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Research Article

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND DISSEMINATION OF COVID-19 INFORMATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE DIRECTION OF CRISIS INFORMATION TRANSMISSION IN KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Every community in the modern-day world has a substantial number of social media users and subscribers. Of extreme concern is that these users form part of the society that has been negatively and positively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic information both directly and indirectly. The information disseminated through social media particularly the lockdown regulations and vaccination information was irrevocably endemic. Therefore, purpose of this study is to analyse the influence of social media on the dissemination of COVID-19 information in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. The study adopted literature review method and data was analysed using qualitative content analysis. The data were collected from the Provincial Department of health official social media platforms' posts that were published between 2020 and 2022 conveying the implementation of the National lockdown and administering of COVID-19 vaccination. The key finding of the study indicated that social media had great influence on dissemination of COVID-19 information and the platforms followed a top-down approach. Therefore, the study recommends that the department should be more responsive and interactive effectively and timeously with its followers. This study is critical to the government as identified areas of social media usage which need improvements in case of future catastrophes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to De-Coninck (2021), while COVID-19 was spreading aggressively and swiftly across the world, people witnessed the spread of another viral sensation on social media platforms in the form of misinformation and conspiracy theories about the pandemic. Although social media continued to prove to be an integral part of society's daily lives as it is largely used in every corner of the world as an information dissemination platform during the outbreak, lockdown and vaccination period, it was marred with information distortion from its users. Social media was one of the key tools used to issue updates pertaining to the virus. Social media swiftly become a critical communication tool for information consumption, generation, and circulation. Social networks are utilised by users of different demographic groups and levels in terms of population. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a total closure of operation which resulted on lockdown in approximately 192 countries across the world and enforced social distancing in over 109 countries across the world in response to flattening the curve of the virus (Duma & Utete, 2023; UNESCO, 2022).

COVID-19 caused the temporal closure of public and private different institutions situated in local and

regional areas (Mutanga & Abayomi, 2022). However, in an attempt to avert the total interruption of day-to-day activities and interactions in society, some governments introduced technology-based working and activities to guarantee that the communities' daily operations are completely not affected (Mahaye, 2020). According to UNESCO (2022), over 1.6 billion people across the globe were compelled to remain home as regulations promulgated to contain the spread of coronavirus. UNESCO (2022) further reports that the lockdown of government institutions in countries such as South Africa, United Kingdom and United States of America were prolonged. Closure of government institution was reported to be relatively lower in Australia, and Northern Europe compared to other parts of the world. During this period, Pressly (2021) confirms that communities and government turned to social media as medium of communication. The consumption of COVID-19-related information increased on social media as people grapple to stay well-informed about coronavirus. Meanwhile, the nature of social media usage shifted from being recreational instrument to become integral for information dissemination and the only window into the world outside the citizens' homes.

In South Africa, most institutions except for those organisations in essential services sector were temporarily closed to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mahaye, 2020). Methods of communication and information dissemination such as the use of Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Twitter became more vital in the spread of information during the period of national lockdown and introduction of the vaccination (UNESCO, 2022). The Government of South Africa in March of 2020 announced the temporal closure of the businesses and economic activities both public and private entities. The country was placed under alert level five (5) lockdown. This announcement was conveyed to the people by the provincial government using their digital and social media platforms for all South Africans to comply with the lockdown regulations. The study conducted by Ahmad (2022) found that South Africa frequently utilised Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to disseminate COVID-19 pandemic information. During this period, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) community expressed themselves differently on the information received and most people spent much time on social media checking COVID-19 updates and information. Hence, bulk of people predominantly rely on social media for most COVID-19 information. However, most people in the community witnessed many deceptive acts taking place on social media about coronavirus namely, fake content, propaganda, conspiracy theories about the vaccination, the origin of the virus, and misinformation that misled the populace and experiences of fear that emanates from the false shared content (De Coninck, 2020). The study sought to achieve the following objectives, namely: i) to analyse how social media users received the Health Provincial Government messages on COVID-19 lockdown and vaccination; ii) to analyse how social media influenced the social media users to respond to the COVID-19 disseminated information by the Health Provincial Government.

