

**THE ROLE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM IN DISSEMINATING INFORMATION
DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SOUTH AFRICA**

BY

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DISSERTATION

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DECLARATION

I, Kopano Kgasago hereby declare that the study titled **“THE ROLE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM IN DISSEMINATING INFORMATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SOUTH AFRICA”** which I hereby submit to the University of Limpopo in fulfilment of the Master of Arts in Media Studies has not been previously submitted by me for a degree at this or any other university, that it is my own work and all the sources used have been acknowledged by means of complete references,

Signature:

Date: 17/10/2024

A small, dark rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature is cursive and appears to read 'Kopano Kgasago'.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate the success of this dissertation to the following:

To God and my ancestors, for the strength you have given me, light, wisdom, and health to complete this dissertation, I am grateful. Through your guidance I have been able to overcome the hurdles of my academic journey.

To my family, a special gratitude goes to you for words of encouragement. My sister's, Constacia and Kabelo Kgasago have never left my side and their presence in my life keeps me going.

To my son, Leano Kgasago. As my pillar of strength, this dissertation is dedicated to you.

To Tshepo Katang Mampane, you have always been my strength throughout the challenging moments of completing this paper. I am truly grateful for his unconditional support.

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ABSTRACT

The role of citizen journalism in disseminating information has been identified as a major challenge during the Covid-19 pandemic. The problem lies under the ambiguity of information distributed intentionally or unintentionally to mislead the public during the pandemic. Citizen journalism may have blurred the lines between fact and opinion, leading to the inadvertent spread of misleading information (misinformation and disinformation). Given that citizen journalism encompasses distinct functions, this study aimed to analyse the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. The study employed the qualitative approach and conducted interviews on citizen journalists located at the five provinces (Gauteng, Limpopo, Kwa-Zulu Natal, Mpumalanga and Western Cape) of South Africa. An interview guide was used as a tool to collect data from a sample of ten (10) citizen journalists, two (2) from each province. The study employed the theoretical framework by using two theories, namely: Diffusion of Innovation and Participatory Culture Theory. The Diffusion of Innovation Theory gives better understanding of how citizen journalism as a new way of disseminating information during Covid-19 pandemic is adopted. Participatory culture theory explains a culture of how the public as part of citizen journalism participate in creation, dissemination and exchange of Covid-19 information. To expand on this concept, the study had three objectives. The first objective was to explore the role of citizen journalists. The second objective was to evaluate how citizen journalists contributed to the spread of falsified information. Lastly, the study examined the level of misinformation and disinformation disseminated by citizen journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. According to the study's findings, citizen journalists are aware of the essence of disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ultimately, citizen journalism play the role of disseminating information. However, the role it plays influences the spread of falsified information, misinformation and disinformation during the pandemic. They expressed that the production of misleading information is unintentional. However, citizen journalists should be cautious of spreading inaccurate information and only strive to maintain credibility, trust and integrity in reporting.

Keywords: Citizen Journalism, Citizen Journalists, Disseminating Information, Covid-19 Pandemic

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of citizen journalism generated a great commotion in disseminating information broadly in the public. As stated by Riaz and Phasha (2011) citizen journalism is referred to as the practice where audiences become active members of creating and disseminating information. The role of citizen journalism is to help ordinary people outside of traditional news media to create, collect, comment and participate in disseminating information (Gillmor, 2004; Wall, 2012). That is to say citizen journalism empowers individuals to create and share their own information. As the results, citizen journalism provide diverse viewpoints, focusing on educating the public about local issues. According to Ncube and Mare (2022), citizen journalism encourages ordinary citizens to frequently use digital media platforms to engage in information sharing (Ncube and Mare, 2022). Most importantly, citizen journalism can be used to shed light on important issues affecting underrepresented voices. However, to preserve the function of citizen journalism, it is vital for citizens to facilitate in the exchange of information. Therefore, this study aimed to analyse the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during Covid-19 pandemic, specifically in South Africa.

In the case of Covid-19 pandemic, the role played by citizens in disseminating information recognised the value of citizen journalism. This is because during the pandemic, the public sought and demanded information to stay informed with the latest update. According to Ncube and Mare (2022), the general need of health information during the Covid-19 pandemic by citizens had hardly been seen at the extent to which the pandemic spread. Therefore, the prevalence of the Covid-19 pandemic significantly influenced the wild spread of information by citizen journalism. Hence, the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2022) acknowledges the extraneous information during the pandemic as “infodemic”. In definition, infodemic is a rise of false or deceptive information during a pandemic in both online and offline settings (WHO,

2022). Infodemic is portrayed by a mixture “misinformation, disinformation and falsified information” (Gao, Raza, Yousaf, Shah, Hussain and Malik, 2023). Falsified information is a combination of misinformation and disinformation (Gerlfert, 2018). Conversely, misinformation is disseminated with no intention to deceive, while disinformation is spread deliberately usually to mislead (Datta, Yadav, Sigh and Bansa, 2020).

Consequently, falsified information, misinformation and disinformation became dominant during the pandemic. The combination of information highly dominated social media since the virus became a global news sensation throughout 2019, 2020 and 2021 (Das and Ahmed, 2022). Thus, when the Covid-19 pandemic spread across South Africa, people were left amused by the information that was disseminated (Thetanaya and Nurcholi, 2022). Hence, the new Covid-19 outbreak heralded and enhanced citizen journalists’ potential as a super-spreader of misinformation and factual information (Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2022). Citizen journalism throughout the Covid-19 pandemic had both positive and negative effects. The positivity effects included the swift dissemination of knowledge regarding the control and prevention of the pandemic (Sharma, Ricardo, Natalie, Lima, Gupta and Varshney, 2022). One significant negative consequence was that some of the information provided during this pandemic was unsupported by data. Kharod and Simmons (2020) contend that false information promotes risky behaviour, and the spread of fake news related to public health. Therefore, the uncertainty about the pandemic can lead the public to distress (depression, anxiety etc.). Likewise, according to Cinelli, Zola and Scala (2020), misinformation and disinformation during Covid-19 create a public panic.

Sharing information in a democratic country such as South Africa can be easily attained. Consequently, information about the pandemic was widely shared on social media (Sharma et al., 2022). However, as noted by Zhao, Cheng, Yu and Xu (2020), the dissemination of information extremely increased during Covid-19 because of the use of social media. According to researchers, digital platforms such as social media provide the safest means of communication during the pandemic (Tsao, Chen,

Tisseverasinghe, Yang, Li and Butt, 2021). With the Covid-19 health crisis, disseminating information gained more attention on various social media platforms such as X, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram (Sharma et al., 2022). Therefore, it is evident that the current state of digital media platforms plays a significant role in citizen journalists disseminating information amid Covid-19.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Citizen journalism encompasses a wide range of information dissemination in a form of text, image, audio, video and interactive content. As a result, the general population can now obtain a wider range of information, from news and events to healthcare choices (Neely, Eldredge and Sanders, 2021). This was apparent through citizen journalism, which disseminated information on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the new digital way of obtaining diverse information changed the nature of disseminating information during the pandemic (Melki, Tamim, Hadid, Makki, Hitti and Amine, 2021). For instance, the public can acquire information on social media, absorb and interpret it on their own without the help of professions that analyse the quality of information. Before internet access, the media mostly used official and trustworthy sources to create their material and provided the public with accurate information. Today, online engagement has powered user-generated content, which includes showcasing voices and experience instead of facts.

It is interesting to note that in South Africa, the dissemination of false information increased during the pandemic. Das and Ahmed (2022) state that during the Covid-19 pandemic, a variety of misinformation was spread on social media. The country's government implemented measures to prevent the transmission of falsified information (misinformation and disinformation) by bringing the law into effect. The South African government passed a rule outlawing the dissemination of false information during the outbreak of the Corona Virus. This came after false information about Covid-19 was widely disseminated on social media, causing significant panic and anxiety to fellow citizens. For example, the information spread included counsel such as boiled water mixed with garlic could cure the virus overnight, claims that the

virus did not exist, and that Covid-19 is spread to decrease the population. On the other hand, when accurate information was needed to support social networking sites and general health was spreading, false information spread faster than platforms offering reliable information (Das and Ahmed, 2020). For this reason, the public began to doubt the role of citizen journalism during the Covid-19 pandemic.

An increasing number of studies has confirmed that the quality of information that is available online has been compromised in recent years, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic (Zhao and Song, 2022). Notably, there has been a significant surge in the spread of misleading information during the Covid-19 outbreak (Bapaye and Bapaye, 2021). This is especially true in making decisions on cases of health crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. This study significantly relied on previous health research that outlined the role of citizens in disseminating information. Citizen-driven information dissemination helped to create a more informed and connected the public during the pandemic. Therefore, it was important to acquire a deeper understanding of how citizen journalists played their role during the pandemic. Considering the different interpretations ascribed to the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa, this study aimed to fill the gap in the literature by focusing more on citizens exploring journalism and information sharing. Likewise, the study evaluated citizen journalists' contribution to disseminating falsified information. Also, the study examined the level of misinformation and disinformation disseminated by citizen journalists during the pandemic. By exploring Covid-19 pandemic, research on citizen journalism can contribute to deeper understanding of its role in disseminating information.

In South Africa, research on citizen journalists' potential to disseminate information during the Covid-19 pandemic is scant. Das and Ahmed (2022) evaluated the role of citizen journalism, while Sheen, Tung, and Wen-Chin (2020) focused on how social media were used throughout the Covid-19 pandemic from the perspective of organisations. Mutunga, Ureke and Chani (2021) examined South African citizens' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic on social media. Mutunga and Abayomi's (2022) study was based on tweeting about Covid-19 in South Africa. Additionally, Mwaura, Carter and Kubheka (2020) analysed how the public used social media to promote

health during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Thetanaya and Nurcholis (2022), on the other hand, focused primarily on media audiences and how they placed their trust in government as a source of information during Covid-19, but the outcomes of the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the pandemic remains underexplored in South Africa. Hence, more research is still needed on citizen journalism and health-related issues. To close this gap, it was critical to examine how citizen journalism contributed to information dissemination amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM

The rise of citizen journalism has transformed the landscape of information dissemination, which allows individuals to promote citizen-generated content. However, the increase of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic has raised concerns on issues of credibility surrounding the shared content. In some cases, the rapid dissemination of news by citizen journalists during the global outbreak of Covid-19 caused dissatisfaction among the broader citizenry (Hartley and Vu, 2020). The surge of unverified and misleading information emerged, making it difficult for individuals to differentiate fact from fiction. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the dissemination of misleading information caused unnecessary fear and panic among the population.

Exacerbating the spread of misinformation and disinformation can blur and decline the public's trust in citizen journalism. Citizen journalism may perpetuate marginalisation, which can be a consequence of social fear. In a way, the role of citizen journalism in disseminating misinformation contributed to the spread of fear and anxiety, which was achieved by spreading inaccurate, exaggerated, and untrustworthy information. According to Thetanaya and Nurcholi (2022), the lack of information during health emergencies can cause anxiety and psychological problems such as stress, loneliness, insomnia, sadness, and worry.

Hartley and Vu (2020) also believe that false information spread by citizen journalism through social media can influence public behaviour and cause panic in the

community. Thus, the consequences of citizen journalism in disseminating misleading information can promote risk communication among the public, which in turn leads to health concerns. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the role played by citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

1.3 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1.3.1 Aim of the Study

This study sought to analyse the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

1.3.2 Objectives of the Study

- To explore the role of citizen journalists in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.
- To evaluate how citizen journalists contributed to the spread of falsified information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.
- To examine the level of misinformation and disinformation disseminated by citizen journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Ever since the digital media emerged, citizen journalism helped the public to understand its impact, potential and challenges, intimately enriching the public's understanding of independently disseminating information. It is critical that those involved in citizen journalism maintain their expertise and attention in remembering their primary responsibility during health pandemics. Therefore, this study might be useful in limiting the spread of false information (misinformation and disinformation) in South Africa for future health pandemics. It will also help the public to understand how citizen journalists provide important information under difficult circumstances. In addition, the results of this study can be used by health organisations to teach social media users how to properly absorb information about health issues. The study could also help the government develop policies to prevent citizens from spreading false

information about Covid-19. Moreover, the study could provide a new perspective on the role of citizen journalists in times of crisis.

1.5 THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The ubiquity of Covid-19 information on digital platforms has brought to light the role of citizen journalism during a health pandemic. The increase of information during the pandemic posed challenges in identifying the role of citizen journalism during Covid-19. Some citizen journalists aim to empower and promote change in the understanding of the pandemic while some offer a range of perspectives and approaches that support misleading information in citizen journalism. However, this study focused on citizen journalists who disseminate information during health pandemics. Hence, they have experience of what the Covid-19 pandemic entails. Hence, citizen journalists were the collective population of this study.

1.6 THE RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

This study was motivated by the need to explore the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Citizen journalism has made a significant contribution to public discourse, community engagement and information dissemination during the pandemic. The attribute of citizen journalism process includes filling information gaps, simultaneously providing an in-depth knowledge on issues such as Covid-19. Regardless of the complexities and difficulties citizen journalists face in their pursuit of disseminating information, they make sure the task is completed. This means citizen journalism fosters a sense of solidarity, most notably in crises such as Covid-19 pandemic.

Citizen journalism permits ordinary citizens to collect, write and spread information to their local communities, highlighting regional issues and concerns that affect all the public. However, there are diverse types of information which exist within citizen journalism. This research study's focus was on citizen journalists who disseminate information to the public. Therefore, it was necessary to investigate the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic. Citizen journalists can be spontaneous in their reporting and more deliberate in disseminating

information. This means that, in citizen journalism, spontaneity and planning can vary depending on what kind of information is disseminated. The positive aspect is that citizen journalists are capable of investigating complex issues and breaking news stories first. Furthermore, citizen journalism guarantees access to exclusive information. However, citizen journalists lead in credibility issues ranging from falsified information (misinformation and disinformation) to hoaxes and conspiracy theories. Consequently, with the provided advantages and disadvantages, disseminating information is a perception that cannot be ignored because it defines the role of citizen journalism during the pandemic.

1.7 AREA OF STUDY

This study focused on analysing the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Even though the country has nine provinces, namely: Limpopo, Gauteng, Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, Free State, Western Cape, Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal, and North-West, the study focused only on five provinces, namely; Limpopo, Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Kwa-Zulu Natal, and Western Cape.

1.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

1.8.1 Informed Consent

A formal consent form was sent to selected citizen journalists to participate in this study. The researcher briefly explained the study's aim and objectives, and the interview guide. The guide consisted of three sections in accordance with the study's objectives.

1.8.2 Privacy

The researcher signed the consent form to pledge to keep the participants' information private. The participants had the right to not agree, if they felt uncomfortable with their responses being recorded; instead, they could ask to write the answers in a journal. To be sure of this, the participants had access to the study by the end of the research

period to confirm if the information on the study was correct. This allowed the participants to participate freely in the study.

1.8.3 Protection of Personal Information

The South African POPIA no. 4 of 2013 was implemented in this study. To ensure anonymity in the study, the researcher and participants signed a consent form where the researcher pledged that information such as names, residences, telephone numbers, email addresses, and profiles on social media would not be part of the collection, analysis, and presentation of data. The researcher labeled the participants of this study as Respondent 1, 2, 3 until 10, to avoid using any information that could link back to them.

1.8.4 Exclusion of Minors

This study only applied to the participants who were above 18 years. Involvement in the research study was completely out of the participants' freewill and permission. The participants did not receive any compensation for participating in the study. Without any coercion from the researcher, participation in this study was voluntary. All the participants were given permission to withdraw their participation at any time without suffering any consequences for doing so.

1.8.5 TREC Certificate

Given that the study involved human beings as participants, the researcher applied for research ethical clearance at the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC), which was approved before data collection could be undertaken. The research ethical clearance was issued when the researcher had satisfactorily shown how their study would adhere to ethical standards such as informed consent, respect for participants, doing no harm, and maintaining the anonymity of every participant.

1.9 DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

1.9.1 Citizen Journalism

Refers to the practice of individuals who are not professional journalists, creating and disseminating information to the public (Bowman and Willis, 2003).

1.9.2 Disseminating Information

It means sharing or spreading knowledge, news, or any data to a wider audience through various channels or methods (Kakkasageri and Manvi, 2014).

1.9.3 Covid-19

It is also known as Corona Virus disease 2019, and is a viral respiratory illness caused by a new strain of Corona Virus known as SARS-CoV-2 (WHO, 2020).

1.9.4 Citizen Journalists

Are individuals who lack formal training and are referred to as citizen reporters, community journalists or user-generated content creators (Kolodzy, 2006; Riaz, 2011).

1.9.5 Social-Media

Refers to internet resources that let users produce and distribute content to others, allowing participation in online conversation, discussions, or debates (Benkler, 2013).

1. 10 RESEARCH CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter One: Introduction of the Research

This chapter provided a brief overview of the research topic, the background of the study, statement of the problem, aim and research objectives, significance of the study, scope and rationale of the study, area of the study, ethical considerations and clarification of key terms and concepts used in the study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter laid a foundation for the literature reviewed on existing knowledge from the scholars, identifying gaps and limitations in the current study. The aim of the study, which was to explore the role of citizen journalism concerning disseminating information during Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa, was in line with the literature reviewed.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Chapter three typically includes details on how a study was undertaken, encapsulated in the term 'research methodology'. Methodology entails a description of the research design (qualitative), an explanation of the research approach (population of the study, profile sampled and sampling procedure, area of the study, data collection, analysis and data interpretation and quality criteria). Also, the chapter developed the theoretical framework, which entailed the discussion of relevant theories, and an explanation of how they related to the study.

Chapter Four: Data Presentation and Analysis

This chapter presented the findings of the study, an analysis of the data and interpretation of the results in the context of research questions and objectives. The data collected were generated from the study's interview guide, providing questions that are related to the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic, in South Africa.

Chapter Five: Summary, Recommendations and Conclusion

The last chapter of the study included the summary of the findings, which included a brief overview of the results, discussions of the findings considering the research theories, conclusion of the study and recommendations for future research.

1.11 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

Chapter one of the study provided an introduction and the background of the study, which included a more detailed explanation of the role citizen journalism in disseminating information during Covid-19. Furthermore, the chapter included the study's purpose, rationale, and scope. Thus, study could advance an understanding of the role of citizen journalism, fill literature gaps and challenge existing theories regarding the dissemination of information about health pandemics.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2. INTRODUCTION

This chapter tackled an overview of literature relevant to this study and elucidated the theoretical framework on the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

To outline this literature, the role of citizen journalists in disseminating information during Covid-19 pandemic was examined. Additionally, it investigated the role that citizen journalists played in disseminating false information throughout the pandemic. Lastly, it discussed how much misinformation and disinformation were disseminated by citizen journalists throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Since misinformation and disinformation have various meanings, the study looked at each term's level of prevalence separately. The literature also clarified the extent to which misinformation has been disseminated through conspiracy theories. The reviewed literature aimed to broaden the field of study in citizen journalism and disseminating information. This would help in understanding the state in which citizen journalism disseminates false information (misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories) during health pandemics, as well as establish knowledge on Covid-19.

2.1.1 The role of citizen journalists in disseminating information during Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa

Citizen journalists maintain control and participate in an immediate response when they experience the impact of an event, while taking an initiative-taking role in sharing information (Muresan, Salcudean and Pintea, 2021). Here, citizens take part in events instead of just being passive witnesses or victims. According to Garfin, Silver and Holman (2020), in times of disease outbreaks, citizens rely on the media to disseminate true and timely information so that they can make wise decisions regarding preventive health behaviours. To prevent the widespread spread of persistent information, and to protect the public from making poor choices, information

is important amid a pandemic. The role of citizen journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic remains in question, where scholars are still struggling to find answers. The role of citizen journalism can be both negative and positive.

2.1.1.1 An overview of the role of citizen journalism in South Africa

Citizen journalism is a nascent phenomenon in news production that is fundamental to the success of the news making process in the world and in South Africa. The term “citizen journalism” has become extremely popular in South Africa due to citizens experiencing and reporting on events themselves. However, its role in society raises many questions that have been discussed by various scholars (Kolodzy, 2006; Riaz, 2011 and Benkler, 2013). Many researchers have focused on understanding the role of citizen journalists. Overall, some researchers concluded that the role of citizen journalists is to open a space for citizens to participate in news gathering, to share their opinions and ideas, and to identify and discuss social problems (Kolodzy, 2006; Riaz, 2011). According to Etika (2019), the power of disseminating information is rooted in the opportunity to report on social media about issues that affect their environment. Furthermore, citizen journalism, which brings the public together to voice their opinions on social media, has demonstrated to be a productive educational tool in the journalistic field.

Benkler (2013) also pointed out that social media as a form of new communication tools, stating that citizen journalists are able to allow a broad public to express their own opinions on issues that concern them. Other scholars explained citizen journalism’s role in a broader context in its contribution to the news production process. Noor (2020) found comparable results that citizen journalists often gather, process, research, report, analyse, and publish news information through digital media platforms. On the other hand, Atika (2019) confirms that the use of technological platforms by citizen journalists has transformed the dissemination of information into a form of encouraging participation in news gathering. Citizen journalists who undertake the process of gathering and disseminating information on social media open up a platform for citizens to advocate common interests. In this new journalism,

also referred to as “participatory” journalism, information reaches citizens who are directly involved in creating content that is raw, naked, and unadulterated (Atika, 2019).

Goode (2009) adds that citizen journalism has the fundamental characteristic of democracy. Citizen journalists use the powers given to them by the government to delegate their power in disseminating information in this democratic age. Goode (2009:114) further argues that the ability of citizens to adapt to function as a fundamental component of freedom and democracy is a “beauty of journalism.” Bowman and Willis (2003) further state that “the intent of this participation is to provide independent, dependable, accurate, wide-ranging, and relevant information that a democracy needs.” According to Atika (2019), citizen-generated content disseminated by citizen journalists can perform significant role in sparking democratic debates and conversations in society. As Riaz (2011) noted, the potential of citizen journalists lies in unbiased, positive reporting, debates, and discussions that constitute “true soul journalism” that enables citizens to build a positive and healthy democratic society. The recent study by Horoub (2023) also suggests that citizen journalism plays a key role in the struggle for access to information, democracy, and basic human rights.

Riaz (2011) believes that with the emergence of citizen journalism, developing communities discovered their purpose in modern society, which is a formulation of the basic democratic principle of free speech. The contribution of many citizens using the new government to speak out on issues that affect them, and their communities can emphasise the importance of democracy. Franklin (2009) states that participation in democracy is a way to give “voice to the voiceless”. According to Allan and Thorsen (2009:121), “anyone with something to say and access to the right software can be a publisher, an expert, and an observer of events large and small.” As Riaz (2011) notes, the development of the Internet and its digital platforms has given the public a space in which to express its voice freely and publicly. This is connected to the belief that citizen journalism has a major impact in the struggle for the right to information and freedom of expression (Horoub, 2023). In addition, ordinary citizens have the right to

expression, including the freedom to obtain information, share it, and speak out on what they believe is right.

According to Jalli (2020), street journalism is considered one of the elements that influence political change. Riaz (2011) argues that they do not direct their discussions towards any political organisation or the leading party, but only collect and report what they see. In addition, Etika (2019) has considered citizen journalists as citizens with versatile skills, including reporting events during crises or risk and increasing public participation in political campaigns. Haas (2012) notes that citizen journalists may be able to address the “democratic deficits of a corporate-dominated, highly commercialized media system, its inequalities of access, representation, and political/ideological power, its economic and structural entanglement with globalizing capitalism and consumer culture.” Therefore, Etika (2019:14) suggests that citizen journalism can play a vital part as an eye-opener to the public on important issues, while also playing a crucial role as a “watchdog”. Goode (2009:15) adds that citizen journalists play the role of a “watchdog” without any pressure from a political party, a corporation, or even sponsors. The most important thing is that citizen journalists open the sphere for those who in the past had no place to be heard without the fear of being suppressed.

In an era where content spreads virally in a split second, citizen journalists contribute to the democratisation of content and help people get information and facts that are not published by traditional media (Haroub, 2023). Apart from news organisations and media, citizen journalism provides a platform for the public to make their voices heard without obstacles. Raiz (2019) highlights that people who participate in creating news experience a connection, pride, and representation, and they sometimes share valuable and diverse content. Citizen journalism helps the marginalised to participate more in the dissemination of information that affects their welfare. This new journalism seeks to enhance “local economies by bringing important information to remote corners of the world” (Etika, 2019:20). According to Jalli (2020), these types of journalists or citizen journalists gather information and disseminate it on digital media platforms to inform their immediate friends, family, and the public. Specifically, citizen

journalists mostly share their content with their followers, who are their closest friends and family members.

In addition, Jalli (2020) notes that on a given day, most media houses pick up content created by citizen journalists to use as part of their news content. Citizens' ability to report events makes citizen journalism so dependable to an extent that even traditional media houses sometimes rely on it to fulfill their daily journalistic duties. Haroub (2023) draws similar conclusions in his statistical analysis, believing that professional journalists sometimes adopt citizen journalists' content because they feel that its reliability and credibility do not interfere with their professional practices. Citizen journalists, however, do not want to report within a newsroom; they want the freedom to report on whatever they want because professional journalists are too busy worrying about good journalistic practices to notice what the public is missing (Bentley, 2011). In other words, citizen journalism sometimes reports on issues that are overlooked by professional media (Licitar, 2019). Overall, the important value of citizen journalism is no different than the role played by professionals in the media industry, and in some cases exceeds the original role of the media. Citizen journalists are more likely to report to the public on issues or topics that interest them. Their decisions will be based primarily on providing citizens with enough information about their lives, their community, their society, and their government.

2.1.2.2 The role of citizen journalists reporting in the Covid-19 pandemic

Amid the Covid-19 outbreak, people were desperate for information, and citizen journalists, thanks to their ability to communicate with the public through social media, were able to disseminate the information widely at once (Madziva et al., 2022). Undoubtedly, the role of citizen journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic is to provide opportunities for the public to exercise their democratic participation and engage in conversations. According to Gilsenan (2020), citizen journalists helped many people stay connected and informed about the Covid-19 pandemic despite their differences. During the Covid-19 pandemic, citizen journalists both informed and facilitated communication with the public, from government officials to public figures to the public.

Therefore, citizen journalists played a role during the Covid-19 pandemic in providing a platform for diverse voices that others could not provide (Horoub, 2023). Citizen journalists play an influential role in South African communities where audiences receive information and provide opinions on health content such as Covid-19.

Wu (2020) asserts that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the sources trusted by the government to implement government policy regarding this health crisis were citizen journalists. According to the study, the government relies on citizen journalists solely because they are independent and trusted by the public for “risk perception and communication” (Wu, 2020:45). Citizen journalists not only work for their communities and neighbouring cities, but also act as an overseer for the government and its citizens. In this regard, professional media and journalism often rely on citizen journalists’ blogs and websites to achieve their daily goals (Loizzo et al., 2018). Yet, citizen journalists have been criticised for lacking journalistic ethics such as “credibility, accountability, objectivity, and authenticity” (Gillmor, 2006:123). Horoub (2023) highlights that professional journalists sometimes use citizen journalism’s content on the internet, knowing that the “reliability and credibility” of social media journalism do not interfere with their professional practices when they use it as a “complementary method”.

Horoub’s (2023) study shows that citizen journalists are tasked with gathering information and reporting on events that are taking place. Accordingly, Raza et al. (2021) state that this role has increased in recent years, which is evident in the rise of the Covid-19 global pandemic. It is important to note that citizen journalists are ordinary citizens who have not acquired journalism qualifications and have the necessary skills and knowledge to follow journalistic rules (Horoub, 2023). This has led to various challenges related to credibility (Al-Shami, 2020). Yang et al. (2020) confirmed that the trend of sharing information from untrusted and genuine sources was observed during the Covid-19 pandemic. In a research commentary published during the preliminary stages of the pandemic, Lewis (2020:83) argued that the Covid-19 not only created latest problems for journalists, but also exacerbated existing problems and increased “the blind spots in our work”. According to Kornbluh and

Goodman (2020:56), “eight of the 10 most visited websites that repeatedly disseminate false content are engaged in Corona Virus stories.” Precisely, the role of citizen journalists is to disseminate false information (misinformation and disinformation).

2.1.2 The contribution of citizen journalists in spreading falsified information during Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa

According to Lewandowsky and Cook (2020), false information is a type of advertising that deliberately or intentionally feigns verifiable trust. By challenging the foundations of people’s ideological and moral beliefs, fake news often gives the impression that people’s worldviews are being replaced. However, the term has often been oversimplified and monolithically portrayed as misinformation or disinformation in both public and academic circles. According to Cinelli et al. (2020), even fake information is ambiguous and inadequate, and the distinction between inaccurate information and unreliable interpretations of facts is blurred. The study defined false information as a line blurred between accurate and inaccurate information disseminated out of fear of the truth.

The digital age, with the advent of social media, offered everyone the opportunity to engage in a range of conversations, post and share information online. According to Neely and Eldredge (2021), thanks to social media, the public now has access to enough information from multiple perspectives to make healthcare decisions. “Digital media and the Internet have given everyone access to multiple sources that in the past were reserved for a small elite” (Gao et al., 2023). One study shows that social media can spread false impressions to the public by using its ability to digitise information (Melki, Tamim, Hadid, Makki, Amine and Hitti, 2021). On the other hand, unlike traditional media, which have a proven record of publishing accurate information from established sources, social media disseminate insufficiently unconfirmed information. Ma, Hmielowski, and Yan (2021) claim that social media journalism has replaced the process of searching for reliable information. Today, everyone can search for information on social media, but it takes a prominent level of assertiveness to distinguish between true and false (Yousaf et al., 2022). This was evident during the

Covid-19 pandemic, when citizens were unable to distinguish between factual and fake information disseminated on social media.

In the recent Covid-19 pandemic, research has confirmed that social media are a platform where the property of available information was unfavourable (Zhao, Zhao and Song, 2022). In this regard, fake information overlapped accurate information, which resulted in the public being exposed to more misrepresentations of Covid-19 data. Bapaye and Bapaye (2021) claim that during the Covid-19 pandemic, interest in spreading misinformation increased greatly. Accordingly, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) claim that fake information, like any other topic, is not a new trend on social media but has gained momentum over time. Social media remained problematic during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly because they were an original venue where false and unverified information could be accessed (Geo et al., 2022). It was quite easy for false information to spread faster on social media, not because Covid-19 was obvious enough, but because it is a home for fake news. Jang, Geng, Xia and Huang (2018) argue in their analysis that, the spread of fake news on social media with the intent to mislead is mostly created by ordinary users.

WHO (2022) states that the Covid-19 pandemic has produced a mixture of information (fake news, misleading content, hoaxes, and missing facts). One study claimed that social media have become a useful platform for citizen journalists to spread false information to stir up fear and gain public attention so that more people will follow them for such information during the pandemic (Liang, Ren, Cao, Hu, Qin, Li and Mei, 2020). In their study, researchers agreed that a lot of unverified information about the Covid-19 pandemic was spread when using social media platforms such as X, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok (Geo et al., 2021). The study further argues that digital media platforms such as “user-generated” blogs that have access to Google search lead to misleading information about Corona Virus prevention. The fake information was very present during the pandemic in South Africa, where citizen journalists claimed that “Lengana and uMhloniyane” could be cooked up to cure the virus. The claim that wild and African wormwood can cure SARS in South Africa led to numerous citizens from different provinces harvesting the alleged drug Covid-19. A

high demand for the herbal medicine increased despite warnings from WHO that there are “no scientific studies” proving it can cure the virus (WHO, 2020).

The consequences of spreading false information about Lengana on social media led to a sudden increase in harvesting of the plant with claims that it could cure Covid-19. The false information not only influenced and changed the behaviour of the public, but also led to reckless harvesting of the plant. After some people were led to believe in the plant, some of them continued to flock to Mount Leolo in Limpopo Province in search of this medicine. The news on social media was later confirmed to be true by the original source (Chen et al., 2021). This claim was later refuted by medical experts and cultural guardians through traditional media. Another misinformation was that salt water and garlic can help cure the symptoms of the virus and reduce the risk of infection if consumed regularly. Such misinformation convinced the public not to believe in clinical drugs and blocked “international methods” to treat the disease (Ghosh and Ghosh, 2021). Consequently, previous research has revealed that flooding people with fake information on social media causes psychological problems and leads to more people refusing to get vaccinated against Covid-19 (Chen, Lin and Cheng, 2022).

Paul, Basu, Mahmud and Kaiser (2020) confidently highlight in their study that “the Covid-19 pandemic has been called the first social media infodemic.” According to Romer and Jamieson (2020), equivalent negativities between the false information and Covid-19 prevention measures such as (social distance, wearing masks, disinfection, and vaccination). Consequently, the information disseminated through social media during the Covid-19 pandemic was among the most important contributions and concerns that led to the public’s stubbornness to take action to mitigate this health crisis. Therefore, another study confirms that not depending on emerging information about the pandemic has a positive impact (Hussain et al., 2022). Hassim et al. (2022) concluded that social media created more confusion during the pandemic, as the public struggled to determine what was true or false. Citizen journalists report on what they have seen either from somewhere or in person.

However, it is difficult to ascertain such information as true or false during a health pandemic.

Millions of South Africans use social media such as Facebook, X, WhatsApp, and Instagram to share information with the population close to them. This information ranges from general reports on current issues to online tutorials to citizen news (Jalli, 2020). A study by Brennen, Fekix, Howard, and Nielsen (2020) found that fake content remains active on social media platforms such as X, WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube. However, while social media have the power to influence a new perspective regarding the pandemic, there are notable limitations to this effect. The study further argues that social media contributed to a rapid pace across the world and across communities during the Covid-19 pandemic (Madziva et al., 2022). Akhther (2021) also believes that social media are a natural and necessary step in changing communication behaviour to address the extensive challenges, including those associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Although social media are contributing to the spread of fake information during the Covid-19 pandemic, they are not neglecting their mission, which is to disseminate information, true or false.

2.1.3 The level of misinformation and disinformation disseminated by citizen journalists during Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa

Since the virus made headlines in South Africa in December 2019, misinformation and deception have dominated the world of social media. The constant appearance and impersonation of key health authorities on media platforms has helped planned disinformation attacks reach a wider audience (Smith et al., 2020). Disinformation is much more destructive because it promotes properly thought-out ideas to change people's perceptions of reality and behaviour, whereas misinformation has been disseminated primarily to prevent valid health advice (Hartley and Vu, 2020). Public health disinformation promotes concern and risk behaviours among the population (Kharod and Simmons, 2020). Selective politicisation of important signals has spread numerous ideological propagandas, as the Covid-19 problem worsened (Hartley and Vu, 2020). The anti-masking campaign, the anti-5G movement, the anti-vaccination movement, etc., are just a few examples of how this ideological manipulation

manifests itself in society. The European Misinformation Observatory claims that since the Covid-19 crisis, the nature of misinformation has changed. According to Tangcharoensathien et al. (2020:26), the “globalization of fake news” has become increasingly sophisticated and has been tailored to local conditions.

2.1.3.1 Level of misinformation during Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa

In the challenging times of surviving the Covid-19 pandemic, the public looked for current information about the sudden health crisis every day. However, some of them did not have time to study the information before sharing it, while others absorbed and consumed it too quickly. At the beginning of the pandemic, citizen journalists helped make the Covid-19 situation even more confusing by relaying conflicting information that led to misinformation (Tagliabue, Galassi and Mariani, 2020). Lazer et al. (2018) refer to misinformation as “false or inaccurate information, especially information that is intentionally used to deceive”, and misinformation poses a threat in pandemics such as Covid-19. According to Laato, Islam, Islam and Whelan (2020), misinformation is not a new phenomenon. Misinformation existed long before the SARS-CoV-2 virus outbreak and in previous health pandemics. Furthermore, Kim and Dennis (2019:23) vividly point out that the concept has been around since the beginning of this century, the difference now is the “amount and spread of misinformation that has increased exponentially”. While citizens had the opportunity during the pandemic to immediately disseminate information through social media and receive positive feedback, it also became apparent that the spread of misinformation found a path to success (Cinelli et al., 2020; Rovetta and Bhagavathula, 2020).

According to the WHO (2020:15), the “Covid-19 pandemic proved to be not only an epidemic but also an infodemic, as the spread of the virus was accompanied by an explosion of fake news and general misinformation about the disease”. The infodemic was so labeled to control the flood of misinformation with a plan to manage the outbreak of this disaster (WHO, 2019). Information overload can strongly influence people’s behaviour and thwart the government’s plan to stop misinformation (Cinelli et al., 2020). In addition, WHO (2021) provides a definition of an infection as “an increase

in information, including false or misleading information, in the digital and physical environment during an epidemic of a disease". The Director-General of the WHO acknowledged in February 2020 the importance of engaging in the fight against an "epidemic and infodemic" (Moffitt, King and Carley, 2021). This came after the Covid-19 outbreak was declared a pandemic in March 2020, following warnings that misinformation can spread faster than factual news.

According to Tangecharoensathien et al. (2020), the Covid-19 infodemic proved that the public is often on the losing side because misinformation affects our ability to think and society. Similarly, another researcher believes that the trend of comparing information from real and untrusted sources on social media has confirmed the misinformation during the Covid-19 outbreak (Ding et al., 2019). According to Das and Ahmed (2022), the term "misinformation" is often used by both the public and researchers to casually describe it as a portion of "misleading" information. Hartley and Khuong (2020) publicly argued that misinformation can be spread at a time when it matters to forcibly suppress important and true health advice. According to Zollo (2018), misinformation tends to spread where people are less educated and lack the discipline to listen to officials when it comes to health issues. Naeem and Boulos (2021) pointed out the difficulties citizens had in the wake of the pandemic, when Covid-19 outbreaks spread information about the disease that was recognised as inaccurate. Compared to accurate information, misinformation appears to spread more rapidly on social media, according to the researcher (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

According to Zarocostas (2020), social media appear to be among the most key factors contributing to the spread of Covid-19. Garrett (2020) also claims that misinformation on social media has contributed to the spread of this health crisis. On the other hand, Madziva, Nachipo, Musuku, Chitungo, Murewanhema, Phiri and Dzanamarira (2022) argue that social media are the root cause of this misinformation in the world and in our closest communities. The behaviour of citizens who played the role of collecting and sharing conflicting information on social media with the intention of not deceiving the public contributed significantly to the increase in Covid-19 cases. Shahi, Dirkson and Majchrzak (2020) also believe that citizen behaviour is driven by

the type of information available to them and may influence the success of the global response to Covid-19. Undoubtedly, the various information disseminated on social media during the days of the pandemic may have led to misinformation and panic, but not enough to change or influence citizen behaviour (Madziva et al., 2022). Hameleers and Van der Meer (2020) note that the faster misinformation spreads on social media, the more confusion and fear it can cause among the public.

In a context where misinformation is at play, understanding and communication will partially surface, causing confusion among people and making it more difficult to resolve health crises (Hameleers and Van der Meer, 2020). In the times of the Covid-19 pandemic, the pronounced fear of citizens may suggest the spread of misinformation (Chen, Luo, Hu, Zhao and Zhang, 2021). However, Pennycook and Rand (2020) argue that while misinformation may cause harms such as anxiety, stress, fear, disagreement, or even harm to the public, it is not solely responsible for the spread of Covid-19 (Pennycook and Rand, 2020). According to the research, misinformation during a Covid-19 pandemic is what happens when citizens are stranded and desperate for information to find a way out of their predicament. It is concerning when such a piece of misinformation is presented to the public with a large development to be perceived as correct (Pennycook, Cannon and Rand, 2018). Although people can have a comprehensive understanding of misinformation, many scientists have found that it is difficult to sort out in an academic context, especially when it comes to health disasters such as Covid-19. In their research, the researchers conclude that the cause of the excessive amount of online misinformation about Covid-19 is unclear. Citizens taking responsibility on social media platforms for gathering information about pandemics is nothing new but was like a ticking bomb that exploded with the Covid-19 outbreak.

2.1.3.2 Level of disinformation during Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa

The Covid-19 pandemic outbreak brought many challenges, with social media disinformation being one of the leading contributing factors. According to Ding, Shu, Li, Bhattacharjee and Hu (2020), the dissemination of disinformation became a

problem during the Covid-19 pandemic. The outbreak of this health pandemic drew attention to commodities that led to concerned citizens. The extreme and rapid spread of disinformation about the Corona Virus created an awareness of a “new infodemic battlefield” (Ding, 2020). “However, the Covid-19 pandemic is not only a global pandemic, but has also led to a disinfodemic, which is disinformation swirling around in the midst of crisis,” argue Song, Petrak, Jiang, Singh, Maynard and Bontcheva (2021). Brennen, Simon, Howard and Nielsen (2020) proffer that the more disinformation is disseminated to the public at an alarming rate, the more it harms society. Against this backdrop, Jamil and Appiah-Adjei (2020) agree that disinformation is a major impact of the Covid-19 global pandemic, making it difficult for citizens to get true information whenever they need it.

Conceptually, “disinformation is when false information is knowingly disseminated to cause harm” (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017:05). According to Hulme, Lidskog, White, and Stanring (2020), disinformation refers to “all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information developed, presented, and advertised to intentionally cause harm to the public or for profit”. Similarly, Naeem, Maged and Boulos (2021) refer to disinformation as false information disseminated without good intentions to deliberately deceive the public. Another study addressed disinformation and emphasised that it is false information intentionally disseminated (Hernon, 1995; Shahi et al., 2020). Jaiswal, LoSchiavo and Perlman (2020) add that disinformation is a strategy to intentionally spread fake information. However, Covid-19 researchers conclude that there is no general agreement among scientists on what part of the information during the Covid-19 pandemic can be considered false (Shahi et al., 2020). Disinformation is a type of content that has the power to spread false information, fully aware that it will deceive the public. This disinformation allowed false rumours to spread quickly in the neighbourhood, making it difficult for citizens to find reliable information about the Covid-19 pandemic.

Klein (2020) states that “disinformation has several common features: Fear-mongering, scapegoating to deflect blame, and the creation or amplification of states of collective shock that can be used to facilitate the implementation of political and

economic goals that are more difficult to achieve in times of stability”. Moreover, a study of the Covid-19 pandemic asserts that disinformation about this health crisis reflects political agendas that may reflect “white supremacy” (Perrigo, 2020; Ross, 2020). Disinformation takes place when political leaders set an agenda to shape Covid-19 information based on the traditional white way of leading society. Furthermore, Paz (2020) and Jaiswal (2019:45) assert that Covid-19 information is linked to “opportunistic, unrestrained capitalism and cult of personality in relation to the country’s leaders.” According to Jaiswal (2019), disinformation is synonymous with “mistrust driven by inequality” in the hands of people who are constantly suffering from “disenfranchisement”. Many scholars attribute disinformation to the government. Consequently, the public’s willingness to spread misinformation on social media has disrupted the government’s original plan to intervene in cases where “pandemics, public health responses, expert advice, and scientific knowledge are needed to combat Covid-19” (Gao, Raza, Yousaf, Shah, Hussain and Malik, 2023).

Situations such as these, as Tagliabue, Galassi and Mariani (2020) point out, have attracted dark days in which some public figures and politicians further confuse the public and compromise the freedom of public opinion. Citizens have adopted such behaviour to play the role of journalism, where they end up gathering disinformation (falsifications, rumors, and conspiracies) to fabricate stories to join the public conversation. According to Ding, Shu, Li, Bhattacharjee and Liu (2020), Covid-19 misinformation is often spread on social media by public figures, celebrities, and politicians through posts in which their personal ideas become one. Another study during the Corona Virus notes that a similar trend on social media was also observed during past health pandemics (Shahi, Dirkson and Majchrzak, 2020). The spread of fake information during the Covid-19 pandemic with the intent to shock and mislead the public are citizens who look up to these public figures so much that they feel the need to follow their behaviour. In contrast, fake news published by institutions and influential individuals trusted by the public plays a leading role in guiding citizens’ behaviour, which later translates into poor health outcomes (Gisondi, Barber, Faust, Raja, Strehlow, Westafer and Gottlieb, 2022).

Galassi (2020) recognised that those who disseminate information that is dangerous to health are those who have “optimistic ideas supporting that Covid-19 is not dangerous.” This happens, especially when people are bored and spread ideas on social media, knowing they are causing harm and misleading people, particularly in situations over which they have no control. The behaviour caused by unhealthy choices made by citizens to intentionally spread false information affects not only their immediate surroundings, but the entire world. Because of the spread of this disinformation, Covid-19 has been declared the greatest public health emergency of the century (Adhikari, 2020). Jamieson and Albarracin (2020) claim that this could lead to societies suffering from anxiety in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, stability versus social and economic development. Disinformation driven by inequality and mistrust among the public during Covid-19 may lead to similar perceptions and understandings of the different origins of these health messages (Jaiswal et al., 2020). Some of these messages can be identified between beliefs and Covid-19-related misinformation.

2.1.3.3 Covid-19 pandemic: Mis/disinformation conspiracy theories in South Africa

While a global pandemic spread in South Africa, misinformation, and disinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic were among the challenges associated with this health crisis. Ding et al. (2020) argue that when the Covid-19 pandemic ravaged the entire world, a number of challenges also emerged. In addition to the calamity brought on by the Corona Virus outbreak, caution was also needed to control it. As Covid-19 spread in South Africa and neighbouring countries, WHO issued a media warning of an “infodemic of rampant conspiracy theories about Corona Virus” (Ding et al., 2020:10). A conspiracy theory is usually defined as an “explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that gives as its primary cause a group of powerful individuals, the conspirators, who act in secret for their benefit against the common good” (Uscinski and Parent, 2014:28). According to the latest study, the collapse of Covid-19 was accompanied by conspiracy theories (Gao et al., 2023). On the other hand, Jin, Raza, Yousaf, Zaman and Siang (2021) say that these conspiracies disrupted efforts to

control the spread of the Corona Virus. In the early days of the pandemic, a number of conspiracy theories in South Africa revolved around claims that powerful politicians were using the virus to control the Black population. Thus, the situation worsened. Known conspiracies could be identified in the misinformation and disinformation spread on social media by citizens posing as journalists.

According to Gallotti, Valle, Castaldo, Sacco and Dokenico (2020), the public incites irrational behaviour when they feel threatened by unreliable, low-quality information and conspiracy theories during public health crises. Some scholars always attribute misinformation and conspiracies to intentions because they do two things, misinform people, or merely attract clicks to turn them into advertisements in exchange for money (Bergmann, 2018). In addition, various news such as conspiracy theories spread along with the false medical information that exploded during the Covid-19 pandemic. Such news is amplified by social media and spreads virally (Chen et al., 2021). The power of social media in pandemics is enough to transform an ordinary health content into an extraordinary piece of information that citizens share with their social media audience without realising that it will cause an uproar. Similarly, Nguyen and Catalan-Motamoros (2020) highlighted in their research the fact that digital media, although serving as a platform where people can freely share important matters related to health disasters, has become a toxic place for citizens to spread conspiracies. Furthermore, citizens engaging in a process of gathering and sharing information for their communities will stimulate discussions outside of morality and lead to “dangerous public decisions” (Nguyen and Catalan-Motamoros, 2020).

Since the emergence of Covid-19, global citizens from all occupations have been searching for the origins and causes of this health pandemic (Madziva et al., 2022). For this reason, citizens invented and spread stories just to feel important and be part of the search team during this period of questioning. According to Nguyen and Catalan-Motamoros (2020), the “5G Corona Virus” is one of the many forms of misinformation spread on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, the President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, issued a media statement warning his people against the spread of Covid-19 misinformation: “We must actively combat

the spread of Covid-19-related disinformation and unfounded conspiracy theories about the virus,” Ramaphosa said. The address was directed exclusively at citizens starting conversations on social media to create a social space for the people of South Africa to engage and resolve their concerns, but in a false way. Bruns, Harrington and Hurcombe (2020) assert in their Covid-19/5G study that social media conversations are the reasons these Covid-19 pandemic conspiracies go viral, including the trend of 5G technology through the use of #5GCorona Virus. The hashtags were sometimes at the top of the trends on social media platforms.

Another strand of conspiracy theories in South Africa involved world-renowned politicians and celebrities. American philanthropist Bill Gates and South African comedian and writer Trevor Noah found themselves in several Covid-19-related conspiracy theories that flooded social media. Bill Gates is said to have created the global virus with the intention of gaining control of the world’s population and controlling the Corona Virus (Fuchs, 2022; Shahsavari et al., 2022). Mutanga, Ureke, and Chai’s (2021) study published during the Covid-19 pandemic found that hashtags such as #COVID19SA, #Corona VirusSA had an impact on social media to spread the word about the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Trevor Noah suffered from citizen journalists on social media who accused him of being one of the powerful politicians who sat on a committee to discuss South Africa’s vaccination programme. Citizen journalists who spread this belief that influential people were the cause or part of this strategy led the covert group to suffer from public accusation. Another allegation that emerged in the context of the Covid-19 conspiracies was that vaccines were a stealth plan to implant microchips, the “Mark of the Beast” trend, circulated on social media (Chimuanya and Igwebuike, 2021). Citizens went far beyond on social media to share their concerns about these well-informed conspiracies. In this context, social media comments, especially from South Africans, proliferated to share their knowledge about this matter.

Thomas, Carder, Zhang, Dosa and Sloane (2019) mention that social media became the order of the day during Covid-19, where conversations about conspiracy theories were not only global, but also increased local. Moreover, it was enough to prove that

South Africa was very quick to notice international conspiracies and increasingly spread them in local communities (Banerjee and Meena, 2021). A number of local celebrities, government officials, public figures, and ordinary citizens were seen spreading contradictory messages (rumours, speculation; fake news). Tagliabue, Galassi and Mariana (2020) note how the public gives in to public opinion in good faith and absorbs information, including fake news, and uses it to formulate their own interpretation about the pandemic. One study shows that local and global conspiracy theories can go hand in hand to achieve a specific goal, especially on health issues (Thomsa and Zhang, 2019). Madziwa et al. (2022) argue that there were no conspiracies on the African continent amid the Corona Virus pandemic, but that they existed for a long time but are only now resurgent. Overall, there are no conspiracy theories that can be identified as local or global, they are all the same (misinformation) with the intent to brew a strategic cocktail during health pandemics.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The two theories (Diffusion of Innovation and Participatory Culture) helped in clarifying the role of citizen journalists in disseminating information during Covid-19 pandemic. The Diffusion of Innovation Theory in particular clarifies and gives knowledge about how technology as an innovation develops in a social structure. The Participatory Culture Theory gives a description of how citizen journalists as members of the public play the role of being a creator and consumer of information and how they get to influence their content. The use of digital media by citizen journalists during crises influences the outcomes of the information distributed.

2.2.1 Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Diffusion of Innovation Theory was developed by the communication scholar and sociologist, Everette M. Rogers in 1931-2004. According to the book *Diffusion of Innovation* by Rogers, new innovations have been operating, studied, and adopted by most populations for over 30 years (Sherry and Gibson, 2002). Researchers from different fields of study have used this theory for their established ideas. Several areas in which the theory was used include political science, public health, communication,

history, economics, technology, and education. The adoption of health information technologies (Zhang, Yu and Doek, 2015), the development of diabetes management programmes (De Civita and Dasgupta, 2007) and the use of HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis are some studies on innovative health behaviour to which the theory has been applied.

According to Rogers (2003:5), diffusion is “the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of social system.” The theory, Diffusion of Innovation, was appropriate for this study as it focused on how citizen journalism as an innovation is a new way of disseminating information during Covid-19 pandemic. Diffusion is therefore considered a unique form of communication where people generate and exchange knowledge with one another to achieve mutual understanding (Garcia-Aviles, 2020). However, according to the study by Sahin (2006), Rogers’ theory has been widely used as a roadmap of research in “technology diffusion and adoption.” Therefore, citizen journalists, as adopters of technology, use social media to disseminate information during the Covid-19 pandemic. Roger’s theory was the most applicable for an investigation of an innovation that gets adopted and diffused through a social system. Therefore, this study used the Diffusion of Innovation Theory to analyse the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Moreover, the theory proposed by Rogers (2003:78) offers four reasons for the acceptance of innovative behaviour: “Attributes of the innovation, communication channel, characteristics of the adopters, and social system.” In accordance with the above definition (innovation, communication channels, time, and social system) are the four key components of the Diffusion of Innovation Theory.

Four Main Elements in the Diffusion of Innovation Theory

1. Innovation

Rogers (2003:12) defines innovation as “an idea, practice, or project that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption.” However, even if an innovation has

been around for over some time, but if individuals recognise it as new, then it may still be an innovation to them (Sahin, 2006). In this study, an innovation was citizen journalism as a new idea or practice of disseminating information during Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Communication Channels

Rogers (2003:05) explains the second element of the Diffusion of Innovation Theory as a process “in which participants create and share information with one another in order to reach a mutual understanding where a message gets from a source to the receiver.” In this study, blogs, online news sites, and social media platforms such as Facebook, X, and WhatsApp were communication channels that citizens used for citizen journalism to disseminate Covid-19 information to the public.

3. Time

According to Rogers (2003:14), the time element of the theory is mostly not given attention in “behavioural research.” He further argues that the study that includes time in a diffusion displays one of its strengths. The study’s time dimension was during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. The rapid spread of Covid-19 information through citizen journalism represents a time dimension of the Diffusion of Innovation Theory.

4. Social System

This is the last element of the Diffusion of Innovation Theory. Social system, according to Rogers (2003:23), is “a set of interrelated units engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal”. He further claims that the nature of social structure influences an individual’s “innovativeness,” which happens to be the main reason it can be adopted (Rogers, 2003:24). Citizen journalists formed part of the online community to engage in disseminating information during Covid-19 pandemic.

Citizen journalism offers the public a platform to be innovative and become part of both the creators and audience of the content. Currently, citizen journalists use social media

to take part in gathering, publishing, and disseminating information and that is taken as the new technological operation. In addition, the new technological advances offer ordinary citizens the responsibility of assuming the role of citizen journalists. What makes citizen journalists stand out and unique is their ability to respond instantly to emergencies, where they will capture the event in an essence manner. Moreover, the Diffusion of Innovation Theory and its four factors were useful in analysing the role of citizen journalism during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

3.2.2 Participatory Culture Theory

Participatory Culture Theory emerged in the 19th century as an idea formed by Henry Jenkins in 2006 based on his study on fandom communities (Singo, 2020). As defined by Henry Jenkins (2006), a participatory culture is one in which many individuals or the community as a whole function as both consumers and creators of meaning, in addition to playing a significant role in influencing content. Jenkins hypothesises that because of advances in technology integration, people are moving away from a passive mode of consumption and toward an active mode of participation that allows them to contribute, disrupt, or join a conversation. Consistent with Jenkin's theory, this study examined how social media have given citizen journalists the freedom to build on existing information and create their own, as well as participate in discussions and debates that may have led to a mixture of information resulting in misinformation and disinformation about Covid-19. In addition, to connect citizen journalism, information sharing and participatory culture, the role of citizen journalism during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa was analysed.

However, Constanza, White, Davis and Sanders (2012) referring to participation theory, emphasised that social media platforms emerge new possibilities for people to debate common challenges in which they have difficulty participating for assorted reasons. Similarly, Singo (2020) attests to the fact that social media emerged with a change of news culture where the public can now participate as consumers of information. Social media as a platform provided people with new opportunities to discuss issues that were difficult to discuss in the past for some reasons (Costanza-

Chock, 2012). This theory was chosen because it shows all the characteristics of participatory culture in citizen journalists using social media to easily access, create, and share information about Covid-19 pandemic while some citizens had the ability to shape the content, making it difficult to determine the reliability of a source. To further support this hypothesis, the study examined the role of citizen journalists in spreading misinformation during the Covid-19 outbreak in South Africa.

The theory holds that with the advent of new forms of content creation and participation, where more people have access to the internet and news is no longer just for a passive audience. Instead, people can contribute to the news and keep the world informed in real time (Jenkins, 2006). In addition, the theory helped the researcher to examine the level of misinformation and disinformation that was spread by citizen journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. As a result of these changes, there are now more sources of information and citizen journalists giving voice to more people in South Africa and presenting a variety of information regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, is creating a participatory culture. As demonstrated by De Michiel (2008), the new technological platforms such as social media platforms permits the engagers to produce and disseminate information easily.

In contrast, Constanza and Chock (2012) used the theory to highlight social media as a place where people have new opportunities to discuss universal issues. This led researchers such as Dorogovtsev and Mendes (2003) to use the theory to connect social media with content creators and consumers' participation. Singo (2020), in line with this idea, used participatory culture in his study of fandoms and social media in the case of the X hashtag charge. In terms of participatory culture, the study applied Participatory Culture Theory to analyse the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

Overall, the Diffusion of Innovation and Participatory Culture theories as applied in this study illustrated how citizen journalists as part of ordinary citizens grasped the role of covering events on their own. The two theories discussed and described the concepts of diffusion of innovation and participatory culture, especially in relation to citizen

journalism. In addition to connecting the theories with the study, a case of citizen journalism in disseminating information during Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa was analysed. A focus on this analysis was selected upon realising that ordinary citizens used social media to engage and support each other's ideas. Those who had more information about the Covid-19 pandemic took that opportunity to share that knowledge with others and let them engage socially on such topics, especially on a topic that went viral such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.4 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

The literature review of this chapter provided fascinating findings about the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study filled the gap in the literature by first examining the role of citizen journalists in the public sphere and then examining their role in spreading information during the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, the literature explored what really contributed to the falsified information during the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, the literature examined the role of citizen journalists in the spread of misinformation and disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Both misinformation and disinformation have the power to influence information and conspiracy beliefs about this health pandemic. To this end, the study's literature review took a closer look at the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in South Africa. The two theories of this study: Diffusion of Innovation and Participatory Culture were also discussed in this chapter. Diffusion of Innovation looked at how, over time, the dissemination of information by citizen journalism through the use of technology is spread from one to another. Participatory Culture Theory explained how citizen journalists have taken on the role of being the creators of content and how they have a way of influencing information that is shared with others.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3. INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides steps of how the objectives were achieved through the research methodology. The chapter interpreted the type of methodology used and discussed how population, the sampling procedure, data collection, and data analysis were preferred to accomplish the study's purpose. It also laid out the steps that were followed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

3.1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to Sreekumar (2023), research methodology describes the techniques and procedures used to identify and analyse information process by which researchers design their study to achieve objectives. The key components of research, such as research design, data collection and analysis techniques, and the general framework in which the study is carried out, are all included in research methodology (Sreekumar, 2023). This section of the study outlined the strategy to achieve the research objectives, as well as the recommended type of design, the population, and the sampling method used to collect and analyse data. Preferences were also clarified and explained. In addition, the four actions taken to meet quality expectations were described.

3.1.1 Research Design

A broad description of a research design is given by Bouchrika (2023), who says it is a foundation which involves the methods and procedures of the study such as collecting, analysing, and interpreting data. It is beneficial to know which research design to follow, as a research will need a proper formulation of the problem statement, the purpose, and the objectives of the study. In other words, the function of a research design is to efficiently give the researcher a direction to collect information with relevant information within the right frame of time (Patel and Patel, 2019). To ensure

quality and correct data collection, the study has taken relevant steps such as population, sampling, data collection, and data analysis techniques of the methodology. Fundamentally, a qualitative approach of the research design was applied in this study.

3.1.2 Qualitative Research Methodology

In qualitative research, non-numerical data (text, video, or audio) are gathered and analysed to gain a deeper understanding of concepts, viewpoints, or experiences. It can be applied to reveal complex information about a circumstance or to generate new ideas for research (Ugwu and Eze, 2023). Qualitative research observes a person's attitudes, body language, feelings, and opinion that a researcher will get to understand and have answers for the study. Moreover, the physical, mental, and social behaviour of humans is an act based on an influence they may have on certain issues. Therefore, an analysis of the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic was the focus of this study. This means that the focus was on the ideas and opinions taken from citizen journalists and their motivation in disseminating information during Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa as participants of the study.

3.1.3 Explorative Research Design

An exploratory research design was used in the study. According to George (2021), exploratory research is a methodological strategy that addresses research questions that have not yet been thoroughly investigated. In this study, the exploratory research design was productive because it aided the researcher in gaining a deep understanding of the role of citizen journalists in disseminating information during Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Moreover, the contribution of citizen journalists to the spread of falsified information, the level of misinformation and disinformation disseminated by citizen journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. For this study, data were collected within a period of three (3) months.

3.2 PROFILE OF SAMPLED CITIZEN JOURNALISTS AND AREAS OF STUDY

This study was conducted in South Africa. According to Mabin and Vigne (2024), South Africa is a country located in the southern part of the African continent. Furthermore, they state that South Africa is divided into nine provinces, namely: KwaZulu Natal, Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, Western Cape, Northwest, Free State, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, and Limpopo. This study engaged five provinces with the largest populations in South Africa, which were captured thus: Gauteng (12,272,263) followed by KwaZulu Natal (10,267,300), Western Cape (5, 8222, 734), Limpopo (5,404,868) and Mpumalanga (4,039,939). Out of the five provinces, two citizen journalists were sampled from each province, resulting in a total of ten participants. All ten citizen journalists were contacted and letters of request were sent to them to participate in the study.

3.3 POPULATION AND SAMPLING PROCEDURE

3.3.1 Population

The population consisted of all persons or objects that the study aimed to look into (Hanlon and Larget, 2011). Population, according to Moffit (1995), is the element that a researcher needs to collect data from to meet the objectives of the study. The population of this study comprised citizen journalists who disseminated information during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. The chosen citizen journalists as respondents had traits that enabled the researcher to accomplish the purpose and objectives of the study.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedure

According to Sarantakos (1998), a sampling procedure is a process followed when one needs to select a sub-group in a population required to take part in the study. Sampling procedures in research differ according to what the study wants to achieve. Therefore, this study used the non-probability sampling procedure.

3.3.3 Non-probability Sampling

This type of sampling procedure is a non-random selection based on purposiveness, which facilitates the researcher's data collection (McCombes, 2022). Moreover, Keptro (2012) states a non-probability sampling "is used in some situations, where the population may not be well defined". In other words, the situation is not so good in drawing attention to the population. Michael (2011) claims that the most important reason for using non-probability sampling in research is that it costs less and can be fast when implemented. This includes the purposive sampling procedure that the researcher used in this study.

3.3.4 Purposive Non-probability Sampling

This study used the purposive non-probability sampling approach because the researcher purposefully selected citizen journalists from the five (5) provinces in South Africa. According to McCombes (2022), purposive sampling is often used when a researcher is trying to obtain detailed information about a specific event where the population is extremely specific. Moreover, Hentry (1990) says purposive non-probability sampling aims to reach a sample of the study that can satisfactorily answer the research questions. Furthermore, as it was expected, sampled citizen journalists provided detailed information on how they regularly disseminated information during Covid-19 pandemic in their provinces and South Africa as a whole. The purposive non-probability sampling was suitable for this study, as citizen journalists of South Africa assisted in addressing the objectives of the research.

3.4.5 Interview Guide Design

An interview guide, as a data collection tool of the study, had twenty open-ended questions with three sections according to the objectives. Section A dealt with the role of citizen journalists in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Section B focused on how citizen journalists contributed to the spread of falsified information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. The last section,

section C, dealt with the level of misinformation and disinformation disseminated by citizen journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

3.3.6 Sample

A sample is a particularly important part when conducting research. According to McCombes (2022), the sampling method refers to the process by which a researcher selects a sample that reflects a group as a whole. Therefore, in this study, ten (10) citizen journalists who played a role in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa were identified in five (5) provinces and two (2) were selected from each province (Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and Western Cape) using social media platforms. Most of their social media handles had a WhatsApp follow-up button, where the researcher formally introduced the study and its purpose to the participants. Introductory emails were also sent to citizen journalists who had their contact details online. Inquiries were made through social media inboxes and through a phone call to those whose numbers were available. All the ten (10) citizen journalists who were identified and chosen from all the five provinces agreed to participate in the study. The provinces were chosen because they had a high population density over the other provinces in South Africa. Moreover, the provinces selected were most affected by Covid-19 pandemic. Ten (10) citizen journalists, two (2) from the five (5) selected provinces above were sampled from the nine (9) South African provinces and interviewed in this study.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data in this study. A semi-structured interview is a technique for gathering data that depends on posing queries within a pre-established framework of themes (George, 2022). In addition, the study used an in-depth interview technique. The in-depth interviews for this study were conducted within a period of three months. The study had four males and six females as the participants. The timeframe of the interview was between 20 and 30 minutes, depending on how the respondents answered some of the questions. This method of

collecting data through open-ended questions was helpful in that it allowed the researcher to collect sufficient information without any limit.

Participants were asked relevant questions according to the themes that were connected to the objectives of the research. This consisted of their role in disseminating information, their contribution in the dissemination of falsified information and the level of misinformation and disinformation they disseminated during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Follow-up questions were raised where necessary to collect sufficient data for this study. According to Bhat (2023), an in-depth interview provides a more comfortable setting for citizen journalists to give specific information about the environment in which they work. Depending on how comfortable the participants were, the study collected data through virtual platforms such as Google Meet, Teams and Zoom Meeting, Skype. In qualitative research, in-depth telephone interviews can be just as effective as face-to-face interviews, and even surpass them in some situations (Cachia and Millward, 2011; Ward, Gott, and Hoare, 2015).

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Data analysis is a technique for collecting and organising data so that the researcher can use it (Belloto, 2018). In this study, thematic analysis was used, where the researcher grouped and examined related responses to collect data. According to researchers, thematic analysis is one of the popular “qualitative analysis techniques” used in studies. Thematic analysis is defined as a “study of patterns to uncover meaning.” Moreover, it is all about identifying the themes of the study that are set to ensure that research has a deeper meaning (Crosley, 2021:1). The researcher analysed data manually, where themes were generated according to the objectives of the study. Therefore, themes were generated, and in-depth analysis is conducted in accordance with the participants’ responses.

3.6 QUALITY CRITERIA

3.6.1 Credibility

Credibility is a measure of how well the research represents its reality (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To reflect the participants' original responses, the researcher used direct quotes to ensure credibility. In addition, the researcher carefully cited comments to avoid misinformation that may impact the affected population. Moreover, follow-up questions were raised with the participants to confirm their responses before they could be used in this study to guarantee that high-quality data were gathered.

3.6.2 Transferability

Transferability is defined as "the extent to which a phenomenon or set of findings from a study is transferable or useful for theory, practice, and future research" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:99). For the results of the study to be understood by other researchers and applied to their own research, the researcher purposefully selected the data collected from citizen journalists in South Africa. To make sure the research is transferable, the study clearly explained the research methodology.

3.6.3 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to how easily others can verify the results of the research (Jones, 1995). For a study to be considered confirmable, the data and conclusions must be connected in a way that is clear and repeatable throughout the study (Jones, 1995; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). This included the researcher analysing the results on their own to confirm the results. As a result, the study collected raw data materials such as notes, audio, and video sessions to ensure other researchers will come to equivalent findings given the same data and research context. This helped the researcher to find out if the findings from the research study matched the data collected from the participants.

3.6.4 Dependability

Dependability is described as the depth to which the study's techniques are documented so that a third party can follow, review, and evaluate the research process, and the consistency and reliability of study results (Sandelowski, 2000). In the context of the research, the researcher continuously analysed the data to determine if the study's results are acceptable, thorough, and visible. The researcher continuously reviewed the documents, including the structure of the study, planned methods, expected outcomes, and results of raw and processed data. The goal was for other researchers to relate the data collected to the interpretations and conclusions of the results.

3.3 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter started with an introduction of the research methodology, providing a process taken to choose the research design, how the sample and population were selected, the tools needed to collect data, and the steps taken to analyse the data. The quality criteria to ensure the quality of the study were also discussed.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents and analyses data gathered. The presentation and analysis are organised into three (3) sections. The introductory part examines the demographics of the participants, while Section 1 discusses the first objective of the study as espoused in Chapter 1, namely, exploring the role of citizen journalists in distributing information during the Covid-19 pandemic. Section 2 evaluates how citizen journalists contributed to the dissemination of false information during the Covid-19 outbreak, which was the second objective of this study. Section 3, the third objective, looked into the extent of misinformation and disinformation disseminated by citizen journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. In addition, the researcher grouped themes inside each part to address the study's objectives. Respondents are South African citizen journalists, and they were assessed as such on a scale of one to ten, considering the study's ethical issues.

OBJECTIVES

- To explore the role of citizen journalists in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.
- To evaluate how citizen journalists contributed to the spread of falsified information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.
- To examine the level of misinformation and disinformation disseminated by citizen journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

4.1 PRESENTATION OF DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Names of the participants	Gender	Age	Province	Years as a citizen	Number of social
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				journalis t	media managing
Responden t (1)	Male	25	Limpopo	5	2
Responden t (2)	Male	29	Limpopo	7	4
Responden t (3)	Male	36	Western- Cape	8	3
Responden t (4)	Male	34	Mpumalanga	5	3
Responden t (5)	Female	25	Gauteng	4	4
Responden t (6)	Female	30	Kwa-Zulu Natal	7	3
Responden t (7)	Female	28	Mpumalanga	4	3
Responden t (8)	Female	26	Gauteng	5	3
Responden t (9)	Female	25	Kwa-Zulu Natal	5	2
Responden t (10)	Female	27	Western- Cape	4	2

4.2 FIGURE 1: PROFILE OF SOUTH AFRICAN CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

Data were gathered from a sample of ten (10) citizen journalists in South Africa. This included six males and four females, with two from each of the five provinces, namely, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Kwa-Zulu Natal, Gauteng, and Western Cape. Those who consented to engage in this study are 18 years or older. Their experience as citizen journalists ranges from four to eight years. Section 2 of this study sought to address the first of objective of the study and responses to the question and captured below.

4.3 SECTION 1

OBJECTIVE 1: THE ROLE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISTS IN DISSEMINATING INFORMATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This section starts by briefly elaborating the traits of citizen journalists. It draws these responses from journalists as mentioned above, thenceforth to be captured as respondent, 1, 3, 4 etc. Section 4.3.2 looks at the role of citizen journalists in communities, 4.3.3 addresses the role of citizen journalists during Covid-19 pandemic while 4.3.5 focuses on the emergency of information released during the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.3.1 Traits of citizen journalists

Questions in this section were tailored as ice-breaking questions, which were mainly tied to the participants understanding of citizen journalism in their respective communities. Respondents felt that citizen journalists should be knowledgeable about news production, communicative, and dedicated to serving their communities. They use social media to share their views on problems and actively participate in community activities. This recognition acknowledges citizen journalists' role in promoting local issues.

For Respondent 6, *“a good journalist must have interest in their surroundings and what is happening to the world, they should also be eager to investigate on important information and publish to the nearest public”*.

Similarly, Respondent 9 submitted that, *“a good citizen journalist must have a strong reputation in the society they serve so that the public can fully trust the information they disseminate.”*

Generally, citizen journalism has given members of the community an opportunity to write and publish their own stories, particularly those relating to the marginalised groups. Through the use of social media, community members who have access to the internet and the ability to operate a smartphone can reach those who hold power over them regarding issues that compromises their state. Franklin (2009) stated that participation in democracy is a way to give “voice to the voiceless”. This particularly shows that democracy is greatly contributing to the principle of “freedom of speech”. This attempt of citizen journalists to take advantage of new technologies to comment on issues regarding their community’s development such as (economic, social and cultural) is a call of freedom of speech. This is related to the belief that citizen journalism plays a significant role in fighting for rights to information and freedom of speech (Horoub, 2023). Social media have enabled citizen journalists to investigate, collect, and disseminate information, transforming information dissemination into a form of news gathering (Atkin, 2019). Many become both audiences and producers of information, leading to news making. However, few emphasise the importance of following good journalistic principles.

Respondent 1 noted that: *“Good citizen journalist must have educative traits about the journalistic field and a good understanding of the community they serve”* while *“curiosity, objectivity, critical thinking and devotion to truth”* were espoused by Respondent 10 as key traits of good citizen journalist.

Similarly, Respondents 4 and 7 emphasised the importance of a journalists’ interest in stories, understanding of writing, persistence, confidence, professionalism, writing abilities, and acquaintance with journalistic ethics. Therefore, citizen journalists outlined how it has been possible for them to follow the universal ethical principles of gathering and publishing information even though they are not professional journalists. As Horoub (2023) notes, citizen journalists are just ordinary citizens who have not

acquired any qualifications in journalism, with the necessary skills and knowledge in following the journalistic rules. The respondents in this study had similar views on how they should be open to report for their communities without limitation, be a good communication tool and follow journalistic principles to be regarded as a good citizen journalist. The views fully indicate that these citizen journalists were knowledgeable about how a news making process operates, they were aware of journalistic ethics and that they did not only work for themselves, but also those close to them.

One of the important factors in writing and publishing information that is worthy to be regarded as news, is to have sources for one's story. However, citizen journalists have received their fair share of criticism for reporting information that is not backed up by credible sources. They have been criticised for failing to adhere to principles of ethical journalism, namely, accountability, credibility, objectivity and authenticity (Gillmore, 2006). Even though citizen journalists have been criticised for lacking the quality of balance when it comes to being authentic, Respondent 5 gave a different perspective concerning being a good citizen journalist and that is to obtain information from dependable sources. For this respondent, a good journalist upholds good journalistic principles and ensures that the information reported comes from reliable sources.

The introduction of technological devices where one can disseminate information using only their smartphones has made it realistic for average people to access news stories. Moreover, the ability to capture events using smartphones and immediately share them on social media gave citizen journalists the role of being both the source and the publisher of information. Even though citizen journalists have a unique edge in terms of accessing material rapidly and releasing fast paced news, it is still critical that they deal with news events from journalistic perspectives by considering balance, credibility, truthfulness, honesty, accountability, and objectivity. However, citizen journalists must bear in mind that having the ability to produce and disseminate information it is not equal to legitimate news sharing, with the important part being the dissemination of "news that holds quality". In this regard, citizen journalists are not quite aware of how important it is to make news.

Therefore, respondents defined different perspectives associated with the behaviour of a good journalist. In their view, a citizen journalist must possess key communication skills, which encapsulate readiness to serve the community and follow appropriate writing journalistic ethics and dissemination of information. These perspectives demonstrated how determined the respondents were as creators of noteworthy material and how willing they were to respect the rules, regulations, and ideals of journalism. It further demonstrated how imaginative the community members had become in using social media platforms as a weapon to fight their underprivileged conditions. Critical note is that citizen journalists also advance the ideals of freedom of speech.

4.3.2 Citizen journalists and the neglected communities

A majority of the respondents were of the view that the role of citizen journalists is to work for the forgotten part of the public, especially those small communities that are not normally reached by traditional media. For them, the role of citizen journalists is to adhere to issues of the communities that are neglected by the main-stream media, a view also held by Licitar (2019). Notably, unlike news organisations and media outlets, citizen journalism lays out a platform for the general public with different voices to be heard without facing any barriers. Some of the answers to the question asked to the citizen journalists about their roles are presented below.

Respondent 8: *“citizen journalists’ job is to reach the community they grew up under with local news and publish for their people where the traditional newspapers and broadcasting stations cannot reach.”*

Similarly, Respondent 10 believed that *“citizen journalists play an important role in raising awareness of topics that mainstream media may neglect, as well as advocating openness and responsibility. They may further assist in improving and providing both public conversations and alternative opinions, resulting in a more educated and involved community.”* In agreement with the two sentiments, Respondent 6 submitted that *“citizen journalists fill in the roles of professional media where they are gatekeeping information that the community deserves to know. They also provide an*

alternative voice of concern from the community that may not get attention of the traditional media.” Therefore, the respondents’ views insinuate that mainstream media often neglect underprivileged communities because they work as watchdogs for the elites and owners of the means of productions. As the result, citizen journalists feel it is their duty to protect and stand up for the poor communities. In this way, citizen journalists often take it upon themselves to stand between the excluded communities and those in control and play the role of the “watchdog”. In support of this, Etika (2019) suggests that citizen journalism may play a crucial role as an eye-opener to the public on important issues and simultaneously play a crucial role as a “watchdog.” Also, they can do that without taking sides or any favours from anyone who has power to manipulate what they stand for.

Respondent 2 said: *“To feed the society with accurate news, to update the public with useful information, to protect the sources who want to remain anonymously, to become a watchdog to everything that is happening to the society.”* For Respondent 4: *“The role of a citizen journalists is to stand for less privileged communities and be their voices to the government and those that the control power. They do this by sharing most important information that the public needs, especially those they serve”.* Another possible role of the citizen journalists highlighted by the respondents is to inform the communities and the nearest public and educate them about the subject-matter they lack knowledge of. According to Jalli (2020), these kinds of journalists or citizen journalists gather information and disseminate it on digital media platforms for their immediate friends, close family and the public to be informed. In particular, citizen journalists make use of social media platforms as an educational tool for learning the programmes that people lack information about. As part of their role, citizen journalists create awareness on challenges faced by the communities and give education about them. Because of citizen journalism, the people in general can now be responsible for handling their own community problems.

Respondents 1, 3, 5 and 7 also augmented the above views. To them, information circulation and education are the core functions of citizen journalists within their communities. Through social media platforms, they engage with members of the

community in discussions that concerns their daily lives, independently from the media. In this way, citizen journalism installed new norms to the public, which is to trust in social media as platforms for public participation. Bowman and Willis (2003) mention that “the intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.”

This new media has enabled the public to come together to express their views, give advice and engage in educative conversations, thanks to citizen journalists. Undoubtedly, citizen journalists’ role is to give the general public an opportunity to express democratic participation in support of the new constitution. Citizens now stand on their own, engage in topics that they find interesting and are in charge of conversations. However, citizen journalists have taken this participation to a level where citizens can have their own media. Specifically, the community can now have their “own identity” through citizen journalists.

Evidently, the respondents were very much aware of their roles as citizen journalists. They firmly believed in educating, informing and taking control in disseminating information to neglected communities. Therefore, citizen journalists fully understand their potential to influence communities towards writing and publishing their own stories. In this way, citizen journalists proved that they do not only improve the state of communities, but also move them from being mere consumers of the media to active members. When citizens are more informed and educated, they will actively participate in news-making and this in turn greatly benefits citizen journalism.

4.3.3 Citizen journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic

The function of citizen journalists as highlighted above were clearly evidenced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Respondents emphasised the importance of education and the spread of right information. Respondents 5, 6 and 10 focused on spreading messages about the protective measures, combating misinformation and myths that emerged with the virus. Respondent 10 expressed the following: *“.....I helped to raise awareness about the virus, dispel misinformation, and demonstrate the impact on local communities. Providing significant insights regarding healthcare issues, lockdown*

impacts, and grassroots activities, which contribute to a better understanding of the pandemic's impact." Respondents 5 and 6 also noted how their efforts in disseminating information during the pandemic have been instrumental in promoting the public's understanding of Covid-19 health measures. According to citizen journalists, the use of social media during the pandemic helped to counterbalance the spread of false claims and conspiracies threatening the public.

As stated by Respondent 6, *"Individually, I kept on updating the society with the number of cases and current news regarding Covid-19 pandemic by posting on social media platforms such as on Facebook and WhatsApp"*. Respondent 5 added: *"I educated people and managed to combat myths concerning the vaccine. People thought they will die, become infertile or even lose their erectile functionality however, I consulted with medical practitioners and with the information I got, I disseminated it on my social media platform especially WhatsApp status"*. Additionally, citizen journalism on social media came to be the most reliable press for the public, as the information about this disease got to be discussed widely, including by local and international people. Information dissemination on health pandemics was very important, given that citizen journalists gave their full attention and provided focus on the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the respondents, their role during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa was to inform, educate and reduce panic in the public. The health language can be difficult to decode, especially in parts of the community that are illiterate. In this regard, the citizen journalists are needed during health crises to help the community interpret the medical terms used in government statements and in the media press. Certainly, the citizen journalists were of good use to the public during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, in accordance with the citizen journalists' views, they were handling the pandemic with the interests of the public, particularly those in compromising situations.

The role the media played was to give the public the information on how to manage the risks during the pandemic, as well as encouraging a cooperation with each other to solve the problem. In other words, citizen journalists brought the public together in a time of need. According to Gilsenan (2020), citizen journalists took part in ensuring

that a number of people stayed connected with each other and were informed about the Covid-19 pandemic despite their differences. Discussions about the Covid-19 pandemic raised on social media attracted the attention of different people's interest and started conversations that raised awareness. Seemingly, citizen journalists provided an overview of the role of media, by consistently displaying information which coordinated with time during Covid-19 pandemic.

4.3.4 The productivity of citizen journalists during Covid-19 pandemic

Concerning the effectiveness of the role of citizen journalists, all the respondents believed they productively disseminated information during the Covid-19 pandemic. Where public health was concerned, the respondents emphasised the importance of being proactive when disseminating information. Respondents 4 and 10 inferred that social media significantly enabled them to access Covid-19 information with understanding and utilise it accurately. From their vantage point, social media have revolutionised the way citizen journalists work, providing unprecedented opportunities for self-expression, collaboration and impact to the society.

“Yes, I believe I have performed my duty as a citizen journalist. People relied on me to get information during the pandemic, and my social media grew a huge number of followers. This proves people were sharing information from my platform as well as recommending others to follow for more reliable information” said Respondent 10.

Respondent 4 stated: *“Yes, I did play my role during the pandemic. People in my community, especially on social media did not believe in the existence of this disease, so I had to stand up and make sure I inform them about the dangers of Covid-19.”* Likewise, Respondents 1 and 5 maintained that citizen journalists' vital role is to stay up to date with current issues and concerns of the community. They believed that being present in a rare situation such as the Covid-19 pandemic can lead to the community having access to exclusive information. This regular engagement of the citizen journalists and the community encouraged a rapport between citizen journalists and the public.

By dispersing Covid-19 information daily, citizen journalists provided diverse perspectives in facilitating public discourse and engagement. Therefore, it was important for citizen journalists to lead within their respective communities and provide Covid-19 information online. Citizen journalists reporting on social media during the pandemic, showed neutrality in reporting when disseminating this information. This means, citizen journalists were not biased in their dissemination of information.

4.3.5 Covid-19 information as an emergency during the pandemic

With regard to the contingency of disseminating information, the respondents provided diverse perspectives. To some of them, the information was shared promptly while others disseminated in a timely manner. Respondents 1, 7 and 10 said it is important to disseminate information often and with a sense of urgency. The respondents shared the following views:

“With the use of the internet, I released information about the pandemic as soon as I got hold of it, I could be from a source or a media statement from government officials” said Respondent 1.

Furthermore, Respondent 1 expressed the following thoughts: *“I made sure every time the government released new statement about the pandemic, I immediately update people on social media.”* Likewise, Respondent 5 stated, *“As soon as the World Health Organisation published official vaccine updates, or any crucial information related to Covid-19 to ensure that the community take informed decision concerning their health”*. In agreement, Madziva et al. (2022) argue that social media during Covid-19 pandemic contributed to a fast-paced news about the virus across the globe and to different communities. During these unexpected times of emergency, the internet becomes a place where the public can get any information needed about the virus as quickly as possible. This points out the importance of having access to computers and working internet for citizens to disseminate and access to information on Covid-19. According to Respondents 4 and 8, social media accounts such as WhatsApp, Facebook and X were mostly used to share information easily and fast to their close populace. According to Jalli (2020), these kinds of journalists or citizen journalists

gather information and disseminate it on digital media platforms for their immediate friends, close family and the public to be informed. With immediate action being one of the factors of the internet, most citizen journalists opined that they met the expected requirement during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The data collected for this section was on the role of citizen journalists in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Overall, citizen journalists thought that a good journalist should have characteristics that match those of any journalist that is trained or educated in journalism. This includes following the journalistic principles of gathering and disseminating information that is worthy to be regarded as news. Moreover, citizen journalists believed that they worked cohesively with the public, including the community, government, media, authorities and health expert to play their role during the Covid-19 pandemic. This means, despite having the means to disseminate information in a quick manner, citizen journalists understood that this must be matched with the professional journalism industry. Moreover, the respondents were aware of how their ability and dedication towards citizen journalism can contribute greatly to the communities' innovativeness and promoting the importance of their role. There is no doubt that the occupation of citizen journalism gave citizens authority and increased their content and interpretative analysis method.

4.4 SECTION 2

OBJECTIVE 2: SPREADING FALSIFIED INFORMATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

4.4.1 Citizen journalists and dissemination of falsified information

The respondents were questioned whether they helped spread false information amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Reactions to this question were not uniform among the responders. While some of them provided a clear yes or no in response, others went on to provide an explanation. Similarly, among those who disagreed, there were citizen journalists who agreed that they helped disseminate false information. Respondents 1, 4 and 8 maintained that no citizen journalist may knowingly disseminate misleading

material. They said that journalism is valued when it acknowledges the possible consequences of spreading inaccurate information. In their elaboration, the respondents said:

Respondent 1: *“No. I don’t believe so because no citizen journalist can deliberately publish false information knowing the consequences that information might carry”* whereas Respondent 4 said, *“No, I do not think they deliberately shared false information as it could put many people’s life in danger.”* Respondent 8 added: *“As a citizen journalist, I often make sure I adhere to the value of journalism. So, I don’t believe citizen journalists deliberately published information that contributed to the dissemination of fake news.”* According to Lewandowsky and Cook (2020), false information is a type of advertising that deliberately or intentionally fakes verifiable trust. Respondents 2, 5, and 6 unequivocally stated that a majority of citizen journalists refuted allegations that they knowingly assisted in the spread of false material during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the objective was not to distribute false information, some respondents believed they played a role in it. However, based on the comments, it was clear that citizen journalists did not deliberately set out to mislead the public when they promoted fake information during the Covid-19 catastrophe. Further, Respondent 9 opined that a majority of citizen journalists covering the epidemic had forgotten the fundamentals of principles in disseminating information, particularly in journalism. Their views are indicated below:

Respondent 5: *“Yes, I believe that other citizen journalists published false information to grow their platforms and get attention from social media users.”*

“Yes, the misinformation and fake news that was published by citizen journalised was circulating fast because they needed views and likes” said Respondent 8. Respondent 2: *“Yes, most of them didn’t understand the seriousness of Covid-19 during that time that’s why they end up misleading the society with false information.”* According to Bapaye and Bapaye (2021), there was a significant rise on social media in the spread of false information during the Covid-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, the fake information about the pandemic spread more quickly than Covid-19 through the efforts of citizen

journalists. Due in large part to its role as an original source of potentially erroneous and unverified material, social media remained troublesome during the Covid-19 pandemic (Geo et al., 2022). The researcher noted that citizen journalists had nothing to do with the erroneous information that was propagated on social media during the pandemic. On the contrary, it appears that the misleading information existed for a long time prior to the outbreak. To put it differently, digital media, not citizen journalism, was the recipient of the fabricated material that was spread on social media. Shein et al. (2018) agree, nevertheless, that citizen journalists consistently use social media to present fresh viewpoints on false information. This typically occurs when someone spreads something widely shared on social media without doing any due diligence with their closest friends, family, and followers.

The fabricated information disseminated during the Covid-19 pandemic also comes with acknowledgment and accountability of acts, as shown by the respondents. Furthermore, they also mishandled their social media accounts to disseminate misleading information during the pandemic. In turn, this means that for citizen journalists to provide accurate information about anything connected to health-related matters, they must have a working grasp of digital media. Handling a health pandemic requires tactful communication with people who will put the needs of the affected population first. Truthful information-sharing during the epidemic is crucial, and citizen journalists need to start realising this. Little is required of citizen journalists; it is only just and reasonable that they accurately verify health-related material before beginning to distribute it to their closest audiences.

4.4.2 Discovery of falsified information during Covid-19 pandemic

In light of the conflicting information that is spreading on digital platforms, the study inquired from the respondents: If they ever spread information during a pandemic only to find out afterwards that it was inaccurate. Fewer citizen journalists disagreed, emphasising that they had taken precautions to stay away from any subversive actions that would endanger the public. Conversely, it came out that a majority of citizen journalists concurred to having spread falsified information during the Corona Virus

outbreak. When distributing information, Respondents 1, 5 and 6 said they did not follow a well-informed path, which entails considering a variety of sources and assessing the objectivity of the evidence. According to their answers, the data that was shared differed depending on personal preferences and viewpoints. Their responses were as follows:

Respondent 1: *“Yes. As citizen journalist we work with people and time is not always on our side so when information received quickly you need to be the one to break the story first to the public without intensive verification of facts.”* Respondent 5: *“Yes. Sometimes I would publish information thinking it’s accurate only to find that that information was not true”* expressed Respondent 5. Respondent 6: *“Yes, I started not to believe when the South African government got R500 billion, so I told the public that this Virus does not exist, the government just want to carelessly use the money, so they manipulate the Covid-19 stats numbers to get money.”* Scholars affirm that in the use of social media platforms such as X, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok, much unverified information about Covid-19 pandemic has been disseminated (Geo et al., 2021). It is evident that citizen journalists who were disseminating falsified information during the pandemic never considered the wellbeing of the public. Admittedly, we now live in a digitalised environment, where any information available online cannot be proven to be factual. Nevertheless, it ought to be a priority to acquire useful information, especially where a health pandemic is concerned. Consistent with prioritising the world health emergency, Respondents 4 and 10 asserted that they never disseminated false information during the pandemic:

Respondent 10: *“I have never. I was very careful with the kind of information disseminated on my platforms.”* Respondent 4: *“No, I never shared information that turned out not to be true.”* According to the respondents, one of the primary explanations for the spread of false information during the Covid-19 pandemic is citizen journalism. The dissemination of misleading information on social media may have contributed to the public’s failure to prioritise taking action to stop this dangerous illness. Hence, Hassim et al. (2022) conclude that social media during the pandemic increased confusion by dividing the public over what was genuine and misleading. In

this instance, citizen journalists were spreading any circulating information regarding the Covid-19 without verifying its accuracy. It is clear that a larger proportion of citizen journalists chased after clouts rather participate in the spread of accurate information about Covid-19. Furthermore, the ability to use technological gadgets such as a desktop computer, laptop, or mobile phone to slow down Covid-19's rapid spread is the key responsibility of citizen journalists. Consequently, social media are regarded as a quick-paced medium with the unique quality of consistently releasing content at the scheduled time and date. In this instance, citizen journalists are aware that anyone can publicly participate in the information-dissemination process online, regardless of whether they qualify as professional journalists. On the other hand, it appears that citizen journalists who spread false information are making this decision on their own. In actuality, people can quickly forget fake information that is in the public domain, but information found online is permanent. According to Saragih and Harahap (2020), there is historical evidence that online media are constantly accessible, regardless of technology advancements. Specifically, information that is shared online can go from one device to another, independent of time or age.

Respondents 1, 5 and 10 said they deleted the falsified information disseminated on their social media. Implicit in the responses of a majority of respondents was that upon discovering that they had been spreading false information to the public, they took immediate responsibility for their conduct. Out of respect, the respondents acknowledged journalism, and its necessary tools to enhance it. While most the respondents valued their work and addressed the false information, assuming accountability for their contribution to the spread of false information about Covid-19 became an issue. According to Respondent 9, being indiscreet is a form of self-censorship used to prevent negative social media reactions from the general public or influential people. This demonstrated how some citizen journalists carry out their duty of information dissemination out of the fear of retaliation.

To be more precise, in an effort to seem as flawless, error-free journalists, citizen journalists ignored the misleading information that was spread during the Covid-19 outbreak. Most respondents, however, held the opinion that inaccurate information

must be corrected as soon as it is recognised to be false. Citizen journalists should examine themselves and decide what is appropriate or inappropriate for their journalistic crafts, especially with regard to the freedom of information dissemination. This demonstrates that even when faced with criticism, people can act appropriately and think rationally. Understanding the extent to which one's acts may cause harm accompanies the capacity to accept accountability for their conduct as a citizen journalist.

4.4.3 Citizen journalists and unintentional spread of misinformation

Lazer (2018) refers to misinformation as false or inaccurate information that is unintentionally spread to deceive. Misinformation poses a threat to the public in pandemics such as Covid-19 (Zarocostas, 2020). A majority of the respondents said that they had not purposefully spread misleading information during the Covid-19 outbreak to encourage public skepticism. Respondents 5, 7, and 9 revealed false information on Covid-19 without realising it. However, the ramifications could have been substantial even if the respondent had no intention of hurting the public. Their subsequent statements were as follows:

Respondent 5: *"No, I never intentionally published false information on my platform because I knew it will jeopardise my platform and the community would lose trust in my news updates."* Respondent 9: *"No, not at all. The false information about the pandemic published on my page was not intentional. I did not mean any harm at all."* Respondent 7: *"No. I published information to inform the public about the Covid-19, but unfortunately some turned out to be false."* Alternatively, a notable number of respondents agreed to have disseminated information that instilled disbelief in the public. For Respondent 1, false information during the pandemic was used to simulate fabricated scenarios to solve the public's vaccination hesitancy. Meanwhile, Respondent 6 had intentions of spreading information whilst aware of its consequences.

Respondent 1 attested: *“Yes. Sometimes the spreading information mainly to raise an awareness on member who don’t believe about the existence of the pandemic. So, telling them ‘Falsely’ that a particular person whom they know has the virus will make them be more caution”*. *“Yes, just like I had hoped, some of my followers started sharing the videos and the news published on my page about how less the virus can spread or kill”* stated Respondent 6. As a result, it is evident that certain citizen journalists spread false information in an effort to create the impression that the Covid-19 pandemic is unreal. Apart from that, they withheld facts on the Covid-19 outbreak from the public to reinforce their doubts. In agreement, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) arguably claim that fake information, just like any other issue on social media, gains momentum as time goes by. Respondents accidentally spreading information demonstrate how difficult it was to distinguish between false and true information during the Covid-19 outbreak. Nevertheless, this does not excuse the way in which certain citizen journalists purposefully spread false information to deceive people about the Covid-19 outbreak.

A majority of citizen journalists comprehended the need to disseminate information, particularly in the event of a health epidemic. Their proactive corporate practices for information-sharing will enhance and further contextualise citizen journalism. Moreover, understanding how individuals conduct themselves is crucial to comprehending the role played by citizen journalists in spreading false information during the Covid-19 outbreak. It is important for a citizen journalists to have personal values, morals and an ability to face the realities of disseminating information. It is concluded that the quality of information disseminated does not depend on social media, but on citizen journalists.

4.4.4 Fact checking: The missing link

Respondents were asked if it was relatively simple for them to collect and assess information from unknown sources during the Covid-19 outbreak. Their responses are captured below:

Respondent 3: *“It wasn’t easy, but I relied mostly on well-established media houses like... Then from there I would check if they had victims of sources they were talking about before releasing information. For instances, for people who lost their family members due to Covid-19, I would wait on the reporter to conduct an interview with the family of the deceased to confirm credibility and verify what I am about to publish”.*

Respondent 1: *“Of course not. It is not easy because after getting that information we must conduct intensive checking of facts about the given information and calling reliable sources.”*

Given the above responses, most respondents presumed it was difficult to gather Covid-19 pandemic information from uncertain sources. It was well acknowledged by the respondents how the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic posed a serious threat to the public. Hence, it became important for most of them to tread with caution when gathering information about this mysterious disease. It is clear that citizen journalists, as active information disseminators during the Covid-19 epidemic, aided its outbreak and management in the same way that other entities did, that is, governments, media, researchers, etc.

Respondent 9: *“No, it was not easy. I could not differentiate between fake and factual information, so as a citizen journalist I sometimes followed my instinct when I was sharing information.”* However, some citizen journalists gave clear answers of how it was easy for them to gather information from untrusted sources during the Covid-19 pandemic. In support of this, Yang et al. (2020) confirm the trend of sharing information from untrusted and genuine sources was visible during Covid-19 pandemic. Similarly, other researchers the trend of the dissemination of falsified information during Covid-19 outbreak (Ding et al., 2019). In other words, citizen journalists who disseminate information from unestablished sources during Covid-19 pandemic on social media use it to satisfy themselves, even if it means sharing unconfirmed information.

“Many publishers do share or publish information before they could check the sources, so it was easy for my platform to spread the false information,” stated Respondent 6.

Respondent 8: *“Yes, everyone had information to give about the pandemic, false and*

true news were available on social media, and one could not differentiate between the two.” The Covid-19 pandemic itself is a health crisis that created a mixture of information from untrusted sources that is disseminated on social media by citizens. Although social media platforms are flooded with information, it is still important for citizen journalists to disseminate information from reliable sources, especially where health is involved. “Digital media and the internet have provided everyone access to diverse sources that were limited to an elite few in the past” (Gao et al., 2023:32). Therefore, citizen journalists need to use the information from various verified sources available online when gathering Covid-19-related matters. The advantage is that citizen journalists will avoid relying on their self-interpretations and speculations.

As it occurred, citizen journalists did not think that they spread misleading information on purpose during the pandemic. As previously said, a majority of the respondents shared anything that appeared to be accurate since they were unable to distinguish between true and false information. Furthermore, some citizen journalists chose to ignore the problem when they realised they had spread misleading material, but others held themselves accountable. The study’s results show that, despite conflicting information and challenging decision-making, some citizen journalists relied only on their personal beliefs. In fact, a majority of citizen journalists demonstrated proficiency in information management throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.5 SECTION 3

OBJECTIVE 3: THE SPREAD OF DISINFORMAION BY CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

Interpreted by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017:05), “disinformation is when false information is knowingly disseminated to cause harm”. In accord, Hulme et al. (2020) define disinformation as all kinds of falsified information that are developed with intentions to cause harm to the public. This misleading information is often used to manipulate people in terms of influencing their opinions and causing damage to

involved individual. Citizens on social media have adopted an attitude of gathering rumours and conspiracies just to fabricate information.

4.5.1 Information about the Covid-19 pandemic

When asked which misleading information during the Covid-19 outbreak was most widely circulated, the respondents provided the following views:

Respondent 9 stated: *“That lockdown was not necessary, and it will still increase the number of infections.”* *“That Covid-19 was a myth and that medical practitioners are responsible for the death of those who were said to be killed by Covid-19”* said Respondent 8. In both public and academic surroundings, the term falsified information in simple terms is portrayed as misinformation and disinformation. Concerning well-being, public health disinformation and misinformation promote concerning and risky behaviour in the population (Kharod & Simmons, 2020). According to the respondents, citizen journalists had different forms of false information disseminated on their platforms.

“Most false information disseminated on my platforms is that it is meant to execute the people in order to regulate population” expressed Respondent 1.

Respondent 7: *“I disseminated information that the Covid-19 disease only kill people who are in their 60’s, people with chronic diseases to decrease population, which turned out to be false.”* Some respondents shared how they disseminated false information to the broader public to oppose Covid-19 preventive treatment, which resulted in vaccine hesitancy. To them, vaccines were not effective and had severe side-effects. Others argued that the virus was intentionally created by a certain group of people to harm the public. Respondent 6 opined that foreign people were responsible for the spread of the disease in the country. The following opinions were stated by the respondents:

Respondent 8: *“That Covid-19 was a myth and that medical practitioners are responsible for the death of those who were said to be killed by Covid-19”.*

“Information about the vaccines were mostly coupled with confusion, however I shared how vaccines are not safe for our bodies and will make us sick even more” conveyed Respondent 5.

“It was that the pandemic was spread by foreigners” opined Respondent 6.

According to the responses, citizen journalists took turns in disseminating different false information during the Covid-19 pandemic. The information spread by citizen journalists proved to be the case of misleading content about Corona Virus. The results show that the citizen journalists’ beliefs about this disease were that it was dangerous to the public. However, Hartley and Khuong (2020) shared how disinformation is much more destructive since it encourages properly thought-out notions to alter people’s perceptions of reality and behaviour, whereas misinformation was primarily distributed to impede valid health advice. The respondents’ responses regarding which false information was spread the most by citizen journalists proved the disbelief and showed the pandemic to be ‘not too bad’ as portrayed by the government and the media. Therefore, this indicates that citizen journalists contributed to the level of dis-misinformation disseminated during the Covid-19 pandemic. With so much contradictory information about Covid-19 that was available online, citizen journalists as a collective or as individuals may potentially have made up stories or shared those that were already on the internet. Similarly, the study agrees that at the start of the pandemic, citizen journalists played a role in making Covid-19 matters even more confusing, by giving contradicting information, which resulted in misinformation (Tagliabue, Galassi and Mariani, 2020). While people were adapting to the behavioural patterns that surfaced with the Covid-19 pandemic, citizen journalists undoubtedly played a role in the increment of anxiety and panic in the public. How citizen journalists are not willing to stand with the government in times of need indicates how they use journalism for themselves, thus compromising the public.

4.5.2 The level of dis-misinformation spread during the Covid-19 pandemic

The respondents were asked to rate the level of dis-misinformation disseminated on their platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic. The degrees were rated on a scale of

1-5, from very low to extremely high. Most citizen journalists as respondents rated the level of dis-misinformation spread during the pandemic as high, which was on level three on the scale. Other respondents believed that the level of dis-misinformation disseminated was extremely high, which was level 5. On the other hand, a smaller number of respondents disseminated a 'high medium' of dis-information during the Covid-19 pandemic. These results proved that disinformation and misinformation were frequently being disseminated by citizen journalists at a high rate. The level of dis-misinformation disseminated varied from forged content, misleading information and false context. The fact that all their ratings on the scale were in the high category (3-5), this means the level of dis-misinformation disseminated during the pandemic in the country remains excessive.

Generally, the production of this dis-misinformation resulted in the coinage of the famous term "infodemic" during the pandemic. WHO (2021:05) regards an infodemic as "an increase in information, including erroneous or misleading information, in digital and physical surroundings during an epidemic of a disease". According to WHO (2020:15), the "Covid-19 pandemic has proven to be not only an epidemic but also an infodemic, given that the spreading of the virus has been accompanied by an explosion of fake news, in general misinformation about the disease". Therefore, the intervention of the world's intergovernmental organisation to the spread of falsified content in a form of dis-misinformation proved to be the universal issue and not just localised. As a result, the surge of this disinformation and misinformation does not only apply in the country. According to Tangecharoensathien et al. (2020), the Covid-19 infodemic has proven that the public often find themselves on the losing side, because misinformation hijacks their ability to think as a whole society. This trend of disseminating false information can hinder citizen journalists from noticing what is really important, especially where health pandemic is concerned. However, citizen journalists must prioritise society's cravings for well-grounded information during the pandemic.

4.5.3 Measures to ensure information accuracy

In light of the foregoing, the study's respondents were questioned regarding the preventive steps they took during the Covid-19 pandemic to ensure the accuracy of the data gathered. It was noted that each respondent employed particular safety measures when gathering information with some employing a common approach to compile correct data while others had their own special ways of doing so. The respondents gave the following responses:

Respondent 10: *"I linked material from numerous sources to ensure that it was accurate. I also verified the trustworthiness of my sources, ensuring that they have a track record of giving accurate and balanced information."* Respondent 8: *"Yes, I was evaluating, analysing and verifying sources before I shared information about Covid-19". "I made sure not to take information from uncertain sources and those posted on media platforms"* affirmed Respondent 6. To provide accurate information, respondents described how they relied on sources to get data. This demonstrates that a majority of the information shared during the pandemic came from a third party. Regarding precautionary measures for information distribution, citizen journalists now recognise the critical need to use sources to uncover accurate and truthful information. As a result of their perceived need to avoid spreading misleading information and deceiving the public, citizen journalists feel compelled to gather information from sources.

Other respondents relied on popular media houses to collect information that is based on facts during the pandemic. Another precautionary measure followed by Respondents 2 and 3 was to verify the information with popular media houses and trusted platforms on the internet. By consulting different media platforms to get information, citizen journalists used the method of researching and verifying with multiple sources when collecting Covid-19 data. Respondent 3: *"Well, to get correct information is to know wish source that will give accurate information more especially during the pandemic health officials were only right source of information."* Respondent 2: *"I listen to one of the popular radio stations like.., watched the news and was always*

following online as well with....” From the results, it can be seen that all citizen journalists have access to correct information by collecting data from multiple sources. The comparison of multiple sources by citizen journalists to ensure that they collect the correct information during the pandemic was the one easy to use. However, other precautionary measures such as careful consideration of time when data is collected were not mentioned by the citizen journalists. Therefore, citizen journalists should consider other techniques to follow when seeking accurate information other than the sole use of sources. The use of different approaches and techniques will enable citizen journalists to reach all levels of correct information during a health pandemic such as Covid-19.

4.5.4 Various techniques used to ensure accuracy

The citizen journalists in this study were asked if they had special techniques that they applied to gather and keep up correct information during the Covid-19 pandemic. Respondent 4 said that they disseminated information without following any steps to keep up with the correct information. This gives the impression that respondents collected information such as rumours, falsified information and conspiracies to take part in disseminating information during the pandemic.

“No. I did not have any special technique. I just published any Covid-19 information I came across on social media” said Respondent 4.

Moreover, Respondents 3, 6 and 8 relied on sources to seek more understanding on how to take important decisions during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, citizen journalists used their sources as part of the special techniques needed to collect and disseminate information that is based on facts. Respondent 3’s special technique was to use the same sources repeatedly. To them, it was important to gather information from multiple sources. Moreover, the respondents believed in this technique as it allowed them to comprehensively understand the Covid-19 pandemic and avoid being bias about it.

Respondent 8: *“I used the same sources and made sure I verify with them before I could publish any information.” “I made sure to have first-hand sources, not talk to sources others have talked to, and I always double checked the facts”* pointed Respondent 6. Respondent 3: *“Yes, I asked more than 2 sources on topic and check if they information does match before reporting. And after conducting my very own research.”* However, the credibility of the sources they relied on were crucially considered by others. Even though the other respondents trusted sources enough to use them to collect information, they ensured the data was from credible and verified media houses. Respondents 1, 2 and 9 subscribed to verified digital platforms as their techniques. Through subscription, the respondents became members of those channels. This proves that the respondents had an early access of information regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the subscription gives the channel an idea of what kind of information citizen journalists are looking for, including the content closely related to what they are looking for, from other channels. Thus, citizen journalists can be part of the subscribed community, with great chances of getting more exposure on the Covid-19 matter. Moreover, citizen journalists can comment on the channel and see comments from others that could potentially provide them with more accurate Covid-19 information.

Respondent 9 affirmed, *“Most of the channels I subscribed to, they notified me daily with the latest news”*. *“Yes I subscribed to news channels and made a notification to alert me when they uploaded videos”* expressed Respondent 1. On the same note, Respondent 2 said: *“Yes, I subscribed to trusted news channels to make sure I get the information first through their notifications.”* Furthermore Respondents 5 and 7 mentioned that their technique was to wait for the WHO media statements before they could disseminate information. According to the respondents, this was the only technique they had to follow to keep up with the correct information to share with their fellow citizens during the pandemic. The following are some of the views:

“My technique was to check WHO website daily to extract official information,”
Respondent 5 indicated.

“I continuously checked WHO on social media platforms and watched news on television” replied Respondent 7.

On the other side, Respondent 10 had a different technique from others to get information that could pass as factual during the Covid-19 pandemic. This citizen journalist mentioned how they educated themselves about the virus as their special technique before they could share the information with the public. The argument was that new information emerged daily during the pandemic requiring one to study it before dissemination. In particular, according to the response, as different information on the virus surfaced, they increased their knowledge and gave more understanding of the pandemic.

“Yes. I routinely updated my knowledge as stories change and new facts emerge” said Respondent 10.

From the results, it can be noted that all the citizen journalists as respondents of this study individually had their own special technique that they applied to keep up with the correct information during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, having these special techniques during the pandemic did not guarantee that the information they shared is correct. This is because, a lot more information that was available on websites came in different forms and was interpreted differently by citizen journalists. In support of this, researchers argue that there is no portion of information that can be taken as false during Covid-19 pandemic (Shahi et al., 2020). In agreement, different data circulating at the same time could result in information overload. In such a case, citizen journalists cannot tell whether the information they are seeking is correct, or completely false. Chances are that citizen journalists' techniques used during Covid-19 pandemic truly scored them factual information. Through all such techniques, citizen journalists gain insights on health pandemics such as Covid-19. Furthermore,

having a specific data collecting technique as a citizen journalist can curb biasness in selecting correct information. If the citizen journalists are to stick to a special technique when gathering information, chances of reducing risks during a health crisis will remain higher. Moreover, the trend of using online sources extends the ability of citizen journalists to search for the truth when disseminating information. Social media platforms are a tool that has gained momentum overtime with more accessibility to investigations. However, it is important for citizen journalists to find a way to utilise these tools during any health pandemics. With social media, citizen journalists can use various languages to communicate and follow trends that will help them to keep up with the correct information.

4.5.5 Verification of Sources

The respondents were asked, “How frequently did you check your source’s claims in order to minimise the spread of false information disseminated during Covid-19 pandemic?” In response, most respondents claimed that they checked the sources information before they could start disseminating.

Respondent 3: *“More frequently, since we rely on people for information to check claim before publishing because sometime those sources to make mistakes which will lead to your story being false without checking of facts.”* *“I fact-checked every information from my sources every time before I published, sometimes I would check the news to ensure that the information that I publish is recognised by the big media”* asserted Respondent 5. Respondent 10: *“I would disclose any misunderstandings and restrictions in my information. Maintain journalism ethics by minimising issues between interest and sensationalism.”* As a citizen who is interested in disseminating information that can affect the public in any way, one should be able to achieve accuracy, reliability and credibility in their writing. As a citizen journalist, it should not be easy to believe everything one hears, or reads on social media. To prevent disseminating information that one is unsure of as a citizen journalist, one should verify every piece of information. In the face of a pandemic such as Covid-19, which at its outbreak had little to nothing known about it, citizen journalists should be careful of

what people claim to know or claim to be accurate information. Undoubtedly, making a close examination of information will simplify the truth and lay a good foundation for addressing the dis-misinformation that citizen journalists come across during a health pandemic.

This section focused on the spread of the disinformation disseminated by citizen journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. The results indicate that citizen journalists highly disseminated disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. The respondents agreed to have made up stories such as the virus is not real, and that vaccines are to distract the public from the truth. Additionally, most respondents claimed to have taken the information from reliable sources where data was verified before dissemination. However, citizen journalists still managed to disseminate the dis-misinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.6 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter presented and analysed the data on the role of citizen journalists in disseminating information, their contribution to the spread of falsified, misinformation and disinformation during Covid-19 pandemic. Reflecting on the responses, a well-behaved citizen journalist is expected to adhere to set of professional standards and ethics regardless of their academic or any good training. Moreover, the respondents were aware that their ability and dedication towards citizen journalism could contribute greatly to the communities' innovativeness and promotion of the importance of their role. The chapter revealed that most citizen journalists were adept at managing information during the Covid-19 pandemic, despite the mixed information and difficult decision-making, with some relying solely on their personal beliefs while some respondents still managed to highly disseminate misleading content as a mixture of misinformation and disinformation.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5. INTRODUCTION

This chapter involves the findings taken from data presentation and analysis. The data presented was collected from ten citizen journalists in five provinces in South Africa (Gauteng, Western Cape, Mpumalanga, Kwa-Zulu Natal and Limpopo). This study's conclusion is based on the preceding chapter's findings. The recommendations are also made in light of the study's findings.

5.1 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

5.1.1 OBJECTIVE 1: THE ROLE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISTS IN DISSEMINATING INFORMATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

According to the findings on the role of citizen journalists in disseminating information during Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa, the respondents were very much aware of their roles. This was evident through their articulation of the role they played in informing and educating the public about the new circumstances such as Covid-19 pandemic, which may have an impact on decision-making. In this case, the primary concern during the pandemic was to present ideas and support citizens' interests. Therefore, the findings indicated that the citizen journalists' information dissemination can be plausible during a health crisis. This indicated that citizen journalists used their privilege of access to technological devices and internet to help others. Because of advanced technologies, people who are often excluded from political, economic and social sphere had a chance of being included during the pandemic. The findings stipulated that the respondents respected and valued their role, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The respondents also believed they promoted interactivity, which in turn encouraged more citizens to create their own content, allowing them to actively engage about Covid-19. This allowed the citizen journalists to form their own world press that focused on delivering information through social media. In this regard, they played an active role of allowing a two-way flow of conversation between the content creator with

audiences, and audiences to audiences. This is noted on social media where information is produced and disseminated among the users with an intention to inform them, and turn it into a back to back conversation. As a result, citizens eventually create dialogues on social media, forming collaboration through journalism. Accordingly, the respondents described how they became more effective in disseminating information during the pandemic. Notably, the focus was to disseminate a large quantity of information for the public to freely access. Hence, they proved to have the ability to provide the community with information at crucial times. On a similar note, they believed to have disseminated the information with a sense of emergency during the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, social media platforms enabled citizen journalists to share timely updates and thus help to inform the public about rapidly changing situations. Certainly, the digital era allows social media to be the fastest and most effective means of publishing information around the world.

5.1.2 OBJECTIVE 2: SPREADING FALSIFIED INFORMATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The respondents stated that they highly contributed to the spread of falsified information during Covid-19 pandemic. However, the promotion of falsified information during Covid-19 pandemic was not meant to cause harm to the public. Digital media platforms provide citizens with an opportunity to disseminate information without any limitations. Through the use of social media, one can disseminate forwarded information or repost an idea without a clue of how it would contribute to spreading falsified information during the pandemic. In this regard, the respondents agreed to have contributed to the dissemination of false information; however, unintentionally.

The respondents also acknowledged to be the cause of false information dissemination escalating faster during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, they believed some of the false information might have instilled disbelief among the people. In the respondents' view, this was ascribable to the conflict of information surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. This is seen on social media debates surrounding the effectiveness of Covid-19 precautionary measures (vaccination, sanitation, lockdown, wearing masks, distance). Therefore, being exposed to conflicting health information

on social media can bring more confusion to the public, including disseminations of inaccurate information on Covid-19.

5.1.3 OBJECTIVE 3: THE SPREAD OF MIS-DISINFORMATION

Majority respondents agreed to have disseminated contradicting information that led to a mixture of misinformation and disinformation. It is believed the false information disseminated added to the rise of misinformation and disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. This proved that false information (mis-disinformation) is disseminated frequently at a high rate. The reason could be that citizen journalists view every information flooding on social media as newsworthy.

According to the respondents, specific precautionary measures were taken to collect and disseminate information on the Covid-19 pandemic. Most respondents described how they relied on sources that wanted to directly be involved in the collection of information about the Covid-19 pandemic while others used multiple sources to provide additional information about the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the main reason could have been that, during the pandemic, more sources helped the writer to maintain information while giving different perspectives on the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the most special technique that was used was to subscribe to different news channels which operated digitally. The possibility was that high-quality information was disseminated on the Covid-19 pandemic on such platforms. However, social media and other digital platforms are overly loaded with data, which makes it difficult for citizen journalists to differentiate between accurate and inaccurate information.

5.2 THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

5.2.1 Diffusion of Innovation Theory and the role of citizen journalists in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic

The respondents acknowledged the use of citizen journalism as a way of disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic. They further stated that the use of technological platforms such as social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, and X) played a crucial role in educating and informing the public about the pandemic.

Accordingly, citizen journalism disseminating information disseminating information on an impending health pandemic such as Covid-19 on social media was new innovation.

This supports the assumption of the Diffusion of Innovation Theory, which states that an idea that is regarded as new even if it has been around for a while will be recognised by individuals as new to them (Rogers, 2003). Based on this study, citizen journalists' main objective was to provide updates, including briefings, press conferences, media statement release, etc., on social media to the public as events unfolded on Covid-19 pandemic. However, the idea in citizen journalism disseminating information has been around for a while, but now regarded as new because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The respondents' views highly acknowledged the positive impact that social media had in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, the respondents harnessed the power of social media to provide citizens with the space where they could come together to fight the surge of Covid-19. In this instance, social media platforms were used to open communication channels to allow the public to interact with each other regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. The respondents used social media to create and share Covid-19 information from the source to the receiver to reach a mutual understanding about the pandemic. This indicates that two or more citizen journalists were included in practicing citizen journalism to spread Covid-19 information to the public.

In addition, the rapid spread of Covid-19 information through citizen journalism focus on the time element of the theory. The privilege to capture photos and videos that could create an engaging content at any time in any place simplified complex Covid-19 information. This was in conjunction with the theory's assumption that the diffusion of innovation process, adoption of an idea, its categorisation and rate include a time dimension (Rogers, 2003). In behavioral circumstances, the time element of the theory is mostly not given attention. However, in the context of this study, the respondents shared their insights of Covid-19 health pandemic to a broader audiences keeping their communities updated in real time.

