The Role of Social Media in Mitigating Risks During Civil Unrest: The Case of the 2021 Looting in KwaZulu-Natal

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Abstract

This study examines the role of social media in mitigating risks during the 2021 unrest and looting in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. It investigates how social media platforms were used to disseminate critical information, alert communities to potential risks, and facilitate public safety during the crisis. A quantitative approach was employed, with data collected through a Google Forms questionnaire from 299 respondents who were active social media users and witnessed the event. The findings reveal that a significant majority of respondents (56.5% agreed, 26.1% strongly agreed) recognised social media's vital role in providing timely alerts about potential risks during the unrest. Additionally, 60.9% of respondents believed social media updates on road closures and safety warnings were helpful. The study also highlights the role of social media in coordinating post-crisis recovery efforts, with campaigns like #LootingMustFall receiving widespread support. The research concludes that social media is an essential tool in crisis communication, but challenges such as misinformation need addressing. Recommendations include strengthening collaboration between local governments and social media platforms, developing crisis management plans, and promoting public awareness of responsible social media use. Future research could explore the dynamics of social media interactions during crises and their impact on public behaviour and perceptions.

Keywords: social media, crisis communication, risk mitigation, civil unrest, KwaZulu-Natal Looting

1. Introduction and Background

Yang (2013) highlights that social media has played a crucial role in driving social and political change across the globe. Since then, activists, protesters, and revolutionaries have increasingly relied on social media to mobilise support for campaigns against various injustices and political unrest worldwide (Gilbert 2022). Patel (2021) asserts that South Africa descended into turmoil after the arrest of former President Jacob Zuma for contempt of court on 11 July 2021. This event led to widespread looting, vandalism, and violence in Gauteng and KZN provinces. What began as a protest against Zuma's arrest quickly escalated into a much more coordinated, controlled, and dangerous series of events. From 8 July 2021 to around 17 July 2021, violent unrest engulfed parts of KZN and Gauteng, characterised by mobilisation via social media platforms. The chaos led to looting, destruction of property, and significant economic disruption, with thousands of injuries, 354 deaths, and economic losses exceeding 50 billion Rand by the end of the violence (Reports of the Expert Group on the July 2021 Riots: 2021)

Sonjica (2021) notes that the KZN government declared a state of disaster in response to the extensive damage caused by the unrest. Social media platforms were instrumental in mobilising and coordinating the unrest, with people using Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and other platforms to spread information and support the violence. Social media experts have pointed to the use of platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok by rioters to coordinate actions and incite violent behaviour (Malinga, 2021). However, Lamb (2021) observes that the looting of shops, shopping centres, supermarkets, and banks in KZN affected the poor, middle class, private individuals, and the government, with devastating consequences for local communities.

While studies have focused on the role of social media in spreading information about revolutions and protests, less attention has been paid to its potential to mitigate risks during such events. Korolov *et al*. (2016) highlight that research into the role of social media in protests and civil unrest gained traction following the Arab Spring, where social media played a pivotal role in sparking revolutions across Arab countries. Solace Global (2019) underscores that social media has been used extensively

as a communication tool in protests for over a decade, and without it, the Arab Spring of 2011, one of the largest waves of civil unrest, would likely not have occurred. Karambo (2021) further stresses that social media contributed to escalating tensions and enabling destructive behaviours during this period. This view is echoed by Mathe and Matsaathebe (2022) and Makonye (2022), who argue that social media influenced public perceptions and amplified unrest. Similarly, Reuters (2011) highlights how platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube played a crucial role during the early stages of the Syrian uprising by coordinating protests, disseminating information, and documenting human rights violations amidst increasing government repression. Some studies even suggest that social media influenced the coverage and public perception of these events, potentially exacerbating tensions (Mathe & Matsaathebe, 2022; Makonye, 2022).

