.2 THEME 1: LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES

Internal governance weaknesses emerged as one of the most prominent themes. A total of 9 out of the 10 respondents (90%) identified issues such as limited transparency, slow leadership responsiveness, and perceived self-interest as major contributors to declining member trust. As one participant explained:

“Most leaders think the NUM is a family business... they don’t tell members the truth and take too long to solve issues” (Participant 1, 2025).

This perception aligns with Buhlungu’s (2010:45) warning that the institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of unions can distance leaders from their membership base. Bezuidenhout (2023:125) extends this argument by showing how NUM’s post-apartheid evolution produced a tension between professionalisation and grassroots accountability, a dynamic that risks weakening the union’s organic connection to workers. Webster (2023:89) similarly contends that union revitalisation depends on restoring participatory internal democracy, which he views as the counterweight to bureaucratic drift.

The interview findings strongly reflect this collective scholarly concern. While participants expressed pride in NUM’s historical role and liberation legacy, they simultaneously described current leaders as “self-interested”, “unethical”, or “unapproachable”. This aligns with Buhlungu’s argument that bureaucratisation erodes trust; while also substantiating Bezuidenhout’s observation that NUM’s professional structures have sometimes overshadowed its grassroots identity. Moreover, participants’ calls for transparent leadership, accountability mechanisms, and more inclusive decision-making echo Webster’s emphasis on democratic renewal.

Taken together, the literature and interview data converge on the same point: NUM's organisational renewal depends on strengthening ethical leadership, rebuilding democratic participation, and restoring meaningful engagement between leaders and members.

4.3 THEME 2: POLITICAL AFFILIATION AND REPRESENTATION DILEMMA

Political alignment with the African National Congress (ANC) and COSATU emerged as a double-edged sword. About 40% of the participants defended the historic alliance:

“NUM is ANC and ANC is NUM... If we lose ANC it means we also lose NUM” (Participant 1, 2025).

Whilst 60% of the participants viewed it as detrimental to independence:

“Members say NUM is like the ANC, they don't deliver on promises” (Participant 2, 2025).

The findings support Satgar (2022:56) who argues that NUM's deep political entrenchment compromises its autonomy and responsiveness to rank-and-file members. The stakeholder lens underscores that while political ties grant NUM access to state structures, they simultaneously constrain its ability to represent divergent worker interests objectively. According to Visser (2019:12), many global unions face similar crises where partisan alliances alienate younger, apolitical workers. NUM must therefore strike a balance between strategic alliances and independent advocacy to preserve representational legitimacy.

4.4 THEME 3: DIGITALISATION AND AUTOMATION IMPACTS

About 70% of the Participants consistently acknowledged the disruptive effects of digitalisation and automation in mining. While technology improves efficiency, it also marginalises less-educated workers and reshapes union member engagement. One participant observed:

“Since this 4IR came into mining it has brought a bad impact... most workers are not educated”-Participant 1, 2025.

The participant’s comment about workers being ‘not educated’ highlights a potential gap in skills. This highlights the importance of up skilling and reskilling initiatives to support employees in adapting to digitalisation and automation. Across the interviews, participants emphasised that the negative impacts of 4IR are not inevitable but stem largely from inadequate preparation of the workforce. About 50% of the respondents stressed that NUM should take a proactive role in up skilling, re-skilling, and continuous learning, particularly for workers over 40 who may lack digital competencies or formal qualifications.

Another emphasised the communication gap:

“NUM must use social media more like TikTok, Facebook, Instagram to tell us what it does” (Participant 3, 2025).

These insights mirror Flores-Castaneda *et al.* (2024:7), who predict that digital technologies will dominate mining operations by 2050, demanding new worker skills. Kochan (2020:34) describes this as a “representation gap” where unions that fail to digitise lose contact with members. 30 % of the participants’ comments suggest that NUM’s reliance on traditional communication methods undermines its visibility among younger, tech-savvy workers. Consistent with ILO (2021:18), unions must integrate digital tools for organising, e-advocacy, and information sharing to remain relevant in the fourth industrial revolution.

4.5 THEME 4: YOUTH AND MEMBER ENGAGEMENT DEFICIT

A generational disconnect emerged strongly with 70% of the participants indicating that NUM’s structures inadequately engage young workers:

“Young people don’t want mass meetings; they want Whatsapp messages or newsletters” (Participant 2, 2025).

In contrast, older participants (ages 40+) preferred traditional mass meetings and in-person briefings. The age distribution of the sample (30–39: 50%, 40–49: 30%, 50+: 20%) highlights that communication preferences vary by generation, suggesting that NUM should adopt multi-channel engagement strategies to remain relevant to all members. This reflects a generational divide in communication preferences within the NUM.

The evidence echoes Visser (2019:68) and Webster and Buhlungu (2004:238), who stress that recruiting youth and women is essential for union regeneration. NUM's youth structures exist, but interviews revealed they are under-resourced and peripheral. From a stakeholder perspective, youth members constitute a critical internal stakeholder whose expectations differ markedly from older cohorts. Leveraging digital communication, peer-to-peer mobilisation, and leadership inclusion could rebuild intergenerational solidarity.

