Government Crisis Communication: Exploring the use of selected media by the Department of Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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DECLARATION

I, Kanwendo Mitchel Thendo, declare that the study titled “Government Crisis Communication: Exploring the use of selected media by the Department of Health during the COVID-19 pandemic” is my own work and has not previously been submitted for academic purposes. All the sources used in this study have been pivotally acknowledged. It is submitted for the Degree of Master of Arts in Communication Studies at University of Limpopo.

Mitchel Thendo Kanwendo **2025**

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to myself, for the dedication, perseverance, and countless hours invested in this journey. Completing this dissertation is not just the end of a project, but the culmination of hard work, growth, and resilience. Here's to believing in myself, even when the path seemed uncertain. This achievement is proof that determination and self-belief can turn challenges into triumphs.

This work goes to my husband Pfariso Sadiki who held my hand from the beginning to the end and my daughter Vhuhuluhawe who is my strength and motivation. The Kanwendo family, particularly my parents, Molatelo and Caroline Kanwendo, whose words of wisdom and encouragement fueled my academic focus, and my siblings, Tshililo Kanwendo and Merlyn Sandane. This work is also dedicated to my late Bishop Sophia Khorommbi, your biblical teachings carried me through this study. This is to recognise the support that everyone has shown and given me through all odds to make it to this end. May the almighty bless and keep you.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

SCCT- Situational Crisis Communication Theory

UGT- Uses and Gratification Theory

RCCE- Risk Communication and Community Engagement

NDOH- National Department of Health

WHO- WORLD Health Organisation

UK- United Kingdom

UNICEF- United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

NICD- The National Institute for Communicable Diseases

IFCN- International Fact- Checking Network

CDC- Centre for Disease Control and prevention

CM- Crisis Management

MDDA- Media Development and Diversity Agency

SAG- South African Government

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore government crisis communication through The National Department of Health on using selected media during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study used qualitative, exploratory approach to determine how The National Department of Health used Facebook and Twitter to disseminate messages of emergency to the citizens. This was to determine and explore the effectiveness of social media in reaching targeted masses in a short period of time in cases of emergency. The hubs of data collection for this study were posts made by The National Department of Health on Facebook and Twitter and comments by the public. Thematic content analysis was used to determine the themes that emerged from the selected media posts, while document analysis was used to analyse data. The selection of the posters was guided by the issues the researcher intended to study which reflected media use and media trust. The findings revealed that individuals relied on government's social media for accurate information regarding the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is proven by the engagement that was taking place between individuals on the comments section on every post the government released. The study therefore recommended that the Government should prioritise engagement on social media platforms. It was also suggested that the government should come up with be a response strategy to answer questions by the public in times of uncertainty.

Key concepts: COVID-19 pandemic; Facebook; Twitter; The Department of Health; Crisis communication.

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CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This dissertation conceptualises the assessment of crisis communication within the government. It also conceptualises how communication is carried out during a crisis to lay a facet and demystify the masses. Arguably, communicating a crisis can be emphasised by bringing another systematic way of communicating to stakeholders and how one builds a trust. Consequently, social media platforms are adopted by majority of users including all spheres of government to connect and inform citizens about any event or development. Thus, this study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore how the South African Government, particularly the Department of Health, used media platforms Facebook and Twitter to engage and communicate to citizens about the Corona virus pandemic. The study adopted Naik's (2017) definition of crisis. Naik (2017) defines crisis as an emerging event that requires an immediate intervention as it threatens the reputation of organisations with a public context. The Department of Health is responsible for not only focusing on access, equity, efficiency, quality, and sustainability but also for improving overall health outcomes by preventing illness and disease and promoting healthy behaviours (Olaboye et al., 2024). The Corona virus began as a sever crisis and a, later a localised disease which quickly grew into a global pandemic that affected nearly every country on the planet. As a result, it is pivotal to assess how the South Africa Government addressed the pandemic to understand how communication practices were exercised. Considered one of the deadliest pandemics in history, the COVID-19 had a massive impact on global healthcare, with far-reaching implications for society and the global economy (Civico, 2021). It exposed several shortcomings in the healthcare systems of many nations, particularly in the global South (Filip et al., 2022). Issues continued and still continue to be beyond the medical field.

The pandemic began on December 31, 2019, when the public health emergency recorded its first case of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wuhan, China. From there, it spread to 24 countries outside of China and is currently affecting the entire world (Worldometer, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic caused a worldwide health emergency that profoundly affected our daily lives and how we perceive the world.

On March 1, 2020, South Africa reported its first instance of COVID-19, and, practically, all media outlets broadcast and reported this information (Modisenyane et al, 2022). The outbreak of COVID-19 revealed that each disaster serves as a learning experience for how to communicate more effectively in the next disaster. In this sense, how the government communicates about it can create clarity, stability and build resilience (Sakurai & Chughtai, 2020).

Further, policy implementation and public engagement to explain restrictions, closures, and other measures to ensure compliance were amongst the importance of government communication during and post the pandemic (Wittenberg et al., 2021; Filip et al., 2022). Every effort from the government was to try and save as many lives as it could due to high death rate (7 050 356 death globally) which was experienced during the pandemic (WHO, 2022).

Building trust through transparency and empathy helped maintain public trust in government responses, coordination by facilitating collaboration among healthcare professionals, emergency services, and essential services were some of the factors that government communication during the pandemic were addressing (Correia, 2024). Notwithstanding the fact that vaccination efforts in terms of promoting vaccine safety, efficacy, and availability to boost uptake and herd immunity was also communicated, the government also gave people free will as to whether they can choose to be vaccinated or not.

Effective government communication saved lives, fostered resilience, and aided economic recovery during the pandemic (John et al, 2022). Government communication during COVID-19 was vital for several reasons, including information dissemination that played a major role in sharing updates, guidelines, and safety measures to inform the public to stay safe, risk management assisted in managing public perception, reducing panic, and countering misinformation for unreliable sources (Wittenberg et al., 2021).

On February 28, 2021, the United Kingdom's Minister for Health announced the start of a public education campaign that will offer guidance on how to handle suspected pandemic cases and prevent infection (Reuters Special Report, 2020). Furthermore, United Kingdom's government published its Coronavirus action plan on the 3rd of

March 2021, and to keep the public informed about the fight against the Coronavirus pandemic, the government announced plans to host daily televised press briefings starting March 15, 2021 (Reuters Special Report, 2020; Gov.uk, 2020a; Gov.uk, 2020b).

This announcement was important, considering that different media outlet present diverging, and often conflicting, perspectives on reality in a “post-truth” world of “alternative facts” (Bursztyn et al., 2020). WHO (2020) states that fake news spreads faster and more easily than the virus itself in a crisis like COVID-19. Thus, crisis communication is an essential area worthy of scholarly attention.

Further, Benoit (1997) theorises that crisis communication is a discourse that evaluates techniques such as denial, avoidance of responsibility, corrective actions, and apologies that can be useful in restoring an organisation’s image or reputation during a disaster. According to the Government Communicator’s Handbook (2014:149), “a crisis communication plan is both necessary and a challenge on its own.” Effective crisis communication is important for any crisis management. Hence, this study intends to unravel the varied efforts made by The South African Government, through the Department of Health, to communicate the global COVID-19 pandemic on selected media platforms.

The study explores how the government employed selected media to communicate with citizens about the COVID-19 pandemic. These media included social media platforms *Facebook and Twitter (X).*

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM STATEMENT

The issue of managing a myth and maintaining facts during crises remains a matter requiring a well-orchestrated communication perspective to gain stakeholder's trust. The South African Government experienced a challenge to communicate with citizens on social media during a COVID-19 pandemic and ensuring trust due to the flow of information from all sides. The challenge lied with misinformation and failure to demystify the masses about the pandemic which was seen as a crisis. It is the responsibility of any organisation to ensure that a crisis is well managed to protect the reputation its reputation and for the safety of the community. Governments must communicate constantly during crises to ensure public safety, challenge misinformation, retain confidence with residents, properly coordinate response activities, manage views of government actions, and prevent undue fear or unrest (Liu et al., 2020, Díaz et al., 2020 & Zhong et al., 2023). During a crisis, misinformation and rumours frequently spread quickly, generating widespread confusion and panic. Government communication is critical in combating misleading information by issuing official declarations, explanations, and fact-based updates (Christensen & Lægreid, 2020). By swiftly addressing misinformation, authorities may reduce undue fear and guarantee that truthful information prevails. Social media provide an advantage for communicating with people and allow for the spread of misinformation, which can heighten fear and worsen social tensions (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Waszak et al., 2018). People's actions are influenced by misinformation, which can have negative effects on their physical and mental well-being and prolong the spread of viruses (WHO, 2020). Van der Linden, Roozenbeek and Compton (2020) postulate that misleading and inaccurate information about the virus makes it hard for people to find trustworthy and reliable news. The President stated that the restrictions would be eased. However, the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs stated the opposite that restrictions would not be eased anytime soon. This not only resulted in contradiction within the COVID-19 task team, but created narratives that omit or add information to facts (Naeem et al. 2020). This, as a result, led to misinformation that spread rapidly. This became a problem that affected the country in multifarious ways that the proposed study seeks to explore in depth. Several variables enhanced the risk of fake news and misleading information during the pandemic. Humans are often bad at recognising bogus information because fake news

often closely resembles actual news. Furthermore, in times of uncertainty and catastrophe, such as a global pandemic, people seek protection and security, making them more susceptible to misinformation that provides simplistic explanations or false reassurances. It is therefore the government's responsibility to monitor all the misleading information since all citizens have rights and free will to post whatever they want. So, this study focuses on the implications of the mismanagement of information about the COVID-19 pandemic on platforms such as social media.

1.3 PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

1.3.1 The role of government's department of health in communicating during pandemics

Media are the primary source of information and play an important role in mass education. The government's pivotal role in uniting and motivating the population is vital for health risk prevention, response, and severe harm recovery during national catastrophes (Kreps et al., 2005; Seeger et al., 2018). Effective government communication is therefore critical for educating the public about looming risks and best practices for minimising harm during emergencies (Liu et al., 2020). However, the government must ensure that during national emergencies, appropriate channels are used to communicate with the public because during such times, it becomes difficult to trust information that is communicated because everyone often reports on the same issue from different perspectives (Zhong et al., 2023). The government communication's role during pandemics is to ensure that the citizens stay informed. The South African government provides information on where to find support and assistance by sending SMSs to all of the nation's registered cell phone (Ataguba & Ataguba, 2020). This encourages citizens to follow precautions put in place, such as staying indoors, to lessen the COVID-19 pandemic's effects.

1.3.2 The role of radio and television in times of crisis

In times of crisis, radio has always proven to be adaptable, and it has been crucial in playing a significant during natural disasters and public health emergencies. (Rodero, 2020). Rodero (2020) highlights the key role of radio, but that was before the majority of citizens started relying on online updates, such as tabloids and social media for information. Mass media hold a significant position in society since they contribute to

the emergence or modification of social norms (Briandana, Meiwanto, Doktoralina, Hassan & Hasan, 2020: 216). Karim, Mariappan and Peters (2016:21) equally support the foregoing statement by explaining “mass media can be used to replace other assets or strengths as a source of power for social innovation, management, and control tools.”

“Community radio stations have served as information outlets for spreading awareness about safety precautions, symptoms of infection and testing; they have been debunking fake news circulating on social media” (Paravala & Jena, 2020:4-5). Information gathered through efficient communication remains a critical asset for governments in times of uncertainty and anxiety during public health outbreaks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Both television and radio are primary sources of critical information to the public in the event of disasters and emergencies, they circulate information and can curtail the spread of disease (Anwar, Meryem, Raees & Anwar, 2020).

1.3.3 Social media as an effective channel to communicate with citizens

Social media has a created an online community engagement where users are able to communicate with one another and create a discussion on any pertinent issue. Communication and trends on the platform become much more accessible and one can get an overview of what is transpiring based on the shared information. This shows that social media is a crucial and dependable key element of communication channels that one can use to get the information and disseminate it within a public domain. According to Meyer (2020:1), “since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic worldwide, social media has become an effective channel of communication and engagement with a broad variety of stakeholders all over the world.” This further substantiate that the pandemic has, in many ways, reinforced social media’s importance in modern communication strategies, allowing people to stay informed, engaged, and connected despite physical separation. The number of persons using social media has increased by 87% (Anwar et al., 2020). This study is evidence that using social media to reach the masses was a good move since there is traffic in different social media platforms due to high usage, meaning that any message that has to reach the public will indeed be received within a short space of time.

People of all genders, ages, educational backgrounds, and income levels use social media (Heldman, Schindelar & Weaver, 2013). Governments and public health experts used Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media channels to swiftly and efficiently reach vast numbers of people with advice on how to keep healthy and stop the virus from spreading. For example, South Africa has a Twitter page named @GovernmentZA, which updates people on activities that are taking place within the country. This page was one of the many platforms that kept informing people about the pandemic.

1.4 THEORY OF THE STUDY

1.4.1 Situational crisis communication theory

The situational crisis communication theory is a theoretical approach that explains the way organisations can manage and understand communication associated with crisis situations. It was developed by Coombs in 1995 (Coombs, 2006). According to SCCT, an organisation's reputation is impacted by the responses and reactions of its stakeholders, which are contingent on its actions or statements during the crisis. Therefore, according to Coombs (2006), there are three stages: the pre-crisis stage, which involves identifying and preventing the crisis before it manifests; the crisis event stage, which addresses the crisis's recognition and potential communication channels; and the post-crisis stage, which includes evaluation and follow-up communication. The SCCT theory assisted the researcher to analyse the communication tactics used by the Department of Health throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.4.2 The Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory was first introduced in the 1940s, then social scientists Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch in the 1970s. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) can be effectively applied to crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic to understand how individuals actively sought out and used the media during this global health crisis. Crisis communication involves disseminating information to inform and guide the public during emergencies. Consequently, in this case, the UGT assisted the researcher to explain how people chose specific communication channels and media types to meet their needs for information,

emotional support, social interaction, and reassurance during such times of uncertainty.

1.5 AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to explore government crisis communication about the use of selected media by the Department of Health during the COVID-19 pandemic. The objectives of the study are:

- To examine the impact of misinformation during COVID-19 communication.
- To assess how the Department of Health managed information related to COVID-19 on selected media.
- To generate themes emerged from the messages communicated by the Department of Health during the COVID-19.
- To analyse how the Department of Health applied government crisis communication to manage the information circulated to the citizens about the pandemic through selected media.
- To examine crisis communication strategies used by the South African Government during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided this study:

- What impact did the spread of misinformation have during COVID-19 communication?

- How did the Department of Health manage COVID-19 information on selected media?

- Which themes that emerged from the messages communicated by the Department of Health during COVID-19?

- How did the Department of Health apply government crisis communication to manage information circulated to citizens about the pandemic through selected media?

- What crisis communication strategies did the South African Government use during the COVID-19 pandemic?

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study explored the use of selected media by the Department of Health during the COVID-19 pandemic. By doing so, it seeks to help both the Departments of Health and Government Communications to identify the most used media platforms that can be utilised to convey urgent messages in times of crisis. In other words, this study enables the two departments to gain a comprehensive understanding of the social media platforms most frequently utilised by individuals. In this way, this study will expand the body of literature on crisis management and the media. It will also lay a foundation upon which research can be conducted regarding crisis communication and message dissemination in the media space.

The study will act as a guiding manual in instances where the government will be facing a similar situation in the future. The Department of Health will be expected to work or come up with possible solutions in a pandemic that affects everyone. It will use this study's findings and recommendations in coming up with solutions, which will further help to protect the government's identity and maintain firm standing among other countries. It will also help citizens to know which sites to visit when they need information, what kind of information to look for on the government's website as well as departmental websites in times of crisis.

1.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.8.1 Research design

This study used the qualitative research method. Qualitative and non-numerical research methods are subjective in nature and focus on discovering and understanding participants' viewpoints and thoughts (Mollel, 2020). They are useful in determining people's talents, opinions, and knowledge capabilities. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research should be used in an inquiry context by talking with selected people in the environment. This study stands out because it will not only focus on government crisis communication but will also include how the government uses media during crisis. The integration of all the parts of research that are included for data collection and analysis in a way that ensures that the study's

objectives and goals are met is known as a research design (Akhtar, 2016). This study further adopts an exploratory research design. While the concept of government crisis communication is not new in the academic field, there is little information on how the government used the media during the COVID-19 outbreak. Exploratory research works with a topic that has never been examined previously to provide a preliminary analysis, or deals with an established topic to generate new ideas (Swedberg, 2020).

1.8.2 Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed in this study. According to Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016), this is a strategy for finding participants who can give in-depth and detailed information about the phenomena under examination. This technique was used to purposively select the posts and comments found on the National Department of Health's *Facebook and Twitter (X)* pages so that their engagement will give insight into the study. The researcher selected different contents posted by the Department of Health's selected social media platforms, go through them, and see if they play a role in achieving the study's objectives.

This study explored selected media, namely, *Facebook and Twitter (X).* Three posts and eight comments from the Department of Health's selected media platforms posted during COVID-19 pandemic will be used. This study will be considered credible because the researcher will purposively select comments whose users' dates are corresponding with the COVID-19 pandemic period.

This researcher also made the study simple in manner where any individual will be able to follow the study since all processes has been reported for future researchers to discover the study applicable using the same quantity of data collection for dependability purpose. A proven data collection is used for this study, and is also applicable to the number of posts that have been chosen for this study. Lastly, the findings from these data remained relevant for future research because this study is built on existing literature and previous findings. This study validates theories that have been used to expand upon new discoveries. The researcher chose a sampling technique that is aligned with the purpose and the objectives of the study.

Further, this study used selected media as population for data collection. It focused on *Facebook and Twitter (X).* Three posts were used from one platform then eight

comments from the other platform. The reason for this is to present accurate and authentic data. Using only one post from the selected media will only not present fairness and credulity.

1.8.3 Data collection

Document analysis

In this research process, the researcher will analyse statements from posts by the South African Government and comments that were made by users on Facebook and Twitter regarding this pertinent issue. According to Bowen (2009), documents provide information needed on the context of the selected phenomenon while also providing background information as well as historical insights. The researcher did not intervene in any of the engagements that took place on selected media platforms. Instead, they will employ document analysis to explore how the government used selected media as a tool used during the pandemic and how the citizens responded. The researcher started by identifying and selected relevant posts, read and reviewed the posts, extracted key information that will help generate themes and categorised content based on relevance to research questions. This will make it easy to examine how they used these platforms and how the public responded.

1.8.4 Data analysis

The researcher employed thematic content analysis since it is an effective method for learning about people's perspectives, opinions, knowledge, and experiences (Caulfield, 2020). This study used thematic analysis to analyse its data. Berger (1993) explains that when researchers try to collect a sizable volume of content to evaluate from a comparative point of view, they do thematic content analysis. That is why the researcher read and re- read the material for familiarity, created codes based on repeated ideas, grouped the codes into themes then concluded by reviewing the themes to ensure they accurately represent the data

1.9 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

This study is structured as follows:

Chapter 1: Orientation of the study

Chapter One introduces the research. It included a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the definition of concepts, research design and methodology, data collecting procedure, data analysis, ethical considerations, and the significance of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter Two presents literature review on the government crisis communication regarding the use of selected media by the Department of Health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Chapter Three provides information on research design and methodology.

Chapter 4: Data Presentation, interpretation, and analysis

Chapter Four presents the findings and interpretations of the results.

Chapter 5: Findings, Conclusion and Recommendation

Chapter Five is composed of conclusions, outline limitations of the study, summary, and recommendations for further research.

1.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on the introduction and background, problem conceptualisation, problem awareness, problem statement, and the study objectives. The significance of the study and the explanation of the research technique were further explored in this chapter. The literature review for this study is presented in the following chapter:

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter critically examines management of crisis communication by the Department of Health in South Africa. The issue of crisis communication is worth to be conceptualised to see how various organisations carry out communication during crisis. Every crisis within an organisation, regardless of its nature or timing, alters the organisation's usual communication patterns, as it demands a more active and responsive approach. There has been an ongoing debate about the crisis communication, as a result, this study gives a reader a glimpse of the foundation of crisis communication. Moreover, this chapter discusses presents theories that underpins it.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Rengasamy (2016), a theory provides understanding of the investigated phenomenon as used lens and allows the emergence of new knowledge from the research through its guidance and compilation of ideas. Similarly, Haugh (2012) argues that better theories applied in a research have an impact of improving the practice and field of investigation. In order to understand how the Government used Facebook and Twitter to communicate during COVID-19, it was important for this research to explore these platforms and how crisis communication strategies were framed.

2.2.1 Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory is one of the most crucial theories scholars adopt to select a crisis response strategy. It was coined by Coombs in 1995 as an approach towards a communication crisis to understand how organisations deal with any emerged crisis and has been put into practice to test its effectiveness and relevancy in mitigating a crisis (Coombs, 2015). This theory suggests that effective communication during crisis should be done from the perspective of understanding all characteristics of crisis such as crisis, crisis responsibility, crisis history, reputational history, crisis response strategy and behavioural outcomes of affected stakeholders.

The key tenet of this theory is that understanding a situational crisis afford any management an opportunity to implement a necessary response towards a crisis. Thus, scholars such as Fussell, Collins and Lyn (2010) applied the theory in their study looking at non-profit organisations' actions and strategies when faced with a crisis. Moreover, they reached a conclusion that SCCT is the appropriate theory to understand organisational responsibility during crisis (Fussell et al., 2010).

This study also adopted the SCCT and its niches to study crisis communication strategy applied by the Government of South Africa during COVID-19 and its position when communicating to the public through the Department of Health as ministry dealing with health-related matters. Using this the SCCT, this study discovered that the South African Government found it challenging to communicate the crisis to the public. This was clear the Government failed to well explain the crisis. The Government also expressed a sense of confusion on social media platforms about the crisis. The Government also applied reactive mechanism to respond to public comments instead of proactive mechanism.

In addition, Fearn-Banks (2002) defines crisis communication as "the dialog between the organisation and its publics prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence." The approaches and procedures employed are intended to reduce harm to the organisation's reputation (Fearn-Banks 1996). Crisis situations can have a positive outcome, even though they can have disastrous consequences for a company and its stakeholders. Communication following a crisis plays an integral role in this success (Ulmer 2001). "Various crises may call for the application of various communication techniques and a focus on various stakeholders" (Coombs, 1999: 121). Coombs separates studies on crisis response into two groups, form and content, which represent distinct focal areas. "Content is what is spoken, while form is how the response should be presented" (Coombs, 2006: 171). This evidence substantiates that the theory is well suited for this study because the two categories of crisis response align with the measures the Government took to communicate during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Coombs first proposed the SCCT in 1995 as a symbolic approach to crisis communication, but over the past 13 years, it has been evaluated, improved, and

developed into a more cohesive theory (Kyhn, 2008). SCCT suggests that an organisation's reputation is impacted by the responses and reactions of its stakeholders, which are contingent on the actions or statements of the organisation itself during the crisis. Accordingly, Coombs (2006) proposes three stages: the pre-crisis stage, which involves identifying and preventing the crisis before it manifests; the crisis event stage, which addresses the crisis's recognition and potential communication channels; and the post-crisis stage, which includes evaluation and follow-up correspondence. The application of this theory together with its valuable defining aspects regarding crisis communication response will help to analyse the communication strategies which were used on Twitter and Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic by the Department of Health.

Signal detection, prevention, and crisis preparation are the three substages that make up the pre-crisis stage, which entails taking action prior to a crisis occurring. In order to identify possible crises and respond to them, crisis managers need to create a system. As soon as such crises are identified, steps must be made to keep them from occurring. As a result, problem managers need to be ready in case a problem still arises (Coombs 2007:18-19). The challenge was that there was no signal detection of crisis and henceforth communication did not take place before the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic. This therefore hindered crisis preparation which affected how crisis communication took place when the South African Government communicated.

The crisis event stage ends when the crisis is considered resolved, and a trigger event marks the beginning of the crisis. The two substages of this crisis phase are crisis containment and crisis recognition. Understanding how events are classified and acknowledged as crises, and how to gather information about them, are essential components of crisis recognition. An organisation's crisis reaction is the main emphasis of crisis containment. "A crucial aspect of this phase is verbal and physical communication with stakeholders" (Coombs 2007:19). Using this theory, this study discovered that COVID-19 was recognised as a crisis affecting the masses who needed a clarity from government through communication on its emergence. But the researcher also revealed that there was not adequate information related to the crisis when the Government communicated but response was made through available platforms.

When a crisis is resolved, crisis management (CM) continues. Following the catastrophe, some important things need to happen. According to Coombs (2005: 219-220), a genuine crisis provides CM with the best learning opportunity. Three phases should be included in this stage: (1) CM evaluation; (2) crisis learning; and (3) further post-crisis activities, such as ongoing stakeholder communication and crisis-related issue monitoring (Coombs, 2007a: 19).

The concept for situational crisis communication theory is focused on the audience and utilised to comprehend the psychological attitudes and characteristics that people have toward a leading organisation in times of crisis (Kyrcychok, 2017). Coombs himself summarises SCCT as a "theory-based system for matching crisis response strategies to the crisis situation to best preserve the organisational reputation" (Coombs, 2004:266). He adds that "this keeps the focus of SCCT on crisis management in these top companies while advancing the discussion of reputation management" (Coombs, 2010:38).

Numerous case studies have demonstrated the applicability of SCCT as designed and the frequency with which crisis managers and management teams have employed it. According to a study by Helene Stavem Kynh, the SCCT proved helpful during the Scandinavian Airlines incident that resulted in the Dash 8-Q400 aircraft being grounded. The application of SCCT in classifying the SAS crisis was not constrained by the divergent opinions of several parties. Coombs also employed this theory in academic research to review corporate reputation. It was used in the study to offer a mechanism for anticipating stakeholders' responses to a crisis in terms of the threat to their reputation. Furthermore, Kriyantono and McKenna (2019) used the theory to assess Air Asia's crisis response, determining whether or not the actions align with the SCCT premise about situations in which a crisis involves several clusters. Similarly, a study by Rensburg, Conradie and Dondolo (2017) employed SCCT to examine how the workers at one South African university of technology viewed the institution's crisis communication efforts.

Although Coombs has been criticised for considering stakeholders as a single actor, the SCCT is based on the idea that the stakeholders' perceptions of the crisis determine what response tactics are suitable. The reality that various stakeholder groups may have differing perspectives on a crisis is not acknowledged by the SCCT.

This is one of the limitations of the theory, because when organisations are communicating during a crisis, the information dissemination could be rejected not because it is not accurate but because stakeholders assume it does not meet their needs. Henceforth, the study could attest that there is a relationship between organisation responding to a crisis and stakeholders who are seeking clarity on the communicated crisis.

2.2.2 The uses and gratifications theory (UGT)

The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) plays a role in mass communication and has been adopted in the communication process through social media platforms. One must note that UGT active audience through needs and motive to connect with them. In the application of UGT, the gratification must be met through a selected communicated message to the audience in assessment related to audience cognition. The theory also plays a fundamental role in assessing the effect of the media. Based on its contributions to our knowledge of the motivations and gratifications behind media choosing, the Uses and Gratifications Theory served as the theoretical foundation for our investigation. It is anticipated that the Uses and Gratifications Theory will assist this investigation by offering the essential understandings to respond to the research questions and validate the study's purpose. The Uses and Gratifications Theory is applied in this study to understand the way the Department of Health has used its media to talk about the COVID19. By applying the UGT, the study understood that people understand the message when it connects to their needs and society. According to Herzog (1941), there are three distinct ways to meet this need: through media consumption for information gathering, thinking engagement, and emotional fulfilment. Herzog's theories of media-induced satisfaction processes were further developed by Katz (1961), who also recommended that rather than focusing on how the media affects people, future studies should focus on how it functions. Traditional mass communication studies that emphasised the "sender and the message" approach prompted the development of the theory (Oliver & Nabi, 2009). The theory tenets are that audience become active in the chosen medium while goal driven to accomplish multiple needs as users are aware of their needs when choosing a particular medium. Therefore, when the Government communicated the COVID-19 crisis, majority of people were effective on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and these platforms were utilised to reach them in relations to the crisis.

Communication was circulated fast and repeatedly, but the challenge was how to respond to the masses.

The categories utilised in current research on internet usage and gratifications were incorporated for this study's aims, which also focused on the interactive element. Many researchers, like Heath (2000:362), Lin (2001:79), Bryant and Hunter (2005), chose to use the five categories of needs—cognitive, emotional, personal integrative, social integrative, and escapist—that Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1974) established.

Despite the fact that UGT was initially employed to examine conventional media (Katz et al., 1973), it has become more relevant in the age of social media as a communication theory that looks at why and how individuals engage with the media. Ruggiero (2000) claims that as the internet has grown, traditional media's functions have changed. As a result of these audience changes in their personal and social habits, the UGT has been reintroduced into the field of social media studies. The claims made by Ruggiero (2000) that new media have revived studies using the use of UGT were corroborated by Stafford et al. (2004). According to Li (2005), there is a distinction between those who consume basic media material from traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers), and those who have embraced the usage of social media. Li (2005) goes on to say that social media allows users the chance to actively look for content and messages that align with their interests. According to Kim (2014), UGT continues to be useful when examining new media and applying it to the two-way communication made possible by social media. Extending Ruggiero's (2000) study, Kim (2014) identified three characteristics that set social media apart from traditional media: social media fosters user interaction; social media use is becoming less mass-produced; social media use is uncontrollable; and social media is relatively new.

UGT enables media and communication channel research investigations that concentrate on the psychological requirements, motivations, and content satisfaction of a media channel (Lin, 1996). Consequently, during a pandemic like COVID-19, when there is little in the way of in-person interactions with friends, family and peers, UGT is the ideal tool for discussing and identifying the causes of user reaction and interaction with Facebook informative posts and preventative messaging (Whiting & William, 2013; Kim, 2014).

This theory provided a framework to help address the research questions of the study, which included how the Department of Health (DoH) has used its social media pages to talk about COVID-19; how the DoH has promoted audience interaction and engagement with posts about prevention techniques and false information during South Africa's national level 5 lockdown; and how the DoH has talked about this common topic based on audience response.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory framework offers insights into new media. This theory can be restructured to explain its social benefits, including information and entertainment, and what drives people to use social media and the satisfaction they derive from continuous use. According to Ruggiero (2000), the UGT's ongoing involvement indicates that it is still significant in the field of media and communication studies.

The primary assumption of the Uses and Gratifications Theory is predicated on an understanding of the aims and gratifications of media consumption. According to Lueng and Wei (2000), UGT looks at how significant media consumers are to the media landscape since they utilise the media to satisfy their social and psychological needs. In the 1970s, research concentrated on the motives of audiences and how they used the media to satisfy psychological and social demands. The central tenet of UGT suggests that media consumers select a media platform from among its rivals according to which one is most likely to satiate their psychological demands. The Uses and Gratifications Theory contends that how satisfaction is attained and how it is influenced by the motivations and objectives of media channel usage are what provide satisfaction, not the media platform itself. Prior research employing Universal Gendered Technology (UGT) has delineated distinct categories for the objectives and satisfactions people hope to achieve through media consumption, including but not limited to social engagement, amusement, knowledge acquisition, and practical utility (Whiting & Williams, 2013). This research project will concentrate on people's objectives and satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly to investigate the reason behind their social interactions in relation to COVID-19 and the acquisition of COVID-19 health-related information.

The variety of new media that has emerged following mass and conventional media has been examined using the uses and gratifications paradigm. The internet has shown to be a useful tool for elucidating the purposes and methods of media consumption due to its innate interactivity and user-directed design (Stafford, Stafford & Schkade, 2004). According to several studies that draw from Ruggeiro's (2000) research, UGT is suitable for analysing new media since audience analytics show that people are becoming more and more selective about the media they consume. The UGT describes how individuals use the media to fulfil their own desires and wants. According to Katz et al. (1974: 21), “the uses and pleasure theory is a viewer-aligned paradigm that focuses on what people do with the media rather than what media does to them.” Considering that the traditional media environment was used to apply and validate UGT (Gallion, 2014), it is easy to examine any type of media, in this case social media, because of the abundance of UGT features (Hunold, 2014; Gallion, 2014).

The fundamental idea behind UGT is how audiences use media channels to further their own desires and needs. The focus of this user-aligned theory is how people use the media and how the media affect them (Katz et al., 1974). Despite having originated from and been used to traditional media, UGT's abundance of features enable it to be utilised in a wide range of media channels, including social media and new media platforms (Hunold, 2014; Gallion, 2014). Computer-mediated communication, according to Ruggiero (2000: 3), has revived the significance of UGT. When new mass communication outlets like newspapers, radio, television, and more recently, the internet, were first introduced, UGT was always a cutting-edge theoretical approach (Ruggiero, 2000).

During the COVID-19 epidemic, social media platforms let people keep an eye on and respond to a range of public reactions and concerns. It also helped spread information, share ideas, and create knowledge bases during the lockdown. Social media is widely used for communication, engagement, entertainment, socialisation, self-expression, education, surveillance, and information exchange (Asemah 2011; Galleon, 2010 Whiting & Williams, 2013). During the worldwide COVID-19 lockdown, these functions were clearly utilised.

Further, social media use is primarily driven by social integration or contact. During the pandemic lockdown, people could engage and connect on social media platforms like Facebook and other online discussion boards about a range of topics. People could easily look for and share information on social media that they could not find elsewhere. They use the media for learning and self-education, since one of the main purposes of the media is to educate people (Asemah, 2011). By enabling users to take care of themselves, UGT encourages user activity. During the lockdown, people could look for instructional articles to support their learning using social media search engines like Google and Wikis (Ayoola, 2020).

Unlike the traditional media, where feedback is sometimes delayed or unreliable, social media users have the freedom and opportunity to interact with one another through a range of groups, discussion boards, sites, and professional and educational forums (Ayoola, 2020). Information seeking, social connection, and entertainment are the main UGT components that will be used in this study to investigate the influence of social media in COVID-19 prevention and misinformation discourses. In a world driven by increasingly interactive media, including internet and digital technology, UGT is considered essential. These media's conventional and interpersonal qualities may have an impact on how they are used and how satisfied users are (Rubin & Rubin, 1985; Ruggiero, 2000). But there are certain drawbacks to the theory. The notion that viewers are always conscious of their requirements and actively seek out media outlets and material to meet those demands is a major criticism and disadvantage. However, Tanta, Mihovilović and Sablić (2014) assert that there is some doubt as to whether each person is fully cognisant of their social situation and able to express their needs.

In addition, Ruggiero (2000) states that the theory's initial research was primarily concerned with individualistic gratifications, which limited the generalisability of the theory's findings and made it challenging to look beyond the target audience. Robert White (1994) emphasises that the UGT frameworks allowed users to choose the media component they desired and that the explication tools are exclusively focused on such tailored conceptions, supports this argument. In contrast to the traditional media, which relied more on the availability and reliability of media content, Zeng and

Li (2020) states that the advent of the internet had fundamentally changed the audience's perspective by offering a wealth of media content at the touch of a button.

A common criticism of the uses and gratifications method was that it was atheoretical and more like a strategy than a genuine philosophy. Palmgreen and Rayburn (1985) defended the method by stating that a theory's capacity to forecast a phenomenon is one of its defining characteristics. They assert that by evaluating gratifications sought originally and gratifications eventually obtained, rather than just gratifications derived, researchers might forecast patterns of future media use.

Ruggiero (2000:7) listed five objections to the hypothesis and explained how it pertains to earlier entities. First, the theory created a "one man" attitude regarding a specific media by focusing mostly on how audiences utilise the media. The idea did not accept a group rationale for media consumption. Secondly, research findings lead to the isolation of studies from the Uses and Gratifications Theory views and the category generalisation of motivations. Thirdly, there is still a need for an ideal explanation for concepts like requirements, motivations, and behaviour. Fourth, there is a lack of a consensus definition and insufficient scholarly explanation for the theory's fundamental component, "motives, gratification."
According to Rosentein and Grant (1997), the content of a media outlet's programmes, audience pleasure, and the factors that influence programme selection have not been linked by UGT. Put differently, there must be a connection between the audience's motivations for choosing a show and its substance that the theory hasn't been able to explore. According to Ruggiero (2000), re-evaluating the Uses and Gratifications Theory should fall under the purview of UGT studies, as they will offer a more nuanced theoretical account and serve as a standard for future research on media usage motivations, especially when addressing human personality. Ruggeiro (2000) goes on to explain that people's perceptions of the media are not always accurate indicators of how audiences behave on media platforms. But according to Ruggiero (2000), critical study on the theory has revealed that audience perceptions of media content diverge greatly from users' intended interpretations of the same.

2.3 LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is defined as a summary and critical study of scholarly writings on a specific topic or theme, and a combination of what has already been written on the subject. It is an examination of what hasn't been written about the subject; conceptual flaws in the literature; and how the researcher tackles gaps in the current knowledge base (Hurst, 2011).

2.3.1 Defining government crisis communication

A crisis, according to Gallion (2010), is any abrupt and unanticipated incident that limits an organisation’s capacity to participate in regular activities and may result in both material and immaterial losses. According to this concept, a crisis may have unfavourable consequences. According to Fink, a crisis is a turning point that can be either positive or negative. Besides, not all outcomes of a crisis have to be negative and that successful crisis management may provide outcomes that are "better" than worse (Gonah, 2020).

Government crisis communication refers to the process of providing timely, accurate and relevant information to the public during a crisis, such as a natural disaster or terrorist attack (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021). This definition evidentially unveils the goal of government crisis communication which with regards to this study is to inform and reassure citizens, provide guidance on actions they can take to stay safe, and coordinate resources to effectively respond to the crisis.

2.3.2 South African government response to COVID-19

According to McConnell (2003), crisis responses are intricate, multidimensional, and impacted by a range of internal, environmental, and even personality factors. South Africa responded to the COVID-19 health catastrophe comparatively quickly when compared to nations like Brazil, Mexico, and the United States of America (Ryan, 2020). Twenty-three days after the initial outbreak, South Africa imposed a lockdown. In other words, the lockdown was implemented 18 days earlier than in Italy and less than half as long as the United State.

Most people believe that the swift execution of a lockdown is a great example of decisive action and strong government, something South Africa hasn't seen in a long

time (Muller, 2021). The president used his emergency management authority within 10 days of the first verified COVID-19 case in South Africa, and five days later, he declared a complete nationwide lockdown (South African Government, 2020). The Government also created a risk-adjusted approach that matched transmission intensity to five levels, with level five being the highest level during intensive community transmission and a nationwide lockdown (WHO, 2021).

President Cyril Ramaphosa regularly updated South Africans on COVID-19 via his Twitter account (@CyrilRamaphosa). His tweets included information on Government measures to combat the spread of the virus, as well as messages of support and encouragement for healthcare workers and citizens (South African Government, 2022). The Department of Health in South Africa developed a portal dedicated to centralising information dissemination about the COVID-19 pandemic crisis which provides the latest number of cases, testing and screening procedures (South African Government, 2022).

The portal is regularly updated and shared across the Government's social media channels (South African Government, 2020). Therefore, citizens can visit the website and browse through information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, this means that unanswered questions will be answered, and confusion and misinformation will be cleared through the information that the Department of Health posted on the website.

Sokfa et al. (2022) also explained that the establishment of an official website for all COVID-19-related information was one of the actions done by the South African Government at the beginning of the epidemic. They added that the website is thorough, regularly updated, and aims to educate and inform the public with reliable and accurate information. It also offers health and safety advice in multiple languages, and contact details for anyone who might have more questions or require access to healthcare support related to the COVID-19. This definition does not only explain the aim of the website but emphasises that the information uploaded is accurate and credible, the government explored this channel to reach citizens with the goal of disseminating information that will benefit the public in general.

The Department of Health in South Africa has also been active on social media, using sites like Facebook and Twitter to answer public inquiries, refute myths, and offer

health advice (Eckert et al., 2018). On March 20, 2020, Twitter confirmed that the South African Minister of Health had over 90 000 followers while the Department of Health had over 100 000 (Kubheka, Carter and Mwaura, 2020). We can conclude that these numbers have increased because of the global COVID-19 pandemic and utilising Twitter as selected media for communication purposes played a role in reaching citizens in a short space of time and during crisis.

In conclusion, South Africa has recognised the importance of social media in keeping citizens informed and engaged during the pandemic, by leveraging social media platforms to share accurate information, combat misinformation, and provide support to citizens, the government has demonstrated an effective use of the channel during a crisis. In response during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government had proven that using social media to deal with government crisis is effective and beneficial for both parties.

2.3.3 Communication during pandemics in different countries

One example of the use case and the importance of media richness in Indonesia is the use of Twitter to establish and expand communities in order to maximise their capacity to deliver public information services and to provide early approval notifications during the 2012 tsunami (Chatfield, Scholl & Brajawidagda, 2013). This shows that social media plays a crucial role in disseminating messages during crisis, due to social sharing and the enormous amount of people that regularly use social media platforms such as Twitter, during an emergency, social media can aid in increasing the reach of government message.

In a similar vein, during Hurricane Sandy in 2012, the British Government used Twitter to inform the public and engage the community in enhancing community initiatives (Chatfield & Reddick, 2018). This further proves that using social media platforms such as Twitter to communicate with citizens during pandemics is a beneficial for both citizens and the government.

According to Osseni (2020), Sub-Saharan Africa's governments implemented mitigation measures that restrict population movement in order to break the chain of contamination after the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Nigeria on January 28, 2020. This prevented the number of cases from increasing and hospitals from

becoming overrun with patients. Osseni's (2020) study does not clearly show how the Sub-Saharan African governments communicated with its citizens or how channels that were used to keep citizens informed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This may suggest that the government was in no possession of advanced.

While representatives in the United States did not actively participate in these practices, Taiwanese government officials warned citizens about the seriousness of the threat, held daily conferences, and established direct communication channels as ways to communicate and keep the public informed (Chang, 2022). Taiwan's government communicated more effectively, which improved the public's opinion of its authority and capacity to reduce the pandemic's risk.

Lastly, a study titled "The role of media in crisis management: A case study of Gallion earthquake" by Ghassabi and Farashbandi (2015) shows how the media play an important role in communicating with citizens during pandemics. The role of the media in managing natural disasters is further increased by the ease with which policy-makers, managers, and individuals can obtain information and by the speed at which new information is received, aggregated, and disseminated (Ghassabi & Zare-Farashbandi, 2015). In similar vein, the study is evidence that the media are important tool that governments use to communicate during pandemics, the same way Azarbayejan did during the earthquake.

2.3.4 COVID-19 landscape nationally and globally

It is crucial to communicate with the public during a national emergency. The concern be on the nature of crisis and its implication while trying to deploy crisis communication strategy to communicate with the audience. While this becomes critical, organisations are expected to make audience understand the crisis and ensure that a communication is well handled and maintained. In order to reduce public agitation and fear during a pandemic or public health emergency, knowledge and preventative measures must be shared (Lowbridge & Leask, 2011). Social media and conventional mass media channels can be used to adopt communicative methods that accomplish this (Kubeka, Carter & Mwaura, 2020). Since it can provide a single platform for all public health messaging, comprehensive healthcare education standards, and

successful social distancing strategies while maintaining social connections, mass media is crucial in today's climate (Anwar, Malik, Raees & Anwar, 2020).

Again, the South African government disseminated information on the COVID-19 pandemic through a range of traditional media means, such as television channels, newspapers, and radio stations (Kekana, 2020). Other countries, most notably Australia, used newspapers and television awareness campaigns announced by the prime minister to inform the public during the COVID-19 outbreak (Hyland-Wood, Gardner, Leask & Ecker, 2021). However, due to the fact that more people are using social media—the number of users climbed from 21.5 million in 2019 to 30.01 million in 2021—it is the medium responsible for the rapid dissemination of information about COVID-19 (Statista, 2021). The government and other relevant agencies have utilised social media channels like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter to communicate preventative measures as well as general COVID-19 information (Kekana, 2020).

2.3.5 The role of government communication during pandemics

The key mechanism for informing the public and explaining choices is government communication. According to Liu, Horsel, and Yang (2012), government communication frequently focuses on matters that directly impact citizens, such as taxation, public policies, elections, and life-or-death situations like disasters. In this study, the COVID-19 pandemic was the subject. Media are the primary source of information and play an important role in mass education. The government's pivotal role in uniting and motivating the population is vital for health risk prevention, response, and severe harm recovery during national emergencies (Kreps et al., 2005; Seeger et al., 2018). The government's capacity to communicate effectively in a digital environment of pervasive speculation, compromised information, and rising mistrust of the government is crucial to overcoming the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and minimising its effects on lives and livelihoods.

Effective government communication is critical for educating the public about looming risks and best practices for minimising harm during emergencies (Hyland-Wood, 2021). According to Suter et al. (2009), when a communication process is considered effective, the intended message is understood accurately and clearly, and the purpose of communication is achieved as best it can. However, the government must ensure

that during national emergencies, appropriate channels are used to communicate with the public because during such times, it becomes difficult to trust information that is communicated because everyone often reports on the same issue from different perspectives.

Additionally, John et al. (2022) explain that the government communication's role during pandemics is to ensure that the citizens stay informed. This is why South African Government provides information on where to find support and assistance by sending SMSs to all the nation's registered cell phone (Ataguba & Ataguba, 2020). This encourages citizens to follow precautions put in place, such as staying indoors, to reduce the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic in the country. In conclusion, government communication is central to the success of any government. Fairbanks, Plowman and Rawlins (2007) observed that a public that is adequately informed about the actions of government is essential to a successful democracy.

2.3.6 Communication Approaches used by DoH during COVID-19

Health facilities are expected to use communication strategies to assist control and manage a pandemic such as COVID-19 during a public health emergency. Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) is a popular communication strategy that has been used in South Africa and seen in other international communities. The response to any infectious disease outbreak depends heavily on risk communication and community participation, which have grown in importance as part of health emergency preparedness during public health emergencies.

The World Health Organization defines risk communication as the instantaneous exchange of knowledge, viewpoints, and recommendations between those who are at risk and specialists, community leaders, or government. This makes it possible for officials and specialists to hear people's demands and worries and react appropriately, guaranteeing that the counsel they provide is suitable, dependable, and trustworthy (WHO, 2018:1). Mass communications, stakeholder engagement, media and social media communications, and community engagement are some of the communication tactics utilised in risk communication.

UNICEF defines community engagement as "a foundational action for working with a wide range of traditional, community, civil society, opinion leaders; and expanding

collective or group participation to address the issues that affect their lives" (Rohan, 2020:1). Through community involvement, the community can actively participate in the planning and management of an outbreak response. By increasing the responsiveness of development and humanitarian actors, community involvement strengthens social networks and social groups. The statement assumes engagement leads to empowerment and improved responsiveness, but this is not always the case. Empowerment can be uneven, and the term "responsiveness" needs clarification. Practical challenges in outbreak responses also limit community engagement effectiveness.

All stakeholders have access to procedures for reviewing, planning, analysing, leading, carrying out, tracking, and assessing activities, programmes, and combining these ideas and tactics. In conjunction with expert and community member collaboration policies that will support the community's survival, development, protection, and participation, RCCE can be used to address outbreaks that start within a community, according to the WHO (2018; 2020). According to Gonah, RCCE helps to clear up confusion and avoid misunderstandings regarding the health risk, which increases trust-building and leads to the acknowledgment and adherence to health advice. It makes it possible to convey intricate and scientific knowledge in a way that the public can understand, access, and trust. RCCE helps close the gap between the dangers that experts and authorities perceive and the risks that are perceived by impacted and at-risk groups (Gonah, 2020).

These perceived risks comprise a wide range of individual and community responses, such as the refusal to engage with response teams or implement suggested behaviours, as well as the acceptance of these responses. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2018) states that listening to community concerns, offering solutions, facilitating choices, demonstrating empathy, involving community members in decision-making processes and forming an alliance around shared objectives of community protection are all crucial components of community engagement.

In order to build interconnected considerations in readiness and preparedness to respond to the Ebola virus, RCCE was used during the Ebola outbreak in Congo (WHO, 2018). The framework emphasises the efforts of national and international

partners, as well as health officials and local authorities. Early in the epidemic, RCCE was a crucial tactic used in South Africa. In order to create a community communication plan, a Risk Communication and Community Engagement Working group was formed in March 2020. This group used the knowledge and best practices gained both domestically and abroad.

There is constant communication with the public, and messages are disseminated by a variety of channels, such as WhatsApp, radio, television, and the internet, in all of the official South African languages. In an attempt to build and maintain public trust, COVID-19 communications were carried out daily. This communication strategy is hampered by the spread of rumours and misleading information on social media, as well as by a lack of funds for participation and communication.

There are many problems with risk communication and community involvement, including difficulties in tracking down and acquiring information that was shared outside of the Department of Health, including the spread of COVID-19 myths and false information (Jamaloodien, Lebese, Chetty, Bamford & Tanna, 2021; Moonasar, Pillay, Leonard, Naidoo, Mngemane, Ramkrishna & Naidoo, 2021).

In order to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous strategic social distancing security measures have been implemented. These consist of travel bans, international border closures, and lockdowns and quarantines. Many people experienced terror and psychological suffering as a result of the pandemic's uncertainty and their abrupt and immediate isolation. The constant barrage of mass information from multiple media outlets, particularly social media, contributes to this anxiety and discomfort (Banerjee, 2020). Anxiety and loneliness are major factors in the global rise in media platform usage. Within the context of COVID-19, Scheufele and Krause (2019) defined misinformation as any information that contradicts the available credible knowledge about a topic and would likely be rectified if challenged. This definition shows that misinformation during COVID-19 fuelled confusion, distrust, and dangerous behaviour. It exacerbated psychological distress, encouraged risky actions, and deepened divisions in society.

2.3.7 The role of traditional media

Nonetheless, the usage of the internet, and more especially social media, has maintained several beneficial changes in health communication, as have traditional and new media technologies. Over the years, traditional mass media—such as radio, television, and newspapers—have shown themselves to be a successful means of educating audiences about critical information or influencing them to adopt new behaviours (Baraybar-Fernandez, Arrufat-Martin & Rubira-Garcia, 2021). It also seeks to teach new health skills, educate a large number of people about preventative measures, and empower underprivileged groups to fight important concerns. The public can act as change agents by adopting new health behaviours that are promoted by the media (Boyd & Shaw, 1995).

Since the advent of the internet, traditional media has had to share its position in the field of health communication. Nowadays, a lot of studies have been done by health communication specialists to find the best strategies to keep people interested in improving their personal healthcare management. The internet is also frequently employed in the disciplines of public health and health communication (Chou, Hunt & Beckjord, 2009).

The public began to worry about the COVID-19 virus's quick global spread, and a number of unknowns about the pandemic caused people to become panicked. A significant source of information regarding the recently identified SARSCOV2 coronavirus was the mass media. Fear and psychological stress were brought on by the media's coverage of the COVID-19 story during geographic lockdowns, protracted quarantines, and economic and social challenges. Through real-time dashboards, the media contributed to the global tracking and updates of coronavirus diseases. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) were able to take prompt action thanks to the media, which made it possible for public health messages to travel quickly and widely.

2.3.8 Social media as a main source of communication

Social media platforms are fast-forward elements of communication to break the news about occurrence of any crisis. People across the globe can grasp whatever is happening through social media. But the platforms come with demanded

responsibilities of coordination by organisations especially when there is something happening and needs to be communicated extensively and accurately. But some organisations, including government departments, experience challenges to manage the flow of communication and respond timeously. Thus, underlining its technological qualities, social media is a type of application-based programme on the Internet and Web 2.0 platform, as noted by (Kaplan & Haehlein, 2010). While social media is defined by McGowan, Wasko, Vartabedian, Miller, Freiherr, and Abdolrasulnia (2012) as an online environment where users can create and consume material created by other users, what sets it apart from traditional media is the fact that its content is produced by social media users for social media users.

On the other hand, Wukich (2015: 282) describes social media as an "internet-based platform that facilitates communication and content exchange between users." Social media can also be defined as "the swift and easy development, creation, dissemination and consumption of information and entertainment by both organisations and individuals" (Wollan, Smith & Zhou, 2011). One of its characteristics is that the "participative internet" includes a wide range of internet-based tools, devices, and communications (Jones & Fox, 2009). Social media platforms have demonstrated effectiveness in both fostering new online interactions and enhancing existing offline ones.

Social media, as used in this research study, refers to online tools that enable people and groups to interact with one another; share ideas, information, private messages, images, and other content; and, when feasible, work together in real time and exchange ideas based on shared data. According to Coombs (2015), social media has become a part of people's daily lives as they engage with traditional mass media and societal structures. Veil, Buehner and Palenchar (2011), on the other hand, contend that social media is a major factor in the way that people who consume information also contribute to it, which creates the foundation for user-generated media.

2.3.9 Reasons why the government reached out to the public using Facebook and Twitter

Due to an increase in internet usage during the Covid-19 outbreak, more than 30 million South Africans are currently involved on social media. That represents 48.8% of the population, which is nearly half, compared to 41.9% (25 million users) in 2020 (Osunkule, 2022). According to Madziva et al. (2022), Facebook, which has 2.74 billion members as of January 2021, is among the most popular social media platforms.

2.3.9.1 Instantaneous social media communication

There has been an 87% increase in social media usage by the people worldwide (Anwar et al., 2020). This study is evidence that using social media to reach the masses was a beneficial move for both the department of health and the citizens. Moreover, social media has long been seen as a means of instantaneous communication, but the pandemic has brought to light how important societies and stakeholders are now embracing the capacity to communicate directly with content creators, execute checklists, and publish revisions quickly and widely (Wong et al, 2021).

According to Alexander (2014), social media as a part of Web 2.0 technology media that has advantages and the ability to distribute data and information quickly and could form a broad social network that supports the rapid dissemination of information as well. This further shows that due to the traffic in different social media platforms as a result of high usage, it gives assurance that any message sent to the public will be received within a short space of time and it is for this particular reason that the Department of Health found it efficient to use social media platforms to communicate with the public about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Earlier studies in this stream of health crisis are mainly centred on users' channel selection identified that people had a greater tendency to rely on traditional media to seeking health information in health crisis events and routine contexts (Abbas et al., 2021). But Velozo and Stauder (2018) say that during emergence of health, crisis people use smartphones and social media more than traditional media to seek health information. Velozo and Stauder (2018) support the decision of using social media to communicate with people in crisis, it also proves that communicating with the masses using social media is efficient hence nowadays individuals rely on it.

According to Muninger, Hammedi and Mahr (2019), most countries in the world have used social media to help governments communicate and coordinate with all parties related to disasters. Lachlan, Spence, Lin, Najarian, and Del Greco (2016) also support the above author by highlighting that several studies reveal that the use of social media as a means of communication and government coordination is effective. The government, through social media, can communicate and coordinate directly with related parties, which then the government gets information and data about problems that occur during disasters (Panos Panagiotopoulos, Barnett, Bigdeli & Sams, 2016).

Governments and public health experts used Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media to convey information swiftly and effectively on how to keep healthy and limit the spread of the virus to individuals (Dmour, 2020). For example, South Africa has a Twitter page named @GovernmentZA. This page updates people on activities that are taking place within the country. This page was one of the many platforms that kept informing people about the pandemic.

Social media is used by a diverse set of audiences, including people of various genders, ages, and education and income levels (Heldman, Schindelar & Weaver, 2013). Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook offer a quick and cost-effective way to communicate to a large, diverse, and increasingly media-savvy audience (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). This shows that due to their quick and cost-effective way to communicate, different screenshots from both Twitter and Facebook were making rounds on WhatsApp beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Kubin and Sikorski (2021), one of social media's value is participatory communication tool for producing and sustaining multi-way communication, as evidenced by the thousands of comments left on every official government post about the pandemic. This played a role in helping the people of South Africa engage with the Government for clarity and way forward. The Government’s effective communication of the country’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic has helped instil practices such prevention measures which were communicated through different social media platforms (Tanseem, 2021).

2.3.9.2 Information sharing

The use of social media and search queries to obtain information about the cause of the disease is constantly expanding, and includes Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, Google Trends, Bing, Yahoo, and other more popular sources such as blogs, forums, or Wikipedia (Depoux et al. 2020). According to Dollarhide (2021), social media platform is characterised as a web-based application that facilitates interactive creation and sharing of information through virtual communities. This definition clearly states that social media allow information sharing hence it is one of the reasons the government used it as a channel for information dissemination.

In circumstances of this manner, people and disaster victims want information and data about the disasters they are experiencing, including information and disaster management policies, the government must be equipped with certainty regarding information and data when handling disasters (Vos & Buckner, 2016). The community will panic if they do not receive accurate information, which will lead to inadequate crisis management (Alexander, 2014). Consequently, using social media to handle crises is the best way to promptly disseminate information to the public, which subsequently provides solace to the community during a calamity.

Further, the government's official social media accounts provide information to the general public. Additionally, during disaster management, the public can speak with the government directly (Luna & Pennock, 2018). In order to get more clarity regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens searched for information and asked questions about the pandemic on different social media platforms owned by the official government.

Many social media handles have been created in the modern day, and people, organisations, and different governments and governmental agencies utilise them to share information with their friends, family, members, and residents. This indicates that the number of news media firms that provide the public with news and information has increased.

In the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, people are using social media more than usual routine because they rely on news sources from online sources to seek health information for themselves and their loved ones. Social media platforms have provided easy access to seeking health information, which empowered people to evaluate

health-related risks and manage global health concern. For example, Twitter, established in 2006, currently stands as the leading microblogging platform that allows sending or receiving of about 280 characters per tweet and to upload photos or short videos.

The microblog has more than a billion visits per month, 500 million tweets per day and over 330 million active users (Java et al., 2007; Omnicore, 2020). A very huge and accessible platform such as Twitter is convenient and comes in handy for the government to disseminate information in times of crisis since it consists of over 300 million users. Information sharing, news reporting and conversations are the various communication forms on Twitter, and users discuss various health-related issues (Yin et al., 2015), among other trending topics on the platform.

2.3.9.3 Social media: an effective channel to communicate with citizens

The number of persons using social media has increased by 87% (Anwar et al., 2020). This study is evidence that using social media to reach the masses was a good move since there is traffic in different social media platforms due to high usage, meaning that any message that must reach the public will indeed be received within a short space of time.

People of all genders, ages, educational backgrounds, and income levels use social media (Heldman, Schindelar & Weaver, 2013). Governments and public health experts used Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media channels to reach vast numbers of people swiftly and efficiently with advice on how to keep healthy and stop the virus from spreading.

2.3.10 Using social media during public health emergencies for health promotion

The media are vital mediators for health communication, helping to change attitudes and intentions to influence health behaviour since it is a potent tool for disseminating health information and subsequently adds to health awareness and promotion (Thomas, Peterson, Walker, Christenson, Cowley, Kosari, Baby & Naunton, 2018). Since it facilitates communication between the public, government, and medical facilities and puts the media in the public spotlight, it is essential to the public's reaction

to a pandemic or other health crises. The people can now influence their own actions and responses during a pandemic by using media outlets as windows to search for reliable information, scientific facts, government policies, and public reactions.

By facilitating two-way communication between audiences and healthcare professionals, and by giving them forums for support group conversations, social media has also been utilised to enhance consumer connection (Chung, 2016; Parker, Reber, & Chon, 2016; Yu, Li, Li, Xi, Xiao & Tebes, 2020).

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, both national and international news networks have worked to raise public awareness and try to lessen fear and anxiety by providing live coverage of news briefings and PSAs. In South Africa, the CovidCommSA collaborated with the South African Broadcasting Commission (SABC) to broadcast PSAs during primetime television in an effort to spread messages about COVID-19 and other false information (Monama, 2021).

Health agencies and organisations have posted and described health precautions and instructions. Among them are important communications that provide directives from the government on websites and social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Mheidly & Fares, 2020). Social media promotes two-way connection with the audience and offers a platform for assistance from other social media users, according to studies done by medical organisations and specialists (Chung, 2016; Park, Reber & Chon, 2016; Yu, Li, Li, Xi, Xiao & Xiao, 2020).

According to Chou et al. (2013), a number of health promotion initiatives that used social media as a means of disseminating information have been successful. For example, health campaigns that highlighted the risks of smoking or dietary interventions that made use of social media platforms saw an increase in the dissemination of their information because of the platform's popularity. These results make it clear that social media may be a powerful tool for promoting health intervention programmes and fostering user participation.

A diverse spectrum of people have used social media platforms, particularly during pandemics like COVID-19, when the public's main information source was social media. The World Health Organization (WHO), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and, more locally, the National Department of Health (NDoH) and

the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) in South Africa are among the government and non-governmental organisations that have used social media to monitor the latest pandemics, including COVID-19.

Health organisations can educate the public on common health issues like smoking, vaccinations, and healthy living; convey the danger of disease outbreaks; promptly instruct a large audience on preventive behaviours during disease outbreaks; and disseminate the most recent information and update the public on how the government is responding to disease outbreaks (Yan, 2017; Jin, Austin, Vijaykumar, Jun & Nowak, 2019; Vandormael, Adam, Greuel & Barnighausen, 2020; Chan, Min, Zhang, Wang; 2020). By facilitating the quick and broad dissemination of public health information, the media also made it possible for prompt interventions. This led to a rise in the dissemination of information about safe COVID-19 health practices, including as enhanced handwashing, mask use, and social distancing (Amwar, Malik, Raees & Anwar, 2020).

The main goal of surveillance, which involves analysing and searching for unstructured information on the internet to inform public health and policy, was identified as one of the components of infoveillance, along with the quick distribution of health information and health interventions (Chen & Wang, 2021). This involves examining and evaluating the unprocessed data that is available online and utilised to guide public health and policy (Eysenbach, 2009). In order to identify possible public health hazards and track how the public reacts to these health concerns, infoveillance has been utilised to precisely analyse data on social media (Chen & Wang, 2021).

The speed with which information spreads on social media is one of its most notable characteristics. Health practitioners can engage directly with the public through social media, which offers a new way to disseminate urgent health information (Wong, Ho, Olusanya, Antonini & Lyness, 2021). This may be a sign of why the Department of Health has posted generic and false information about COVID-19 on social media and shared information about COVID-19 prevention techniques based on these platforms.

While social media is known for its quick information distribution, user-generated content and media enable the news of health emergencies to be shared and reshared, reaching millions of people without the need for journalists to step in. According to Veil,

Buehner and Palenchar (2011), social media platforms are renowned for changing the way that people and medical professionals communicate during health emergencies, such as infectious disease outbreaks and man-made ones. According to Jahanshir, Karimialavijen, Sheik, Vahedi and Momeni (2017), social media is utilised not only to seek for and share information on health emergencies, but also to trade personal information like safety status.

By connecting people through the sharing of personal information, social media users offer emotional support to one another both during and after a public health emergency (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). By examining the posts on the NDoH Facebook page that promoted audience interaction and engagement on preventative tactics and false information during lockdown level 5 in South Africa, this research project aimed to investigate social media user engagement.

Since 2013, there have been a lot more applications for social media than those mentioned by Moorhead, Hazlett, Harrison, Carroll, Irwin, and Hoving (2013). Beyond patients, the general public, and medical professionals, the studies investigate the usage of social media for health-related reasons. Social media use by health institutions, including government entities like international, national, and local health departments and nongovernmental health organisations, has been the subject of studies by Jha, Lin, and Savoia (2016) and Bhattacharya, Srinivasan, and Polgreen (2017). According to Moorhead et al. (2013), social media use mostly helps those who are unwell or in need of health information, but government organisations use of social media may also assist society as a whole, particularly during disease outbreaks.

Social media posts that contain stress and anxiety-related content can predict future diagnoses of mental illness, according to studies that have found that social media can anticipate the start of illness for individual users (Shen, Chen, Luo, Zhang, Feng & Liao, 2020). Based on the number of cases discovered in a region, social media posts can be used to forecast the size of an infectious outbreak such as COVID-19 (Shen, Chen, Luo, Zhang, Feng & Liao, 2020). Its posts created by users can be utilised to learn more about how the general population thinks and acts in relation to health-related concerns.

Social media posts have been examined to learn about public concerns and opinions during pandemics like the Zika virus in 2016 and, more recently, COVID-19 (Hung, Lauren, Hon, Birmingham, Xu, Su, Hon, Park, Dang & Lipsky, 2020). This research also assessed public support for certain health-related policies, monitored public conversation on contentious issues like COVID-19 tests or immunisations, and examined how the public responded to the adoption of advised disease preventive techniques (Huo, Zhang, Prosperi, Guo & Bian, 2020).

Diddi and Lundy (2017) note that social media has been widely incorporated into health interventions and performs a variety of tasks, including directing campaign audiences and intervention participants to other health resources, promoting engagement in health-related events, and supplying audiences with health information. Participants in the intervention use social media to document and share their own progress while promoting positive changes in behaviour. Examples include posting a photo of a nutritious meal or virtual prizes for weekly physical activity accomplishments, creating group challenges to reach health objectives, and competing with peers in healthy behaviour (Fang, Ma, Mo, Zhang, Xiang & Zhang, 2019). Social media is ultimately employed after the end of an intervention to reach a wider range of people, including those who are difficult to reach, including those who have limited access to basic resources (Thornber, Huso, Rahman, Biswas, Rahman, Brum & Tyler, 2019; Pagkas-Bather, Young, Chen & Schneider, 2020).

There are many examples of international health promotion intervention campaigns on social media platforms. For example, in Canada, public health messages were introduced and implemented into everyday online conversations through social media, and in the USA, social media was used to educate and inform the public about diabetes (Schein, Wilson & Keelan, 2010; Harris, Mueller, Snider & Haire-Joshu, 2013). Social media platforms have been used to spread health-related information and to provide discussion and counteract views on changing sexual behaviour in underdeveloped nations like South Africa (Norman, 2012; Govender, Dyll-Myklebust, Delate & Sundar, 2013).

The quality of social media information and its effect on personal health outcomes have been the subject of several studies (Reidy, Klonoff & Bernard-Kelly, 2019). A study by Sallam, Dababseh, Yaseenm Al-Haider, Taim, Eid, Abaneh, Bakri, and

Mahafzah (2020) found that people who obtained their health information from social media were less informed about COVID-19 than those who obtained their information from medical professionals and scholarly publications. Additionally, individuals who discovered material on social media did not verify its veracity with medical experts who disapproved of the content (Crilly, Jair, Mahmood, Moin Khan, Munir, Osei-Bediako, Samir & Kayyali, 2019). Information gleaned from social media must therefore be reliable and checked before being shared. Therefore, it is clear that initiatives are being made to lessen false information on social media and enhance the public's capacity to locate trustworthy information there.

There are numerous advantages for people with health issues to engage in online communities, where they can avoid stigma and do not have to disclose their personal information (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch & Bartels, 2016). Peers may offer additional information on treatment possibilities not brought up by medical professionals due to time limits, and online communities serve as an information conduit to supplement offline communication channels in terms of content and time. This enables users to access online groups at any time for emotional support and answers (Naslund et al., 2016). Internet users are in charge of the kind of assistance they want and how they get it, which helps the audience meet interdependency demands and reduce treatment avoidance (Pretorius, Chambers & Coyle, 2019).

2.3.10.1 Benefits and shortcomings of using social media during Covid-19

Social media may improve health in a number of ways, according to study on the connection between social media use, health communication, and public health emergencies (Zeng & Li, 2020). The internet will become a more valuable health resource as its availability grows.

According to Hawn (2009), the rise in user-generated content makes information sharing more democratic and patient-controlled. This makes it possible for users to share health-related information that they might need, which makes the information more consumer-centered. Public health initiatives have shown success in utilising social media as a communication tool for health promotion initiatives such as therapies and prevention techniques, expanding their online reach (Vance, Howe & Dellavalle, 2009). Similar instances were documented in South Africa during the 2017–2018

listeriosis outbreak, which the World Health Organization characterised as the largest outbreak of the disease ever detected worldwide. The WHO subsequently published a toolkit in several South African official languages that served as a guide for online users to share from any location (World Health Organization, 2020).

In order to disseminate health information, healthcare organisations can also post YouTube videos and podcasts on different social media sites (Harrison, Wilding, Bowman, Fuller, Nicholls, Pound, Reszel & Sampson, 2016; Patrick, Stukus & Nuss, 2019). According to research, health institutions should step up their efforts to monitor and enforce fact-checking of dubious information on social media. They should also encourage timely and strategic retraction of misinformation, share personal experiences to refute rumours, and use search optimisation strategies on these platforms to direct users who ask questions about health to reliable sources of information (Steffens, Dunn, Wiley & Leask, 2019; Grimes, 2020; Xie, Tan & Li, 2020; Mheidly & Fares, 2020; Cuello-Garcia, Perez-Gaxiola & van Amelsvoort, 2020).

According to a study by Gesser-Edelsburg, Diamant, Hijazi, and Mesch (2018), health officials' theory-based correction message on Facebook was more successful than a standard correction message at clearing up misconceptions about vaccinations. According to a prominent social media warning, the quantity of inaccurate and potentially dangerous information is increasing at an unprecedented rate along with the volume of information (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). Inaccurate, deceptive, or misunderstood health information are all examples of misinformation. Mass panics among the populace may result from this, which could have terrible repercussions (Kortum, Edwards, Richards- Kortum, 2008; Habel, Liddon & Stryker, 2009).

Social media's participatory nature necessitates candid dialogue for information sharing, which raises the potential for widespread distribution of dubious and possibly inaccurate health information (Habel, Liddon & Stryker, 2009; Kortum, Edwards, Richards-Kortum, 2008). Social media provides a platform for the public and professionals to disseminate information (Sandman, 2006; Ophir, 2018; Lwin, Lu, Sheldenkar & Schulz, 2018). Therefore, when developing successful risk communication and response strategies, social media can be viewed as both beneficial and detrimental.

Given that public perceptions of risk vary greatly across individuals, experts and professionals can play an important role as reputable sources on social media, assisting in the spread of new information as it becomes available and addressing people's concerns as they change. Users of social media and the media sector often choose media sites for news depending on credible news sources (Sandman, 2006; Hill, 2019). The researcher seeks to understand what motivates social media users to use social media platforms to collect and interact with COVID-19 discourses posted by a national health institution, the NDoH, on their Facebook page during this pandemic by emphasising the benefits and drawbacks of using social media during a public health emergency, such as COVID-19.

2..3.11 The role of radio and television in times of crisis

According to Rodero (2020), in times of crisis, radio has always proven to be adaptable, and it has been crucial in playing a significant role during natural disasters and public health emergencies. Rodero highlighted the key role of radio, but that was before many citizens started relying on online updates, such as tabloids and social media for information. Mass media hold a significant position in society since they contribute to the emergence or modification of social norms (Briandana, Meiwanto, Doktoralina, Hassan & Hasan, 2020: 216). Karim Mariappan, and Peters (2016) equally support the foregoing statement by explaining that mass media can be used to replace other assets or strengths as a source of power for social innovation.

Community radio stations have served as information outlets for spreading awareness about safety precautions, symptoms of infection, and testing; they have been debunking fake news circulating on social media (Paravala & Jena, 2020:4-5). Information gathered through efficient communication remains a critical asset for governments in times of uncertainty and anxiety during public health outbreaks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Both television and radio are primary sources of critical information to the public in the event of disasters and emergencies, they circulate information and can curtail the spread of disease (Anwar, Meryem, Raees & Anwar, 2020).

2.3.12 Print media as a tool to disseminate messages

According to Clear (2015:66), “print media is defined as anything that is printed and distributed to the public, it comprises of various publications, leaflets and pamphlets that can all at some point be put to good use.” According to Korir and Nabushawo (2021), the phenomenon has long been characterised as powerful due to its capacity to effect positive social change, particularly in the way it disseminates news. Kuppuswamy (2017) explains that reliability and trust are not always the same in all forms of media. Prior research has proven that the print media are still the most reliable and valued source of information for the public, stating that the print media play a vital role in taking information to the masses and in continuing to shape public opinion in countries.

Similarly, a study by Pandey and Kumar (2010) states that when crucial catastrophe occurs, the media shapes our perception and exerts strong influences on both personal and societal levels. The two studies reveal that potentially, the media have a proactive role in shaping the actions of the mass population and thereby influencing policy actions. Furthermore, the media play a prominent role in disseminating information among people and it also plays an important role in spreading public awareness about certain issues.

The print media is considered a key avenue for taking information to the masses (Parvin, Ahsan, Rahman& Abedin, 2020). This is why printed media was utilised by supermarkets to send messages such as “stay safe” and “observe social distancing”. Furthermore, supermarkets used stickers to convey messages about safety precautions, these were pasted on the floor where individuals were expected to step on to maintain social distancing while queuing to pay for their goods. The media have a key role in keeping people connected and informed and its good impact on promoting emotional stability among people was demonstrated during the COVID-19 crises (Anwar et al., 2020).

Print media has effectively raised awareness of a number of diseases in the past, including AIDS, encephalitis, TB, the H1N1 swine flu, and the polio eradication mission. To raise awareness, newspapers ran special stories and one-column news about it on the main page (Pandey & Kumar, 2020). Akintola, Lavis, and Hoskins

(2015) state that the news media is situated at the intersection of the public and policy agendas and offers a window into public issues. As a result, it might be an effective instrument for promoting the health of the populace and supporting evidence-based primary healthcare systems that are receptive to their needs. In a similar vein, news outlets have the power to influence the environment for evidence-informed health policymaking, which is the methodical and open application of research findings in public health choices (Cheung, 2011).

“Provincial newspapers tend to provide more extensive coverage of primary healthcare-related stories compared to national newspapers, possibly due to their closer proximity to local health issues, a stronger focus on community-specific concerns, and a greater emphasis on regional healthcare challenges and initiatives that may be underrepresented in broader national media outlets” (Akintola, Lavis & Hoskins, 2015:11). This appears to reflect the smaller number of national newspapers, it could also be because, in South Africa, the implementation of primary health care occurs at the provincial and district levels (Akintola, Lavis & Hoskins, 2015). Newspapers have been publishing information about the disease and about the measures taken by the central and the state governments to contain the spread of infection and the lockdown (Zafri et al., 2021). This shows that the widespread coverage in the newspapers enabled the governments to plug loopholes to individuals with no access to social media during the COVID-19 crisis.

According to Hawdon et al (2014), even at present time in the digital era, print media is playing a strong role in creating awareness the world from the epidemic of Coronavirus (COVID-19), which is rapidly taking over the world. Print media is an important tool for educating the public about COVID-19, and one reason for this is that the messages are targeted to certain populations (Al-Dmour et al., 2020). Community newspapers and magazines are two examples of print media that are frequently intended for specific audiences. These two studies show that print media plays a role in allowing public health officials to tailor their messaging to specific groups who may be at higher risk of contracting the virus or who may face additional health or economic challenges because of the pandemic.

Wasserman (2020) explains that print media is accessible, it is widely available in many communities, including rural areas or those without access to the internet. This

makes it an effective tool for reaching a broad audience with important COVID-19 messaging. It also provides local coverage, supported by (Hess and Waller, 2021), many print media outlets provide local news and information, which can be invaluable in communicating information about COVID-19 to specific regions or communities. Hess and Waller (2021) study further explained that it includes information about local testing sites, resources for those who have lost their jobs because of the pandemic, and stories about how the virus is affecting specific communities.

Overall, print media remains an important tool for disseminating accurate and important information about COVID-19 to the public. By leveraging credibility, targeted messaging, accessibility, and local coverage of print media, public health officials and media outlets can work together to keep communities informed and safe during the pandemic.

2.3.13 Challenges of using Facebook and Twitter to send messages across

This section provides a quick overview of the Department of Health's chosen media challenges during the crises.

2.3.13.1 Misinformation and the impact

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the spread of false information, facilitated by social media and other digital platforms, poses a bigger risk to global public health than the virus itself (WHO, 2020). In a "post-truth" world of "alternative facts," different media sources provide various, and usually contradictory, perspectives on reality. Additionally, due to the global expansion in internet connectivity, more individuals than ever before have access to an incredible amount of information (Anderson & Raine, 2017). However, navigating this oversupply of often contradictory messages, some of which are reliable, others of which are erroneous, or manipulative remains a difficulty (Matscheke, Mack, Reineck & Zaitoonie, 2021).

As with television and print media, neither can the government control what news trends on social media. During the month of March 2020, Facebook claimed to have labelled roughly 40 million posts as false, citing fabrications relating to COVID-19 (Facebook, 2020). During the coronavirus pandemic, the community sees the government's website as a "strategic tool" and "the latest media" to provide information

and communicate matters relating to COVID-19 services (Karkin & Janssen, 2014). This shows that at present, the government is competing in various ways to provide information related to COVID-19.

Citizens' participation is essential during a crisis, whether it be in the form of donations or accurate information provided to the government (Hoehle, Aljafari & Venkatesh, 2017). By doing this, residents' worry, bewilderment, and terror can be reduced during emergencies. The government uses communication as a tool to improve the public's ability to comprehend information and raise awareness of self-reliance.

The public has been exposed to a range of disease-related information during the pandemic from both traditional (such as television and radio) and non-traditional (such as social media) media outlets (Cinelli et al., 2020). On the other side, because non-traditional websites are uncontrolled, they might disseminate news without any checks or filters. Social media has been used by some to disseminate rumours, conspiracy theories, and false information about SARS-CoV-2. For instance, some have claimed that COVID-19 is caused by radiation from 5 G networks (Brindha, Jayaseelan & Kadeswara, 2020). During pandemics, people are exposed to a variety of information, which may affect how they see things.

Caceres (2022) defines information as "factual data," which includes the knowledge that permeates society and directs people's decisions, deeds, and efforts—or lack thereof. The chosen media for this study is just one of several sources from which we obtain our information. We define information in this context as a component of the communication process, wherein Madden (2000) takes the unique stance that meanings are found in people rather than in words or data. He also explains that social and temporal factors are important in the processing and interpretation of information. We might infer from these two definitions that the idea of disinformation originates with the interpretations people make of information after it has been shared. A false rumour that has been disproved is just misinformation (Kvetanova, Predmerska & Svecova, 2020).

2.3.13.2 Social media influence

The usage of social media and search searches to gain information about the COVID-19 pandemic is constantly growing, and now includes Twitter, Facebook, Instagram,

and other more popular sources (Depoux et al., 2020). Various internet sites, especially social media, became platforms for distributing incorrect and inaccurate information about the epidemic (Tasnim, Hossain & Mazumder, 2020). According to Guljas (2021), these include ideas about the disease's origin, transmission, prevention, and vaccination effectiveness, all of which lack evidence-based support. Social media platforms are used by 53.6% of people worldwide, making them one of the primary routes for the rapid dissemination of information. Thus, it has substantial effects on disinformation (Maserole, 2018). The increase of social media users was the largest in 2019 at 27.8% (Galal, 2022), this actively demonstrates that social media channels have a potential of disseminating false information in the COVID-19 pandemic and the reason behind this conclusion is that the COVID-19 outbreak was in late 2019.

In the twentieth century, the term "information overload" was coined to describe the proliferation of false information created and disseminated by mass media platforms, including social media (Naeem, Khan & Batti, 2020). This shows that misinformation multiply rapidly and act as narratives that omit or add information to facts. The most common myths and rumours that could endanger public health have been closely monitored and addressed by the World Health Organization (WHO 2020). During the pandemic, several mainstream media sources, including newspapers, used their social media accounts on sites like Twitter to spread information. There is growing evidence that some social media accounts from mainstream media purposefully or unintentionally spread false information on COVID-19.

During the pandemic, people often used Twitter, one of the most popular social media sites, to express their thoughts about how the disease was spreading, to share rumours about treatments and preventative measures, to speculate about the disease's cause, and to suggest how the government should respond. As a result, Twitter served as a medium for the dissemination of both accurate and false information. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) has established MythBusters, a platform that dispels false information and encourages digital companies to combat fake news on their platforms, in an effort to reduce the spread of false information on social media. Additionally, Comlekci (2022) notes that fact-checking groups have banded together under the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) to cooperatively combat misinformation.

2.3.13.3 It creates fear-mongering environment

Misinformation has always been mostly disseminated through social media, and its main subjects include disease data, drugs, prevention strategies, dietary recommendations, and viral transmission techniques. According to a Brazilian study, false information regarding the spread of the virus and its adverse effects was extensively circulated during the Zika outbreak in 2015 and the yellow fever outbreak in 2016. Additionally, a literature review study by Huang, Li, Jiang, Li, and Porter (2020) discovered that the spread of false information about health might result in needless and unpleasant consequences like anxiety, panic, and a misinterpretation of the illness, and issues in the patient-doctor relationship. The World Health Organization has responded to this by launching specific WhatsApp and Facebook messaging services in Arabic, English, French, Hindi, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese to keep people safe and informed about the coronavirus. Two billion people might be reached by this user-friendly chat software, which also enables WHO to communicate directly with those in need.

2.3.14 Conclusion

Social media is utilised in many facets of life such as promoting health information, sharing pandemic prevention tactics, and thwarting false information during a period when information is not always reliable due to its quick transmission. According to a review of the literature, the media have traditionally been used to spread health information, but social media has recently seized the initiative and is now widely utilised to alert the public about pandemics and public health emergencies like COVID-19. The discovery of COVID-19 and its media coverage, including the dissemination of prevention strategies, the different functions of social media in disseminating health information and countering misinformation, the advantages and disadvantages of using social media for health promotion, and the COVID-19 pandemic that became known as the "infodemic" were all covered in this chapter.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 reviewed literature on similar studies done by other researchers. This chapter exhibits an overall research strategy and procedures utilised to meet the research objectives outlined in Chapter 1. It also outlines the general methodology, including population identification, sampling processes, and unit of analysis, and data gathering and analysis techniques. This study looked at government crisis communication and the usage of specific media by the Department of Health during the COVID-19 epidemic. The aim of this chapter is to give an exposition of the methodology that was used in the execution of this study. This chapter thus reports on the research methods and procedures followed for the purpose of data gathering, analysis and reporting.

3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methodologies refer to the rationale and the philosophical assumptions that underlie a particular study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2012). Philosophically, its arguments were underlined by the government crisis communication regard the use of selected media by the Department of Health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research will be applied by selecting individuals for data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study is noteworthy due to its inclusion of the government's use of the media during times of crisis.

3.2.1 Qualitative research approach

In this study, a qualitative research methodology was adopted to collect and analyse data. This helped the researcher to analyse and present the findings of the study in words. Thus, qualitative methodology was an approach ideal for this study as it dealt with a phenomenon that required an analysis of human response from narrative perspective and how the Department of Health was viewed when communicating a crisis. The researcher also managed to analyse the data through this method and addressed the objectives of the study. The study design and data collecting approach chosen for a research study are influenced by the research methodology (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001: 14). The approach a researcher takes to conduct a study is known as

the research technique. According to Kreuger and Neuman (2006: 150), methodology is the science of examining how a research study should be conducted and is a procedural approach to providing explanations for research challenges. While Leedy & Ormrod (2001: 14) claim that “research methodology encompasses the techniques that researchers employ to uncover, elucidate, and envision the phenomenon they are studying.”

Three research approaches—qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches—can be employed when doing research (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). Because it is acceptable to examine unquantifiable data manifestations, such as the motivations and behaviour of a research phenomenon, this study employs qualitative research methodologies (Stebbins, 2001).

A qualitative research strategy is a way to acquire a thorough knowledge of a phenomenon or setting using non-numerical data, text, video, or audio and is usually collected through observations, interviews, focus groups, and surveys. It investigates meanings, experiences, and viewpoints to achieve insights and understanding, rather than making statistical generalisations, of which the key characteristics of qualitative research are subjective interpretation, in-depth exploration, small sample sizes, data collection methods like interviews, focus groups, observations, and content analysis and emphasis on context and meaning (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). There are several different approaches to qualitative research, including grounded theory, ethnography, action research, phenomenological research, and narrative research (Schilling, 2006).

Qualitative research is commonly used in social sciences, education, health sciences, history, and anthropology. In this study, the qualitative research approach is important since there is no major statistical generalisation. Accordingly, "a systematic subjective approach used to describe life experiences and give them meaning" is a component of qualitative research (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014: 93).

Research methods include formulating questions and procedures that evolve from the participants' context to inductive data analysis, which enables the application of particular elements to broad themes before concluding with the interpretation of the data's meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Gaining understanding and investigating a phenomenon's depth, richness, and complexity are the goals (Denzin & Lincoln,

2017). The goal of qualitative research, a very subjective field of study, is to comprehend emotions, perceptions, and points of view (Gounder, 2012). This approach emphasises how individuals view their surroundings. Qualitative research encompasses a wide range of research techniques that are all used to explore, elucidate, and comprehend the problems that societies face. Better understanding of people's experiences, emotions, and behaviours is made possible by the qualitative method. Utilising an individual's social media use and the information they engage with, this study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the function of social media in risk communication and health promotion during a public health emergency.

3.2.2 Exploratory research design

Creswell (2013) defines research design as the processes in the research process that are committed to planning the study so that data may be collected and analysed. McMillan and Schumacher (2013) define research design as a series of decisions about what issue will be explored among what population, using what research methodologies, and for what aim. This study has adopted this design to explore a new phenomenon and poorly understood problem which is the COVID-19 pandemic as well as gaining insights from existing research while identifying variables that will assist government crisis communication. Exploratory research works with a topic that has never been examined previously to provide a preliminary analysis, or it deals with an established topic to generate new ideas (Swedberg, 2020).

As a research design, exploratory research is a type of research strategy that is used to investigate a new, poorly defined field of knowledge in order to better comprehend the knowledge that already exists. (Pandey & Pandey, 2015). The goal of exploratory research, according to Bless and Higson-Smith (1988: 41), is to obtain a comprehensive understanding of a scenario, phenomena, community, or individual. The necessity for such a study may result from a dearth of fundamental knowledge in a news area of interest. It encompasses the methods used to carry out a research project (Lewis, 2015). Nonetheless, some academics argue that the paradigm selected for the study affects how effective a design plan is. "A research design is the plan, structure, and strategy of investigation conceived so as to obtain answers to research questions" (Pandey & Pandey, 2015).

It aims to investigate the composition of new experiences and the conditions that surround them. According to Burns and Bush (2006), this research design offers details on the motivations and techniques used in the study of a specific phenomenon. By using personal information and knowledge to gather important data about the subject of inquiry, it enables the study of the motivations and methods underlying incidents that had place. In line with the study's goal, this research design helps the researcher explore, analyse, and gain insight into the efficacy of social media promotion of health information, particularly regarding COVID-19 prevention messaging and misinformation awareness.

3.3 POPULATION

This study focused on the Government, the Department of Health in South Africa which used *Facebook and Twitter (X)* to communicate about a crisis of the COVID-19. Since the researcher seeks to understand how the Government communicated with the citizens, the selection of the department was based on the task it was given to update the masses on the pandemic. It was the only department responsible for the matter. Therefore, the researcher focused on its communication on the social media. The group from whom the researcher wants to draw conclusions is known as the population (Neumann, 2016). A group of things that display all the measurements that the practitioner or researcher is interested in is referred to as the population (Creswell, 2013). The population for data gathering in the study was chosen from comments section of the Department of Health's *Twitter (X)* comment sections which are eight and three posts from April 2020 on *Facebook*.

3.4 SAMPLING

This study applied purposive sampling because the researcher focused on crisis communication of the pandemic carried by the Department of Health in South Africa to get the depth of the information and prospective online users' optimal insights about how the crisis was communicated online. A sample size of three posts from Facebook and eight comments from *Twitter (X)* were adopted to respond to this study to ensure that analyses take place on how the communication was performed and the responses from both platforms. The purposive sampling strategies are typically used when

focusing on limited number of informants. The process of choosing a sample from the desired population is known as sampling (Osuala, 2007).

The researcher used a non-probability sampling technique, specifically the purposive sampling method, to help choose the posts and comments in a suitable way (Leedy & Ormrod, 2007). In order to choose the sample for a research study, a big population of data must be narrowed down. Maree (2007) distinguished between two types of sampling techniques: probability sampling and non-probability sampling. While probability sampling methods were founded on the principle of unpredictability and the likelihood theory, nonprobability procedures relied on the researcher's viewpoint. This is why nonprobability random sampling techniques are used in this study. Similarly, compared to examining only one item for each chosen medium, employing three things was found to improve conformability.

The selected quantity assisted other researchers in validating results. For future researchers to find the study useful utilising the same quantity of data gathering for dependability purposes, the researchers also made the study simple enough for anyone to follow. This was achieved by reporting all steps. This study employs a tried-and-true method of data gathering, which is also relevant to the quantity of posts and comments selected for analysis. Finally, the results of this study are still applicable to other studies. The sample strategy that the researcher selected was in line with the goals and purposes of the investigation. For this investigation, purposeful sampling was used.

This is a tactic for locating data that can provide comprehensive and in-depth knowledge regarding the phenomenon being studied (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). Using this method, people who were discovered on the Government website's comments section were purposefully chosen to get insight into the study through their participation. The researcher was just required to choose various government-posted materials, review them, and determine whether they contributed to the accomplishment of the study's goals.

As previously mentioned, a selection of media, such as Facebook and Twitter were examined in this study. From every social media network that was chosen, three posts were utilised. Three posters were utilised, addressing COVID-19 laws, vaccine roll out,

and disinformation. The specific rationale behind this is that, to give true and real data, it would not be fair or credible to present just one post from the chosen media.

3.5 DATA COLLECTION APPROACH

In this research process, the researcher will analyse statements in the form of posts by the South African Government and comments that were made by users on Facebook and Twitter regarding this pertinent issue. According to Bowen (2009), documents provide information needed on the context of the selected phenomenon while also providing background information as well as historical insights. The researcher will not intervene in any of the engagements that took place on selected media platforms. Leedy and According to Ormrod (2012), data collection is more than just collecting data, it is about acquiring information in unique ways connected to the study's aim. The following methods will be used to describe the findings and confirm the trustworthiness of the interpretations. Data collection is the methodical process of obtaining information from a chosen population in order to carry out scientific study (Abawi, 2013). It is the process of gathering a large amount of data from multiple sources in order to find solutions for a certain study phenomena (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

Researchers usually use participant observation, focus groups, interviews, documentary sources, archival records, content analysis, and face-to-face encounters to collect data on a subject (Mouton, 2001; Myers, 2009). The researcher also took on the role of an impartial observer during the data collection process. It was simple to examine how the Government used these platforms and how the public responded because the researchers did not interfere in any of the interactions that took place on the chosen media platforms. Instead, they watched and analysed how citizens responded and how the Government used the media as a tool during the pandemic.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

Leedy and Ormrod (2012) note that the term "analysis" refers to the breakdown of a complicated whole into its constituent elements. It entails condensing a large amount of material into manageable chunks. The researcher employed thematic content analysis since it is an effective method for learning about people’s perspectives,

opinions, knowledge, and experiences (Caulfield, 2020). Content analysis can be seen as “any technique used to make inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1968). In view of the fact that it is thought that words and phrases have the same meaning when categorised into the same categories, content analysis allows the researcher to organise the text in smaller content-related groups (Cavanagh, 1997).

In this study, thematic content analysis was used, understanding content is the focus of qualitative content analysis (White & Marsh, 2010). The objectives of qualitative content analysis include identifying trends in the way ideas are expressed, understanding the intentions of individuals or groups, revealing differences in communication in diverse contexts, and evaluating the impact of communication content, which may include information flows or audience responses (Krippendorff, 2018). Choosing pertinent themes and categories from the data collection is a crucial step in qualitative content analysis. Additionally, the researcher ought to consider remarks or comments that support one another and offer examples of the same overarching notion or thought.

Through the methodical categorisation process of coding and detecting themes and patterns, qualitative content analysis can be referred to as a research method that permits a subjective assessment of the content of text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The researcher is able to comprehend the significance of using social media for COVID-19 pandemic messaging, misinformation, and false news awareness using the themes found in the posts on Facebook and Twitter. Additionally, it uses conceptual content analysis to ascertain the presence and frequency of concepts, which can be either explicit or implicit terms or concepts within a text. The fundamental steps of content analysis are developing the research problem, selecting the population, sample, or content to be analysed, selecting a research design that includes defining the unit of analysis or analytical categories, collecting the data and developing a set of coding rules, coding the text in accordance with the rules, and finally analysing the findings and drawing conclusions (Wilson, 2011; Lou, 2020). Furthermore, qualitative content analysis investigates who says what, to whom, and how (Boor & Wood, 2006). To perform this study, the researcher collected and analysed audience reactions to

each COVID-19 prevention messaging, misinformation, and fake news awareness post on the Department of Health's social media pages.

3.7 QUALITY CRITERIA

3.7.1 Credibility

This study achieved credibility by employing suitable research procedures to ensure that the research goals are attained. The study's conclusions were deemed credible if they faithfully reflected trustworthy information extracted from the source data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The researcher made sure that the dates in the sources were accurate (from the COVID-19 epidemic to the present) and that they were related to the study's chosen media. The identities of users who interacted with various posts were kept private during all study-related discussions. The researcher did not edit the remarks or offer a skewed interpretation of what was said there.

3.7.2 Confirmability

The possibility that the findings of a research study will be verified by additional researchers is known as confirmability. The term "confirmability" describes a researcher's attempts to show that the conclusions are the product of the evidence they have collected, not of their personal prejudices (Shenton, 2004). Regarding confirmability, the researcher simply conducts unbiased, non-prejudicial analysis of relevant sources related to the study's topic to make sure that all content has undergone independent evaluation. The researcher refrained from manipulating the data to fit the needs of their viewpoint.

3.7.3 Dependability

According to Streubert (2007), dependability is the extent to which research methods are recorded such that a non-participant may examine, verify, and critique them. To help future researchers learn about the findings and techniques of the current study, the researcher thoroughly reported every step that was taken during the investigation. The investigation avoided dependability issues by thoroughly examining the results.

3.7.4 Transferability

According to Moon et al. (2016), transferability is a subset of external validity that measures how applicable or transferrable a study's conclusions are to theory, practice,

and further research. To guarantee that the results would be comparable if the study were to be replicated in a different environment with same conditions, the researcher employed a tried-and-true data collection approach. Furthermore, the researcher guaranteed transferability in this investigation by providing a precise explanation of the study's concept, goal, and study population. This also covers the nature of the investigation and an explanation of a pertinent theory.

3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to De Vos (2010), non-maleficence the researcher must not injure the participants and privacy and anonymity the participants' identities must not be disclosed in any way are among the ethical considerations that should be considered. Leedy and Ormrod (2012) are of the view that most ethical problems in research can be categorised into one of three groups, depending on the factors the researcher considered when carrying out the study.

3.8.1 Application of ethical clearance

The question of ethical consideration is defined as one of fundamental concern for the rights of others. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017), these are the guidelines that the researcher must follow while performing the study. Prior to starting the data gathering process, the researcher applied for ethical approval at the University of Limpopo's Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC).

3.8.2 Confidentiality and anonymity

The names of the people who participated in the government-disseminated information about the epidemic could be kept anonymous thanks to the data that was gathered from a few media outlets that captured the opinions of the public. This includes keeping the dates of their engagements a secret. This indicates that no personal information about data gathered on certain media platforms was disclosed by the researcher at any point during the study. This includes names of individuals who have engaged on the Department of Health’s official pages.

3.8.3 Risks and harm

To avoid putting social media users in any kind of risk or harm, in cases where the researcher may use figures in this project, usernames was cropped out. The

researcher is fully aware that opinions disseminated by social media users may put users in compromising positions or even put their lives in danger to prevent such, the researcher will not disclose any identity.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter went over the research technique for this study. The researcher determined that the demographic and sample processes, and research instruments, data gathering methodologies, and data analysis, were adequate for the approach. Population and sampling techniques described all participants in the study and how they were chosen to create a sample. The interview schedule was utilised as a data gathering tool to ensure the study's success. The following chapter presented, interpreted, and analysed data for this investigation.

CHAPTER 4: DATA PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the data is initially presented in terms of the conclusions drawn from the document analysis of the Department of Health's comments on social media posts. Research questions 1 and 2 are addressed in the second place. To address research questions one and two, the Department of Health has used its social media page to discuss COVID-19 prevention and disinformation. The comments under the three selected posts are used to identify common topics of discussion and the ways in which the Department of Health has used its social media page for interactions.

The study's goal was to look into the role of social media in COVID-19 prevention, and misinformation and misinformation discourses on social media, with a focus on why people use social media during pandemics. The study looked at the literature on how social media works and why people use it to find health information during pandemics like the COVID-19. In order to determine how the public responded to and interacted with the initial impacts of COVID-19 prevention messaging, general information and disinformation pertaining to COVID-19, and the factors that led to increased social media usage during the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Department of Health, the premier national health institution in South Africa, this study analysed the comments under the posted content.

This chapter summarised and talks about the study's findings in relation to the goals and purposes of the research and the information gathered through content analysis. The study examined comments made in response to three posts made on social media by the Department of Health (DoH) during the first three weeks of the COVID-19 national lockdown in South Africa. It aimed to answer the following research questions:

- What impact did the misinformation that was spread during COVID-19 communication have?

- How did the Department of Health manage COVID-19 information on selected media?

- Which themes emerged from the messages communicated by the Department of Health during COVID-19?

- How did the Department of Health applied government crisis communication to manage the information circulated to the citizens about the pandemic through selected media?

4.2 ANALYSIS OF DATA COLLECTED

The researcher's introduction and a thorough explanation of the meeting's goal came before the actual data gathering process. The significance of unrestricted involvement and contribution were also emphasised. The participants were assured of secrecy and anonymity by the researcher, who also mentioned that they might have access to a copy of the transcript should they require one. The Department of Health had to post on their social media page about the COVID-19 prevention message and to raise awareness of false information and fake news, where comments are analysed and therefore the posts are included in the research study. Social media posts which incorporated preventative message and awareness of false information and fake news, were chosen to be consistent with the research questions and study's logic.

Theme 1: The impact of misinformation during COVID-19 communication

The first theme, misinformation about the COVID-19, is divided into three categories: conspiracy theories, general misinformation, and fake news. These categories were then broken down into subcategories, which included discourses about fake news, COVID-19 information, public voice suppression, information dissemination channels, COVID-19 viral legitimacy, contributory factors, and the COVID-19 virus origin. The discussions surrounding information and disinformation regarding the COVID-19 are crucial to this issue.

Table 4.1: Codes, sub-categories and categories of the impact of misinformation that occurred during COVID-19 communication

The themes mentioned above led to the discussion of the following categories:

- The impact of misinformation;
- General and mis/information regarding COVID-19;

- Fake news; and
- Conspiracy theories.

Category 1: The impact of misinformation

During the early stages of COVID-19, the scant information that was available led to a delayed or staggered release of information, which increased uncertainty. People's ignorance of what is true and what is not is exacerbated by the factor of misinformation. Even though false information spreads swiftly and extensively through a variety of media, Laurie Garret (2020) asserts that accurate information that consistently conveys scientifically supported information is a useful tactic against escalating public anxiety regarding misconceptions about the science and epidemiology of the COVID-19 virus.

Participating in posts on the Department of Health's (DoH) social media page, individuals have voiced concerns about the seriousness of COVID-19 and the detrimental effects that false information and fake news have on people's perceptions of the virus: "The COVID-19 virus is a serious illness that should not be played with. If you get infected, you will feel ashamed of yourself when you find out you have the disease. Please stop spreading false information about the COVID-19 virus; it is very serious."

They have also drawn attention to the discomfort that the public's right to free speech caused by the legislation enacted in cases involving the dissemination of false information and fake news: "Since we have the freedom of speech in this country, how could you label my opinion as false news? What cover are you hiding behind if incorrect? What a waste of legal action to prove your own correctness rather than providing evidence? Quit messing with us Sinibekiles as a nation."

Concerns expressed by the public over COVID-19's staggered information release based on the number of deaths and recovered cases have also been expressed in other comments: "We want to know all the information, but all I hear is that there are more and more COVID-19 infections and deaths, but no information about how many people have recovered."

The suppression of public voice, whereby South Africans feel that their right to free expression has been violated because the National Department of Health (NdoH) article suggested that individuals disseminating false information will face consequences, is another element of confusion and misinformation surrounding COVID-19. Comments like this demonstrate this:

"As a country we have right of speech so how could u determine my opinion as false news what are u hiding behind If I am wrong with my view what a use of prosecution instead of giving fact and prove ur self right stop playing with us, as a Country.....😳
"This comment conveys the idea that the freedom of speech that was previously fought for is vanishing: "Satan wants his work to be done in secret, so there is no freedom of expression...where are the freedom fighters???? The same feathers, but nothing new was written, not even in the Bible."

One further comment emphasises that people can face legal consequences for disseminating false information, but they should be cautious because the government, or anyone attempting to pursue legal action, may be the source of the information. "*Yes, people can be hold reliable if they can't prove what they say which can be challenging because fake news can also come from the same side that is very keen to prosecute while we need to be educated here hellllllo!!!!wakey-wakeeeeeeeey!!!@*"

In response to a comment that calls into question the "best" constitution in the world, the user asks what comes next: "What happened to the best constitution in the world? Are they taking away our freedom of speech now? What's next?"

These remarks demonstrate that social media users were worried about the effects of false information and the fallout from disseminating fake news.

Category 2: Fake news

The COVID-19 pandemic has been nicknamed an "infodemic" due to the amount of misleading information and fake news, caused by the widespread use of social media platforms, a lack of scientific expertise, and the transmission of wrong information. In a post, the National Department of Health (NDoH) cautioned South Africans about the dangers of disseminating false information; however, this message was met with criticism, to which their followers replied negatively:

"🤣🤣🤣🤣*Good folks, you can find out the truth about the virus through this so-called fake news, but it's up to you. "There are some news stories that you have no right to know about or consume because you could divulge a great deal about what we refer to as the government," and "Why do they tolerate fake news so much? As humans, we take facts seriously. Give them a chance to refute the news that is going around, hawu."* These comments show the need for engagement between the Government and the public to combat misinformation and inform them that accurate information about the pandemic will be disseminated through appropriate channels.

Some comments indicate that fake news originate from wealthy first-world nations: "What if fake news originates from the top? Our job is to respond harshly to the false information that officials spread. Imagine having people prosecuted for suggesting that a French doctor so and so suggested that Africa be used to test COVID-19 virus vaccines? We also need to know why he suggested that way, who he suggested it to, and what the outcome of that meeting is." He may have said, "Why don't they walk on four legs instead of two, like Italy or the USA."

Category 3: Conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories and false information may seem to have no direct influence on behaviour in the actual world, but the COVID-19 pandemic has shown numerous times that this is not the case. There have been reports of attacks on telecom workers in the UK and the Netherlands, as well as many telecom mast fires, all linked to the theory that the COVID-19 virus originated on 5G networks (Vincent, 2020; Shahsavari, Holur, Wang, Tangherlini & Roychowdhury, 2020).

Conspiracy theories like this are prevalent throughout the world due to the speed at which information travels, regardless of location. Social media users commented on a National Department of Health post about the negative effects of spreading fake news, saying things like, “No such a thing (No corona), some claim that the government is building a 5G network while we are under lockdown.”

Some remarks addressed the idea that individuals shouldn't get tested for COVID-19 since the tests may already be contaminated and that this is a part of the Government's scheme to spread the virus: *" It is said that China is attempting to spread the disease*

by donating millions of masks and that musk that tested positive. Beware of people who try to test you by giving you free musk gloves and be cautious of those hand sanitisers that one person in Limpopo tested positive for COVID19. Take care, stay away, and don't trust anyone. Don't test COVID19 until you are sick or suspect symptoms."

"Funny how some individuals want to question the tests, but they use foreign-made medications or pills, foreign-made needles that they oppose to being used in hospitals, foreign-made food and drink, and even other hospital tests outside the Covid 19 testing. How certain are you that things aren't contaminated? As the only means by which the government can track and combat this pandemic, cease discouraging people from getting tested. Please don't believe you're smart while acting foolish."

First, to address how the Department of Health, a prominent South African health institution, used its social media page to introduce and promote conversations about COVID-19 prevention messaging, misinformation, and fake news awareness, the Department of Health has done this by using its page to introduce and promote conversations about COVID-19 prevention messaging, misinformation, and fake news awareness. This is demonstrated by the 210 comments that were found under the three postings and the three themes that were generated from them.

Through the comments made by social media users, these themes show how the DoH used social media to promote conversations about the elements that impact COVID-19 preventive messaging, the consequences of the lockdown, and COVID-19 misinformation. It is clear from reading the comments and the topics that emerged from them that the DoH was successful in starting these conversations by using their social media page to promote conversations around COVID-19 prevention messaging and raising awareness of false information and fake news.

Based on how the audience responded to the chosen DoH pieces, research question investigated the popular discussion topics. Following a study of the data, several debate topics emerged in both the data and the posts. These recurring subjects are covered in the themes and categories that emerged from the participation and interaction of social media users in the posts and comments.

The impact of physical preventive measures and COVID-19 protective clothing on prevention messaging; the influence of Chinese medicine, herbal remedies, and religious interventions on prevention messaging; the impact of scientific interventions and Western medicine on prevention messaging; the experiences and results of lockdown, which formed the theme of the effects of lockdown; and fake news, general misinformation about COVID-19, and conspiracy theories, which formed the theme of the factors that influence COVID-19 prevention messaging, COVID-19 errors, or misinformation were some of the common topics of discussion that bolstered the study's justification. This study applied the comments to understand how users approached the information posted by the government. The researcher also applied the theoretical perspective to achieve the postulated themes of the study.

Theme 2: How the Department of Health managed information related to COVID-19 on selected media

The second theme, "Lockdown experiences and repercussions," is split into two subthemes and focuses on how the Department of Health managed material connected to COVID-19 on certain media. These variables were then divided into smaller groups, such as the duration of the lockdown, the regulations governing it, its effects, and its aftermath. Based on the remarks made below, the themes, categories, and subcategories listed below were created. The notion that lockdown should end, the 21-day nationwide lockdown, disobeying lockdown restrictions, the boredom of staying indoors, unemployment, returning to work and school, and the ban on alcohol are a few of the themes and sub-themes produced.

Table 4.2: Codes, sub-categories and categories of how the Department of Health managed information related to COVID-19 on selected media.

Theme 2: How the Department of Health managed information related to COVID-19 on selected media		
Code	**Sub – Categories**	**Categories**
• Lockdown should end	Duration of lockdown	Experiences of Lockdown
• 21-day National Lockdown	Duration of lockdown	
• Disobeying lockdown rules	Lockdown regulations	Experiences of Lockdown
• Alcohol restrictions	Lockdown regulations	
• Tired of being indoors	Repercussions of lockdown	Consequences of Lockdown
• Unemployment	Repercussions of lockdown	
• Return to school and work	Aftermath of lockdown	

Category 1: **Impact of covid-19 on internal communication**

Organisations and employees were compelled to change their habits as a result of the pandemic Covid-19 scenario, which resulted in one of the toughest confinements ever witnessed in history. Many people began telecommuting or working from home. In response to this situation, businesses must change and take on new difficulties relating to social media communication. Thus, managers must come up with new strategies to engage workers online in addition to educating their teams about the changes brought about by the epidemic in the workplace.

The goal of Bakó's research (2020) was to evaluate how well the company communicated internally during the pandemic. The findings of the study showed that although employees were happy with the information they received from the company, they weren't happy with how often it was shared. Stated differently, people desired that the organisation notify them of new developments in the workplace more rapidly and regularly. Many workers did not receive clear instructions from their supervisors, according to this study, and the main issues that subordinates had with their superiors were unclear priorities and goals, lost knowledge, and a decline in team spirit.

It is interesting to observe that those who spoke with their supervisors both in person and online encountered the fewest communication problems, while those who spoke with them only in person or virtually encountered the greatest obstacles. A total of 25 out of 64 respondents indicated that there had not been any notable changes in internal communication throughout the pandemic, which the authors also intended to investigate. Others said they were receiving more emails and tasks, and some even felt like they had greater flexibility in how they carried out their work.

Regarding the frequency and quality of communication, both respondents reported receiving updates on the organisation’s condition monthly and receiving information more frequently, but they also complained about receiving inconsistent and delayed information. In their study on telecommuting, Tavares et al. (2020) concluded that a major challenge experienced by people was a dearth of professional engagement and communication among coworkers.

Category 2: Experiences of lockdown

A nationwide lockdown was necessary to stop the COVID-19 virus from spreading and to reduce the number of COVID-19 infections and fatalities in the nation. While

schools, shops, and places of worship were shuttered and only necessities like groceries and medical care were open, people were permitted to work from home if they could under the lockdown conditions. The posts and comments that were examined revealed that the people of South Africa did not approve of these rules and limitations. Kids wanted to return to school, and panic shopping prevented people from getting groceries.

The public in South Africa is in favour of lockdown regulations, but they are also concerned about not being able to purchase food because they cannot go to work. This is evident in the following quote, which shows that while some people are tired of the lockdown and its rules, others view it as essential to ensure safety and save lives: *“We know that we must work to save lives while we are under lockdown, but since the government has at least given us food, that's all we're asking for. It's difficult when a child comes to you and says, "There's nothing we can do," but please just give me a sample and I'll be fine..".* The constructive engagement and permanent solution are what the citizens also needed and thorough explanation of the occurred crisis.

Additional remarks emphasise the anxieties and concerns of individuals who are jobless or unable to work because of the lockdown. These individuals are concerned about their future: *"My mother and I are not working, so if the lockdown continues, what will happen to our family.”* This comment demonstrates how the crisis communication of the government was adopted and received by some citizens who shows that social issues such as unemployment is still a threat towards societal development. So, the concern was put on the crisis and how it was communicated and dealt with by the government.

Category 3: Consequences of Lockdown

Its repercussions accompanied the experiences of being under lockdown. Throughout the lockdown, the public was impacted by these repercussions in one of two ways: negatively or positively. People throughout the world experienced social isolation because of the lockdown. Among these side effects were psychological distress, anxiety, and depression; there were also sentiments related to the lifestyle adjustment we had to make, like reduced physical activity, poor eating habits, irregular sleep patterns, and feelings of isolation and loneliness (Novotný, Gonzalez-Rivas, Kunzová,

Skladaná, Pospíšilová, Polcrová, Medina-Inojosa, Lopez-Jimenez, Geda & Stokin; 2020).

A comment highlights the negative effects of the lockdown regulations, which prevented people from praying at places of worship that would have provided them with a sense of security during an uncertain time. It asks how people are supposed to beg and ask God for forgiveness when they are not present at His house of worship. Once more, we do attend the funerals because He is the only one who can put an end to this illness and restore health to our people*...?yet again we do go and attend the funerals ...bcz Him alone have the power to stop this disease and heal our people...?"*

Due to financial difficulties and their children being at home, parents had psychological stress. Children lost out on going to school and seeing relatives, and they were anxious about contracting COVID-19. A few of these repercussions were children being unable to go back to school and unemployment. Remarks focused on how people were losing their jobs and were unable to support their families, as well as how children were being disadvantaged by not being able to attend school: "*When do the children return to school? I'm having trouble understanding when this lockdown will end right now. When were the schools going to open? I don't understand how this lockdown is going to help the workers, who are remaining at home with their families. Please, government, find a solution to this COVID-19 issue. For me, it's a crc desecras."*

Other comments criticised the fact that, despite the lockout, the COVID-19 numbers continued to rise and that, instead of helping the already vulnerable, it only made matters worse.: *"No employment, no educational institutions not enough food for jobs I CN say like they've been saying that machines will take over the world because they can't do it. He also doesn't believe in the rise of humanity in schools, and not all of us CN have wealthy donors who have donated billions of dollars to help with food aid and disaster relief. If we don't have anything to eat, should we break into Bo Mifrnds stores instead? I can state that because the number is increasing, it is useless to continue the lockdown."* All the posts and comments published on social media contained different emotions emitted by stakeholders. To develop an understanding of the emotions displayed during the crisis, posts and comments is to identify words that have significant emotional meaning. Therefore, the comment above highlights that

government was also expected to deal properly with social matters and be communicated for citizens to understand everything.

Theme 3: emerged from the messages communicated by the Department of Health during COVID-19

Category 1: Government communication during disasters

Diverse interpretations and representations exist in government communication. Howlett suggests that government communication must be viewed as a tool or instrument of policy that is used to carry out policy objectives in the framework of public governance. By using informational resources to "influence and direct policy actions through the provision or withholding of information or knowledge from social actors," government communication becomes a general phrase for a variety of specific sorts or categories of governance instruments.

During a crisis, effective communication is both essential and difficult. As evidenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and other tragedies, people become more receptive to false and dangerous messages when their suffering and anxieties are heightened during times of crisis. This also fuels a desire for information that empowers and reassures people. These messages quickly proliferated on social media, conflicting with government messaging, escalating anxieties, and undermining government initiatives. People often react to crises subjectively, and emotions have a significant influence in the thought processes that the crisis triggers, as noted by Mwaura, Carter, and Kubheka (2020). Government communications at times of calamity must therefore be considerate of the sentiments of the populace.

There is an ongoing discussion on the exact definitions of disaster, crisis, and emergency. Depending on the situation, the period of time, and occasionally the particular events in question, these terminologies might be simple or complex. Nevertheless, because of their overlapping meanings and hazy distinctions, mainstream literature uses them interchangeably. This study defines a disaster as an unexpected event a catastrophe, accident, or major disruption that causes significant harm, mortality, or uncertainty over the short- or long-term, as well as material,

environmental, socioeconomic, or human losses that the impacted community is unable to address on its own.

An incident that spreads unrest or puts individuals, groups, or society at risk is referred to as a crisis. A public event or situation that endangers people's lives, property, or well-being is referred to as an emergency. These could arise from human activity or from the natural world. Thus, emergencies include both crises and disasters. These terms are used in this work as overlapping ideas. The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis, calamity, and emergency all at once.

Effective crisis communication requires adherence to the essential values of being first, right, and credible. This gives governments the ability to take charge and win people over. Chang's work serves as an excellent example of the efficacy of crisis communication. It reveals that in Taiwan, public exposure to effective communication set off a series of events that started with the perception of government as empowering. This perception in turn triggered intrapersonal empowerment, which in turn led to preventive behaviour, which in turn reduced vulnerability and worry. Additional research demonstrates the impact of communication on vulnerability and health during the epidemic.

Category 2: Government communication and information system

The framework and procedures for government communication in South Africa are provided by the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS). It views this kind of communication as essential to the provision of services and the smooth operation of the South African Government. It makes the case that "a nation's future success is largely dependent on the government's ability to deliver optimally transparent, productive, communication and interaction at all levels." Stated differently, the advancement of any country depends on the ability to communicate effectively and efficiently.

The Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) identifies important components for contextualising government communications, including making sure that the public always has access to all information and that successful communication practices are maintained to influence public opinion and preserve government legitimacy. Additionally, that the goal of government communications should be a

constant, strategic, and citizen-focused engagement. This entails going beyond just getting "the right message to the right people" and making sure that the communication process serves the interests of the public as well as the government. As a result, information must be communicated in a way that is thorough, cohesive, understandable to communities and individuals, and gives them the tools to use it to better their lives and engage in government.

In general, the GCIS promotes the adoption of hybrid communication models that make use of both new and conventional media platforms and technology. It provides instructions for creating and managing websites for government agencies and divisions. It also emphasises how crucial it is to guarantee that content on websites is true, up to date, readable, trustworthy, and free of grammatical and editorial errors.

Category 3: Message communicated.

These posts, which included awareness of false news and disinformation and preventative messaging, were chosen in accordance with the study's research goals and justification. Some significant phrases or codes that were gathered from the data to create the initial coding categories were: prayer, religion, freedom of expression, lockdown, prevention, and fake news. COVID-19 is genuine, COVID-19 is phony, the state of South Africa's healthcare facilities, the 5G network, the prohibition on alcohol, masks, sanitiser, the Chinese virus, the effects of the lockdown, conventional versus western medicine, and COVID-19 statistics.

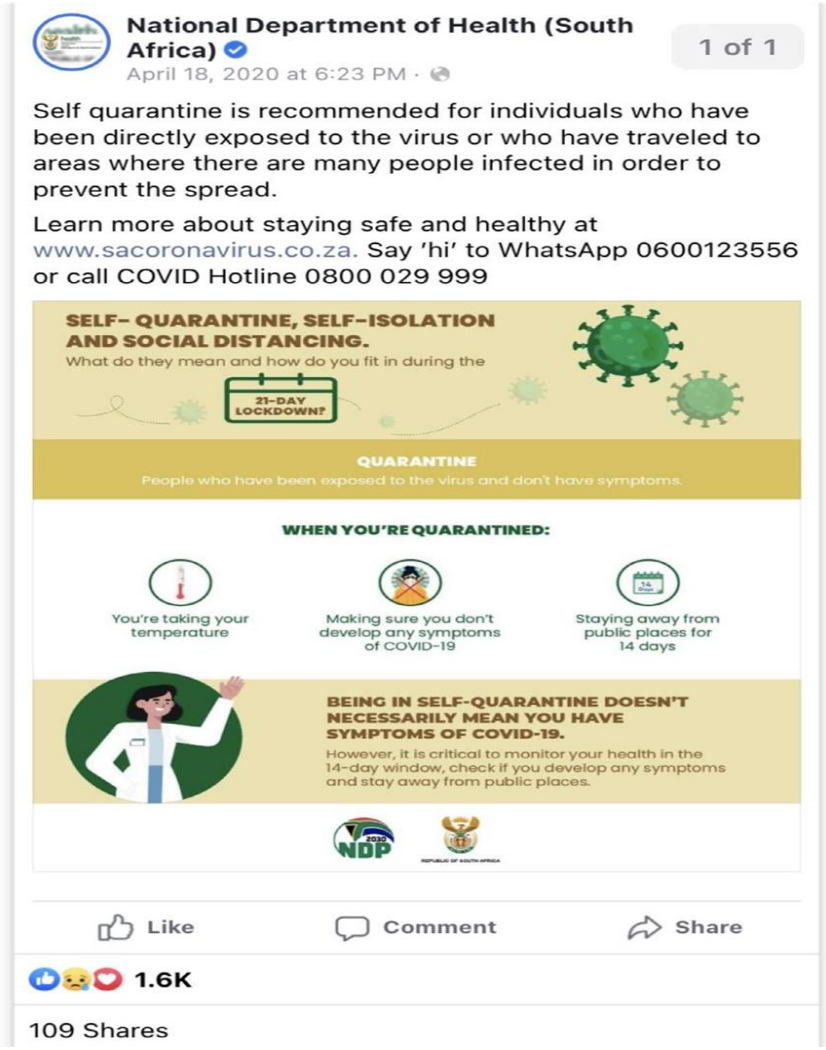

Image 1 - Post Three (18/04/2020)

These terms were employed by the NDoH, one of the most significant health organisations in South Africa, to promote audience participation and interaction on its social media channels. These keywords were selected because they were often used in the evaluated comments. They will be further be discussed to show how well they communicated COVID-19-related information, preventative techniques, disinformation, and fake news awareness. The analysis included posts made by this organisation between March 27, 2020, and April 18, 2020, during lockdown level 5 following the COVID-19 level 5 nationwide lockdown in South Africa. Only comments submitted by the general public on the chosen posts were included. Only the comments left on these images and postings from the DoH's social media accounts were analysed by the researcher.

Image 2 – Post Two (10/04/2020)

Theme 4: How the Department of Health applied government crisis communication to manage the information circulated to the citizens about the pandemic through selected media

Category 1: Government Crisis

Due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, 7, 010,681 persons have already passed away worldwide. Since the WHO proclaimed the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, several noteworthy incidents have occurred, greatly increasing public concern, dread, and uncertainty worldwide. Since then, most governments have concluded that they

need to respond quickly to the problem to finally be granted authority over this grave epidemic.

It is commonly recognised that crisis communication plans, by lowering anxiety and promoting public adherence to mitigation measures, lessening the burden, and enhancing the efficacy of patient care, can play a critical and significant role in the long-term prevention and mitigation of pandemics. In order to allay people's fears and anxieties, government representatives have employed a range of crisis communication strategies to persuade the public to adhere to particular rules for stopping the virus's spread.

In modern democracies, widespread societal catastrophes like the COVID-19 epidemic are followed by heightened public debate over the best course of action for laws and response tactics. These difficult circumstances are made worse by digital media, which allows regular people to voice their thoughts and participate in public conversation while news organisations, journalists, or authorities are no longer able to play the special role of gatekeepers and information brokers. For example, Twitter data provide new perspectives on these interactions. Social media digital trace data offer useful tools for analysing communication trends during emergencies.

As more and more communication is mediated through digital platforms, data from those platforms are being used to analyse public debate objectively. However, there is still a dearth of thorough research on the ways in which crises affect public discourse in various communities. As a result, this article will examine how COVID-19 has affected public conversation on Twitter in relation to four language communities (English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese), concentrating on two pandemic-related crises: (a), the Omicron variant and (b) the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine.

A lot of people used social media sites throughout this epidemic to share their thoughts on important developments or to get information. Consequently, the study's conclusions offer important information that clarifies the most prevalent issues and disputes that arise on Twitter in various global groups. These results can also be used as guidelines for health communication strategies, enabling governments to put into practice effective communication techniques that take into consideration the intricacies of social networks in a range of circumstances. These results also

contribute to the development of a global perspective by deepening our understanding of this phenomenon.

Image 3 - Post One (07/04/2020)

Category 2: Crisis management

The topic of vaccinations garnered significant public attention during the pandemic. As evidenced by variations in vaccine availability, immunisation as a tactic to reduce the number of hospitalisations and deaths began on December 8, 2020, in the United Kingdom and spread internationally with variable vaccination rates. The rapid development and production of COVID-19 vaccines has allowed us to have a wide selection of vaccines available on the market. The European Medicines Agency (EMA) gave the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccination approval in January 2021. The World Health Organisation (WHO 2019a) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) have stated that the vaccination is safe and that the benefits outweigh the risks but reports of rare blood clotting disorders (thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome) linked to this

immunisation in March 2021 have caused many European Union countries to decide to temporarily suspend its use.

On the other hand, this incident may have affected people's vaccination adherence, which was important during the early stages of immunisation campaigns. This vaccination is presently the most widely used vaccine in the world, having been used in 185 countries. In addition to affecting pandemic management, the discovery of the novel Omicron variant in November 2021 in South Africa sparked public discussion. Since it was unknown at the time if it was as hazardous as the Delta variety, it caused a great deal of worry. The extent of the disease's spread and the potential for a more severe clinical presentation in this variation were both unclear. It is now known that the danger of contracting omicron is much higher than that of the preceding subvariants, which are still extremely contagious and are mostly found worldwide.

Scientists and health authorities determine and assess the true risk in circumstances like these. They formulate plans of action and reach choices based on this assessment. However, people's impressions of risk in connection with these events don't necessarily match the real risk. It is crucial to comprehend this point of view because it affects people's readiness to accept or reject the preventive measures being used to contain the epidemic, like social isolation, mask use, and vaccination. Perception of risk is a subjective concept that can be influenced by fear, convictions, and past encounters. Among other things, it can impact interpersonal relationships, faith in the media and in authority figures, and scientific uncertainty. People's sense of danger will affect how they react to it, which could lead to things like vaccine hesitation. This phenomenon, which the World Health Organization lists as one of the top ten threats to global public health, happens when a person has the opportunity to receive a vaccination but chooses not to or is unwilling to do so. Nonetheless, social media is mostly responsible for spreading inaccurate and alarming information, contributing to the growing resistance to vaccination and other coronavirus preventive measures. The anti-vaccine campaign creates this kind of content and uses social media as a powerful weapon to quickly propagate its views.

One of the social media sites that is comparatively frequently used to spread false information is Twitter, which is still unique in that regard. Founded in 2006, this microblog is distinguished by brief messages (up to 280 characters) that users can

include images or videos in. Every day, 500 million tweets are sent by users on it. There are presently 436 million active users; men make up 70.4% of this user base, while women make up only 29.6%. Made up primarily of those who are between the ages of 25 and 34 (38.5%) (Mwaura et al., 2020), the bulk of these users have more mature profiles than those on TikTok and Snapchat. Regarding educational attainment, the majority possess a bachelor's degree or above (33%). Furthermore, Twitter is recognised as the social media network with the greatest amount of content about health. Investigating the public conversation around these two crises the AstraZeneca-related thrombus cases and the spread of the novel omicron variant may be helpful in this regard, as can using this social network (Wong et al., 2021).

Much research has looked at the conversation that the public is having around the COVID-19 vaccines on Twitter, but not many of them focused on these two particular problems. For instance, Marcec and Likic investigated opinions on the AstraZeneca/Oxford, Pfizer/BioNTech, and Moderna vaccines based on tweets written in English, and Jemielniak and Krempovych investigated false information and anxiety regarding the AstraZeneca vaccine on the same social media platform. According to the first study, favourable opinions about AstraZeneca deteriorated over time, showing a notable fall between December 2020 and March 2021. In March 2021, opinions on this vaccine started to skew significantly negative. Rodrigues and Xu (2020) revealed that the one of the reasons could be probably related to the thrombotic events that happened in this period. This fact may collaborate to increase vaccine hesitancy. In the case of the second study, the circulation of misinformation not only came from the anti-vaxxer movement but was also carried out by professional sources. The authors highlighted the negative campaign related to this vaccine on Twitter which can be provoked by political and economic issues.

Toward Scheufele, and Krause (2019) examined tweets concerning opinions and experiences with this novel variety, whereas Thornber et al., (2019) investigated attitudes toward this variant on Twitter. The current body of research on social media and the two crises being studied (the Omicron variation and the Astra-Zeneca vaccination) mostly looks at posts written in English, which leaves large gaps in our knowledge of what the public discourse on social networks is like. Our ability to understand the larger public discourse surrounding these topics is restricted when we

limit our attention to a single language. Our work intends to overcome this constraint by broadening this viewpoint through a comparative analysis across many communities with a significant amount of data.

Sub theme 3: DoH uses social media to circulate the information

The Chinese government took various measures to contain the virus, including case isolation, contact tracing, environmental disinfection. Among all the measures to combat the virus, personal prevention is of particular importance. According to the prevention guidelines published by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC), the recommended behaviours included wearing face masks, washing hands frequently with soap and water, covering coughs and sneezes with tissues, avoiding touching eyes/nose/mouth with unwashed hands, avoiding contacting with affected person, and maintaining social distance.

The main channel for health intervention is the media. The impact of media on people's changing health-related behaviours has been extensively studied. It has been demonstrated that using mass media can influence people's health-related behaviours. Recent research indicates that social media usage is linked to better health behaviour results. Information is very important during a crisis. Social media and conventional media are both significant information-gathering platforms for the general population. Still, there are functional differences between these two categories of media outlets. Connections to "expert" information sources are emphasised in the traditional media. People are more likely to rely on the media as a reliable source of information when they perceive a threat from social issues.

However, the researcher revealed that the traditional media are typically more passive in nature. Ordinary citizens can hardly be actively involved in the information transmission process. In China, central government media focus more on news related to national level policies and the image of the state and leadership than their local counterparts. Local media, in contrast, set and define news agendas based on local interests.

In the meantime, during times of crisis, individuals also like using social media to exchange ideas and obtain information. The public has access to real-time information sharing on social media, which allows them to discuss diseases and share their

thoughts with friends, family, and even complete strangers. In China, social media provides a significant platform for people to voice their complaints in contrast to traditional media. However, the proliferation of false information and information overload plague social media.

Media trust is another aspect of the media that may have an impact on health-related behaviour. Acceptance, liking and other processing impacts of knowledge have been shown to positively connect with trust. Adopting healthy practices and accepting health messages are more common among those who place a higher value on media trust. Increased acceptance of health-related messaging is one way that media trust impacts the use of preventative measures. It was discovered that compliance with all advised actions in the H1N1 pandemic of 2009 was correlated with media trust. Ad-promoted health behaviour was found to be correlated with trust in online pharmacological information. Furthermore, the intention to behave in a protective manner was linked to trust in new media.

Prior research indicates that media trust plays a significant role in the health communication process overall, but it does not distinguish between confidence in new and old media. Media use and media trust are frequently seen to be related. The "rational audience" paradigm assumes that viewers would heed the advice of the media outlets they respect. But a lot of the time, individuals don't select media in an orderly manner. One of the "motivational characteristics" of the audience is their level of trust in the media, which may influence how they use it. It makes sense that credible media would be more effective in mobilising people in this way. By this reasoning, we may also anticipate that media trust will interact with media use to influence behavioural outcomes related to health.

Sub-theme 5: Crisis communication strategies

Dealing with public health crises requires precise and efficient communication to a variety of audiences during emergency situations. This is known as crisis communication. In times of crisis, people often look for additional knowledge to help them feel less uncertain. There are now unique needs for crisis communication because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Numerous recent investigations endeavoured to tackle these issues. For example, the researcher discovered that casual

communication may be a compensating factor in lowering uncertainty during the epidemic.

It is also advised to use structured crisis communications to give medical staff members the most recent information. In order to assist government agencies, the public sector, and doctors in improving their reactions to COVID-19, crisis communication tactics were reviewed and suggested. Since the early COVID-19 breakout, the Chinese government has also been engaging in crisis communication exercises. China's authorities aimed to raise public knowledge of prevention and intervention techniques by disseminating daily updates of COVID-19 material through news releases and media publications. Furthermore, one might find contentious conversations about the subject on social media.

The contentious debates on social media could spread rumours and false information, starting an infodemic that could hasten the spread of the disease. Misinformation and an abundance of information can also damage social media platforms' trustworthiness, making it harder for people to follow government-recommended countermeasures and preventive actions. Given this, the current study investigates how various media channels affected individual health behaviour compliance during the COVID-19 pandemic in China, as well as the contingent effects of media trust. The study's conclusions have significance for tailoring communication tactics for various media platforms and for policy responses during the epidemic.

4.3 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study aims to explore government crisis communication about the use of selected media by the Department of Health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings reveal different effects of media use on health behaviours. In addition, the study found media trust would magnify the effect of media use on health behaviours. First, this study found that individuals with Facebook accounts trusted information that was posted by the Department of Health. During the pandemic, people relied heavily on the media for health-related information. The study found that Facebook and Twitter were the most frequently used media during the pandemic as the number of usages increased rapidly. Anwar et al. (2020) also highlighted that the number of persons using social media has increased by 87%. This continues to prove that employing these selected

media to disseminate health related information to the public was a good crisis communication strategy.

Second, the findings of the study showed that use of different media outlets had different effects on individuals' level of compliance with health measures. In general, government media had positive effects on people's compliance with health measures. Through compliance posts made by the Department of Health, individuals were cooperating when instructed to respect COVID-19 rules. Government media are the most authoritative media, they provoke nationalism and political trust therefore, those who used central government media adhered more to recommended measures. Dr. Zhang Wenhong, a widely acknowledged expert in China quoted "what people need to do is staying at home, they are not in quarantine but in battle" (ThePaper, 6 Feb, 2020). This statement was widely disseminated during COVID-19 pandemic on social media platforms and traditional media as one of the preventive measures, this continues to prove the power of selected media.

Thirdly, regarding media trust, government media received the highest trust score. It is not surprising given that people highly trust in central government (Li, 2008; Liu & Raine, 2016). According to the study's analysis, trust in government media had positive effect on compliance with health behaviours. Trust in central government media was likely to increase acceptance of information (Chen et al., 2018). Acceptance of information would increase the tendency to adhere to these behaviours.

Fourth, we found an amplified effect of media trust on the relationship between media use and compliance with health measures for government media. Specifically, trust in central government media amplified the positive effect of media use on adherence to health behaviours. It indicated that the effects of media use on health behaviours were more prominent among those with higher level of media trust. Trust is related to credibility of the media platform. If people trust the media platform more, then they are likely to accept the message on that media. There is limited research addressing the relationship between media trust and media use (Tankovska, 2021), as well as the consequences of media trust and media use (Wong, Ho, Olusanya, Antonini, and Lyness, 2021). The study contributes to the literature on health behavioural consequences of media use and media trust.

The results of this study indicate a high volume of information flow from the government to the public during the pandemic. The 43.9 average monthly distribution of press statements also indicates that communication was frequent and consistent (John, 2022). This shows a concerted effort towards taking the leadership in ensuring that the public is exposed to the right information in a timely manner. This ensures an informed public and encourages confidence in the government for being in control of the situation and ensuring that citizens are equipped to understand government policies and make the right decisions. This is consistent with the provisions of the GCIS and literature.

The results also demonstrate a degree of responsiveness and flexibility in relation to the uncertainties and changing trajectories of the pandemic. This is visible in the shifts in the focus of government at different stages of the pandemic. This is not interpreted here as an indication of efficiency or effectiveness in how the pandemic was handled. It merely shows what the Government prioritised and who these priorities targeted or affected at different periods as communicated in press statements.

Finally, we found the predictive patterns for going out for work and daily needs, and for going out for entertainment and gathering were different. A smaller R-square for the model predicting going out for work and daily needs suggests that the predictors included in the models only accounted for a small portion of variance in the dependent variable. Going out for work and for daily needs was inevitable for all and therefore, such variable was less predictable with the personal characteristics we included in our analysis.

The study has several limitations. First, although we found association among media use, media trust and health behaviours, the feature of cross-sectional data limits the inference of causal relationship. Second, we were not able to include all the traditional media and social media platforms in the questionnaire because of limitation of time and resources. Future studies may consider including other media outlets in the model. Third, the study was based on an Internet panel sample. Although the sample reflected demographic characteristics of Chinese Internet users, those who did not use Internet were not included. Last, this study was fielded in China, an authoritarian country. Generalisation of the findings to other parts of the world needs to be made with extreme caution.

4.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter comparatively and analysed the collected data on selected media namely Twitter and Facebook to address misinformation, COVID-19 regulations and vaccine roll out. The researcher concludes that misinformation has been a significant challenge in effectively implementing and adhering to COVID-19 regulations and vaccination efforts. This misinformation has led to confusion, scepticism, and in some cases, resistance to following public health guidelines and getting vaccinated. Addressing misinformation through targeted communication strategies, fact-checking initiatives, and community engagement will be crucial in promoting accurate information and increasing vaccine uptake to combat the pandemic effectively.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The research findings discussed in the previous section provide the basis for the findings, suggestions, and conclusion are presented in this chapter. Based on the four study objectives, recommendations and results are given. These results highlight the use of specific media by the Department of Health during the COVID-19 epidemic as an example of government crisis communication.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

Integrated communications practice recognising the diversity of language and digital access should be used rather than the more conventional market segmentation approach of private sector marketing. The recognition of South African Twitter and Facebook users as interlocutors with the potential to breach the rural–urban divide would increase the circulation of public health information. The 'black Twitter' community should be recognised as a relevant interlocutor between different forms of media and different communities.

Individuals with access to social media and the Internet should be encouraged to share public health messaging within their communities. For example, the online vaccine registration drive will only reach across the rural– urban divide if the digital citizens help others (particularly elderly or vulnerable people and those with underlying health challenges) who have no access to data and/or the Internet, to register. This will not only help the public to stay informed but will also build a certain level of trust with the government, and as a result, misinformation will not be a factor in times of crisis.

The government should prioritise engagement on social media platforms, there should be a response strategy that they use with the public. The COVID-19 pandemic was an era of uncertainty and the public needed answers and assurance. In such instances, there should be a team that deals with responses on comment sections and engage with the public by answering questions they may have.

More significant investment is needed in the promotion and use of all 121 official languages across all government communications platforms. A multilingual approach that includes sign language is vital for public health messaging. The language services

unit at the GCIS should urgently be capacitated, so that government messaging can be distributed in all official languages on government websites and social media accounts. This approach will set an important precedent and needs to be adequately resourced.

The communications approach should have humanitarian overtones first, rather than a security driven approach that projects the authority of the state towards enforcing behavioural change. The approach should emphasise public health communications principles and use African storytelling techniques to customise generic public health messaging for a diverse population.

Stakeholder relationships between private, public media, community, and government media should be cultivated for public emergencies in the context of a public information and education campaign. The public media should be included in Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) planning meetings of communicators across government. These are critical to a shared strategy for any future public health emergency.

The government communications system and the public broadcaster should work more closely with the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) to share relevant public health content across all community media networks to maximise media diversity and development.

Further, the Presidential Committee should investigate the sustainability of the public, private, and community media to ensure that the media sector survives the challenges of economic stagnation, multinational tech monopolies on advertising, and the changing patterns of media consumption to digital platforms.

The COVID-19 has intensified the financial sustainability crisis facing commercial media, large and small, as digital advertising has been drawn towards the multinational social media platforms and Google. As in other countries, the Government needs to develop a strategy to deal with platforms that operate internationally without paying taxes and whose dominant share of advertising revenue has had such damaging effects on national media. The Government must also pay attention to the call for financial support from tax income for public interest media, which disseminates key information to the wider population. Three recent reports on the financial crisis of the

South African media all call for intervention at the highest levels to rescue the industry. The existing vehicle, the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA), could be enlarged in scope to act across the news media industry to provide funding and ensure a healthy and diverse public interest media. However, the MDDA would need to operate with transparency, oversight, and credibility to fulfil this role.

5.3 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

This study will help researchers to understand the importance of using crisis communication during crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. The study investigates the efficacy of selected media platforms utilised by the Department of Health. It offers significant insights into which media platforms were most effective in reaching and interacting with target audiences, which may be applied to future crisis communication efforts. Through an exploration of selected media usage, the study offers insights into audience engagement patterns during a crisis. It helps in understanding how different demographics interact with and consume information from various media sources during times of heightened public concern.

By exploring the Department of Health's communication practices, the study identifies both challenges and opportunities encountered in crisis communication. This study can inform strategies to overcome obstacles and leverage opportunities for more effective future communication efforts. The study provides recommendations for enhancing government crisis communication strategies. These recommendations include maximising the use of media, developing messaging strategies, more effectively focusing on the targeted audience segments, and enhancing coordination among various communication channels. The study contributes to the broader literature on public health communication and government crisis communication by offering empirical insights into crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. It adds to the understanding of effective communication strategies in the context of public health emergencies, thereby informing future research and policy development in this area.

5.4 FURTHER RESEARCH

Since the Covid-19 pandemic still lingers, and given the likelihood of future public health emergencies, an independent, longitudinal research study is needed on the effectiveness of government communications and engagements with civil society and other relevant agencies in combating the Covid19. The next phase of this report will seek to frame the longitudinal study, which will include a financial analysis of media spend across government, a review of the role of service providers in the roll-out of the communications campaign, and mechanisms of accountability for communications campaigns led and managed by government communicators. An intersectional (gender, race, and class) analysis of the drivers of messaging will be included, given the initial findings by various studies that men have by far been the most prominent sources of information in 2020.

5.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

To lessen the pandemic's impact on lives and livelihoods, the South African Government implemented the required actions during the reviewed period to give the public regular, consistent, reliable, and empowering information. During this period, a key component of government communication was the use of press releases. They conveyed the government's goals, achievements, and challenges, demonstrating how it changed at various points during the pandemic. All things considered, it seems that the Government has responded to the crisis more reactively than proactively. This runs counter to the DMA's requirements, which place a strong emphasis on disaster risk management in terms of proactive readiness and anticipation at all levels. Since no government seemed to have been adequately prepared for a calamity of that scope and severity, let alone the sense of urgency that accompanied it, the reactive approach also seems to be the prevailing feature of government response worldwide, particularly in the early phases of the epidemic.

The patterns of the South African Government's response imply that the illnesses' behaviour guided its strategy rather than conveying control over the broader issue. This also suggests that a more thorough communication plan is required, which should be a key part of disaster preparation. Additionally, the Government must target its messages more dynamically. It must be cognisant of the reality that various demographic groups are impacted in different ways and make sure that its crisis

communication is grounded in a sophisticated knowledge of its citizens and their difficulties, not just in the necessity of responding to the crisis. This is especially crucial because research indicates that contextual and sociocultural elements have a big impact on how communities react to catastrophes and how well disaster management initiatives work.

By examining the comments under three National Department of Health Social Media posts on prevention messaging and fake news and misinformation awareness, this study investigated the role of social media in these areas during South Africa's COVID-19 level 5 national lockdown. The literature review emphasised how social media is used in many facets of life, such as promoting health information, communicating pandemic prevention strategies, and thwarting false information during a period when information is disseminated quickly and isn't always reliable.

Literature shows that the media have historically been used to spread health information, but social media has recently taken over and is now widely utilised to alert the public about pandemics and public health emergencies like COVID-19. This study looked at the discovery of COVID-19 and its media coverage, including the dissemination of prevention strategies, the different functions of social media in disseminating health information and countering false information, the benefits and drawbacks of using social media for health promotion, and the COVID-19 pandemic that became known as the "infodemic".

Social media content was a decisive factor in this study. Non-probability random sampling procedures were used in this study because not all members of the population or unit of analysis could be included and because non-random sampling techniques are used to choose participants who meet certain conditions. Social media sites were specifically selected for this study as an efficient information source that would enable the researcher to learn more about the issue under investigation. Only posts from the NDoH on social media that focused on COVID-19 information and preventive messaging, and raising awareness of false information and fake news, were chosen.

Posts about COVID-19 prevention message, disinformation, and false news awareness that were published between on March 27 and April 18, 2020 were

purposefully chosen by the researcher. During South Africa's level 5 national lockdown, which lasted from March 27, 2020, to April 18, 2020, information from the National Department of Health's social media website were collected. This period was selected because it corresponds to South Africa's first COVID-19 shutdown. During the first three weeks of South Africa's level 5 COVID-19 shutdown, the posts on the NDoH Social Media website provided a deeper knowledge of how social media platforms are being used to promote audience participation and interactivity.

Three posts from the National Department of Health's (NDoH) social media page between March 27, 2020, and April 18, 2020, were included in the selection. Purposive sampling was used to choose the posts that satisfied the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the population sample that included data based on the research study's justification, namely, knowledge of false news and misinformation and preventative messaging. The posts were picked during the first three weeks of the nationwide lockdown, which was a level 5 lockdown period. During this time, there was a surge in the usage of social media and a profusion of fake news and misinformation.

To accomplish the goals and objectives of this research project, a variety of data collection techniques were chosen, including document analysis. Data were gathered from the DoH's social media accounts using the document analysis technique. The NDoH's Social Media page's comments beneath the three posts were included in the data. To provide the research study with context and insight, the data were analysed and categorised into topics and categories, which were then discussed. Through document analysis, the researcher can gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation. The researcher was able to gather extensive data on the dissemination of COVID-19 prevention messaging and awareness of misinformation and fake news from the Department of Health's social media page by employing this technique for data collection and analysis. The researcher was able to learn more about how the National Department of Health, South Africa's top health department, has disseminated COVID-19 preventative messaging and raised awareness of COVID-19 misinformation and fake news through document analysis. Using the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the research questions were addressed using the categories and themes that emerged from the data analysis.

The results and analysis demonstrated that the more recent UGT constructs—process, content, and social gratifications—could be applied extensively to the data analysis to comprehend the reasons for using social media during a pandemic and the function of social media in spreading awareness of misinformation and fake news and prevention messaging. In an era when physical distance was a barrier, it enabled people to interact with one another, obtain knowledge, and educate themselves on COVID-19. The three research questions of this study were satisfactorily addressed using the information above.

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