

The Opportunities and Challenges of Social Media Use by Government in Crisis Management: A Case of Ministry of Health and Twitter Usage in Kenya during Covid-19

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Abstract

Social media has become an essential tool for government communication during the Covid-19 pandemic. New links between the government and citizens are being formed, with each group relying on the other to combat the pandemic. Despite considerable research interest in the intersection of social media and government, little is known on how governments use social media to manage crisis like Covid-19. This exploratory study aimed to investigate how governments used social media in Covid-19 management, focusing on Kenya's Ministry of Health and its Twitter usage. Qualitative data was collected through content analysis from the Ministry of health's official Twitter account (@MOH_Kenya) from 30th June 2020 to 30th June 2021. Overall, 1345 tweets were retrieved and analyzed using the thematic analysis method. Six primary themes were identified, indicating that the Government of Kenya used social media to communicate: important public health messages, plans and measures, regular updates on the pandemic, humanitarian and community cohesion, and surveillance messages, while misinformation control was the most prevalent challenge. The government now has opportunities to promote public awareness of Covid-19, boost surveillance, improve public preparedness, manage government reputational effects, and increase accountability and transparency while fostering public confidence through social media communication. The study concludes that social media has been beneficial in government communication during the pandemic. While there are obvious benefits to using social media for government communication during Covid-19 when reaching a larger population is critical, the government must monitor social media users, and the information exchanged to ensure quality and reliability, avoid infor-

mation overload, and misinforming the public. To increase public engagement, information penetration on Covid-19, and a more inclusive policy process, the government should acknowledge the constraints of its voice and pursue prospects to collaborate with more influential voices in the community.

Keywords

Kenya, Government, Social Media, Covid-19, Opportunities & Challenges

1. Introduction

The term “social media” refers to a type of computer-based technology that enables the exchange of ideas, opinions, and information via the establishment of virtual networks and communities. Social media is Internet-based by nature, allowing users to distribute content easily and quickly through electronic channels. (Wong et al., 2020). Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, blogging platforms, WeChat, and Whatsapp, are all included in this definition. According to the Digital Global Statshot Report (Kemp, 2021), Global mobile users have surpassed 5.27 billion, accounting for slightly less than 67 percentage of the total population in the world, a 2.3 percent growth between 2020-21. As of July 2021, the number of internet users globally stood at 4.8 billion, accounting for almost 61 percent of the world’s total population. In Addition, There are presently 4.48 billion social media users worldwide, accounting for over 57 percent of the world’s total population (Kemp, 2021). These statistics show that social media is no longer a question of choice for individuals and Governments globally. Social media has, as a result, altered the way people communicate with one another online. It has empowered people to stay informed about world events in real-time, communicate with one another, and have rapid access to an endless amount of knowledge.

As a result, most governments are no longer opting out of social media presence and interaction, as these new platforms empower citizens and non-traditional stakeholders. Politicians quickly adapted to these changes, mobilizing support using social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Government organizations are catching up and experimenting more with social media (Mickoleit, 2014). As communications technologies grow and expand, social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) is increasingly being utilized as a tool to distribute information during crises, issue warnings, uphold situational alertness, and even catalyze action.

Individuals, organizations, and governments have increasingly used social media as a means of communication amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Governments have communicated crucial public health messages to citizens via targeted adverts on Twitter, Youtube and Facebook, which are particularly important for the ever-growing population evading conventional news coverage. Given government directives, physical distancing, and isolation, social media usage has enabled the maintenance of social closeness without physical contact. Physical distancing has

also increased social media usage and proliferation of Covid-19 support groups. Despite its utility, governments are wary of social media because of the costs of keeping up with rising citizen demands. The trustworthiness of social media content has been questioned at times.

Kenya reported its first coronavirus case on 12th March 2020 (Ministry of Health, 2020). To combat the spread of viruses, the Government of Kenya has taken proactive measures such as medical checkpoints, compulsory international travel quarantines, the enforcement of the movement control order, the expansion of the number of Covid-19 healthcare centres, and the establishment of the Covid-19 common Fund (Ministry of Health, 2020). Additionally, conscious of the vital necessity of efficient risk communication during a pandemic, Kenya's government places a high premium on social media and e-government to ensure individuals access adequate and updated information. Effective risk communication not only alleviates public panic during a health crisis but also motivates the adoption of precautionary measures (Quaife et al., 2020). Government organizations in Kenya are gradually becoming more visible and engaged on social media. Numerous ministries and specialized organizations now use social media. They ensure that information is conveyed, rumors are refuted, and people's health is safeguarded. Kenyans can obtain updates and news about Covid-19 from the official social media accounts of the Ministry of Health (MoH), the Government Spokesman, the President's Office, and the Ministry of Interior and National Security, among others. Daily news conferences led by the Cabinet Secretary of Health offer continuous updates on Covid-19, aired on television and online via Facebook.