4.6 THEME 5: RIVALRY AND COMPETITION FROM OTHER UNIONS

The interviews highlighted the aggressive competition posed by AMCU and other independent unions, with 60% of the participants indicating that rival unions such as AMCU's tactics are violent yet effective in recruitment:

"AMCU threatens members and uses violence... NUM has not changed its organising strategy" (Participant 1, 2025).

Another added:

"If you don't serve members, they go to the alternative" (Participant 2, 2025).

This corroborates Alexander (2013:608) and Botiveau (2015:130) who documented NUM's membership losses post-Marikana due to perceptions of collusion with management. The persistence of "old strategies" shows limited organisational learning. Heery (2022:115) argues that unions must transition from a servicing to an organising model that empowers members. Applying that model, NUM should refocus on workplace-level empowerment, quicker grievance resolution, and proactive organising in emerging mines to regain competitiveness.

4.7 THEME 6: OPPORTUNITIES FOR REVITALISATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Although concerns were raised, the majority of participants proposed constructive solutions. Notably, 70% highlighted enhanced training, continuous education, and improved collaboration as central to NUM's renewal. One leader noted:

"NUM must train workers on new machines so they can maintain them, not people from other countries." - Participant 1, 2025.

Others advocated for unity:

"We need to collaborate with rival unions to fight capitalism together." - Participant 3, 2025.

These views align with Tattersall (2018:105) and Webster (2023:85), who argue that revitalisation in the Global South demands "strategic hybridity" balancing traditional industrial unionism with new alliances and capacity building. Bezuidenhout (2023:125) further emphasises that extending union services to retrenched or contract workers can rebuild legitimacy. Educational initiatives such as the Elijah Barayi Training Centre and the JB Marks Bursary Fund were viewed positively, suggesting that continuous learning can reposition NUM as a development partner rather than a reactive negotiator.

4.8 THEME 7: EXTERNAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

About 60% of the participants found that there was insufficient external reinforcement from government, COSATU, and NGOs. As one participant lamented:

"Support from external entities is not enough; NUM fights everything on its own." - Participant 1, 2025.

This finding corresponds with ILO (2021:18), which underscores that sustainable union revitalisation requires multi-stakeholder collaboration and policy backing. COSATU's perceived absence at grassroots level undermines NUM's collective strength. Enhanced

cooperation within the labour federation and with state training agencies could strengthen NUM’s institutional resilience.

4.9 **THEME 8: ORGANISATIONAL IDENTITY AND VALUES**

Finally, a majority of participants (75%) reflected nostalgically on NUM's historical mission and called for moral renewal:

“NUM must remember where it comes from; it’s bigger than any leader.”- Participant 1, 2025.

“Leaders must be honest with members, either bitter or smooth.” - Participant 1, 2025.

This aligns with contemporary scholarship emphasising that trade unions must uphold democratic accountability, fairness and member-centred responsiveness to retain legitimacy in the modern era (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman 2022:34; Webster, Masondo & Xulu 2023:15). While NUM’s identity as a liberation-era vanguard still carries symbolic and historical weight, the union now faces what Webster *et al.* (2023:21) describe as the “post-liberation dilemma”: liberation-movement unions must transition from struggle-based identities to transparent, service-driven, digitally capable organisations. In the post-Marikana and digital era, NUM’s sustainability therefore depends on ethical renewal, strengthened internal democracy, and a clear shift from political symbolism to member-centred organisational practice.

4.10 **SUMMARY OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK**

Table 4: Summary of thematic Analysis Framework

Main Theme	Sub-Themes / Codes	Verbatim Participant Quotes	Interpretation	Linked Research Question
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1. Leadership and Governance Challenges	• Lack of transparency and honesty • Self-interest and corruption perceptions • Slow response to member issues	“Most leaders think the NUM is a family business... they don’t tell members the truth and take too long to solve issues.” <i>(Participant 1, 2025)</i> “Leaders are greedy and paint NUM with red ink.” <i>(Participant 1, 2025)</i>	Internal governance deficits erode trust and cause attrition. Members differentiate between NUM as an organisation and individual leaders, signalling institutional rather than ideological disillusionment.	What internal governance issues have affected member trust in NUM?
2. Political Affiliation and Representation Dilemma	• Strong ties to ANC/COSATU • Perceived loss of independence • Mixed attitudes toward tripartite alliances	“NUM is ANC and ANC is NUM... If we lose ANC it means we also lose NUM.” <i>(Participant 1, 2025)</i> “Members say NUM is like the ANC,	Political alignment gives NUM policy access but undermines perceived autonomy and responsiveness to rank-and-file members. This dual identity creates	How do NUM’s political affiliations influence its ability to represent workers effectively?

		they don't deliver on promises." (Participant 2, 2025)	representation tensions.	
3. Digitalisation and Automation Impacts	• Technological disruption in mining • Digital literacy gap between old and young • Limited digital engagement capacity	"Since this 4IR came into mining it has brought a bad impact... most workers are not educated." (Participant 1, 2025) "NUM must use social media more such as TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, to tell us what it does." (Participant 3, 2025)	Digitalisation creates both risk (exclusion of low-skilled workers) and opportunity (technology-enabled mobilisation). NUM's digital adaptation is uneven.	How has digitalisation and automation in mining impacted union engagement?
4. Youth and Member Engagement	• Weak youth representation • Out-dated	"Young people don't want mass	NUM risks irrelevance among new-	How can NUM better engage young workers or