However, there is a significant gap in the literature when it comes to the role of social media in mitigating risks during or preventing civil unrest. This study aims to address this gap, arguing that social media not only promotes civil unrest but also has the potential to mitigate risks during such crises, and can even contribute to preventing unrest altogether. Social media platforms have been effectively used to monitor public sentiment and behaviour during emergencies, which, in turn, can lead to more efficient and proactive risk management strategies (Nazaruddin, 2020: 1). Haataja *et al.*, (2016) examined how crisis and emergency management organisations utilise social media, identifying the key motivators and barriers these organisations face when using these platforms. These organisations predominantly use social media to inform the public and minimise risks, while also gathering crucial information from citizens. The remainder of the study is organised into the following sections: a literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, findings and discussion, conclusion, recommendations, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, the use of social media to disseminate timely information during crises has become increasingly common. Specifically, the "one-to-many" communication model has provided stakeholders with the opportunity to share crisis-related news and access a wealth of information that might otherwise be unavailable (Olteanu *et al.*, 2015). Brynielsson *et al.* (2018) illustrate that social media has become an integral part of human communication, serving as a tool for building and maintaining social relationships, as well as for sharing and co-creating knowledge. Social media offers a wide range of opportunities for individuals, groups, businesses, and governments. Features such as online sharing and social networks have revolutionised the way information is disseminated and updated during crisis situations.

There are several ways in which social media can be leveraged for risk minimisation and crisis communication. First, it enables the development of better situational awareness through collaboration and online interaction. Second, social media is widely accessible and available, allowing emergency services to transmit information and warnings over long distances. Finally, social media platforms generate data that can be tracked geographically or over time, offering valuable insights into the geographic and temporal progression of a crisis (Wendling *et al.*, 2013). One of the main advantages of social media in times of crisis is its ability to disseminate information rapidly. Social media facilitates the immediate distribution of risk messages to a broad audience, which is essential in situations where timely information can significantly impact public safety and response. This immediacy is particularly important in food safety crises, where stakeholders have recognised the need for rapid communication to effectively mitigate risks (Regan *et al.,* 2014).

Table 1. List of Social Media Platforms Used in Risk and Crisis Management

Types of Social Media	Examples	Use for Risk and Crisis Communication
Social Networking	Facebook, Myspace, Friendster	Enhance coordination among volunteers and emergency services, allow information sharing within communities, provide swift updates on emergency situations
Content Sharing	YouTube, Flickr, Vimeo	Enhance situational awareness in real time through exchange of images and videos, allow emergency services to launch viral campaigns about risks, help identify missing individuals or victims
Collaborative Knowledge-Sharing Platforms	Wikis, Forums, Message Boards, Podcasts	Facilitate dialogue between victims and emergency services, foster knowledge exchange
Blogging and Microblogging	Blogger, WordPress, Tumblr, Twitter	Convey recommendations, warnings, and share facts; Twitter enables immediate, widespread information sharing with feedback opportunities
Specialised Crisis Management Platforms	Mapping Collaboration, Crisis Mappers, Google Map Maker	Map emergencies, coordinate contributions from community emergency response teams

Source: Wendling (2013: 13)

As shown in Table 1, social media platforms can be categorised in various ways, such as social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Myspace) that bring together people with shared interests; content-sharing sites (e.g., YouTube, Flickr) where users can upload and share images and videos; collaborative platforms (e.g., Wikis, forums) that enable users to ask and answer questions; and

blogging and microblogging platforms (e.g., Twitter) that allow for real-time sharing of facts, recommendations, and warnings. These platforms are specifically designed to facilitate communication during risks and crises (Wendling, 2013).

The use of social media platforms has significantly enhanced communities' ability to anticipate and prepare for crises. Mavrodieva and Shaw (2021) highlight that collaborative projects on social media provide communities with a wealth of content to analyse and validate, offering valuable opportunities for intervention during crises. Similarly, Aslan (2022) emphasises the central role social media played during the Egyptian uprisings, noting its significant contribution to helping citizens achieve substantial victories. In the context of the 2021 looting in KwaZulu-Natal, Allen (2021) demonstrates how images and videos of burning infrastructure and civil disobedience, many of which were fabricated or taken out of context, contributed to a dynamic that potentially escalated violence and sparked threats of racist and militant counter-attacks. This underlines the role of social media in generating widespread concern and fear, particularly through the blending of fact and fiction on digital platforms, which can exacerbate racial mistrust and hatred during a crisis.