Social media and Electronic government are crucial to disseminating information on Covid-19, especially on protective behavior. As individuals avoid physical contact, spend more time online and at home during the pandemic, their attitudes on adopting protective conduct may be affected by social media and e-government exposure. The pandemic has heightened the importance of digital governance. To improve the timing of pandemic communications, the government should constantly watch and analyze social media data. As the pandemic progresses, simply giving status updates and rules may not be enough to pique public attention in the messaging. As the condition impacts more individuals, the government may embrace a more empathetic communication approach to meet public concerns.

From this background, the researcher carried out this exploratory study and sought to investigate how governments are using social media as a communication tool in Covid-19 management, focusing on the Ministry of Health Kenya. Specifically, the research aimed at answering three questions: How is social media being utilized by the Government in the Covid-19 management? What are the challenges associated with the Government's use of social media in Covid-19 management? What can be done to enhance governments' use of social media during times of crisis? Government institutions must better understand social media use to prioritize goals and create effective policies. They must adapt to, learn from,

and ideally shape how social media transforms public value generation (Wendling et al., 2013).

Given the recency of this pandemic, there is limited literature on this topic. Despite considerable research interest in the intersection of social media and government, much is not known about how governments use social media to manage Covid-19. A few empirical research studies have been carried out, though some are limited in scope and region. For instance, (La et al., 2020) carried out a study in Vietnam focusing on the “Policy response, social media and science journalism for the sustainability of the public health system amid the Covid-19 outbreak”, while (Mat Dawi et al., 2021) examined “The influence of e-government and social media on the public’s attitude to adopt protective behavior in Malaysia”.

Therefore, this exploratory study sought to bridge the research gap identified, shed light on Kenya’s government’s use of social media during the pandemic, and offer insight into how social media involvement might be harnessed in the pandemic’s later stages. This will help Kenya and other countries deal with public health concerns today and in the future.

2. Scope

Today’s social media platforms include a wide range of functions, features, and target consumers. Different classifications exist; however, this study took the practical approach of concentrating on one of the most popular generalist platforms (Twitter) rather than including all social media platforms. According to the annual globalstats report, Twitter is the second most popular social networking site in Kenya, accounting for 16.9 percent of the country’s 11 million social media users as of July 2021 (Globalstats, 2021). Twitter has also been one of Kenya’s government social networking platforms for public interaction since 2013 (United States International University-Africa, 2019) and thus provides a representative sample for examining the government’s use of social media during this pandemic.

This study also focused on the social media activity of an office rather than the persons that hold those positions. There are considerations related to the subject matter that argue for comparing the use of social media by public sector agencies rather than individual officeholders. First, institutions are the primary point of contact with the state in the daily lives of citizens and organizations. Second, the institutional focus aids in the identification of policy options that are more directly related to the state’s primary mission. Furthermore, organizations often last longer than the officeholders, making institutional focus more critical.

Before Kenya’s Covid-19 epidemic, the Ministry of health’s Twitter account was dormant primarily. However, since March 2020, when the first incidence of Covid-19 was reported in Kenya, the Ministry of Health’s Twitter feed has been devoted to information on Covid-19, among other public health issues. It has become the primary government communication platform on Covid-19. Therefore, the study only covered Covid-19 posts from the Ministry of Health (@MOH_Kenya). Due to time limitations, the study used uni-directional data, i.e., from the govern-

ment to the public. For further research, bi-directional information could be used to evaluate how the government uses social media and the public's engagement and participation.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Government, Social Media, and Covid-19 Management

Social networking technologies can all glean users' ideas, intentions, feelings, behaviors, and attributes. Social media usage in government is regarded as technological advancement and a transformative tool in producing citizen participation (Dawes et al., 2011). The role of social media in encouraging democratic involvement is growing, yet keeping public engagement and activity online is a challenge. To foster citizen participation, governments should constantly evaluate their social media and digital platforms selection (Cho & Chun, 2011).