Deficit	communication models • Generational disconnect	meetings; they want Whatsapp messages or newsletters.” <i>(Participant 2, 2025)</i> “Use young people to speak to the youth; they know how we want to be engaged.” <i>(Participant 3, 2025)</i>	generation workers. Youth structures exist but are underutilised as communication remains hierarchical and paper-based.	adapt to technological changes?
5. Rivalry and Competition from Other Unions	• AMCU’s militant tactics • Propaganda and victimisation • NUM’s slow strategic response	“AMCU threatens members and uses violence... NUM has not changed its organising strategy.” <i>(Participant 1, 2025)</i> “If you don’t serve members, they go to the	Rival unions fill service gaps and project authenticity. NUM’s bureaucratic response limits its competitiveness in an aggressive labour market.	How has the emergence of rival unions affected NUM’s membership and operations?

alternative.” <i>(Participant 2, 2025)</i>				
6. Opportunities for Revitalisation and Sustainability	• Training and skills development for 4IR • Educational bursaries and RPL programmes • Strategic collaboration with other unions and stakeholders	“NUM must train workers on new machines so they can maintain them, not people from other countries.” <i>(Participant 1, 2025)</i> “We need to collaborate with rival unions to fight capitalism together.” <i>(Participant 3, 2025)</i>	Revitalisation depends on capacity building and partnerships that reposition NUM as a modern, learning-oriented union.	What opportunities exist for NUM to regain its influence in the mining sector?
7. External and Institutional Support	• Weak government and NGO support • COSATU's limited ground	“Support from external entities is not enough; NUM fights everything on	Insufficient external support magnifies NUM's internal capacity strains. Sustained	What support structures can strengthen NUM's operations?

	presence • Need for cross-sector alliances	its own.” (Participant 1, 2025) “COSATU should be more visible on the ground to help NUM.” (Participant 3, 2025)	alliances could stabilise membership and advocacy power.	
8. Organisational Identity and Values	• NUM’s legacy and historical mission • Erosion of founding values • Call for renewed ethical leadership	“NUM must remember where it comes from; it’s bigger than any leader.” (Participant 1, 2025) “Leaders must be honest with members, either bitter or smooth.” (Participant 1, 2025)	Members differentiate between NUM’s historic identity and its present state, demanding a return to transparency and moral accountability as a Revitalisation path.	What recommendations can revitalise NUM’s relevance and values?

(Source: Own compilation, 2025)

4.11 SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

The analysis reveals a crisis of trust, adaptability, and identity. Internal governance weaknesses, politicisation, and out-dated communication undermine NUM's legitimacy. Simultaneously, external factors such as technological disruption, industrial rivalry, and institutional fragmentation intensify membership decline. Yet the data also expose clear revitalisation levers: improved leadership ethics, digital transformation, targeted youth engagement, educational empowerment, and inter-union cooperation.

These insights support Braun and Clarke's (2021:330) argument that reflexive thematic analysis does not merely organise data but also generates meaningful insights into participants' lived experiences. Viewed through the stakeholder lens, NUM's sustainability depends on balancing the expectations of its diverse constituencies; members, youth, leadership, rival unions, and the state. In line with Webster (2023:85) and ILO (2021:18), revitalisation in the Global South must therefore be contextually grounded, digitally enabled, and ethically anchored.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented and interpreted the findings from ten semi-structured interviews conducted with stakeholders within and around the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, the chapter identified eight interconnected themes that illuminate both the internal and external dynamics influencing NUM's membership decline and opportunities for revitalisation. These themes encompassed leadership and governance challenges, dilemmas around political affiliation, the impacts of digitalisation and automation, youth engagement gaps, intensified union rivalry, revitalisation opportunities, external support structures, and NUM's organisational identity.

The findings revealed that internal weaknesses, particularly governance lapses, opaque leadership practices, and limited responsiveness, have significantly eroded member trust. At the same time, external pressures such as political alignment constraints, technological disruption, aggressive competition from rival unions, and insufficient institutional support have further destabilised NUM's membership base. The generational divide emerged as a critical factor, with younger workers demanding digital, transparent, and flexible communication models that differ from NUM's traditional structures.

Despite these challenges, the interviews highlighted clear pathways for revitalisation, such as strengthening ethical leadership, modernising communication through digital platforms, providing training and educational opportunities to equip workers for new mining technologies, collaborating across unions and institutions, and re-anchoring the union in its founding values of accountability and worker solidarity. These insights suggest that NUM's sustainability depends on its capacity to adapt strategically to a changing socio-economic environment while rebuilding internal cohesion and external credibility.