The rapid growth of social media in South Africa, with an estimated 22 million users (and the number continuing to rise as smartphone ownership expands), highlights the power of these platforms in shaping public response during riots, protests, or looting. During the unrest, social media had both positive and negative effects. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp allowed real-time communication between the police, military, and emergency services about events on the ground (Institute for Security Studies, 2021). Malinga (2021) reports that several online initiatives were launched to address the aftermath of the riots and looting in KZN and Gauteng, with hashtags like #LootingMustFall, #SaveSouthAfrica, and #Clean-ups gaining traction on Twitter as citizens and organisations worked together to restore order in the affected provinces. While social media can be an effective tool for mobilisation and raising awareness, addressing complex post-conflict issues such as reconstruction requires sustained offline action, collaboration with local authorities, and community-based efforts.

Moreover, social media facilitates a participatory approach to risk communication, enabling two-way interaction between organisations and the public. This interactive nature allows emergency services to engage with communities, collect real-time feedback, and tailor their responses to the needs of the population. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, social media played a vital role in disseminating health-related information and warnings, increasing public awareness and preparedness (Aboagye, 2023).

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by agenda setting theory and the concept of the public sphere to explain the role of social media during the 2021 looting in KwaZulu-Natal. Max McCombs and Donald Shaw first presented this theory in 1972. The theory suggests that media influence which issues the public considers important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). With social media, this influence has become more interactive, as platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp amplify certain narratives, shape frames of interpretation and influence mainstream media coverage (Salman et al., 2016). During the unrest, social media made issues such as the arrest of Jacob Zuma and political grievances highly salient, while also spreading misinformation that fuelled tensions (Makonye, 2022).

The public sphere, as conceptualised by Habermas (1962), is a space for citizens to debate issues of common concern. Social media has transformed this into a digital public sphere where many voices can participate and mobilise quickly (Papacharissi, 2018). In the KZN case, platforms enabled citizens to share real-time updates, organise community protection efforts and mobilise recovery campaigns (Malinga, 2021; Mathe & Matsaathebe, 2022). At the same time, they also created fragmented echo chambers and spread incitement and false information, showing the dual nature of the digital public sphere during crises (Petla, 2023).

Taken together, these theories provide a lens to understand how social media both shaped what people focused on and offered a space for collective communication and action. Agenda setting highlights how issues gained prominence, while the public sphere framework explains how these issues were debated, contested and acted upon. Together, they allow the study to examine how social media served as both a tool for mobilisation and a mechanism for either mitigating or escalating risks during the 2021 unrest.

3. Methodology

A quantitative research approach was employed in this study, with a focus on data collection via a Google Forms questionnaire. This method was chosen to allow for a systematic and rigorous investigation of the research objectives. The target population consisted of adults aged 18 to 60 years who resided in Durban, were active social media users, and had witnessed the unrest and looting in KwaZulu-Natal. This demographic was selected to gather insights from individuals who directly observed these events and were active on social media during the period in question. Data was collected through an electronically administered online questionnaire created using Google Forms. The questionnaire sought to

gather detailed information on respondents' experiences and perspectives regarding the 2021 unrest and looting in KwaZulu-Natal, as well as their use of social media during this time.

The recruitment process began with the researcher sharing a link to the questionnaire on her Facebook account, inviting potential participants to take part by clicking on the link, which directed them to the first page of the questionnaire. Upon accessing the link, participants were presented with a consent form, which they had to confirm before proceeding. Participants were also asked to verify that they were based in KwaZulu-Natal and had been active on social media during and after the 2021 riots and looting. Those who did not meet these criteria, or who did not agree to the consent form, were automatically excluded from the survey. A total of 299 respondents completed the online questionnaire, providing valuable data for the study. This recruitment method ensured that only relevant and willing participants were included, thereby enhancing the reliability of the data collected. By employing this quantitative research approach and systematic data collection method, the study aimed to obtain a robust data set to effectively address the research objectives.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section explores how social media was utilised to mitigate risks in situations of civil unrest. The analysis examines the strategies and methods employed by individuals and authorities to effectively leverage social media platforms during these events.

4.1 Social Media Use to Alert Individuals and Communities

Figure 1 illustrates the results for the statement: "Social media played a crucial role in alerting individuals and communities about potential risks and dangers during the KZN 2021 looting."
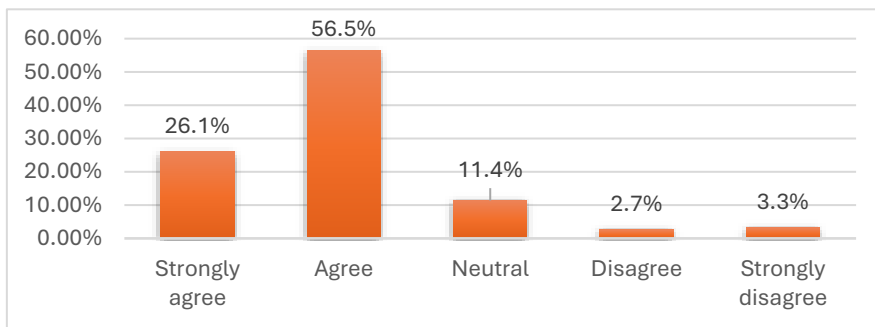

Figure 1. Social Media Use to Alert Individuals and Communities

Figure 1 illustrates that a significant proportion of respondents, 56.5%, agreed, and 26.1% strongly agreed that social media played a vital role in alerting individuals and communities to potential risks and dangers during the 2021 unrest in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). A smaller percentage of respondents expressed neutrality (11.4%), while 2.7% disagreed, and 3.3% strongly disagreed. These results indicate that the majority of respondents recognised the critical role of social media in disseminating timely and essential information during periods of crisis. This analysis aligns with Ndawana's (2023) assertion that social media platforms are central to mobilising and coordinating protests, as well as distributing critical information about risks and dangers during civil unrest. The data and literature collectively affirm that social media not only facilitated the coordination of actions but also served as a crucial mechanism for alerting individuals and communities to potential threats, thereby playing a dual role in shaping the events of the KZN 2021 looting.

4.2 Updates on Road Closures and Safety Warnings

Figure 2 illustrates the statement: "During the civil unrest, I found updates on road closures, safety warnings, and alternative routes shared on social media during the KZN looting to be timely and helpful."
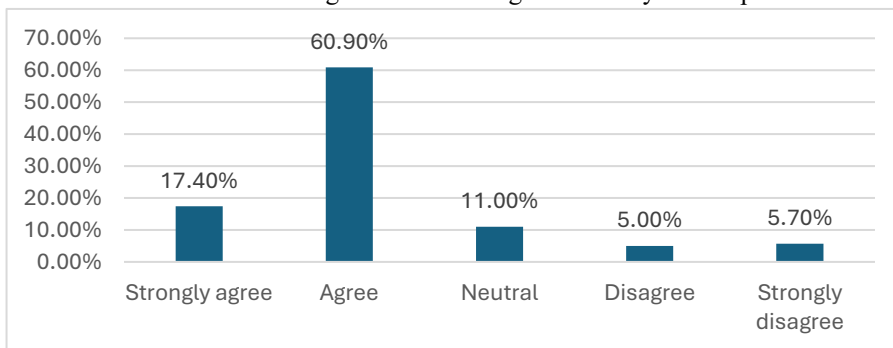

Figure 2. Social media updates

Figure 2 illustrates that a significant majority of respondents, 60.9%, agreed, and 17.4% strongly agreed that social media updates during the 2021 unrest in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) were timely and helpful for road closures, safety warnings, and identifying alternative routes. Meanwhile, 11.0% of respondents remained neutral, reflecting a degree of uncertainty, while 5.7% strongly disagreed, and 5.0% disagreed. This analysis is consistent with Grill's (2020) assertion that social media platforms facilitate the mapping of unrest events and the dissemination of essential updates. These platforms enable real-time alerts, particularly regarding road closures and safety warnings, playing a pivotal role in supporting public safety and informed decision-making during crises. The data findings in Figure 4.13 underscore that the majority of respondents perceived social media as an indispensable tool for accessing timely and actionable information, further highlighting its effectiveness in managing safety concerns and navigating disruptions during the KZN looting.

4.3 Sharing of Official Updates and Safety Information

Figure 3 illustrates the statement: "Government authorities effectively utilised social media platforms to share official updates and safety information during the KZN 2021 looting."
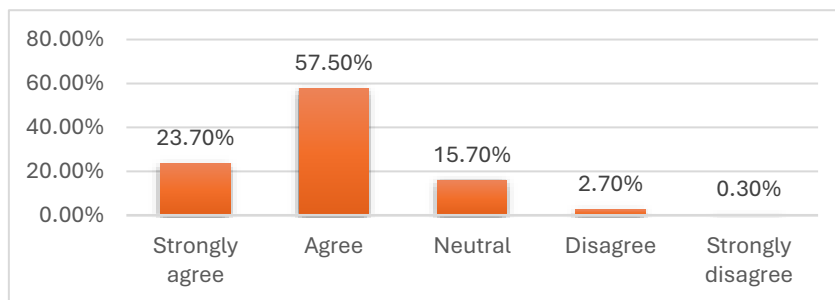

Figure 3. Government authorities utilised social media

The findings from Figure 3 indicate that a significant majority of respondents, 57.5%, strongly agreed, and 23.7% agreed that the government's use of social media to share official safety updates during a crisis positively impacted trust in the government. Meanwhile, 15.7% of respondents remained neutral, 2.7% disagreed, and 0.3% strongly disagreed. These results suggest that timely and transparent communication via social media plays a crucial role in fostering public trust during crises. This analysis aligns with Canero *et al.* (2023), who emphasise the positive relationship between government communication on social media and public trust during crises. The literature highlights that the prompt dissemination of official updates through social media not only enhances public awareness but also strengthens confidence in the government's ability to effectively manage and respond to crises.

4.4 Social Media Primarily to Inform the Public and Minimise Risk

Figure 4 illustrates responses to the statement: "Crisis and disaster management organisations use social media primarily to inform the public to minimise risk and to gather information from citizens."
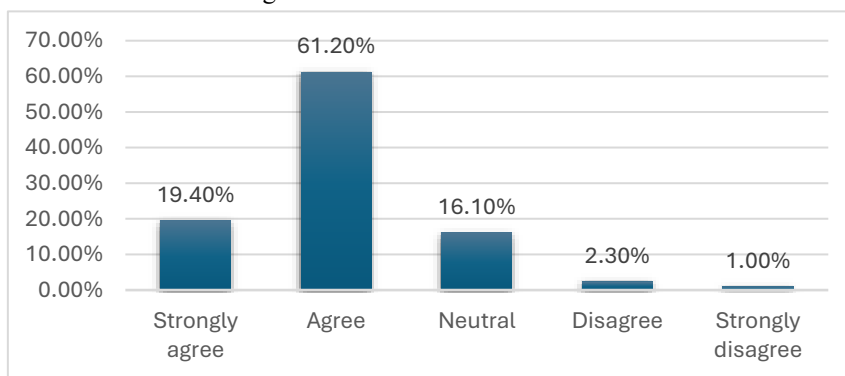

Figure 4. Disaster management organisations use of social media

Figure 4 demonstrates that a significant majority of respondents, 61.2%, agreed, and 19.4% strongly agreed that social media plays a crucial role in facilitating real-time monitoring and situational awareness during crises. Meanwhile, 16.1% of respondents remained neutral, 2.3% disagreed, and 1.0% strongly disagreed. These findings emphasise the recognised importance of social media in crisis management. This analysis aligns with Cvetković *et al.* (2023), who highlight the critical role of social media platforms as tools for governments and organisations to monitor public sentiment and collect real-time, on-the-ground data. This capability enables more effective response strategies, reduces risk, and ensures better coordination during crises. Similarly, Bukar *et al.* (2020) emphasise that social media has been successfully utilised

during natural disasters and periods of social unrest to inform the public, promote situational awareness, and mitigate risks.

4.5 Social Media Initiatives After the Unrest

Figure 5 illustrates responses to the statement: "I saw initiatives such as #LootingMustFall, #SaveSouthAfrica, and #Cleanups that were launched to deal with the aftermath of the riots and looting in KwaZulu-Natal to restore normalcy."
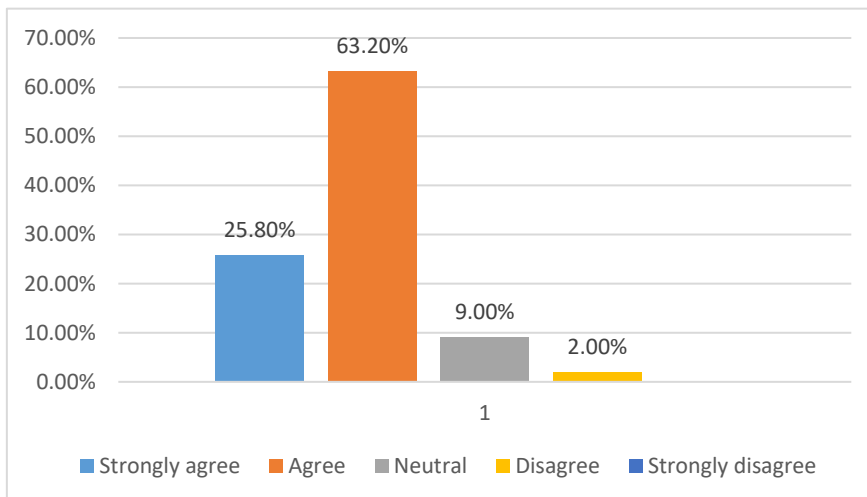

Figure 5. Aftermath of a crises impact

Figure 5 reveals that a significant majority of respondents supported the statement, with 63.2% agreeing and an additional 28.5% strongly agreeing. Meanwhile, 9% of respondents were neutral, and only 2% expressed disagreement. This overwhelming level of agreement highlights a strong consensus in favour of the statement that respondents saw initiatives such as #LootingMustFall, #SaveSouthAfrica, and #Cleanups, which were launched to address the aftermath of the riots and looting in KwaZulu-Natal and restore normalcy.

The findings align with insights from ITWeb (2025), which emphasise the pivotal role of social media campaigns in facilitating cleanup efforts within the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province. Hashtags such as #LootingMustFall, #SaveSouthAfrica, and #CleanUpSA emerged as effective tools for raising awareness and mobilising community involvement. These digital campaigns played a crucial role in galvanising public support, fostering collective action, and driving the success of collaborative cleanup initiatives.

4.6 Gender-based Analysis

Table 2. Gender-based analysis

Gender	Female (N=169)	Male (N=130)	p-value	Overall (N=299)
Social media platforms can disseminate accurate information and influence which issues the public deems important, thereby influencing public perceptions	Chisq., p = 0.234			
Disagree	53 (31.4%)	50 (38.5%)		103 (34.4%)
Agree	110 (65.1%)	75 (57.7%)		185 (61.9%)
Social media played a crucial role in alerting individuals and communities about potential risks and dangers during KZN 2021 looting	Chisq., p = 0.306			
Disagree	24 (14.2%)	25 (19.2%)		49 (16.4%)
Agree	139 (82.2%)	100 (76.0%)		239 (79.9%)
During the civil unrest, I found updates on road closures, safety warnings, and alternative routes shared on social media during the KZN looting to be timely and helpful	Chisq., p = 0.808			
Disagree	37 (21.9%)	26 (20.0%)		63 (21.1%)
Agree	126 (74.6%)	99 (76.2%)		225 (75.3%)

The chi-square test results indicate that there is no significant relationship between gender and any of the statements, as all p-values exceed the 0.05 threshold (p > 0.05). Specifically, for the statement *"Social media platforms can disseminate accurate information and influence which issues the public deems important, thereby influencing public perceptions"* (p = 0.234), *"Social media played a crucial role in alerting individuals and communities about potential risks and dangers during KZN 2021 looting"* (p = 0.306), and *"During the civil unrest, I found updates on road closures, safety warnings,*

and alternative routes shared on social media during the KZN looting to be timely and helpful" (p = 0.808), the analysis suggests that gender does not significantly affect perceptions of social media's role during the KZN unrest. The agreement rates for all statements remain consistently high across both male and female respondents, indicating that both genders generally share similar views on the impact and utility of social media during the unrest.

4.7 Age-based Analysis

Table 3. Age-based Analysis

Age Group	18-25yrs (N=134)	26-35yrs (N=76)	36-45yrs (N=59)	46-60yrs (N=30)	p-value	Overall (N=299)
Social media platforms can disseminate accurate information and can influence which issues the public deems important, thereby influencing public perceptions					0.750	
Disagree	45 (33.6%)	31 (40.8%)	20 (33.9%)	11 (36.7%)		107 (35.8%)
Agree	89 (66.4%)	45 (59.2%)	39 (66.1%)	19 (63.3%)		192 (64.2%)
Social media played a crucial role in alerting individuals and communities about potential risks and dangers during KZN 2021 looting					0.515	
Disagree	23 (17.2%)	15 (19.7%)	7 (11.9%)	7 (23.3%)		52 (17.4%)
Agree	111(82.8%)	61 (80.3%)	52 (88.1%)	23 (76.7%)		247(82.6%)
During the civil unrest, I found updates on road closures, safety warnings, and alternative routes shared on social media during the KZN looting to be timely and helpful					0.359	
Disagree	25 (18.7%)	20 (26.3%)	11 (18.6%)	9 (30.0%)		65 (21.7%)
Agree	109 (81.3%)	56 (73.7%)	48 (81.4%)	21 (70.0%)		234 (78.3%)

The chi-square test results indicate no statistically significant differences across age groups for the three statements tested: *"Social media platforms can disseminate accurate information and can influence which issues the public deems important, thereby influencing public perceptions"* (p = 0.750). The p-value is greater than 0.05, suggesting that age does not significantly influence how different age groups view social media's role in disseminating accurate information and shaping public perceptions.

Similarly, the statement *"Social media played a crucial role in alerting individuals and communities about potential risks and dangers during KZN 2021 looting"* (p = 0.515) shows no significant differences in perceptions across age groups regarding social media's role in alerting individuals and communities about potential risks. Additionally, for the statement *"During the civil unrest, I found updates on road closures, safety warnings, and alternative routes shared on social media during the KZN looting to be timely and helpful"* (p = 0.359), the p-value further supports the conclusion that age does not significantly affect perceptions of social media's role in providing updates on road closures and safety warnings. Agreement rates remain high across all age groups, ranging from 70.0% to 81.4%.

4.8 Race-based Analysis

Table 4. Race-based Analysis

Race	Black (N=201)	Indian (N=59)	White (N=21)	Coloured (N=18)	p-value	Overall (N=299)
Social media platforms can disseminate accurate information and can influence which issues the public deems important, thereby influencing public perceptions					0.010	
Disagree	66 (32.8%)	16 (27.1%)	7 (33.3%)	13 (72.2%)		102 (34.1%)
Agree	135 (67.2%)	31 (79.9%)	14 (66.7%)	5 (27.8%)		185 (61.9%)
Social media played a crucial role in alerting individuals and communities about potential risks and dangers during KZN 2021 looting					0.461	
Disagree	37(18.4%)	9 (15.3%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (5.6%)	Fisher's	47 (15.7%)
Agree	164(81.6%)	38(84.7%)	21(100.0%)	17 (94.4%)		240(83.3%)
During the civil unrest, I found updates on road closures, safety warnings, and alternative routes shared on social media during the KZN looting to be timely and helpful					0.55	
Disagree	42 (20.9%)	12 (20.3%)	2 (9.5%)	5 (27.8%)	Fisher's	61 (20.4%)
Agree	159 (79.1%)	35 (79.7%)	19 (90.5%)	13 (72.2%)		226 (75.6%)

The chi-square and Fisher's tests reveal a statistically significant difference in perceptions across racial groups only for the statement on social media's role in disseminating accurate information and influencing public perceptions, with a p-value of 0.010. This significance is primarily driven by the notably lower agreement rate among the Coloured group (27.8%) compared to other racial groups, with 67.2% of Black, 79.9% of Indian, and 66.7% of White respondents agreeing.

However, for the other two statements: *"Social media played a crucial role in alerting individuals and communities about potential risks and dangers during KZN 2021 looting"* (p = 0.461) and *"During the civil unrest, I found updates on road closures, safety warnings, and alternative routes shared on social media during the KZN looting to be timely and helpful"* (p = 0.55), the p-values are greater than 0.05, indicating no statistically significant differences in perceptions by race. In both cases, high agreement rates were observed across all racial groups, suggesting general consensus on these aspects of social media's role during the KZN unrest.

5. Conclusion

The research findings clearly highlight the critical role that social media plays in mitigating risks during periods of civil unrest, specifically in the case of the 2021 unrest in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). Social media platforms were found to be instrumental in disseminating crucial information, such as alerts about potential risks, road closures, and safety warnings, which helped individuals and communities navigate the crisis more effectively. These findings align with the literature by Haataja *et al.* (2016), which underscores how crisis and disaster management organisations leverage social media to inform the public and gather real-time information. Social media's immediacy and wide-reaching nature make it an invaluable tool in mitigating risks during crises, as it enables the rapid dissemination of critical information to a broad audience.

The study's primary findings reinforce this, with a significant majority of respondents agreeing that social media played a vital role in alerting individuals and communities to potential risks during the KZN unrest. Additionally, respondents found updates on road closures, safety warnings, and alternative routes shared via social media to be timely and helpful. This supports Regan *et al.*'s (2014) assertion that quick communication is essential in managing food safety crises and can also be extended to broader crisis management scenarios, including social unrest. Given the widespread agreement on the importance of social media in providing timely and relevant updates, it can be concluded that social media effectively serves as a tool for risk management in crisis situations. The research successfully demonstrates that social media is integral to enhancing public safety, fostering communication, and ultimately mitigating risks during times of unrest.

6. Recommendations

Strengthen Communication and Online Monitoring: Local governments in KZN should establish dedicated teams within law enforcement agencies or collaborate with social media platforms to actively monitor and address potential threats and misinformation. This initiative would help detect and counter the spread of fake news, as well as the organisation of criminal activities through social media. Real-time monitoring and swift responses to harmful content would contribute to more effective risk management during crises.

Enhance Collaboration with Social Media Companies: Closer collaboration between the local government and social media companies should be fostered to ensure more efficient information sharing. Establishing direct channels of communication will enable the quicker removal of harmful content and assist in identifying individuals or groups that incite violence or criminal activities. A streamlined communication process would allow for faster responses, preventing the spread of misinformation or incitement.

Public Awareness Campaigns: The local government should assist in launching public awareness campaigns to educate citizens on the responsible use of social media, focusing on the dangers of misinformation. Citizens in KwaZulu-Natal should be empowered to identify and report suspicious or harmful content that could contribute to criminal activities. Public campaigns should also educate individuals on the legal and social consequences of participating in or supporting illegal activities such as looting.

Invest in Technology and Training: Local government agencies should allocate resources to invest in technology and training for law enforcement personnel, enabling them to effectively monitor, analyse, and respond to social media activities. Incorporating advanced technologies such as data analytics and artificial intelligence tools would help authorities identify patterns and detect potential threats, ultimately enabling them to take proactive measures to prevent future incidents of unrest.

7. Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the role of social media in mitigating risks during the 2021 KwaZulu-Natal unrest, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the reliance on self-reported survey data introduces the possibility of response bias, as participants may have overstated the significance of social media due to its prominence during the crisis. Second, the study focused on a single geographic region, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other contexts. Third, the use of a self-selected sample may have influenced the type of individuals who chose to participate, and although respondents were asked to confirm their presence in the region and their social media use, the verification process was not highly rigorous. Finally, the reliance on primarily quantitative methods restricted the ability to capture the depth and nuance of participants' experiences and perceptions.

8. Future Research Directions

Future research could delve deeper into how social media users interacted during the 2021 KZN looting, exploring how users shared real-time information, coordinated activities, or expressed opinions about the events. This could involve analysing the use of hashtags, live videos, and community groups, which played a significant role in mobilising support, spreading awareness, and in some cases, inciting violence. Qualitative research methods such as content analysis, interviews with active users, and sentiment analysis could help uncover the specific dynamics of these interactions and their effects on public perception and behaviour. Gaining insights into both the positive and negative impacts of social media in such crisis situations could inform better management strategies for future crises.

Further research should also examine the role of social media in crisis communication from the perspective of different stakeholders, including government agencies, social media companies, and the general public. Studies could focus on how these stakeholders use social media to communicate during crises, how they perceive the effectiveness of these tools, and the challenges they face. Research could also investigate the evolution of crisis communication strategies in response to the growing influence of social media.

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