The goal of social media promotion in government has been to improve communication with citizens, transform government practices and behaviours in knowledge transfer and provision of services, alter government decision-making trends, and compel policy decisions depending on widespread citizen contribution (Mellouli, 2011). Indeed, empirical data shows that government organizations that actively encourage engagement have more social media followership. Simple correlation analysis of the complete contents emitted by selected government Twitter accounts over six months in 2012 reveals that the use of interactive elements (hashtags, replies, and mentions) correlates with increased popularity to a degree (correlation factor $R^2 = 0.2885$) (Mickoleit, 2014).

Many observers see social media as a potent set of tools for reinventing government-citizen connections. Government institutions are experimenting with social media to communicate with their citizens. A study on 'Understanding Risks, Benefits, and Strategic Alternatives of Social Media Applications in the Public Sector' Presented the dangers, benefits, and strategic recommendations associated with the use of social media in government. The study concluded that having a sound implementation strategy, updating regulations, and changing culture and behaviours are practical guidelines (Picazo-Vela et al., 2012). Despite the enthusiasm for government experimentation in social media, serious issues regarding whether resources spent on social media contribute to fulfilling mission-oriented goals are already being raised (Mickoleit, 2014).

Since the beginning of the Covid pandemic, social distancing increased the use of social media and direct messaging activities. The number of people using Facebook messenger and WhatsApp more than doubled (Statista, 2021). As a result, the presence and activity of government agencies on social media has not been a question of choice and has increased to reach their citizens. Government agencies worldwide have excelled on social media, ensuring that information is shared, rumours are debunked, and the health of their inhabitants is safeguarded. Social media has aided governments in maintaining and strengthening personal relationships with the public (Chen et al., 2020).

Daily updates on the situation have been provided via official Twitter and Facebook pages as well as transparent and accurate guidance on safeguarding the health of their people and supporting those fighting to stay positive. Government risk communication methods are seen to be highly successful and cost-effective tools during the Covid-19 epidemic (Tran & Bar-Tur, 2020). People believe that in a pandemic, the government must protect and guarantee public safety (Jennings & Perez, 2020). Individuals will thus be compelled to engage in prudent conduct if the government proves its commitment to containing the spread of the virus.

The Covid-19 pandemic has created a pressing need for e-government services due to limited travel and social distance. According to United Nations data, governments worldwide began using digital channels such as mobile applications, social media and portals to disseminate information about Covid-19 throughout the pandemic (Mat Dawi et al., 2021). Among the vital information provided is on travel restrictions, advice on preventive measures, and government reactions. Consequently, these improvements in e-government have enabled countries to combat the pandemic's impacts (Burlacu et al., 2021). In China, research showed that the government's use of social media to disseminate updated information during the covid pandemic has a beneficial effect on public involvement (Liao et al., 2020)

Recently, there has been an upsurge in government initiatives to enhance public communications through social media (Mergel, 2012). With over 3 billion users globally (Kemp, 2021), social media may be the most effective medium for increasing public knowledge and adherence to suggested preventive measures. Social media features such as banners and pop-ups help notify users of new information and remind them to practice protective behaviours (Evener, 2018) such as social distancing and hand washing. Additionally, social media's capacity to disseminate real-time information aids in the detection and fight against contagious illnesses. Within 24 hours of the World Health Organisation (WHO) declaring Covid-19 a pandemic, there were around 19 million Covid-19 references on social media (Ahmad & Murad, 2020). It demonstrates the critical role social media had in sharing information during the health crisis.

Governments' use of social media may result in more communication and citizen participation, increased openness, and the transference of best practices among government agencies. To obtain these benefits and avoid dangers, a robust implementation strategy is required. Social media usage demonstrates the critical importance of maintaining current rules and regulations and promoting reforms in government ethos and administrative procedures.

3.2. Opportunities and Risks of Social Media Usage during a Pandemic

In the current global socio-economic environment, it is prudent to examine social media's potential to reestablish confidence between governments and their consti-

tuents and improve government responsiveness to citizens, especially in times of pandemics like Covid-19. Governments may get more benefits from social media than merely increasing communication.

Various scholars have argued on the opportunities and benefits that social media presents during a pandemic or crisis. Literature shows that social media is a valuable instrument for communication and mobilizing support for action, capturing the attention of mainstream media and policymakers during the Covid-19 pandemic (Sahni & Sharma, 2020). Channeling disparate interests and mobilizing support for action is not novel; established interest organizations such as lobbies and unions have been doing it for a long time. However, social media and the Internet have empowered less organized and established groups by providing them with a low-cost method of rallying ad hoc support (Mickoleit, 2014) around shared issues like Covid-19. With these tools in hand, previously elusive people or organizations have more agenda-setting power.

Further, it is argued that social media has supported government accountability and transparency efforts during the pandemic. Governments are increasingly attempting to make information accessible and transparent, for example, through open government data regulations on Covid-19 (Ubaldi et al., 2021). The primary goal of open data projects addressing Covid-19 is to communicate with and update the public. Importantly, in the Covid-19 era, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter enable the quick transmission of instructional information. For example, an infographic on airway care for patients with suspected or confirmed Covid-19 was created and distributed via Twitter and WeChat. It was later translated into more than ten languages and disseminated information customized to specific environments (González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2020). Accelerating the dissemination of information on preventive measures has numerous benefits. A study that reviewed the top 100 coronavirus videos on YouTube showed that they together garnered more than 165 million views; about a third of these videos discussed preventative methods, nearly 90% focused on fear, isolation, and death, and less than half discussed the most common symptoms (Basch et al., 2020). This research underscores the critical importance of spreading reliable information on the Covid-19 pandemic through social media channels. Individuals often seek reputable information, consequently enhancing public trust in the government.

Additionally, various social media platforms have consistently aided medical education via live and recorded webinars on platforms such as Facebook, youtube, and others. Since Covid-19 was declared a pandemic, most scientific medical activities have been online through webinars to preserve ongoing medical education (Ismail et al., 2021). Webinars have been a major avenue of educating the citizens on the symptoms, preventive measures, and other critical information on the pandemic. However, it is essential to note that despite their initial satisfaction, it is reported that most medical personnel are overwhelmed by the quantity and regularity of webinars. Therefore, webinars and other social media activities should

be regarded as a supplement to conventional in-person techniques rather than a substitute because physicians' satisfaction is critical (Ismail et al., 2021).

Further, social media is an essential informal data source for identifying unreported health information to the government, medical officials or health agencies and for uncovering or sharing views on potentially life-threatening health-related problems, especially during a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic (Charles-Smith et al., 2015). Due to the quick flow of information on social media, governments can use social media material to better understand and respond to a crisis (Wendling et al., 2013).

Notably, throughout the coronavirus outbreak, social media platforms have aided governments in maintaining and strengthening personal ties with the public and even enabled the formation of organized support groups for the community's most vulnerable members (Jefferies, 2020; Examiner, 2020). Official Twitter and Facebook pages have provided regular updates on the state of affairs, concise and factual advice on protecting their nationals' health, and support to those battling to maintain a positive attitude. Combating Covid-19 will require a strategy that takes into account the socio-cultural, and emotional ramifications of the lockdown, widespread disease, and mortality (Honwana & Honwana, 2020), and early community participation may aid in the management of Covid-19 and safeguard the public's interests (La et al., 2020). Personalized communication is more effective at changing behaviour. Social media platforms can be highly effective at promoting resilient behavior within a community and solicit donations when major catastrophes occur (Wendling et al., 2013). Indeed, it is unlikely that government messages would have the same reach without social media. Governments and public organizations should be authoritative, ensuring that their message is shared and seen in the local communities. They should also surveil the local support networks on different social media sites to detect problems before they become serious.

Appreciation of social media's good aspects must be weighed against the possibility of undesirable developments, such as exposure to too much information and the spread of misinformation. While educating the public about the virus's substantial dangers is necessary, excessive disease-related information will likely result in higher tension, anxiety, and concern levels. Exposure to media coverage of upsetting events on a repeated basis has been proven to be detrimental (Holman et al., 2014). WHO has advised against excessive exposure to information on Covid-19 (Organization, 2020b). They recommend checking updates no more than once or twice a day and warn against the harmful consequences of continuous news. This fundamentally contradicts the usual pattern of social media usage, in which newsfeeds are constantly updated in real-time. The acute stress produced by this exposure may also create a constructive feedback system in which individuals most worried may seek out Covid-19-related information more easily. The algorithmic character of social media programming aggravates this since following links with Covid-19 references will suggest more links on a similar topic by

the software, resulting in justification prejudice and alteration of risk perception (O'Brien et al., 2020).

While social media may benefit government organizations and the public, it also serves as a breeding ground for conspiracy theories and misinformation operations. Social media can increase public engagement and connection; it can also divide and confound (OHIO University, 2020). The surge in misinformation weakens governmental responses and exacerbates people's mistrust and anxiety (Home, 2020). Disinformation, especially on social media, influences how nations respond to the worldwide crisis by eroding confidence, exacerbating tensions, and sometimes encouraging destructive behaviour. At a time when public trust and adherence to safeguards spanning from lockdowns to cleanliness recommendations are critical, a wave of misinformation is weakening official efforts to the Covid-19 pandemic and endangering public health. Untested medical interventions, preventive methods et al. are saturating the Internet and spread by people whose worries are exacerbated by the deluge of contradictory material (Rovetta et al., 2020). Compared to past instances of extensive misinformation, there is much made-up material with the Covid-19 pandemics where data are often twisted, and unproven ideas are hailed as ground-breaking findings, capitalizing on existing scientific uncertainty (OECD, 2020). A study by Reuters Institute on claims of Covid-19 misinformation indicates that up to 59percent is based on altered accurate information, while 38 percent is completely fabricated; 88 percent of the misinformation comes from social media (Brennen et al., 2020). Covid-19 disinformation contradicts established public health recommendations and is notorious for being hard to detect. Some of this erroneous medical information is propagated by people masquerading as experts in the medical field or erroneously ascribed to health and research organizations, making its legitimacy more difficult to detect (2020).

On the other hand, propaganda creating distrust on the effectiveness of social isolation or erroneous "knowledge" on how the virus spreads have persuaded individuals to continue with their normal undertakings in defiance of the government's guidelines (Seitz, 2020). Globally, governments' initial hesitation in speaking strongly, even about the pandemic's uncertainties and unknowns, created a conducive environment for misinformation propagation as people sought answers (Organization, 2020a; Tambo et al., 2021). Offline, the adverse effects of disinformation are evident. For example, while viruses cannot be transferred wirelessly, speculations tying 5G wireless technology to Covid-19 have grown in popularity (Ahmed et al., 2020), resulting in the destruction of over 70 cell towers across Europe (most notably the United Kingdom) and Canada (Reichert, 2020). Further, among all virus-related conspiracy theories, the most widespread were those linking Bill Gates to Covid-19 and implanting microchips into significant segments of the world population via vaccination (Wakabayashi et al., 2020). Among other immediate repercussions, a non-governmental group associated with this conspiracy theory was forced to seek assistance from the FBI after online

attacks (Parker, 2020).

For public policy, misinformation signifies that a greater volume of formal and reliable information does not ensure an increase in efficiency unless the information is made more convincing and presented to diverse consumers through their channels of choice and comprehension of psychological and behavioural prejudices. This is particularly critical for young people who prefer to get information through social media. Therefore, the government must provide scientific advice that is susceptible to change in light of new data. Establishing a clear mandate for public communication is also critical to ensuring its efficacy in fighting misinformation and establishing public confidence.

Arguably, the widespread acceptance and usage of social media by the government and general public signals a new era in which emergency responders must adjust their work practices to the risks and possibilities provided by this development. Simultaneously, they must heed ethical concerns and guard against the abuse or misuse of social media during times of crisis or disaster. Governments and public institutions should speak authoritatively, ensuring that their message is communicated and seen. They should also surveil local support networks on social media to detect problems before they become serious. Lastly, they should establish stricter internal controls for digital publication to guarantee consistent messages.

4. Methodology

This research used an exploratory research design. Qualitative data was collected through content analysis from the Ministry of health's official Twitter account (@MOH_Kenya) and manually analyzed using the thematic analysis method. Content analysis is one of the most crucial research methodologies in the social sciences for analyzing data within a given context (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Content analysis is "A research method that gives systematic and objective methods to derive accurate inferences from verbal, visual, or written data to characterize and quantify certain phenomena" (Smith, 2000). An effective Thematic Content Analysis illuminates the thematic content of texts by uncovering recurrent themes in the texts under study (Anderson, 2007). This procedure is often comprised of the following six steps: familiarization with the data, initial coding, themes identification, review of themes, definition and naming themes, and report production (Loh, 2013)

Data was collected from the information posted by the Ministry of Health n twitter (@MOH_Kenya) from 30th June 2020 to 30th June 2021. The search tool on Twitter was used to retrieve tweets using the hashtags corona and #covid 19; only Covid-19 related tweets were considered. The number of comments was also retrieved. This data may be used to assess the degree of various kinds of government social media involvement. The number of comments indicated how eager people were to engage with the government and other users by posting comments. However, the study was uni-directional, and only the content of the Ministry of

Health’s original posts was considered for analysis but not from the Twitter users’ comments since the focus was on the government.

5. Results

The researcher gathered 1345 tweets from 30th June, 2020 to 30th June 2021 (365 days), on Covid-19. Following the deletion of comments with no text content, 9574 comments on these posts on Twitter were also retrieved. Averagely, the Ministry of health posted 3.65 Covid-19-related postings each day, while users left an average of 7.19 comments per post.

The posts were manually analyzed using thematic analysis. The seven major themes revealed included: Public health messages, Plans and measures, containment of misinformation, regular news updates (daily Statistics on the new number of deaths and Covid-19 cases), general updates on the pandemic, Humanitarian and community cohesion and surveillance messages (Table 1).

Table 1. Themes and excerpts on Covid-19 gleaned from content analysis of Ministry of Health Twitter accounts.

Themes	Subthemes	Sample Quotations extracted
Public health messages	Civic skills, education on prevention and treatment, public awareness, prevention and treatment, emergency preparedness and response, isolation and quarantine, training and caring, vaccination.	<p>“...No vaccinations should take place outside the Ministry of Health designated vaccination-approved sites. These sites are available at the Ministry of Health website.”</p> <p>“...Government roots for Chanjo system to enhance Covid-19 vaccination drive youtu.be/7-y-Fw5xjRI via @YouTube”:</p> <p>“...The Ministry of health is currently training regional depot managers and health workers on handling procedures of the Pfizer vaccine ahead of its planned deployment...”</p>
Government Plans and Measures	Disposition of government, the government’s management of the crisis, The response of the government, Preventive measures, Policies and guidelines, official actions, Control measures	<p>“...The Ministry of Health is enforcing strict Covid-19 protocols during the ongoing World Athletics Under-20 championships at the Moi International Sports Centre, Kasarani to ensure safety and security of athletes and other accredited groups. The measures include daily Covid-19 testing and establishment of sport bubbles with no one allowed into the stadium without a Covid-19 testing tag. Those seeking to access the green zone are expected to adhere to stringent measures in an effort to protect the competitors...”</p>
Containment of misinformation	Correction of misinformation, counter-rumours and control of misinformation	<p>Concerning misinformation on the social media where a local leader claimed that there were over 7000 people in mandatory quarantine.</p> <p>“...this is not true. It is immoral and unethical for anyone to mislead people for whatever reason they may have regarding the fight against Coronavirus...”</p>

Continued

Regular updates	Daily Statistics on the new number of deaths and COVID-19 cases, health care system situation, and general latest updates on the pandemic	“...today, 1018 people have tested positive for the coronavirus disease, from a sample size of 9347 tested in the last 24 hours. The positivity rate is now at 10.9%. Total confirmed positive cases are now 236,881 and cumulative tests so far conducted are 2,380,918.”
Solidarity and community cohesion	Contributions in monetary and other forms, mental health, appreciation for frontline employees and the public	“...Health Principal Secretary Susan Mochache has today received a donation of assorted medical equipment and PPEs worth KSh 32.1 M from the World Health Organisation to aid in ongoing COVID-19 management and mitigation efforts...”
Surveillance messages	Informal source of data for identifying unreported health information	“...a section of Kenyans are not following the covid protocols at clubs, according to footage posted on Twitter and shared by different people. The government is now confirming the veracity of the recordings, and the conveners will face severe consequences...”

6. Discussion

This study highlights the government’s use of social media to engage the public during the Covid-19 outbreak. In regard to how the government is using social media in covid 19 management, the results show that this has happened in various ways and mainly, to communicate to the citizens on different public health messages, the plans and measures that the government intends to execute, regular updates, solidarity and community cohesion, surveillance and misinformation containment.

Some of these public health messages are on preventive measures. Individuals are urged to take preventative measures, such as wearing face masks and public physical distance observation, staying at home, frequent hand washing, and self-isolation of individuals with Covid-19 signs and symptoms. This finding corroborates research by (Tursunbayeva et al., 2017) which concluded that Governments around the globe are starting to harness the Internet and associated Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to satisfy people’s desires for increased access to information, institutional openness, participation in policymaking, and access to public health information. The Internet-based sharing of health information has been hailed as a means of enhancing public health monitoring. Social media is seen to be a critical venue for disseminating information about Covid-19 and educating citizens about protective conduct because as individuals avoid physical contact, spend more time online and at home during a pandemic, their attitudes on adopting protective behavior may be affected by social media and e-government exposure (Mat Dawi et al., 2021). A study by (Tsao et al., 2021) also concluded that social media has become a significant communication tool for government and may be utilized successfully to convey health information to the general population in the event of a pandemic which plays a critical influence in how

individuals perceive illness exposure, their subsequent decision-making, and risk-taking behaviours. This is because emergent viral infections, such as Covid-19, often raise the general public's usage and consumption of all sorts of media (Freberg et al., 2013). This study concludes that the government's use of social media to communicate public health messages has enhanced public awareness on Covid-19. This has been critical as it has enabled information and emergency services to reach audiences of all kinds, including younger audiences that depend less on conventional media and more on digital. The government using social media to increase public awareness has also reduced reliance on conventional media channels and developed new kinds of campaigns that include personalized tones and innovative digital technologies to improve behavioral change in the fight against Covid-19.

Social media was also a communication tool on the different plans and measures that the government intended to execute. The government of Kenya executed a series of public health measures since March 2020, including a travel restriction, curfew, and shutdown of schools, businesses, and places of worship, measures to lessen the social and economic impacts of the pandemic, expanding civil servant health insurance to all county-level health workers, increased capacity and supplies for health services, as well as extended mass testing. This information was posted both on social media as well as other platforms. The findings corresponded to a study by (Mat Dawi et al., 2021), which concluded that Malaysia's government extensively depended on social media to ensure that the public receives adequate and up-to-date information on different plans and measures on Covid-19. This study concludes that since the general population is not always aware of the efforts made by government agencies, using social media to publicize what the government is doing will certainly help to improve the public's impression of the efforts done to manage Covid-19 and thus, managing the government reputational effects.

Further, the government of Kenya used social media for regular updates on the pandemic. Since the first verified Covid-19 case, the Ministry of Health in Kenya has held regular news briefings concurrently streamed live on social media. This is a crucial step toward increasing government openness and decreasing public uncertainty amid the Covid-19 anxiety. Previous research shows that regular and constant news briefings were positively viewed to maintain public engagement and promote transparency in some countries or regions such as Australia and Taiwan region that have made significant progress in the fight against Covid-19 (ABC News, 2020; Lai et al., 2020). Along with these regular updates, the government of Kenya created an open portal and data storage where citizens can freely access information on covid-19, including vaccine availability data, testing, and vaccination centres. These regular updates on social media arguably supported government accountability and transparency efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic. Previous research shows that Governments are increasingly attempting to make government information accessible and transparent to communicate with and update

the public on the pandemic (Ubaldi et al., 2021). Studies also show that risk and crisis communication via social media are effective methods of establishing trust; the more citizens interact with their government online, the more trust they create (Wendling et al., 2013). The daily updates and press conferences could also enhance the engagement between the public and government and make it easier for the public to understand various health information pieces. This study concludes that the government has increased its openness, accountability, and confidence in the public by disseminating reliable, consistent, and up-to-date Covid-19 updates through social media.

The results also indicate that the government used social media for surveillance. Twitter has been an informal source of data for identifying unreported health information for the government of Kenya. The public often contributes unofficial information on social media, which the government utilizes to research previously undisclosed problems. This corroborates previous research by (Charles-Smith et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2018) which concluded that Social media platforms offer an extra unofficial data source that may be used to reveal public health data that is not disclosed to the government, medical authorities or health agencies, as well as to expose views on health-related issues, particularly those that are sensitive. In a field that has historically depended on a well-established framework of physicians and laboratories disclosing renowned viral infections to government agencies on a mandatory and voluntary basis, social media and user-generated information advancements may contribute to more rapid identification of infectious disease cases (Velasco et al., 2014).

The results also reveal that the government has often used social media to enhance solidarity and community cohesion. Previous literature shows that Combating Covid-19 needs a plan that considers the social, cultural, and emotional ramifications of the lockdown, widespread sickness, and mortality (Honwana & Honwana, 2020). Early community participation may aid in the management of Covid-19 and safeguard the public's interests (La et al., 2020). In Kenya, the government has used social media and community networks' initiatives to foster social solidarity by assisting afflicted people and rally donations towards the Covid-19 fund (Ministry of Health, 2021). Recent research indicates that personalized communication is more effective at changing behavior. Social media platforms can be highly effective at promoting resilient behavior within a community and solicit donations when major catastrophes occur (Wendling et al., 2013). Calls to action are more effective when integrated into local conceptions of sociability and interpersonal connections. When well utilised, government social media platforms may instill a sense of optimism about the pandemic and bring communities together.

Challenges faced by the Ministry of Health in using Twitter during the Covid-19 pandemic on the challenges facing the government on the use of social media, misinformation containment was the most prevalent. Misinformation, commonly known as "infodemic," has been a huge problem globally during this pandemic.

Kenya is not immune, and as a result, the government has issued some statements to counteract rumors and misconceptions. Previous research concluded that social media has long been recognized as a vehicle for disseminating misleading health information (Allington et al., 2021) and instilling fear during a health crisis (Ahmad & Murad, 2020). The surge in misinformation weakens governmental responses and exacerbates people's mistrust and anxiety (Home, 2020). Disinformation, especially on social media, weakens official efforts to the Covid-19 pandemic, endangering public health (Rovetta et al., 2020). Covid-19 disinformation contradicts established public health recommendations and is notorious for being hard to detect. Some of this erroneous medical information is propagated by people masquerading as experts in the medical field or erroneously ascribed to health and research organizations, making its legitimacy more difficult to detect (2020). However, the government of Kenya has put in place severe measures for any misinformation posted on social media. For public policy, misinformation signifies that a greater volume of formal and reliable information does not ensure an increase in efficiency unless the information is made more convincing and presented to diverse consumers through their channels of choice and comprehension of psychological and behavioral prejudices. Therefore, the government must provide scientific advice that is susceptible to change in light of new data. Establishing a clear mandate for public communication is also critical to ensuring its efficacy in fighting misinformation and establishing public confidence. Our results underscore the value of using social media by the government to combat misleading information.

7. Conclusion

Social media has become a powerful government communication tool during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, new links are being established between the government and citizens, with each group relying on the other to combat the pandemic. This exploratory study aimed to investigate how governments used social media in Covid-19 management, focusing on Kenya's Ministry of Health and its Twitter usage. This research revealed that the government of Kenya used social media to communicate to the public on; crucial public health messages, plans and measures, regular updates on the pandemic, Humanitarian and community cohesion, and surveillance. The most prevalent challenge identified was the containment of misinformation regarding Covid-19.

The government now has opportunities to promote public awareness of Covid-19, boost monitoring, improve public preparedness, manage government reputational effects, and increase accountability and transparency while fostering public confidence through social media communication. The study concludes that social media has been beneficial in government communication during the pandemic.

While there are clear advantages to using social media for government communication during pandemics when time is of essence, physical distance is a factor, and the need to reach a larger population is critical, the government must monitor

the users of social media and the information they exchange to ensure quality and reliability and to avoid misleading the public.

The research recommends that the government should acknowledge the limitations of its voice and pursue prospects to collaborate with more influential voices in the community, such as social media influencers. This will increase public engagement, enhanced information penetration on Covid-19, and a more inclusive policy process. Additionally, the government must avoid information overload while promoting ethical and legal open data.

Since social media can make policy processes more inclusive, hence increasing trust between governments and individuals, government authorities in Kenya should utilize this medium to act more effectively during public health emergencies by clarifying ambiguities and educating the public on various pandemic elements as well as receiving feedback. Increased government use of social media during pandemics and other crises is critical, but traditional media should not be overlooked, as both are essential communication tools.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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