Overall, the chapter demonstrated how the interplay between internal governance issues and external sectoral shifts shapes NUM's current crisis of legitimacy, identity, and relevance. The thematic analysis underscored that revitalisation requires a holistic, stakeholder-informed approach that balances member expectations, organisational reform, and technological adaptation. Building on these empirical insights, the next chapter integrates the findings into practical revitalisation framework, offering targeted recommendations and strategies to strengthen NUM's representational effectiveness and long-term organisational sustainability.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 presents a synthesis, evaluation, and interpretation of the study's findings, drawing on both the literature review (Chapter 2) and the empirical research (Chapter 4). The chapter aims to integrate insights from the thematic analysis of interviews with NUM stakeholders, including current and former members, leaders, officials, and industry experts, to highlight key factors influencing membership decline and identify pathways for revitalisation.

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, it summarises the main findings, linking empirical observations with theoretical and contextual insights from the literature. Second, it evaluates the study's contributions, reliability, and methodological rigor, while acknowledging limitations that may affect interpretation or generalisability. Third, the chapter provides actionable recommendations for management, policymakers, and future research, informed by the synthesis of findings and grounded in stakeholder perspectives.

By consolidating the study's insights, Chapter 5 establishes the foundation for practical interventions that can support the NUM in addressing internal governance challenges, technological disruption, generational engagement gaps, and external pressures such as competition from rival unions and limited institutional support. The discussion emphasises the need for a holistic, stakeholder-informed approach to revitalisation, balancing ethical leadership, member engagement, digital adaptation, and institutional collaboration to ensure long-term sustainability (Braun & Clarke, 2022:43; Creswell & Poth, 2018:259; Visser, 2019:12).

5.2 Main findings from the study

This section presents a synthesis of key insights from both the literature review and the empirical investigation. The purpose is to consolidate the main factors influencing NUM's membership dynamics and to contextualise these findings within existing scholarship.

5.2.1 Main findings from the literature review

The literature review revealed several critical trends impacting trade union membership, particularly in the South African mining sector. First, declining union membership is closely associated with governance weaknesses, including opaque leadership, poor accountability, and limited responsiveness to members' needs (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004:238; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2022:34). Second, political entanglements, especially with the African National Congress (ANC) and COSATU, are double-edged: while they provide strategic access to state structures, they can compromise union autonomy and alienate younger, apolitical members (Satgar, 2022:56; Visser, 2019:12).

Third, the literature emphasised the disruptive role of digitalisation and automation. The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) was identified as creating skill gaps, particularly for older workers, and contributing to communication barriers between unions and members (Flores-Castaneda *et al.*, 2024:7; Kochan, 2020:34). Fourth, youth engagement and intergenerational communication were highlighted as critical for union sustainability, with younger workers preferring digital and flexible engagement methods over traditional mass meetings (Visser, 2019:68).

Fifth, external and institutional support, including from government, COSATU, and relevant NGOs, was identified as insufficient for sustainable union revitalisation (ILO, 2021:18). Finally, the literature reinforced the importance of organisational identity, ethical leadership, and adherence to founding values in maintaining legitimacy and member trust (Webster, Masondo & Xulu, 2023:15; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2022:34). Collectively, these insights provide a theoretical framework for interpreting empirical findings and developing actionable strategies for NUM.

5.2.2 Main findings from the Empirical research

The thematic analysis of ten semi-structured interviews produced eight interconnected themes that explain the internal and external dynamics affecting NUM membership.

- **Leadership and Governance Challenges:** 80% of participants highlighted that opaque decision-making, inconsistent leadership practices and poor accountability have undermined member trust. Governance lapses were cited as central to declining engagement, echoing findings from the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2022:43; Creswell & Poth, 2018:259).
- **Political Affiliation and Partisan Alignment:** Approximately 60% of participants expressed concerns about NUM's deep political alignment with the ANC and COSATU, which restricts independent advocacy, while 40% acknowledged the strategic advantages of such alliances. This confirms the literature on the dual-edged nature of partisan relationships (Satgar, 2022:56; Visser, 2019:12).
- **Digitalisation and Automation:** 70% of respondents emphasised that 4IR technologies marginalise less-educated workers and create generational communication gaps. The reliance on traditional communication strategies was seen as inadequate for digitally literate younger members, suggesting the need for digital up skilling and multichannel engagement (Flores-Castaneda *et al.*, 2024:7; Kochan, 2020:34).
- **Youth and Member Engagement Deficit:** The interviews confirmed a generational divide in communication preferences. Participants aged 30–39 (50% of the sample) preferred digital engagement, whereas older members favoured traditional meetings, indicating the necessity for multi-channel communication strategies (Visser, 2019:68; Webster & Buhlungu, 2004:238).
- **Rivalry and Competition from Other Unions:** AMCU and other independent unions were reported as aggressive competitors. Members frequently switch to alternative unions when services and responsiveness are lacking, highlighting NUM's need to modernise its organising approach (Alexander, 2013:608; Botiveau, 2015:130; Heery, 2022:115).
- **Opportunities for Revitalisation:** 70 % of the participants identified pathways to strengthen the union, including ethical leadership, enhanced digital communication,

targeted training programs, and improved intergenerational engagement (Creswell & Poth, 2018:259).

- External and Institutional Support: 70% of the participants highlighted limited support from government, COSATU, and NGOs, constraining NUM's ability to collectively address member challenges. Stronger institutional collaboration was recommended to enhance resilience (ILO, 2021:18).
- Organisational Identity and Values: There was a strong call to reinforce NUM's historical mission, ethical leadership, and member-centred values to maintain legitimacy in the post-liberation era (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2022:34; Webster, Masondo & Xulu, 2023:15).

Overall, the empirical findings corroborate and extend the literature, providing context-specific evidence that NUM's membership decline is shaped by the interplay of internal governance issues, technological shifts, generational divides, external pressures, and political entrenchment. These insights form the basis for the subsequent evaluation, limitations, conclusions, and recommendations.

5.3 Evaluation of study

The evaluation of this study assesses the extent to which the research objectives were achieved, the robustness of the methodology, and the credibility of the findings. The primary objective was to explore the internal and external factors influencing NUM's membership dynamics and identify potential pathways for revitalisation. Overall, the study successfully addressed this objective by combining an in-depth literature review with a rigorous empirical investigation.

First, the qualitative, case-study approach enabled a detailed exploration of complex organisational phenomena within their real-life context, in line with Yin (2018:15). Semi-structured interviews provided rich, context-specific insights from a diverse group of stakeholders, including current and former members, leaders, and industry experts. Methodological triangulation with NUM documents and scholarly literature further

enhanced the depth and validity of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018:45; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019:158).

Second, the study demonstrated analytical rigor through Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase thematic analysis framework. The systematic progression from data familiarisation, coding, theme identification, and refinement ensured that findings were grounded in participants' lived experiences. Peer debriefing, member checking, and the maintenance of a detailed audit trail enhanced transparency and mitigated potential researcher bias, particularly given the investigator's affiliation with NUM (Creswell & Poth, 2018:259; Babbie, 2021:204).

Third, the study's findings are consistent with and extend the existing literature. For instance, governance lapses, political alignment dilemmas, and generational communication gaps emerged as prominent factors affecting membership, corroborating prior scholarship (Visser, 2019:12; Satgar, 2022:56; Kochan, 2020:34). At the same time, empirical insights offered nuanced, context-specific evidence, such as the age distribution of participants and the quantified perspectives on youth engagement, which were not widely documented in the existing literature.

Finally, the study achieved methodological and ethical robustness. Ethical compliance with NWU's Research Policy (2023) and POPI Act (4 of 2013), including informed consent, confidentiality, and data security, ensured the protection of participants' rights. The use of an independent interviewer mitigated potential bias and reinforced the credibility of the responses.

In conclusion, the study successfully met its aims by providing a comprehensive understanding of NUM's membership challenges, identifying key themes and patterns, and highlighting actionable pathways for revitalisation. The findings provide a solid foundation for practical recommendations that can inform policy, organisational strategy, and future research within the South African trade union context.

5.4 Limitations of study

While this study provides valuable insights into NUM's membership challenges and revitalisation opportunities, several limitations must be acknowledged. Recognising these constraints is essential for interpreting the findings and understanding their scope.

Firstly, the study employed a qualitative case-study approach with a relatively small sample size of 20 participants, or until data saturation was reached (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019:192; Creswell & Poth, 2018:157). Although purposive and snowball sampling ensured rich, information-dense data, the findings cannot be statistically generalised to all NUM members or other South African trade unions. Instead, the study offers analytical generalisation, providing context-specific insights relevant to similar organisational settings (Yin, 2018:15).

Secondly, the reliance on semi-structured interviews introduced potential biases, including social desirability bias, recall bias, and the influence of participants' personal experiences on their responses (Bryman, 2016:27; Creswell & Poth, 2018:259). While methodological measures such as the use of an independent interviewer, triangulation with organisational documents, and member checking mitigated these risks, it is impossible to eliminate them entirely.

Thirdly, the study's temporal focus (2012–2025) provides a bounded perspective on membership dynamics, particularly in relation to digitalisation, technological disruption, and post-Marikana union developments. While this timeframe captures key turning points in NUM's history, events outside this period may also have influenced membership patterns, and future research could extend the temporal scope to capture longer-term trends (Flores-Castaneda *et al.*, 2024:7; Visser, 2019:12).

Fourthly, the study focused primarily on NUM members and stakeholders with direct organisational experience, with limited input from younger, apolitical workers or those disengaged from the union. Consequently, certain perspectives on membership decline, particularly from external or non-affiliated workers, may be underrepresented (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004:238).

Finally, the qualitative nature of thematic analysis relies on interpretive judgement, which, despite efforts to maintain analytical rigor and transparency, may introduce subjectivity in the identification and naming of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022:35). These limitations do not undermine the credibility of the findings but highlight areas for caution when extrapolating results.

Acknowledging these limitations provides a clear context for the interpretation of findings, underlining the importance of complementary quantitative studies or broader mixed-methods approaches in future research to validate and extend the insights obtained in this study.

5.5 Conclusion

This study investigated the membership challenges and revitalisation opportunities within the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in South Africa. Drawing on both a comprehensive literature review and empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews, the research identified eight key themes influencing membership dynamics: leadership and governance challenges, political affiliation dilemmas, impacts of digitalisation and automation, youth engagement gaps, intensified union rivalry, revitalisation opportunities, external support structures, and organisational identity.

The findings revealed that internal weaknesses, particularly governance lapses, limited transparency, and inconsistent member engagement, have eroded trust and loyalty among NUM members. Externally, political entrenchment, technological disruption, aggressive competition from rival unions, and insufficient institutional support have further destabilised the union's membership base. A generational divide emerged as a critical factor, with younger workers requiring digital communication channels, flexible engagement models, and transparent decision-making processes.

Despite these challenges, the study also highlighted clear avenues for revitalisation. These include strengthening ethical leadership, modernising communication and engagement through digital platforms, implementing targeted training and up skilling initiatives, fostering

collaboration with other unions and institutional actors, and re-anchoring the union in its foundational values of accountability and worker solidarity.

Overall, the study demonstrates that NUM's sustainability depends on its ability to adapt strategically to evolving socio-economic and technological contexts while rebuilding internal cohesion and external credibility. The empirical and theoretical insights from this research provide a foundation for actionable strategies aimed at enhancing NUM's representational effectiveness and long-term organisational resilience (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Visser, 2019).

5.6 Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen NUM's organisational sustainability and address membership decline:

5.6.1 Recommendations for Management

Enhance Leadership and Governance Transparency

- ✓ Implement participatory decision-making and accountability mechanisms to rebuild member trust.

Digital Transformation and Member Engagement

- ✓ Adopt multi-channel communication strategies such as Whatsapp, social media, newsletters to reach both younger and older members.
- ✓ Provide digital literacy training for members over 40 to bridge the technological divide.

Up-skilling and Reskilling Initiatives

- ✓ Offer targeted training to prepare workers for 4IR-driven changes and ensure continuous learning opportunities.

Strengthen Youth Structures and Intergenerational Engagement

- ✓ Allocate resources to youth committees, leadership development, and mentorship programmes.
- ✓ Promote peer-to-peer mobilisation to increase youth participation in union activities.

Revitalise Organisational Identity and Values

- ✓ Reinforce NUM's historical mission, ethical standards, and member-centred practices to maintain legitimacy.

Adaptation to Competitive Union Environment

- ✓ Transition from a servicing to an organising model focused on proactive recruitment and workplace empowerment (Heery, 2022:115).

5.6.2 Recommendations for Policy Makers

Support Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

- ✓ Facilitate collaboration between unions, government agencies, and NGOs to provide training and institutional support (ILO, 2021:18).

Strengthen Regulatory Oversight

- ✓ Ensure compliance with labour laws and encourage policies that protect union autonomy while promoting fair competition among unions.

Promote Skills Development Policies

- ✓ Implement national programmes for reskilling and up-skilling mining workers to adapt to technological disruption.

5.6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Expand Sample Scope

- ✓ Conduct studies with larger and more diverse NUM membership to capture broader perspectives and enhance generalisability.

Longitudinal Studies

- ✓ Track membership trends over time to assess the effectiveness of revitalisation strategies and changes in engagement patterns.

Comparative Studies

- ✓ Explore membership dynamics in other South African unions to identify best practices and lessons for NUM.

Technology and Union Engagement

- ✓ Investigate the role of emerging digital platforms and social media in improving union communication, particularly with younger members.

Implementing these recommendations across management, policy, and research levels will enable NUM to modernise governance, enhance member engagement, and strengthen its strategic relevance in the post-liberation and digital era (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Visser, 2019).

5.7 Chapter Summary

Chapter 5 presented a synthesis and evaluation of the study's findings, integrating insights from both the literature review and the empirical research. The chapter began by outlining the main findings from the literature, which highlighted recurring challenges in trade union governance, member engagement, political affiliation, digitalisation, and intergenerational participation (Braun & Clarke, 2022:43; Creswell & Poth, 2018:259; Visser, 2019:12). These findings provided a conceptual backdrop for understanding NUM's membership dynamics and contextualised the empirical observations.

The empirical research findings confirmed and extended these insights. Eight major themes emerged, including leadership and governance challenges, political alignment dilemmas, technological disruption, youth and member engagement deficits, intensified competition from rival unions, external and institutional support gaps, revitalisation opportunities, and organisational identity and values. Quantitative indicators, such as

participant percentages, highlighted that certain issues particularly opaque leadership practices (80% of participants), youth disengagement (70%), and insufficient institutional support (70%) were widely recognised across stakeholders. These findings underscored the interplay between internal organisational weaknesses and external pressures in shaping NUM's current challenges.

Evaluation of the study emphasised the methodological rigor applied, including purposive and snowball sampling, semi-structured interviews, triangulation with documents and literature, and adherence to Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis framework. Ethical compliance, transparency, and reflexivity enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Babbie, 2021:204). The chapter also acknowledged limitations, including the relatively small sample size and the focus on stakeholders accessible via NUM networks, which may limit generalisability.

Overall, the chapter consolidated the key insights from both the literature and empirical data, forming the basis for practical recommendations targeting NUM management, policymakers, and future research. The findings emphasise that sustainable revitalisation requires a combination of ethical leadership, digital communication strategies, workforce training, intergenerational engagement, and strengthened institutional collaboration, thereby providing a comprehensive roadmap to enhance NUM's organisational sustainability, legitimacy, and member-centred effectiveness.

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ANNEXTURES

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW:

A stakeholder approach to the membership challenges faced by a trade union in the mining industry

My name is **Tebogo Lesabe**, of student number **37211587**, who is a MBA candidate at the North-West University Business School. The purpose of this interview is to get an ***understanding of the membership challenges that are faced by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM)***.

Before resuming with the interview, kindly provide your demographic information to enable me to create a profile for each participant.

SECTION 1: Demographical Aspects

Q1: Before we start with the interview, I would like to get your demographic information as this will assist me in creating a profile of the participants.

1. What is your age?
2. What is your role in the NUM?
 - Current Member
 - Former Member
 - Union leader/official
 - Industry Expert
3. How long have you been affiliated with the NUM?
4. What is the sector of your employment?
 - Mining
 - Energy
 - Construction
 - Metal
 - Allied
 - Other

SECTION 2: Membership Journey & Motivations

5. Describe your journey as a NUM member/leader. What initially motivated you to join the union?
6. How has your perception of NUM's role in advocating for workers' rights evolved over time?
7. In this membership journey, what about NUM do you consider to be good and also bad?. What issues did you experience as disappointment(s) and what has been commendable?

SECTION 3: Challenges and Barriers

8. What do you perceive as the most significant challenges contributing to NUM's membership decline?
9. How has digitalisation and automation in mining impacted union engagement?
10. How do NUM's political affiliations influence its ability to represent workers effectively? e.g. ANC
11. What internal governance issues, if any, have affected member trust in NUM?

SECTION 4: Opportunities for Revitalisation

12. What opportunities exist for NUM to regain its influence in the mining sector?
13. How could NUM better engage younger workers or adapt to technological changes?
14. How might collaboration with rival unions or other stakeholders address current challenges?

SECTION 5: Skills and Competencies

15. What skills do NUM leaders and members need to navigate modern labour challenges? E.g. digital advocacy, negotiation
16. How effective are NUM's current training programs in preparing members for these challenges?

SECTION 6: RIVALRY & COMPETITION IN THE MINING SECTOR

17. How has the emergence of rival unions such as AMCU affected NUM's membership base and operations?
18. Where there any specific events or behaviours that drove members to switch unions?
19. In your view, what factors make workers choose rival unions over NUM?
20. How has competition from other unions influenced NUM's strategies for organising, recruitment and member engagement?
21. What opportunities exist for NUM to collaborate or coexist with rival unions to strengthen worker representation in the mining industry?

SECTION 7: SUPPORT STRUCTURES (Governance)

22. What support does NUM receive from external entities? E.g. government. NGOs, mining companies, COSATU
23. How effective are these support addressing membership retention?
24. What additional support mechanisms would strengthen NUM's operations?
25. Do you know the vision & mission of NUM? Has it changed?
26. How regular did you receive communication from the Leadership of NUM?

SECTION 8: RECOMMENDATIONS

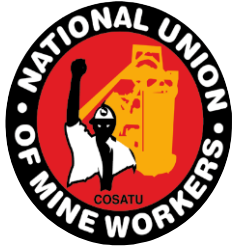
27. What advice would you give NUM leadership to revitalise membership and relevance?
28. What policy changes should the government implement to support unions like NUM?

IN CONCLUSION

29. Is there anything else you would like to share about NUM's challenges or future strategies?



Thank you so much for taking your time to participate in this interview. This brings us to the end of the interview.



NATIONAL UNION OF MINEWORKERS

No: 22 Cnr Ledys and Heystek Street, Rustenburg
Telephone: (014) 597 2615/95
Email: gmoatshe@num.org.za

RUSTENBURG REGION

RE: Organisational Permission to Conduct Research Study

Leadership, this letter serves to formally grant permission to Comrade Tebogo Lesabe, who is currently employed by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), to conduct the research study titled:

“A stakeholder approach to understanding the membership challenges faced by a trade union in the mining industry”

as part of his Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree at North-West University.

We acknowledge that:

- We have reviewed the research proposal, including the study objectives, methodology, data collection tools such as semi-structured interview guide and informed consent form
- We take note that the study seeks to explore the factors contributing to NUM's membership trends, with a focus on identifying challenges and opportunities for organisational revitalisation in the context of digitalisation, political dynamics, and evolving labour relations.
- There are no objections to the research proceeding and thus permission is granted for comrade Lesabe to carry out this study involving current and former NUM members, shop stewards, officials and industry stakeholders.

Our permission takes note that:

- Participation of all individuals involved will be entirely voluntary, based on informed consent, and all ethical requirements as per the North-West University Ethics Committee guidelines will be strictly adhered to.
- The confidentiality and anonymity of all participants and organisational data will be protected, with results presented only in aggregated form.
- A summary of the key findings may prove to be vital for the organisation.

We trust that this study will contribute valuable insights into the challenges facing trade unions in the modern era and support on-going strategic initiatives within NUM.

Comradely,

Debby Langa, DLanga@num.org.za, Unit Head, NUM.

Signed on 01/07/2025



28 Oct 2025

To: Potential interview participant**INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW**

Date: _____

Participant code: _____

Title: A STAKEHOLDER APPROACH IN MEMBERSHIP CHALLENGES FACED BY A TRADE UNION IN THE MINING INDUSTRY

Dear _____

I am Tebogo Lesabe, a North-West University Business School MBA candidate. As part of my research for an MBA in Economics and Management Sciences, I am seeking to understand the membership challenges faced by the National Union of Mineworkers in South Africa. This study aims to explore these membership challenges, barriers, and opportunities that face the National Union of Mineworkers and provide revitalisation strategies that could help the organisation retain relevance in the modern era of trade unionism.

There are a total of eight sections with questions, and the interview will take approximately 45 – 60 minutes of your time to complete. Your participation is entirely voluntary and confidential, and your insights will contribute to a better understanding of this organisation as far as adoption to digitalisation, political affiliation, rivalry, youth integration, and overall service to members

Potchefstroom Campus: (+27) 18 299 1406

Mahikeng Campus: (+27) 18 389 2095

Vanderbijlpark Campus: (+27) 16 910 3011

Important notices, terms and conditions:

- The study is part of a post-graduate qualification conducted by North-West University.
- This study is subject to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act 4 of 2013), and the researchers commit to complying with the regulations of this legislation. Any personal identifying information, such as demographics will remain confidential.
- This interview is voluntary, and you are under no obligation to participate.
- You will have no negative consequences if you do not participate in the interview.
- Results will only be used and presented anonymously, and you will not be named at any time (We will use pseudonyms).
- By participating in the interview, you agree that the information you provide can be used for research purposes, specifically for potential academic publications and conferences.
- There are no correct or incorrect answers to any of the questions.
- This study has been approved by the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC), which reserves the right to audit this study to ensure compliance.

If you have **ANY** questions or concerns, you are welcome to contact the researchers: My promoter of the thesis is Prof Ronnie Lotriet. He can be reached at Ronnie.Lotriet@nwu.ac.za for further questions or concerns about the research project. Should you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at 0766440606 or via email at tebogolesabe@rocketmail.com

Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to a vital area of research.

Sincerely,

I have read and understood the information provided above. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and all my questions have been answered satisfactory. I voluntary agree to participate in this study.

Name of Participant:

Signature.....

Date.....

Tebogo Lesabe

MBA Research Student

Student Number: 37211587

North-West University Business School

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22 October 2025

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the **North-West University Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC)** on 22 October 2025, the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee hereby **approves** your study as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-REC) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Study title:	A STAKEHOLDER APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THE MEMBERSHIP CHALLENGES FACED BY A TRADE UNION IN THE MINING INDUSTRY														
Study leader/Supervisor (Principal investigator/Researcher):	Prof R.A. Lotriet							University no.:	10066373						
Student:	Mr T.L. Lesabe							University no.:	37211587						
Ethics number:	N	W	U	-	0	0	7	1	7	-	2	5	-	A	4
Institution Study number Year Status Status: S = Submission; R = Re-submission; P = Provisional authorisation; A = Authorisation															
Application type:	Single study - Postgraduate research							Risk level:	Low/minimal risk						
Commencement date:	10/22/25														
Expiry date:	10/22/26														
<i>Approval of the study is initially provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of the annual (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation.</i>															

Special in process conditions of the research for approval (if applicable):

None.

General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, the following general terms and conditions will apply:

- The study leader/supervisor (principal investigator)/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the EMS-REC:
 - annually (or as otherwise requested) on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided, and upon completion of the study; and
 - without any delay in case of any adverse event or incident (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the study.
- The approval applies strictly to the proposal as stipulated in the application form. Should any amendments to the proposal be deemed necessary during the course of the study, the study leader/researcher must apply for approval of these amendments at the EMS-REC, prior to implementation. Should there be any deviations from the study proposal without the necessary approval of such amendments, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
- Annually a number of studies may be randomly selected for an external audit.
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the study may be started.
- In the interest of ethical responsibility, the NWU-SCRE and EMS-REC reserves the right to:
 - request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the study;
 - to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process;
 - withdraw or postpone approval if:
 - any unethical principles or practices of the study are revealed or suspected;
 - it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the EMS-REC or that information has been false or misrepresented;
 - submission of the annual (or otherwise stipulated) monitoring report, the required amendments, or reporting of adverse events or incidents was not done in a timely manner and accurately; and / or
 - new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.
- EMS-REC can be contacted for further information or any report templates through the secretariat. Botlenyana Maluleka (Botlenyana.Maluleka@nwu.ac.za / +27 18 2852436) or the chair Prof Diana Viljoen-Bezuidenhout (Diana.Viljoen@nwu.ac.za / +27 16 9103403).

The EMS-REC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well with your study. Please do not hesitate to contact the EMS-REC or the NWU-SCRE for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely,



Digitally signed by
Prof Diana Viljoen
Date: 2025.10.23
13:47:12 +02'00'

Prof Diana Viljoen

Chairperson: NWU Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee