

An Infodemic Within a Pandemic: Assessing the Role of Social Media During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The chapter examines the role of WhatsApp during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe, analysing how this social media platform impacted on the information concerning symptoms, prevention, transmission and treatment of the coronavirus disease as well as the countermeasures put in place by both the Zimbabwean government's health arm and the World Health Organisation (WHO). While social media is regarded as a handy tool during crisis communication, it also a double-edged sword. When a disaster strikes, people develop an intensified need for information and, at the same time, authentic sources seem to take too long to provide the much-needed information. This drives people to seek out alternative sources of information. With the proliferation of social media platforms, alternative sources of information are only a click away. However, much of the information posted on social media is unverified and hence it becomes a hotbed for conspiracy theories, misinformation and fake news. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the flux of information on social media, especially WhatsApp, was witnessed. The surge in COVID-19 information (both authentic and inauthentic) was so intense that the WHO and the Ministry of Health and Child Care (MoHCC) faced difficulties in addressing the health crisis. The situation was termed an 'infodemic'. This study is an investigation of how social media, through WhatsApp, impacted on the efforts by the health organisations to combat COVID-19. The study used qualitative data collected through questionnaires, focus group discussions and secondary sources. Questionnaires were distributed to the public healthcare workers to find out the extent to which the efforts of the health organisations to curb COVID-19 were impacted on. Focus groups were held to establish how misinformation on WhatsApp impacted on individuals in relation to their response to COVID-19. The data was analysed using the Butterfly Theory of Crisis Management.