The Concept of Social Media

Mayfield (2008) describes social media as online platforms that have extensive space for users to access, create and disseminate information. In other words, social media relates to a collaborative internet-based technology that promotes the expansion or exchange of content, thoughts, and other modes of appearance across virtual communities and network. Anyone on social media can participate, share messages, and communicate with several other users (Hoffmann & Bublitz, 2017). Social media provides a distinction to conventional mass media communication, in which communication is usually one-way, from a text creator to a broad anonymous mass audience. Sparta (2012) indicates that social media was introduced in the early 2000s. However, it evolved over the past years, and it is the majority used source of information in the world. It remains to be an easy-to-use communication tool, cheap, fast, and easy to access (Adanlawo & Chaka, 2022). Several registered and non-registered users on social media platforms find it to be the easiest and most effective way to publish information and has been the most powerful way to disseminate information ever since its introduction to the globe and adoption by society. Social media platforms include linkedin, instagram, pinterest, whatsapp, youtube, tiktok, quora, reddit, foursquare, swarm, facebook and twitter.

The COVID-19 pandemic

According to World Health Organisation (2022), coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a transmittable disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Majority of people infected with coronavirus experienced minor to moderate respiratory sickness and recovered without any special or prescribed medication. However, some experienced severe illness and got special medical attention. Old persons and those with pre-existing underlying medical conditions like respiratory disease, cancer, cardiac disease, chronic and diabetes were more likely to develop and demonstrate severe illness (Zhou & Utete, 2023). Almost everyone was susceptible to contract and fall sick with COVID-19 that led to severe illness and death as the virus reached advanced stage in the body. Therefore, prevention and reduction of the transmission was aligned to alertness that people receive from the responsible authority. Marivate, Moodley and Saba (2021) advise that the protection of people's health should be always a priority as it minimises the mortality rates. In this case, adhering to precautions such as

maintenance of social distancing, wearing a correctly fitting face mask, washing of hands frequently with soap and clean water, and use of an alcohol-based hands sanitizer were of great importance. According to World Health Organisation (2022), the virus blow-out from an infected person's liquid particles particularly nose or mouth when sneezing, coughing, or breathing next to someone at close range. These particles range from smaller respiratory droplets to larger sprays. The WHO continues to emphasise the good practices, for example reducing touching face, mouth, and nose, and cough into a flexed elbow to prevent droplets from spreading, and self-isolate when feeling unwell or had contacted the virus or person with the virus until one recover (Ciotti, Ciccozzi, Terrinoni, Jiang, Wang & Bernardini, 2020; Ndelu & Utete, 2023).

Social media and COVID-19 pandemic

A health crisis was experienced as COVID-19 pandemic excessively threatened the lives of people worldwide (Abbas, Wang, Su & Ziapour, 2021). The outbreak of the diseases uncover the influence of social media on the dissemination of information around the globe as the most people used it a source of information regarding COVID-19 updates. Different from other global pandemics witnessed worldwide previously, with COVID-19 individuals were more interconnected with rapid access to information through social media (Sobaih, Palla & Baquee, 2022). Social media can be useful for risk and crises communication as it permits both the public and experts to quickly gather and extend relevant information. However, it can be also harmful as it generates widespread fear and misinformation (Chaka & Adanlawo, 2022). According to Hartman, Marshall, Stocks, McKay, Bennett, Butter, Gibson, Hyland, Levita, Martinez, Mason, McBride, Murphy, Shevlin, Vallieres and Bentall (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic is an event of immense global significance. However, it was not well-received as it came with lots of uncertainty. Social media users took charge of the space and became the number one communication medium and reporting instrument with of course positive and negative narratives. Social media is one of the important innovations and a great source of information for its users (Donepudi, 2020).

According to Auxier and Anderson (2021), majority of people are social media users which they utilise for different purposes but mainly to disseminate information on informed subjects. Different social media platforms are accessible to users who are subscribers and non-subscribers, which they can use to create, comment, like and share posts content with the public (KhosraviNik, 2023; Sifundza & Utete, 2023). These platforms mostly do not verify the users or their posts which makes it difficult to control information distortion on any subject matter. The minimum requirement to subscribe and access these platforms mostly is to create an account using either a cell phone number or email address with support of internet-connection (Donepudi, 2020). Information distortion on coronavirus is highly associated with frenzy reporting on social media predominantly during the outbreak of the virus. The pandemic was dominated by creation and sharing of fake news that can be propaganda against society, pandemic, organisation, individual, belief and political organisation (Orzeață, 2022).

Theoretical framework

This study is guided by the Framing theory. Framing theory was prepared by Goffman (1974). According to Mohammadi, Tahamtan, and Mansourian (2022), framing refers to the selection of some features of the subject matter to make them more noticeable in communication. The theory further emphasises how communication is framed and presented to people can have different impacts on public perception, actions, behaviour, and opinions. For this theory, framing is beneficial at both the micro and macro levels of communication. Macro-level framing emphasizes the reflection, motivations, and goals of message senders. For this study, with social media as a communication tool on the framing theory, when social media users initiates a message and frame and believe how it is received by other users on the other end is what they have intended. During this level, the government had an aim of conveying correct, useful, and relevant information to the public, while there were disruptions from conspirers and those who want to misinform the public about the virus also took charge of the social media space to spread false information. Micro-level effects include the ways message receivers see, understand, analyse, and act on messages (Mohammadi et al, 2022). The study focuses on what transpires during micro-level of framing on social media, and how community responded to COVID-19 lockdown and vaccination information when it was framed. An insignificant change in how communication is framed can occasionally have a substantial impact on public opinion. Tahamtan, Potnis, Mohammadi, Miller and Singh (2021) disclose that social media users used various hashtags on social media platforms to frame their opinion about COVID-19 and received high attention among users.

2. METHODOLOGY

For this study, desktop research was utilised to assess the influence of social media on dissemination of COVID-19 pandemic. The study is a narrative review of the literature which offer broad attention to social media and COVID-19 pandemic. The data was analysed from the comments, reactions, interactions, and themes which were further explained to be meaningful. For this study, the data was collected from posts of lockdown and vaccination that were published between the period of 2020 to 2022 in KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. To obscure the identities of the respondents, we used the alphabets rather than full name of the responders on social media. This study utilised the content analysis approach in analysing the data. According to Neuendorf (2016), the importance of content analysis lies in its ability to provide objective and systematic insights into various forms of communication. It allows researchers to uncover hidden meanings, identify trends and patterns, and gain a deeper understanding of cultural and societal values. In this study, qualitative content analysis is used to evaluate the effectiveness of social media networks in informing the state COVID-19 pandemic. The study is limited to the Province of KwaZulu-Natal, in South Africa. KwaZulu-Natal Province (KZN) was the first province to record the first ever Coronavirus case in South Africa. The South Africans in the morning of March 5, 2020, awoke to the news that the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) confirmed a case of COVID-19 and had a fast growing and high rates of infections. This prompted this study to focus on KZN.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

During the lockdown and vaccination rollout and implementation period, the public was on online platforms including social networks since it was the fastest means of communicating and updating the information pertaining to the pandemic (Muswede & Sithole, 2022). The usage of social media content has become exceedingly massive due to the adjusted public health and social regulations in the country. These adjustments and new regulations were to be adapted and adhered to in combating the spread of the virus. Adhering to these regulations, national lockdown, and vaccinating for the virus was administered by the South African Government (Jamieson & Van Blerk, 2022). Although there are various social media platforms such as linkedin, instagram, pinterest, whatsapp, youtube, tiktok, quora, reddit, foursquare, swarm, facebook and twitter, the data indicated that the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health used only facebook, twitter, youtube, whatsapp, instagram and tiktok platforms during and post the pandemic era.

Figure 1: KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health

KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health official social media channels	
Facebook	Twitter
Youtube	Whatsapp
Instagram	Tiktok

Source: Authors' analysis (2023)

According to the @Kznhealth Instagram page, the KZN Department of Health has six official social media channels, as indicated above. However, for this study, only three will be analysed because they many followership than the others and had relevant information to the study. These channels are namely, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. As of 18 June 2023, the followership of these platforms is as follows, Facebook 74 000 followers, Twitter 6 911 followers, Youtube 301 subscribers, WhatsApp unverified, Instagram 4 491 and Tiktok with 4 747 followers. WhatsApp statistics regarding the followership and interactions is not known as it not available on the public domain, however the researcher did make some correspondence and discovered that the line is active and responsive. The researcher also discovered that even though TikTok is amongst the top 3 most followed, the platform was only active towards the end of lockdown, hence it does not have information relevant to the study, such as the first lockdown regulations announcements, and lockdown adjustments.

The researchers selected three social media platforms, namely Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. KZN Department of Health's facebook handle has the largest followership and become the most popular, 80% of the data was collected from it and the remaining 20% came from Instagram and Twitter. According to the analysis of posts on the selected platforms, the results indicate that accurate and relevant information shared on social media. In this regard, the messages that the department had intended to convey were well-received by the targeted audience. The informations shared was mainly concerns vaccination sites per district, and screening and testing centres during the peak of the virus. In addition, COVID-19 statistics, announcements and updates on

lockdown adjustments update posts were also shared on the social media platforms accurately and efficiently (Mutanga, Ureke & Chani, 2021).. However, it has been embroiled in negativity, uncertainty, confusion, and ignorance from some people in the community. This is evident in various comments particularly the posts shared on 8 February of 2021 about the launch of vaccination sites across the province.

With regard to the acceptance of the vaccination, an analysis was conducted on the first post below communicating the launch of the vaccination rollout. Responses varied with different opinions from people. This post had 47 positive reactions, some comments expressed concerns on the matter while some were pleased that could reduce the death of health workers.

“Please respond to my inbox, my mom took the vaccine few days ago she has suddenly become sick please assist, what may be the problem? I am also due for vaccination but now am starting to worry”

Ms L is worried about her mom, this has even resulted on her becoming sceptical to take the vaccine as she had already concluded that her mom is sick from taking the dose. She got information of vaccination through social media.

Ms X also commented “niyasifuqa nje ngalento yenu, kodwa anisiphenduli uma sinemibuzo, uma sifika lapha phambili kube kukhani sithola ulwazi nani ebeningasika lona” (you are crowding us with information on this thing, however you are not responding to us if we have questions, it is only than when we get to these vaccination sites we are able to be provided with clarities where areas you could had also done that).

Ms X is obviously concerned and frustrated of the non-responsive of the page and indicates that as much as information is provided, she could had appreciated to be provided with more information even before getting to these vaccination sites. This conduct of non-responsive may result in not getting vaccine as they have inadequate information.

‘Kuphathwani uma uyogoma?’ (What to bring when I go vaccinate?)

One user Mr O asked under the shared vaccination sites posts. However, he was not responded to by the health official, instead it was another user who responded as:

“Akuphathwa lutho” (you do not bring anything)

This response by this user was sarcastic as it could not go on vaccination site empty handed. Such replies by other users may either contribute to the circulation of incorrect information, it may also not do so well in supporting the psychological state of Mr. O. It is clear that Mr O had some knowledge that one should bring something, and maybe it was the matter of finding out the exact documents required.

The Department addressed a rumour that was posted from a fake Facebook account impersonating the Department official page implying that the community should no longer wear face-masks, which contradicted with the regulations at the time. The address clearly indicates that the health department prioritised the accuracy against what was presented out there to the public. Most content shared on the platforms were followed by the hashtags such as (#PleaseStayHomeSA #BeSafeSA #spreadFACTSnotFEAR), meaning they were aware of the conspires on other social media accounts and channels, as some would even post on departmental social media posts comment section with either a link to these unverified sites with fake information or comment using fake or personal accounts with copied false information and pasted on the comment sections.

The findings continued to uncover the significance and accuracy of social media as a tool of communication during that time by going through posts. It was clear that some content was uploaded late, as one user responded Ms Y commented on a Facebook page with lockdown adjustment announcement, and said

“Old news”

This is also a sarcastic comment as the term “old” means ancient, but it was just only one hour that had passed after the official announcement by the national government this post was shared. This may indicate that “old news” simply indicate that they had already seen the announcement on other channels owned by other entities.

Mr K welcomed and expressed gratitude about the information of lockdown adjustment on Instagram as replied,

Thank You mhlonishwa for your leadership

(Thank You honourable for your leadership)

This indicates that he is impressed by the information shared. The whole statement directed that he was pleased and trust the leadership the government displayed.

The acceptance of the vaccine and lockdown was clear from onset that the national government implementation the lock lockdown was long overdue as they witnessed growing numbers of infections among the health workers. However, people were worried about the longevity that the government took to administer lockdown. The post put on 27 March 2020 informing that community should remain home as it was the beginning of the national lockdown.

Mr A commented, *“MEC please intervene, Spar supermarket Esikhawini ayibavikeli abasebenzisa. Ababaniki amaMask and gloves, especially cashiers please ngenelela”* (MEC please intervene, Esikhawini Spar supermarket does not protect its workers, they are not provided with face mask and gloves especially the cashiers, please intervene)

Ms. Z also commended *“Kodwa abasenzi bezempilo bazogibela Public Transport uma sebeya emakhaya engathi singakubhekelela nalokho”* (health care workers utilise public transport when they go home, if that can also be considered)

Mr. T commented *“Sizokwenza njalo ...and siyabonga nhe support nokusukumela phezulu okulwisana naleligciwanethank you #indoors”*

The community was pleased that the government was finally implementing the lockdown regulations. However, this was short lived as in less than a year from this post to 2022 the tune changed as the users began to voice out their unhappiness on why the lockdown was taking long to be suspended and further expressed, they wanted to go back to their normal lives and go back to work to make a living.

One user Mr Q on a posted that the regulations were reversed and placed back on alert level 3, while most people believed that the regulation were going to be reduced to level 2.

“Akufe ifayo manje, abantu abezwa sekukhulunywe kakhulu. Thina sifuna impilo ibuyele esnweni, silambilie sinjala nje amatothho awazameki”

(Whoever is negligent must die now, the government has spoken a lot on this matter. Some of us want our normal lives back, we are struggling, and small job opportunities are not easy to find)

The community responded on what was shared, and the responses could not be controlled or predicted as people have the right to express their opinions in line with how they analysed and interpreted the message. But it normally brings shame when users comment with intimidating opinions, one user Mr P responded to the post sharing the information about administration of the vaccine.

MEC sicela ajove kuqala, nifuna kusibulala nina (the MEC should vaccinate first, the government wants to kill us)

As analysed from the post, social and psychological support on the posts was little and the content created was more of news and information on available sources. However, home screening and testing was well received but the drive subsequently declined after the province introduced the vaccination.

some comments from the users commented on the post;

C commented *“When are they coming to Mariannhill? Please come I beg”*,

D commented *“When are you coming to Hammarsdale we are part of eThekwin, or you forgot that”*,

E commented *“Are you guys coming to Fairview ?”*

The relationship between Social Media and the COVID-19 pandemic

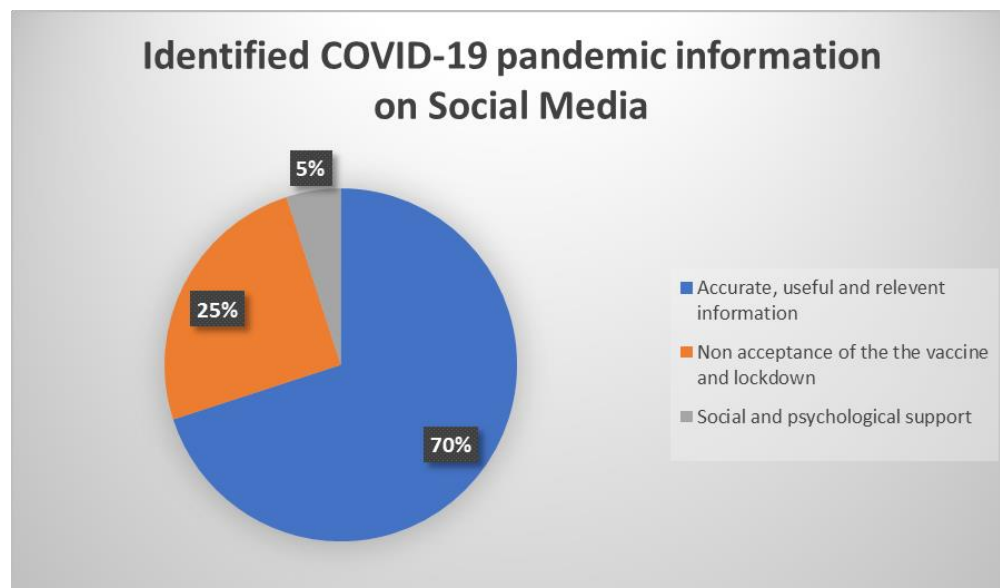
A typical instance of information distortion is deep-rooted by the peak of consumption of information on social media about the coronavirus from the day it was first reported to date. This view indicates that KZN at largely relies on social media for coronavirus-related events and updates. According to Alfatease, Alqahtani, Orayi, and Alshahrani (2021), during and after post COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and announcements, social

media played a crucial role in sharing information of different natures from reliable to misleading statements in KZN. There has been a damning widespread of misleading information that triggered a severe public health problem, which leads to the adjustments of patterns of infection, scope, and extent of the pandemic. There has been crisis communication about the virus from its origin to what was expected of the public. However, KZN communicate was diluted by the powerful media users with misleading, fake, and unverified information about the pandemic. The results of inaccurate or incorrect information in the form of rumours from social media or inaccurate news led to panic and fear in the community, which worsens the situation (Kemp 2020).

According to Douglas (2021), conspiracy theories emerged immediately after the first news of the COVID-19 outbreak case in South Africa. Agley and Xiao (2021) prepare a list of confusing, disturbing, and worrying conspiracy theories with misinformation that people mostly believed and shared widely on social media. One of the theories associates 5G wireless technology with COVID-19 proliferated with support from even prominent people. Wide-ranging conspiracies involving Mr. Bill Gates to COVID-19, as a ploy to implant microchips in a huge percentage of the global population through vaccination. The first narrative reaches every corner of the world on the outbreak of the coronavirus, and that narrative is the laboratory development that seems to indicate that the virus is a man-made zoonotic virus. The latest narrative that made rounds during the discovery of the coronavirus's many variants is the Liberty Restriction in which social distancing and wearing of mouth masks was promoted (Agley & Xiao, 2021). These are unverified theories but have been widely shared as pop-up news feeds on Facebook and sometimes with a shared link leading to Youtube where a Youtuber narrates these theories. This indicates these theories are shared to the full capacity and a huge percentage of these platforms were talking about it.

According to Baron and Croot (2017), the nature of being human is the likeness shared in believing there is a purpose for something when people see others sharing and promoting information on the subject matter. This modifies how the concern in question is perceived by subsequent content consumers. If a person sees a crowd run, the natural inclination in the other person is to run as well. Historically, this response may have assisted many to avoid predators; in today's digital world and space, it makes people vulnerable. Social media users may unintentionally or intentionally share the fake content and support the conspiracies by commenting on the fake news with an individual's point of view (Odendaal, 2021). Without verifying the content, and sometimes with suspicious content as it may seem, users waste no time on making sure it reaches as far as it could. Social network is flooded with massive, diverse, and homogeneous information, and spread rapidly on these platforms causing severe impact on the KZN society (Arora & Hangloo, 2021). In the South African social media context, during the period when the first coronavirus case was reported, fake news took charge of the social media space and people were left with a great choice of believing what was made for them to believe which was, unfortunately, tales and unverified news in most cases. The correct information was rare and small as was suppressed by the overwhelming fake news (Abbas, Wang, Su & Ziapour, 2021).

Figure 4 Illustration of social media posts reception by the KZN community



Source: Authors' analysis (2023)

Influence of Social Media on the Acceptance and Non-acceptance of the COVID-19 Vaccination

Earlier, vaccination has led to the elimination of communicable diseases and various other infectious diseases, and a comprehensive administration of vaccination is vital in the prevention and management of the pandemic (Alfatease et al, 2021). In South Africa there have been 3,9 million cases reported and 101, 815 deaths recorded in South Africa as of July 2022 (South African National Department of Health, 2022). Social media has caused a stir on KZN vaccine administration and conveys incorrect and unverified information. Regardless of the negative influence of social media on information sharing of the COVID-19 vaccine, there was substantial advantages of social media in disseminating vaccination information. The deliberations, arguments and social debates about public health are extended through social media. Therefore, the capacity to have discussions of COVID-19 information especially regarding the vaccination experiences has trailing positive and negative impact on the wellbeing of the citizens (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2021)..

The identified COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and vaccination information was themed into three main categories after being analysed: 1. Accurate, useful, and relevant information, 2. Acceptance and doubts on the vaccination and lockdown, 3. Social and psychological support. Accurate, useful, and relevant information was the most frequent category, with 70% of the identified COVID-19 pandemic information falling into this category. The non-acceptance of lockdown and vaccine information was the second most frequent category, with 25% of the identified COVID-19 pandemic information falling into this category. Social and psychological support was the least frequent category, with only 5% of the identified COVID-19 pandemic information falling into this category.

The findings were also themed according to the most accessible, informative, and preferred channel, and channels the interacted with the most. Facebook had the equal reactions as there were responses that are negative and those that carried positive responses. Within this equal fraction, the most were more clarity seeking questions on the content shared. Twitter and Instagram had the least comments, but mostly reactions in the form of likes and retweets. Analysing Twitter, the engagement was large as other users retweeted the content as an aim of sharing it with other users. The study uncovered that social media is an effective tool for disseminating COVID-19 pandemic information and is highly recommended in future with improved strategies. The high frequency of accurate and useful information shared on the Provincial Government social media platforms indicates that social media is used effectively to communicate important information to a large audience.

The results shows that the KZN Department of Health posts were successful in sharing accurate, useful and relevant COVID-19 pandemic information pertaining to lockdown and administration of vaccine on social media platforms. However, the acceptance was not soundly received by the social media users from the province. The low frequency of social and psychological support information indicates that the health department authorities and essential officials needed to improve its efforts to provide the community with social and psychological support during the administration of the lockdown and vaccination. This further highlights the necessity for the health authorities to recognise the challenges faced by individuals and to provide appropriate support to the community to cope up with stress, depression and anxiety associated with the effects of the lockdown and acceptance of the vaccination.

4. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that social media platforms played a vital role in disseminating information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic on lockdown and vaccination in the community of KZN. The accuracy and usefulness of the information varied significantly based on how the community responded from the communicate. The study recommends that the health department in the province should continue to use social media platforms to disseminate information on the crises. However, caution should be considered to ensure that the information is directly accurate and useful and does not require follow-up clarities by the community especially where the officials will be unable to respond to clarities raised on social media. In addition, social media platforms could have created a more responsive approach and improve interactions with the followers. The paper is also important in that it extends the body of knowledge in the field of governance and media

Implications of the study

The social media channels should have been monitored closely in a way that community can comment reporting a case or death and the department to respond to the scene. In fact, the communities should be able to access them on freely. The down-up and two-way communication should be embraced. Information posted on social media channels were of a top-down approach. The department posted the information with purpose of

making the community comply with a minimum set COVID-19 regulations. The community was left to interact alone and not provided with emotional and psychological support. The health department could have provided direct links on their Facebook and Instagram for the community to further read for themselves on subjects where limited information was shared as this pattern was popular on their Twitter account. This could not have been done only on posts. The health department should have categorised the information they shared from important, relevant and useful (as high). Thereafter, social, emotional and psychological support (and medium) should be provided. The department should have adopted a prompt pattern of updating information on their social media channels. Most updates were posted hours after the official announcements had been made either by the President of the country or by the Minister that was responsible for communicating the adjustments on COVID-19 regulations. As the custodian of the information at that time in the province, they should have interacted and responded to the community with no hinderances. The health department should have utilised their crisis communication and management strategies and made it available to the community. The health department should have conducted monitoring and evaluation identify any rumours and unverified information.

The department should have utilised social media effectively and open all their platforms to the public to share testimonials of those who were on quarantine, infected by the virus, the effects of the lockdown. The researchers should be careful when analysing comments in the post as some messages are unverified and fake. From sharing of fake and unverified information to victimise and intimidate those they felt were accountable for what was wrong from their viewpoint. Nevertheless, the community should be more considerate and apply mutual respect where it was required. The health department should have lobbied other health public and private entities, health experts and influencers to assist with responding to the community on their social media platforms. This could have been done through the lobbied groups commenting using their official accounts and could have been done with an aim of ensuring that no entity or person is sitting with relevant and useful information unshared. Although this study provides insights about the influence of social media, it did not cover other provinces. The findings can only be representative of the analysis of the impact of social media on the COVID-19 pandemic in KwaZulu-Natal Province, therefore cannot be generalised to other provinces. Hence, future studies should be carried out to other provinces especially Gauteng Province in South Africa.

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6. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The study has no conflict of interest.

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