5.2.2 The Diffusion of Innovation Theory and the contribution of falsified information during the Covid-19 pandemic

The respondents attested to having contributed to the dissemination of falsified information during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the narrative was that contribution to the spread of false information was not done deliberately. According to the respondents, the priority was to gather any interesting Covid-19 information on social media whether it was true or false. Alternatively, citizen journalism was used to share their own ideas, opinions and personal challenges faced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Likewise, the Diffusion of Innovation Theory proffers that this finding, which is seen as citizen journalism disseminating false information could be regarded as an innovation that is adopted and spread to the public through social media platforms. Nevertheless, citizen journalists enhance Covid-19 false information, causing it to travel quickly through communication channels such as social media networks and platforms. Citizen journalism influence can cause the adoption of Covid-19 false information as normal and leading it to be accepted during the pandemic.

5.2.3 Diffusion of Innovation Theory and the spread of mis-disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic

A majority of the respondents agreed that the dissemination of Covid-19 pandemic information added to the level of misinformation and disinformation. They stated that the information disseminated was from excessive to extreme levels of misinformation and disinformation. Therefore, citizen journalism spreading misinformation and disinformation can be viewed as innovations that were adopted and shared to the public. Misinformation is an unintentional spread of false information, while disinformation is spread intentionally (Lazer et al., 2018; Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). Therefore, in line with the Diffusion of Innovation Theory, citizen journalists adopts misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms and disseminate to others to form Covid-19 manipulation.

During the pandemic, citizen journalists' different personal beliefs, values and ideologies caused divisions in the public. Conflicting views such as the dangers and effectiveness of vaccine, lockdown and economic restrictions to manage the Covid-19

pandemic caused sharp disagreements on social media. Consequently, citizens accused each other of being irresponsible during the pandemic. Thus, the spread of false information and conspiracy theories about the virus contributed to spread of misinformation and disinformation, making it difficult to have a common ground on the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation on social media is a way of amplifying new and long existing false information. On the other hand, the misinformation and disinformation lead to the erosion of trust from the public, making it challenging for citizen journalists to provide the Covid-19 information effectively.

5.2.4 Participatory Culture Theory and the role of citizen journalists in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic

The respondents believed they fulfilled the role of disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic. In their description, citizen journalism allowed them to create content for consumers of information and form participation as a community to influence discourse on the Covid-19 pandemic. In relation to the Participatory Culture Theory, the link was that individuals or communities as a whole could act as both the consumers and creators of meaning while playing an important role of influencing the content (Jenkins, 2006). The theory advocates for citizens to use their access to technological platforms, such as social media, to create conversations and give information a meaning (De Michiel, 2008). During the Covid-19 pandemic, respondents played a significant role by participating in the culture of disseminating information to help members of the community to construct the meaning of the virus.

Moreover, the content created about Covid-19 pandemic provided a broader perspective of what community engagements mean. In addition, the theory emphasises that social media platforms guarantee new opportunities to build conversations around issues that people face difficulties in addressing (Constanza et al., 2012). The Covid-19 pandemic emerged with a huge change of news culture, allowing the public, especially the marginalised, to experience independence while pushing the boundaries of participation. Therefore, the hypothesis of theory is that because of advances of technologies, people are now moving away from being

passive consumers of information to actively participating in information production and dissemination (Jenkins, 2006). This study employed the Participatory Culture Theory to highlight that citizens are playing a vital role in shaping the information around Covid-19 while promoting public engagement.

5.2.5 Participatory Culture Theory and the contribution of falsified information during the Covid-19 pandemic

One of the assumptions of Participatory Culture Theory is that the usage of technological integration allows the users to actively participate in disrupting information (Jenkins, 2006). Since citizen journalism uses social media to disseminate information, it can be argued that the respondents fulfilled the participatory culture value. However, the theory emphasises that the active role of individuals in creating and sharing content can contribute to the spread of false information. This was apparent in the respondents stating that they could not differentiate between factual and non-factual information; instead, they relied on multiple sources, which could lead to the spread of inaccuracies. Therefore, participation at the forefront allowed the public to engage in attention-grabbing content that led to falsified information about the Covid-19 pandemic.

5.2.6 Participatory Culture Theory and the spread of mis-disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic

A majority of the respondents agreed to have participated in disseminating information, which added to misinformation and disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their views were in harmony with this theory, which states that citizens have the ability to shape the content, making it difficult to determine the reliability of a source (Jenkins, 2006). This theory holds that the new form of participation in creating content on the internet is not only for passive audiences, but for anyone to contribute to keeping the world informed (Singo, 2020). Moreover, the respondents supported the premise of this theory by creating and sharing Covid-19 information, which included deliberately sharing misleading content. This also means the respondents were struggling to differentiate between what is right and wrong before disseminating information. The views also supported the theory's belief that there should be an interaction about new

topics on social media. This means when people fail to do so, the role of disseminating information is neglected.

Overall, the findings fairly support the theories of the study (Diffusion of Innovation and Participatory Culture). The respondents understood the role they played in disseminating information, including false information, misinformation and disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. The Diffusion of Innovation Theory explained that the idea of disseminating Covid-19 information on social media platforms was adopted by individuals over time. Similarly, this strongly stands with the theory that audiences should be the consumers of content and simultaneously participate in creating its meaning. Undoubtedly, it is obvious that those who created and disseminated information, whether accurate or inaccurate, affirmed the notions of Diffusion of Innovation and Participatory Culture theories.

5.3 SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation looked at the role of citizen journalism in the dissemination of information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. The existence of the Corona Virus pandemic has undoubtedly strengthened and changed the practice of citizen journalism. Through social media, citizen journalism has significantly improved and expanded the reach and accessibility of information. Thus, the pandemic has led to an unprecedented demand for information, with people seeking to engage with others and make informed decisions. In this regard, the demand for information increased, resulting in citizen journalists becoming a critical component in responding to and managing the pandemic. However, the availability of Covid-19 information has led to an increasing mix of information, contributing to the spread of fake information, misinformation, and disinformation. The volume and complexity of information made it difficult for citizen journalists to distinguish fact from fiction, reinforcing existing biases, which led to the spread of false information (misinformation and disinformation). Furthermore, the conflicting information during the pandemic had a significant impact on the role of citizen journalism. The specific aims of this study were: To explore the

role of citizen journalists in disseminating information, to assess their contribution to the spread of misinformation, and to investigate the extent of misinformation and disinformation spread during the Covid-19 pandemic.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For this study, a qualitative method was employed. Online interviews were conducted with ten citizen journalists from the five provinces of South Africa (Gauteng, Limpopo, Kwa-Zulu Natal, Mpumalanga, and Western Cape). The interviews, which took place from December 2023 to March 2024, were selected through purposive sampling focusing on the role of citizen journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic. Data was gathered using an interview guide that included open-ended questions. Themes were generated and the participants' responses were analysed in detail. The collected data was structured considering the study's variables.

RESULTS

THE ROLE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISTS IN DISSEMINATING INFORMATION

The respondents in this study believed that they played an important role in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic, precisely because they thought citizen journalists provided important information about local outbreaks, lockdowns and public health responses. They added that they disseminated information to represent marginalised communities and filled the gaps left by the mainstream media. In the participants' view, citizen journalists reported on a hyperlocal level, focusing on specific communities and neighbourhoods that were often overlooked by mainstream media. Despite the challenges, they understood that the effectiveness of information dissemination could strengthen public participation. Citizen journalists facilitated community engagement and provided a platform for the public to share their concerns, experiences and opinions on the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, the production of Covid-19 information was found to have raised an awareness of local issues and niche problems related to the pandemic. That is, they have contributed to a better understanding of complex Covid-19 information. On the other hand, the participants believed that citizen journalists disseminated information

about the Covid-19 pandemic on their social media platforms in a timely and often faster manner.

SPREADING FALSIFIED INFORMATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As the study found, citizen journalists contributed to the spread of false information during the Covid-19 pandemic. The said journalists contributed through various means, such as making unconfirmed claims, promoting conspiracy theories as well as exaggerated and misinterpreted information. According to the respondents, when false information was uncovered, corrective statements and apologies were issued along with clarifications and new updates. However, the respondents proffered that the false information was not deliberately disseminated to harm the public. Even though they could distinguish between right and wrong, the respondents believed that some of the information disseminated was ambiguous. Therefore, they believed that the application of journalistic guiding principles in the dissemination of information could effectively contribute to responsible reporting. By prioritising accountability, respondents maintained the role of information dissemination when inaccurate information was removed, and new information was updated. However, the respondents stated how it was challenging to obtain information about the Covid-19 pandemic from uncertain sources. For them, the tricky part about disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic was to verify the accuracy of information.

SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The citizen journalists interviewed in this study disseminated an excessive amount of misinformation and disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. In their opinion, a noteworthy quantity of misinformation and disinformation was spread during the pandemic. Furthermore, in their opinion, the respondents participated in the spread of misinformation and disinformation, which posed a serious challenge in identifying correct information. To guarantee that the information disseminated was accurate, citizen journalists had to rely on gathering information from various sources. However, a majority of respondents felt that the techniques used to confirm accuracy were not

highly dependable. Furthermore, respondents stated that their over-reliance on certain sources was the reason for the dissemination of false and misleading information. Therefore, due to the pressure to report quickly, respondents often did not check their sources of information. Furthermore, respondents indicated that the increasing demand for Covid-19 information required rapid reporting, which resulted in the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation.

5.4 CONCLUSION

The importance of citizen journalism as a result of digital development and its crucial role in the dissemination of information in our lives cannot be overestimated. During the Covid-19 pandemic, citizen journalists proved how possible it is to take on the role of democratising information. Moreover, citizen journalists are showing how important it is to report on local issues and bring the media specifically to places that the mainstream media cannot reach. Furthermore, citizen journalists bring diverse perspectives to the Covid-19 pandemic by making the voices of the voiceless heard and enriching the public discourse.

South African citizen journalists explained that they understood the qualities that make a good journalist, regardless of their lack of journalistic training. They also explained that part of their job was to bring awareness and health educate the public about the pandemic. This means that citizen journalists correctly understand that journalism can put them in a position to hold those in power accountable for Covid-19. This reflects the role of citizen journalists in exposing depravity and promoting transparency. Obviously, citizen journalists disseminated a mixture of information (fake information, misinformation, and disinformation) during the pandemic. This proves that citizen journalists are fulfilling their role of disseminating information, regardless of whether it was accurate or inaccurate during the pandemic. Overall, citizen journalism in this study played the role of disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings, the study proposes the following recommendations:

- Since citizen journalism developed with the digital media, it is important for citizen journalists to learn about digital literacy that will enable them to effectively practice journalism online. Media literacy is crucial in today's digital era, where it can promote the citizen journalists' critical thinking and analytical skills. Without a doubt, this will enable citizen individuals to evaluate information, in a way of assessing the credibility and reliability of a source.
- With only a smartphone and a good internet connection, the Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools that are available can best assist at identifying patterns of false information, including misinformation and disinformation. These AI tools can be used in fact-checking information, analysing credible sources, detecting fake and manipulated pictures and video content before it can be shared on social media. Globally, some of the available AI-powered fact-checking tools that can assist citizen journalists to make better judgement and oversight information online include Google's Fact Checking Tool and Facebook's Fact-Checking Partners.
- During a health pandemic, citizens should be encouraged to support health education to reduce chances of false information spreading in the public. This will promote the usage of evidence-based medication prescribed to fight the Covid-19 virus. In this way, health education during the pandemic will essentially be to control the dissemination of the virus, reduce the burden of healthcare professionals, and supporting individuals to make informed decisions about their health.
- Citizen journalists should be encouraged to get knowledge professionally about journalism. This is because education in journalism is very important to develop writing skills, ethical principles, critical thinking and research skills. For citizen journalists to be successful in journalism, they can register for some free courses offered online. The following institutions in South Africa offer free online courses in the journalism that aims to promote a social cause (Citizen Justice

Network at Wits University, South African National Editors Forum with Project Management Institute).

5.6 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

The overriding aim of this study was to analyse the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. In summary, this chapter outlined the presentation findings, theoretical assumptions, recommendations, and conclusion of the study. The key results of this study briefly highlighted the role citizen journalism played in disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Moreover, the findings of the study fairly support the two theories (Diffusion of Innovation and Participatory Culture Theory). Overall, the study concludes that citizen journalism have the ability to critically play a role in disseminating information, whether it is good or bad. Obviously, participating in citizen journalism may influence the dissemination of falsified information (misinformation and disinformation). The inclusion of recommendations is for citizen journalists to make informed decisions when disseminating information, especially for future pandemics.

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APPENDIX 1



University of Limpopo

School of Languages and Communication Studies

Department of Media, Communication & Information Studies

Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa

Cell: 0744729065, Email: 201812686@keyaka.ul.ac.za

Date: 25 May 2023

From: Miss Kgasago

Subject: A REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN A MASTERS STUDY

I am kindly requesting your participation in a Masters Research Study conducted by Ms. **KOPANO KGASAGO: 201812686**, at University of Limpopo in the Department of Media, Communication and Information Studies. The study is titled: **THE ROLE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISTS IN DISSEMINATING INFORMATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SOUTH AFRICA**. Based on your experience as a citizen journalist, this letter serves as an invitation for an interview with the researcher which should take approximately an hour of your time. The interview will contain questions based on the subject of the research.

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyse the role of citizen journalists, how they contribute to false information and the level of disseminating misinformation and disinformation during Covid-19 pandemic, specifically in South Africa. Your participation in this research will help the public understand the role citizen journalists play during health pandemics. Please note that participation in this study is by free will, you have an option to withdraw at any time should you feel uncomfortable during the interview.

This study's proposal has been submitted to the University of Limpopo Research Ethics Committee and adheres to its guidelines. Hence, a consent form explaining the participants and the researcher's expectations is available and will be asked to sign before taking part. Should you have any questions with this research paper, do not hesitate to get in touch with me.

Kind Regards

.....

Ms. Kgasago Kopano

APPENDIX 2



University of Limpopo

School of Languages and Communication Studies

Department of Media, Communication & Information Studies

Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727, South Africa

Cell: 0744729065, Email: 201812686@keyaka.ul.ac.za

Date: 25 May 2023

From: Miss Kgasago K

Student no: 201812686

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS CONSENT FOR MASTERS RESEARCH STUDY

Prior to collecting data, the researcher will give the respondents an overview of the study, after which they will be given this consent form to read and sign if they decide to participate.

I, Kopano Kgasago, have explained the purpose of the study to the respondents and his or her rights with regard to taking part in the study. She/He voluntarily consents to take part in this dissertation.

Kind regards

.....

.....

.....

Participant

Signature

Date

APPENDIX 3

SECTION A: PARTICIPANT'S PROFILE

PROVINCE		
GENDER		
AGE		
YEARS AS CITIZEN JOURNALIST		
NO OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLARTFORMS MANAGING		

INTERVIEW GUIDE.

INTERVIEW: SEMI-STRUCTURED (OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS)

SECTION B: THE ROLE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISTS IN DISSEMINATING INFORMATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SOUTH AFRICA.

1. What traits do you think a good citizen journalist should have?

.....
.....

2. According to you, what is the role of a citizen journalist in society?

.....
.....

3. In your own opinion, what role did you play as a citizen journalist during Covid-19 pandemic?

-
.....
4. Do you believe you performed your duty of disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic effectively? Give reason for your response.

-
.....
5. How quickly did you release information each day concerning the Covid-19 pandemic?

.....
.....

SECTION C: CITIZEN JOURNALISTS CONTRIBUTION TO THE SPREAD OF FALSIFIED INFORMATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SOUTH AFRICA.

1. Do you believe that citizen journalists deliberately published information that contributed to the dissemination of false information?

-
.....
2. Have you ever disseminated information during the Covid-19 pandemic only to discover afterwards that it was false?

-
.....
3. How did you respond when you realized that the information you had released was false?

4. Did you spread false information during the pandemic solely to instill disbelief and mistrust among the public?

.....
.....

5. Did it feel easy to you to gather and evaluate information on the Covid-19 pandemic from uncertain sources?

.....
.....

SECTION D: THE LEVEL OF MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION DISSEMINATED BY CITIZEN JOURNALISTS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SOUTH AFRICA.

1. What was the most false information that was posted on your platform during the Covid-19 pandemic?

.....
.....

2. What would you rate as the overall level of false information spread during the Covid-19 epidemic on a scale of 1 to 5 be?

.....
.....

3. What precautions did you take to make sure that the information you gathered was factual and correct?

.....
.....

4. Did you have a special technique you employed to keep up with the correct information?

-
.....
5. How frequently did you check your sources' claims in order to minimize the amount of false information before publishing on the Covid-19 pandemic?

.....
.....

END OF INTERVIEW

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION