

**AN ANALYSIS OF ZIMBABWEAN MAINSTREAM PRINT MEDIA
REPRESENTATION OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC INFODEMIC COMMUNICATION
DISORDERS**

by

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submitted in accordance with the requirements for

the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the subject

COMMUNICATION SCIENCE

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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2 FEBRUARY 2026

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my late father (Shadreck Chekufa Mahefu) and my late mother (Eugen Chinyan'anya Mahefu) who sowed a foundation and seed of hunger for success in me, and did not see me flourish into a fruit and person they desired to raise in their life. Additionally, it is also dedicated to my wife (Memory Nyakanda Mahefu) who stood by me and supported me throughout the sleepless nights of this hard and demanding academic journey. Without the support of my sons Ashley Isheanesu Mahefu and Kudzai Leeroy Mahefu this dissertation would not have been complete.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I give glory and honour to the Almighty God, the Alma-mater of my life. If it was not for this God, I would not have gathered the strength and wisdom to complete this piece of work in an exuberant and classical manner as I did. I would also want to thank my supervisor Dr Mercy Bvuma for her guidance, support, mentorship and motivation throughout my academic journey. Metaphorically, my academic journey was a comrade marathon indeed but with the support and resilience of my supervisor I did not have a reason to disembark from the rigorous and energy-sapping marathon. Thank you so much Dr Bvuma for not throwing me under the bus. I would also want to thank my partners in the academic journey – Mr Allie Michael Makupe, Dr Gladness Mpya, Dr Tendaiishe Berejena and Dr Allen Munoriyarwa for the encouragement, advice, and emotional support in my academic journey. Above all, I want to salute and acknowledge Erna Jorgensen for her exceptional editing and proofreading expertise. Her editing acumen endeavours made this dissertation pass through the examiners without any technical and language related flaws. I also have the pleasure of thanking my family (my wife Memory and sons – Ashley and Leeroy) for supporting me emotionally and financially throughout my academic dreams to become true. I have managed to come to the end of my Masters journey without being broken and bruised emotionally and psychologically all because my family became a pillar of my support system right up to the end.

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by a parallel “infodemic,” characterised by an overabundance of information, including false or misleading content, which complicated public understanding of the crisis. This study explored how Zimbabwean mainstream print media represented COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders during the first phase of the pandemic in 2020, focusing on *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*. In this study, misinformation and disinformation were conceptualised as core forms of infodemic communication disorders, alongside malinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories, thereby anchoring these concepts within the broader infodemic framework. Guided by representation theory, framing theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative methodology. Data were collected from 32 newspaper articles published between 1 May and 31 August 2020 and analysed using Braun and Clarke’s Thematic Analysis and van Dijk’s critical discourse analysis. The findings indicate that media representations of COVID-19 were shaped by ideological positioning, selective framing, and discursive strategies that both reinforced and contested infodemic communication disorders. The analysis reveals a consistent pattern of fear-inducing frames to emphasise the severity of the pandemic. Moreover, in both newspapers, a multi-pronged debunking strategy was adopted, however, there were significant gaps in corrective discourse and scientific clarification. The study provides a nuanced understanding of how print media not only reflects but also constructs social and ideological meanings in response to COVID-19 pandemic infodemic communication disorders. It was concluded that mainstream print media played a complex role in the framing, circulation and contestation of misinformation and disinformation, with implications for public trust, health communication, and responsible journalism during pandemics. The study contributes to scholarship on media and health communication by providing a localised and theory-informed analysis of the representation of infodemic communication disorders in Zimbabwe, offering valuable insights for media professionals, policymakers and the public

Key Words: COVID-19 pandemic, Critical Discourse Analysis, Framing Theory, Infodemic communication disorders, Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation, Representation, *The Standard*, *The Sunday Mail*, Zimbabwean mainstream print media

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

5G	Fifth-generation mobile network technology
ABC	Audit Bureau of Circulation (Zimbabwe)
AI	Artificial Intelligence
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CNN	Cable News Network
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
MDM	Misinformation, Disinformation and Malinformation
GSK	GlaxoSmithKline
ICU	Intensive Care Unit
PAHO	Pan American Health Organisation
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SA	South Africa
TA	Thematic Analysis
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
US	United States
VMCZ	Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe
WHO	World Health Organization

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

This study examined the representation of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic infodemic communication disorders in the Zimbabwean mainstream print media; in particular, *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* weekly newspapers. Research such as that of Munoriyarwa and Chibuwe (2022:201) observed that the media landscape in Zimbabwe exhibited a significant degree of polarisation and discordance. The presence of significant levels of media polarisation has been found to directly shape the production and circulation of infodemic communication disorders such as misinformation, disinformation, and selective or distorted reporting, in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hart, Chinn & Soroka, 2020:679–697; Munoriyarwa & Chibuwe, 2022:205). In this current study, polarisation does not operate as a separate phenomenon but as a driving structural condition that influences how information is represented, framed, prioritised, and interpreted. Competing ideological positions within polarised media environments often lead to the privileging of particular narratives while marginalising or discrediting others, thereby facilitating the spread of contradictory, misleading, or politically motivated information. From a framing theory perspective, polarised media environments privilege particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, and moral evaluations, thereby shaping pandemic narratives along ideological lines. Through the lens of representation theory, such selective framing constructs partial and contested meanings of the pandemic, often amplifying uncertainty or legitimising misleading interpretations. Furthermore, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reveals how these representations are embedded within broader relations of power, where political and institutional interests influence which voices are amplified or silenced. In this way, polarisation is not merely a contextual feature but a generative force that produces infodemic communication disorders as discursive outcomes. This dynamic contributes to fragmented and inconsistent public health messaging across media platforms (Ball & Maxmen, 2020:371). Consequently, COVID-19-pandemic infodemic communication disorders can be understood as discursive outcomes of polarised media systems, where news content is shaped less by public health imperatives and more by political alignment and institutional interests.

Against this backdrop, the current study explored the representation of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (MDM), as well as fake news and conspiracy theories, as constitutive forms of infodemic communication disorders within Zimbabwean mainstream print media. In this regard, these phenomena were not treated as isolated categories, but were analytically examined as interconnected manifestations of the broader infodemic, through which distorted, misleading, and ideologically framed information about COVID-19 was produced, circulated, and legitimised in news discourse. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented an occasion for scholars and academics to evaluate the merits and constraints of media coverage and representation of the pandemic. In view of the above concerns and problems bedevilling the media landscape due to the proliferation of COVID-19 infodemic; guided by representation theory, framing theory, and CDA as its theoretical lens, the current study explored and described the representation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders in Zimbabwean mainstream print media within a polarised and politicised media landscape. In this context, media polarisation and politicisation are conceptualised as enabling conditions that shape the production and circulation of infodemic communication disorders (misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories). Scholars argue that during the COVID-19 pandemic, politically aligned and polarised media systems tended to frame health information in ways that reinforced ideological positions, thereby amplifying misleading or conflicting narratives (Hart, Chinn & Soroka, 2020:679–697; Brennen, Simon, Howard & Nielsen, 2020:2). Similarly, Cinelli *et al.*, (2020:1-10) demonstrate how fragmented and polarised information ecosystems facilitate the rapid diffusion of unreliable and conspiratorial content. From this perspective, infodemic communication disorders are not incidental but emerge as discursive outcomes of ideologically driven media practices, where selective framing, narrative contestation, and power-laden representations shape public understanding of the pandemic.

In a nutshell, in this introductory chapter, the research context is addressed by presenting the research problem and its background, the research objectives and questions, as well as the theoretical background. In addition, key terms are defined and research methodology, including ethical aspects, are briefly elaborated and discussed.

1.2 Background of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic affected billions of people worldwide; and the manner in which its origins, spread and containment has been represented or framed in the media become debatable and popular among media and communication scholars and academics (Mutua & Oloo Ong'ong'a, 2020:3; Pieri, 2019:73; Wen, Aston, Liux & Ying, 2020:331; Zhou, Wang, Xia, Xiao & Tang, 2020:2693). Due to its significant impacts, the pandemic has naturally gained a prominent position in both private and public media coverages. Both print and electronic media disseminated informative information pertaining to the pandemic and spread misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories about the pandemic in a manner which spells doom and despondency among citizens. This phenomenon has been termed "infodemic" (De Nicola, Mambou & Kauermann, 2023:3). The coverage provided by mainstream media plays a significant role in conveying health risks and influencing public attitudes. This was achieved through high volume of media coverage and the manner in which COVID-19 news was reported. The prevalence of stereotypical and xenophobic frames which stigmatised and labelled the Chinese as the source of COVID-19 emerged in the international media (Mutua & Oloo Ong'ong'a, 2020:2).

1.3 Description of the Study Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by a parallel "infodemic," characterised by an overabundance of information including misinformation, malinformation and disinformation that complicated public understanding and response to the crisis (World Health Organization, 2020a). This phenomenon undermined trust in health authorities and contributed to uncertainty and risky public behaviours (Zarocostas, 2020:676; Brennen, Simon, Howard & Nielsen, 2020:2). While existing scholarship has largely focused on digital misinformation, comparatively little attention has been paid to how traditional print media have engaged with and potentially reproduced such communication disorders, particularly within African contexts.

In Zimbabwe, newspapers such as *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* played a central role in shaping public narratives around COVID-19. However, media institutions are not ideologically neutral; they reflect and reproduce broader political and institutional interests (Hall, 1997:24; McQuail, 2010:172). Despite this, there remains a lack of systematic, theory-informed research examining how Zimbabwean

print media framed and represented infodemic-related communication disorders. The absence of such localised and analytical scholarship limits understanding of how media discourse may have influenced public knowledge, perceptions, and behaviours during the pandemic. This current study therefore addresses this gap by analysing the representation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders in *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*, guided by framing theory, representation theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis interpretive frameworks.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The research goal is a declarative statement that outlines the overarching objective or intention of a research investigation (Imran, Ghufan, Shah, Ahmad & Anwar 2024:1432). The aim of the current study was to explore how the Zimbabwean mainstream print media represented the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic communication disorders, specifically misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories, during the first phase of the pandemic (May to August) 2020.

1.5 Research Objectives and Questions

1.5.1 Research questions

The research question is the key question that the study will address and it is also the precursor of research objectives (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2023). The primary question of the study was: How did Zimbabwean mainstream print media outlets represent and frame the COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders such as misinformation, disinformation, malinformation and conspiracy theories during the first phase of the pandemic in 2020?

The following sub-research questions guided the study:

- How did *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* represent the proliferation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders, such as disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories, during the first phase of the pandemic?
- Which elements of the COVID-19 infodemic did the two newspapers identify in their coverage of the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- What dominant themes and frames of the COVID-19 infodemic are reflected in the news coverage and editorial content of *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* during the first phase of the pandemic?
- In what ways did the newspapers attempt to debunk or correct misinformation and inaccuracies related to the COVID-19 pandemic and which discursive methods were used to do so?

1.5.2 Research objectives

The study explored and described media representation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders in Zimbabwean mainstream print media, specifically *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*. The objectives were exploratory and descriptive. The specific research objectives were:

- To explore how *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* represented the proliferation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders such as misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories during the first phase of the pandemic.
- To identify and describe the elements of the COVID-19 infodemic the two newspapers identified in their coverage of the first phase of the pandemic.
- To identify and categorise the dominant themes and frames of the COVID-19 infodemic as reflected in the news coverage and editorial content of both newspapers.
- To critically analyse whether and how the newspapers attempted to debunk or correct false information, and the discursive methods used to do so.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it analyses the conformity of two selected mainstream print media newspapers to the ethical standards governing news collection and dissemination. The Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe (VMCZ) Code of Conduct (2022) mandates that Zimbabwean media practitioners report with accuracy, fairness, truthfulness, and balance, while minimising harm. This document stipulates that media reporting must maintain balance by avoiding misrepresentation, distortion, and exaggeration, among other forms of deviation from factual accuracy. This study is

significant as it reveals whether the two chosen newspapers complied with these guidelines in their representation of the COVID-19 infodemic.

The study provides a nuanced understanding of how print media not only reflect but also construct social and ideological meanings in response to infodemic communication disorders. It aligns with emerging African scholarship that emphasises the need to examine the role of media ideologies, state control, and resistance within postcolonial communicative spaces (Mutsvairo & Bebawi, 2019:143). Furthermore, the study contributes significantly to the conceptual and empirical understanding of infodemic communication disorders namely, misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories. According to the WHO (2020a), the COVID-19 infodemic posed an equally pressing threat to public health as the virus itself, undermining risk communication, sowing distrust, and amplifying confusion. Yet, limited research has systematically interrogated how African print media responded to these communication challenges.

Methodologically, the study makes a distinct contribution by combining Thematic Analysis (TA) and CDA to examine media texts. While CDA has been widely employed in Western media research (Wodak & Meyer, 2016), its integration with TA in African crisis communication contexts remains limited. The hybrid analytical approach of this study provides a robust framework for exploring not only the content of media narratives but also the underlying ideologies, power relations, and discursive strategies employed. Beyond theoretical and methodological contributions, the study provides practical insights for journalists, media houses, and policymakers. It highlights the practices used by newspapers to either reinforce or challenge the spread of misinformation, offering lessons for future journalistic training, newsroom protocols, and crisis communication strategies. Findings may inform policies on fact-checking, source verification, headline framing, and media ethics in times of public emergency (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017:5). Finally, this study enriches the field of media representation and ideological analysis by unpacking how actors, events, and beliefs related to COVID-19 were discursively constructed in the Zimbabwean press. Representation, as argued by Hall (1997:28), is not merely about reflecting reality, but about producing meaning through language. By examining the interplay between

government positions, public sentiment, scientific narratives, and misinformation, the study illuminates how media frames serve as sites of ideological contestation and power negotiation.

1.7 Research Method

This section provides a brief overview of the research paradigm, methodology, and research design adopted in the study. Detailed discussions are presented in Chapter 4.

1.7.1 Research paradigm

The study was guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which recognises reality as multiple and socially constructed, and is appropriate to exploring meanings embedded in media representations.

1.7.2 Methodology

A qualitative methodology was employed to facilitate an in-depth understanding of how COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders were represented in print media discourse.

1.7.3 Research design

The study adopted an exploratory case study design focusing on selected Zimbabwean mainstream newspapers during the period May to August 2020.

1.8 Population, Sampling and Sample Size

The study focused on Zimbabwean mainstream print media, with *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* forming the accessible sample. A non-probability sampling approach was used to select relevant newspaper articles within the defined study period. Further details are provided in Chapter 4.

1.9 Data Collection Method

Data were collected using a desktop-based approach from digital newspaper repositories, specifically PressReader. Articles published between May and August 2020 were purposively selected using relevant COVID-19-related keywords. The detailed data collection procedures and instruments are discussed in Chapter 4.

1.10 Data Analysis Method

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, guided by representation theory, framing theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). These frameworks informed the interpretation of patterns, meanings, and ideological dimensions within the data. A comprehensive account of the analytical process is presented in Chapter 4.

1.11 Dissertation Chapter Outline

The dissertation comprised of seven chapters which are briefly outlined and described below.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter described the study's background. It emphasised the global infodemic communication problems related to the COVID-19 pandemic as shown in the media and delineated the research problem together with the utilised approach. The setting, theoretical framework, and background of the research problem were delineated, in addition to the questions the study aimed to address, as well as an examination of the methodological strengths and weaknesses.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Chapter 2 outlines and discusses the pertinent COVID-19 pandemic literature for the study and representation of the COVID-19 infodemic. The key focus was on how the media covered the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic in international and African countries. It also discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic constituted an infodemic. The chapter also discusses the key elements and forms of an infodemic, namely misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

This chapter serves to illustrate the theoretical framework that provided additional context to the findings of the study. The framing theory and the representational theory were employed as the lens for this study. The theories presented in Chapter 3 were used throughout the research to evaluate the existence and extent of misinformation, malinformation, and disinformation in COVID-19 newspaper discourses. The theoretical framework highlighted the media representations of COVID-19 infodemic. The chapter illustrates how the most appropriate information required for the study was collected.

Chapter 4: Methodology framework

Chapter 4 delineates the study approach by detailing the methodological framework, design, and sample collection technique, while concurrently providing a candid awareness of the advantages, limits, and ethical considerations pertinent to this methodology. The study's time frame, the methodologies employed by the researcher, and the data analysis techniques were clearly outlined, elaborated and justified.

Chapter 5: Presentation of findings and data analysis

This chapter provides a qualitative analysis of newspaper stories published in The Sunday Mail and The Standard from May 1 to August 31, 2020. The findings are analysed in relation to the aims, questions, and theoretical framework of the study. It examines the analysis of how the chosen newspapers reported and depicted the infodemic communication surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. The proliferation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders such as misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories during the first phase of the pandemic is discussed. In addition, the analysis identified and described the elements of the COVID-19 infodemic the two newspapers identified in their coverage of the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlighted the dominant themes and frames of the COVID-19 infodemic as reflected in the news coverage and editorial content of both newspapers. Lastly, a critical analysis of how the newspapers

attempted to debunk or correct false information, and the discursive methods used to do so is presented and discussed.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This chapter provides a discussion of the findings and provides literature that corroborates or contradict the findings emerging from the current study.

Chapter 7: Conclusion, limitations and recommendations

The last chapter encapsulates the primary findings of the research. It examines the ethical responsibility of the media in debunking infodemic communication disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter addresses the research questions as originally formulated. The study examined and articulated the representation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders by the Zimbabwean mainstream print media. The research findings highlight the significant impact of media on developing societal ideologies and emphasise the urgent need for responsible and ethical media activities.

1.12 Summary

The opening chapter set a strong foundation for the rest of the dissertation by establishing the scope, purpose, significance, key concepts, and methodology of the study. Chapter 1 introduced the study that investigated the representation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders in Zimbabwean mainstream print media, specifically *The Sunday Mail* (state-owned) and *The Standard* (privately-owned). It outlined the background and context of the study, highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic created a dual crisis: a global public health emergency and an “infodemic” commonly defined as a surge of false, misleading, and contradictory information in both digital and traditional media spaces. The background section outlined the global and local significance of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on how media coverage influenced public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. It described the phenomenon of the “infodemic,” characterised by the overabundance of false or misleading information, and its implications for public health and communication. The

Zimbabwean media landscape is characterised by deep political polarisation, which affects how information is framed and communicated. Research has shown that this polarisation influences the spread of misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and conspiracy theories, especially during crises like COVID-19. The study sought to examine how these communication disorders were constructed and represented in Zimbabwe's print media, and how these representations may have shaped public understanding and behaviour. The study adopted a qualitative research design, using a hybrid methodological approach combining representation, framing theory and CDA to examine how the newspapers framed and represented COVID-19 infodemic content.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW: COVID-19 PANDEMIC INFODEMIC COMMUNICATION DISORDERS

2.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by a parallel “infodemic,” characterised by the rapid proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (MDM), which disrupted public understanding and responses to the crisis (UNESCO, 2020; Siddiqui & Gupta, 2022). A growing body of scholarship acknowledges the scale and consequences of these infodemic communication disorders; however, much of this literature remains largely descriptive, focusing on the existence and spread of misinformation rather than critically interrogating how such information is represented, structured, and legitimised within mainstream media discourse.

Globally, the infodemic posed significant challenges to effective health communication, with misinformation and fake news often circulating across both digital and traditional media platforms (Kamil & Kumari, 2023:548). Of particular concern is the extent to which mainstream media, rather than acting solely as corrective institutions, at times inadvertently endorsed or amplified misleading information, often by reproducing unverified content from online sources (Ukaegbu & Kwani, 2025:113). Such practices contributed to declining public trust in media institutions, as audiences increasingly questioned the credibility, accuracy, and integrity of pandemic-related reporting (Hameleers et al., 2022:237). This erosion of trust has been shown to encourage audiences to disengage from traditional media and seek alternative, and sometimes less reliable, information sources.

Despite these insights, existing scholarship tends to privilege digital platforms, often overlooking the role of traditional print media, particularly within African contexts. In Zimbabwe, where media systems are historically polarised and politically embedded, the representation of infodemic communication disorders was shaped by ideological positioning, institutional interests, and contested claims to authority over “truth.” However, current studies have not sufficiently examined how these structural and political dynamics influence media representation practices, particularly in relation to print journalism.

Against this backdrop, this study explores the representation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders; specifically, misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories in Zimbabwean mainstream print media, focusing on *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*. The study analyses newspaper articles published between May and August 2020 in order to examine how infodemic narratives were constructed, prioritised, and framed within media discourse.

This chapter therefore provides a critical review of global, regional, and Zimbabwean literature on COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders, with particular attention to media representation, framing, and discourse construction. While there is a necessary conceptual overlap with theoretical frameworks such as framing and discourse analysis, this chapter focuses on empirical and conceptual debates, with detailed theoretical operationalisation presented in Chapter Three.

Importantly, the review identifies specific gaps aligned to the study's research questions, particularly the limited:

- focus on Zimbabwean print media as a site of infodemic production,
- application of theory-driven approaches to media representation, and
- analysis of how media practices actively produce and structure infodemic communication disorders.

2.2 Conceptualising infodemic communication disorders

The concept of an infodemic refers to an overabundance of information (both accurate and misleading) that complicates access to reliable knowledge during a crisis (WHO, 2020a; 2020b). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this phenomenon became particularly pronounced, as scientific and technical information was increasingly intermixed with rumours, fake news, misinformation, disinformation, and biased reporting. Such conditions produced what scholars describe as infodemic communication disorders, which not only disrupted access to credible information but also undermined public health responses and polarised public debate (Singh et al., 2020:1).

The scale and impact of the COVID-19 infodemic were immense such that, the WHO Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus observed that the world was confronting not only a health crisis but also an “infodemic crisis” (Zarocostas, 2020:676). This dual crisis significantly complicated pandemic management, as misleading information influenced risk perceptions, promoted harmful behaviours, and weakened adherence to scientifically grounded interventions. In African contexts, for example, misinformation contributed to beliefs that COVID-19 was engineered to reduce the global population or that it had minimal impact on Black communities, thereby illustrating how infodemic narratives can shape socio-cultural interpretations of disease (Adebisi, Rabe & Lucero-Prisno, 2021:137).

Conceptually, the term “infodemic” (a fusion of “information” and “epidemic”) captures both the rapid dissemination and overwhelming volume of information during crises (Gallotti et al., 2020:1285). Originally introduced by Rothkopf (2003), the concept emphasises the interaction of multiple information systems including mainstream media, digital platforms, and informal communication networks in transmitting a mixture of fact, rumour, interpretation, and propaganda. Similarly, the WHO (2020a; 2020b) defines an infodemic as the widespread circulation of excessive information across both digital and physical environments, often described as an “information tsunami” due to the sheer scale of misleading content. Complementing this, UNESCO introduced the concept of the “disinfodemic” to foreground the harmful and deceptive dimensions of pandemic-related information (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2021:11).

A closer analysis of the WHO’s definition reveals four defining characteristics of an infodemic:

- (1) an excessive volume of information,
- (2) the presence of inaccurate or misleading content,
- (3) rapid dissemination across multiple platforms, and
- (4) resulting confusion and risky behavioural outcomes.

These characteristics are further shaped by both the volume and velocity of information flows, which constrain verification processes, weaken editorial

gatekeeping, and blur distinctions between credible information and falsehoods (Zielinski, 2021:6). Consequently, infodemics are not merely about information excess, but about structural conditions that enable misinformation to circulate, gain visibility, and influence decision-making.

The basic characteristics of an infodemic during a pandemic are tabulated and summarised in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Basic characteristic of an infodemic during a pandemic

Characteristic	Component	Effect
Volume of information	Location	Difficult to find because it is scattered in different media platforms.
	Capacity	Difficult to gather, manage and publish due to its abundance.
	Quality	It is difficult to determine/control the quality of the information as it emanates from various sources some with limited expertise in health communication.
	Visibility	It is difficult for authentic and new scientific based evidence to be accepted and make an impact on the citizens.
	Validity	Difficult in distinguishing between news/conspiracies and disinformation.
Velocity of information	Assessment	Time for verifying and assessing the information is limited.
	Gatekeeping	The ability to detect/castigate mis/disinformation and correct it is limited by time constraints.

	Application	Results in delays in identifying and acting on true information.
	History	It is difficult to identify and record the sequence of information events.
	Waste	Minimal replication of research findings.

Source: Zielinski, (2021:6).

Table 2.1 indicate that the concept of COVID-19 pandemic infodemic alludes to the instantaneous dissemination of substantial amounts of information, including pervasive falsehoods and misleading narratives around the pandemic. For its purposes, the present study espouses the definition of COVID-19 pandemic presented by WHO (2020a).

Despite general agreement on these defining features, scholars diverge in how they conceptualise the nature of the infodemic. The infocentric perspective treats the infodemic primarily as a problem of information overload, emphasising the need for improved information management, fact-checking, and communication strategies (Eysenbach, 2020; Colombo, 2022). From this perspective, misinformation is viewed as a deviation from otherwise functional communication systems, and solutions focus on correcting inaccuracies and restoring informational balance.

In contrast, the ecological perspective conceptualises the infodemic as embedded within broader media and communication ecosystems shaped by power relations, institutional dynamics, and technological infrastructures (Colombo, 2022; Houlden et al., 2021). Here, misinformation is not simply an anomaly but a systemic outcome of how information is produced, circulated, and interpreted. This perspective highlights that media institutions, platforms, and audiences are all active participants in shaping infodemic dynamics.

The distinction between these perspectives is analytically significant. While the infocentric approach prioritises information control and accuracy, the ecological approach foregrounds the discursive and structural conditions through which infodemic communication disorders emerge. During COVID-19, this shift is evident in

the transition from reactive misinformation management strategies to more comprehensive approaches that integrate health literacy, information monitoring, and ecosystem-level interventions (WHO, 2020b; 2023; Abuhaloob et al., 2024). Importantly, emerging scholarship challenges the assumption that misinformation exists external to media systems. Instead, it argues that media institutions themselves may actively produce, reproduce, and legitimise infodemic communication disorders through selective representation, framing, and narrative construction. This is particularly relevant in contexts where media systems are shaped by political, economic, and ideological interests, which influence how information is prioritised and presented.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 infodemic encompasses a constellation of interconnected phenomena, including misinformation, disinformation, malinformation (MDM), rumours, fake news, and conspiracy theories which collectively constitute disruptions within the communication system (Baines & Elliot, 2020:20; Ahmad et al., 2022:12727). While these concepts differ in intent and structure, they converge in their capacity to distort meaning, undermine trust, and destabilise public understanding.

In response, global institutions such as the WHO have emphasised the need for multifaceted infodemic management strategies, including promoting accurate information, enhancing public health literacy, and collaborating with media and digital platforms to mitigate misinformation (Ratzan et al., 2020:3; Chhatwal et al., 2021:3). However, these approaches also raise critical tensions between information regulation and freedom of expression, highlighting the complexity of addressing infodemics within democratic societies.

In this study, infodemic communication disorders are therefore conceptualised not merely as informational inaccuracies, but as discursively produced phenomena embedded within media practices and communication systems. This approach shifts the analytical focus from the presence of misinformation to the processes through which it is constructed, represented, and normalised within mainstream print media discourse.

The time line presented in Figure 2.1 highlights historical development of the communication disorders from 2015.

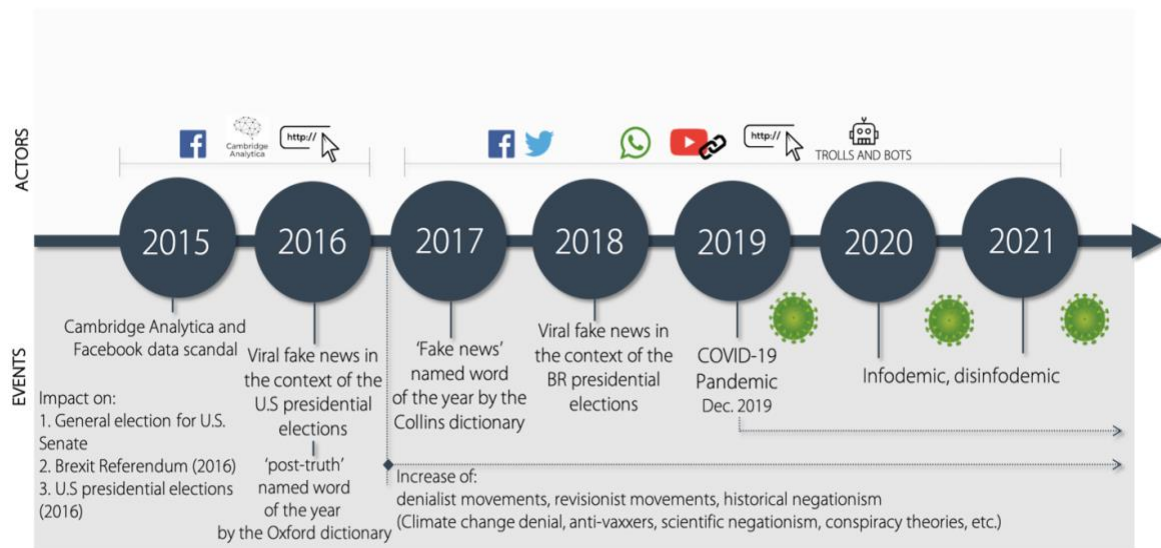


Figure 2.1: Some historical facts about mis-, dis-, mal- information over the last years

Source: Santos-D'Amorim & de Oliveira Miranda, 2021:9)

Figure 2.1 encapsulates significant occurrences from recent years that enable researchers to recognise the utilisation of mis-, dis-, and mal-information as a novel warfare technique with direct societal repercussions.

2.3 Forms or types of infodemic communication disorders

Infodemic communication disorders are commonly categorised into misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (MDM) (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017:20-22). These categories are analytically useful in distinguishing intent, structure, and impact: misinformation refers to false information shared without intent to harm; disinformation denotes deliberately fabricated or misleading information intended to deceive; while malinformation involves the strategic use of truthful information to cause harm. However, while these distinctions are conceptually clear, their practical application within media discourse remains contested. Figure 2.1 illustrates the convergence of three categories of communication disorder/infodemic and the integration of sub-categories within each main category. Misinformation and disinformation can inflict physical and psychological harm, whether purposefully or accidentally. In contrast, malinformation is specifically designed to inflict harm.

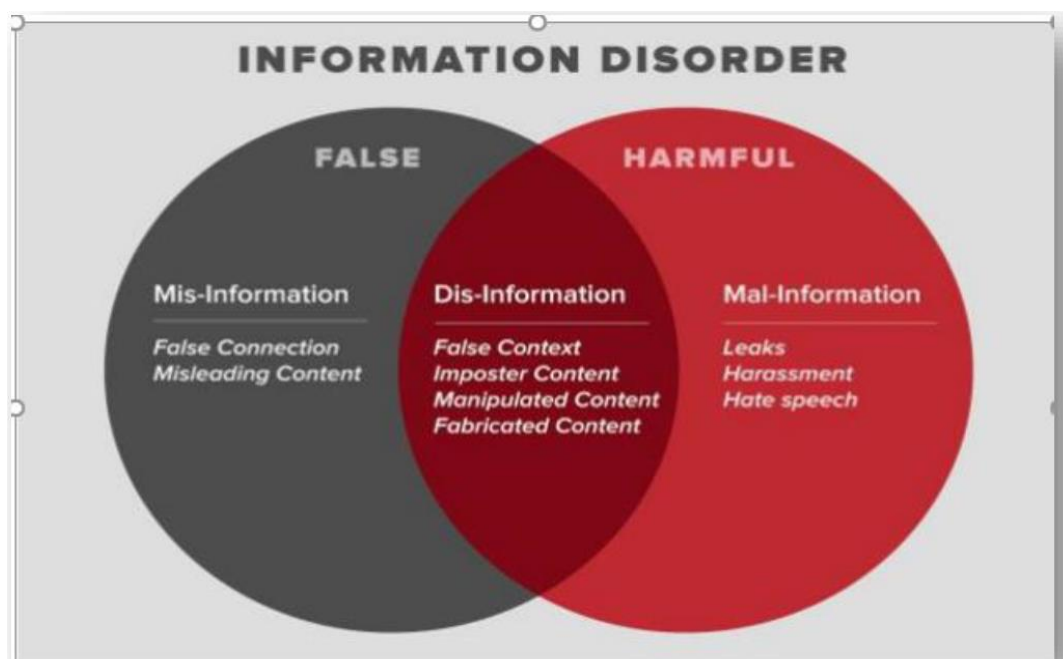


Figure 2.2: Three types of disinformation

Source: Wardle & Derakhshan (2017:20)

The pandemic highlighted the evident existence of *disinformation* and *misinformation*, which the WHO termed an infodemic on 15 February 2020 (WHO, 2020a). The WHO (2020b) indicated that this situation might result in confusion and, ultimately,

scepticism towards government agencies and the public health measures they implement. *Disinformation* refers to intentionally false or misleading information that is created or distributed with the aim of causing harm (El Mawas, 2025:6; Mare & Munoriyarwa 2022:63; Munoriyarwa & Chambwera, 2020:75; Pathak, Srihari & Natu, 2021:357; Santos-D'Amorim & de Oliveira Miranda, 2021:9;). In contrast, *misinformation* is the act of unknowingly spreading inaccurate information. Gradually, the word malinformation is becoming more prevalent in this field (Gibbons & Carson, 2022:231). *Disinformation* and *misinformation* specifically involve the dissemination of incorrect information, whether it is intentionally made or unintentionally disseminated (El Mawas, 2025:2). On the other hand, *malinformation* refers to the leaking of private information, engaging in harassment, and spreading hate speech, with the intention to cause harm (Baines & Elliott, 2020: 20; Santos-D'Amorim & de Oliveira Miranda, 2021:9; El Mawas, 2025:6; Warde & Derakhshan, 2017:22).

A key limitation in the literature is the tendency to treat these categories as discrete and stable. In practice, they frequently overlap and co-occur within media texts, making empirical separation difficult. For instance, a newspaper article may unintentionally reproduce misinformation while simultaneously reinforcing disinformation narratives through selective framing, sourcing, or headline construction. Similarly, malinformation may be embedded within otherwise factual reporting through decontextualisation or strategic emphasis. This suggests that MDM categories function less as isolated phenomena and more as interconnected discursive processes within the broader infodemic.

Global scholarship has extensively documented the proliferation and effects of MDM during COVID-19, particularly in relation to vaccine hesitancy, conspiracy beliefs, and declining trust in public health institutions (Ognyanova et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2023). However, this body of work is largely content-focused, prioritising the identification and classification of false information rather than analysing how such information is represented, structured, and legitimised within media discourse. As a result, the role of mainstream media especially print media in actively shaping infodemic communication disorders remains under-theorised.

In contrast, emerging Zimbabwean scholarship provides important contextual insights into how misinformation operates within a politically polarised and economically

constrained media environment (Mare & Munoriyarwa, 2022; Ncube & Mare, 2022). These studies demonstrate that misinformation and disinformation are often intertwined with struggles over authority, legitimacy, and control of public narratives. However, despite this contextual richness, Zimbabwean research exhibits three critical limitations.

First, it predominantly focuses on misinformation as content, rather than examining how it is discursively constructed and represented in mainstream print media. Second, it tends to prioritise social media platforms, leaving print media underexplored despite their continued role in agenda-setting and legitimising information. Third, there is limited application of theory-driven analytical frameworks, such as framing, representation theory, or Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to interrogate how MDM is embedded within media narratives.

These limitations reveal a significant divergence between global and Zimbabwean scholarship. While global studies offer broad conceptual classifications of MDM, they lack contextual depth; conversely, Zimbabwean studies provide contextual insights but lack systematic, theory-informed analysis of media representation practices. Consequently, there remains a critical gap in understanding how mainstream print media in Zimbabwe represent, structure, and potentially reproduce infodemic communication disorders.

The present study addresses these gaps in direct alignment with its research questions:

- **RQ1 (Representation of infodemic disorders):** Existing studies identify the presence of misinformation and disinformation but do not analyse how newspapers represent and construct these phenomena in their reporting.
- **RQ2 (Elements of the infodemic):** Literature does not sufficiently examine how newspapers identify, prioritise, or define elements of the infodemic within their coverage.
- **RQ3 (Themes and frames):** There is a lack of theory-driven analysis of dominant themes and framing patterns in Zimbabwean print media.
- **RQ4 (Debunking and discursive strategies):** Minimal attention is given to how newspapers attempt to correct misinformation and the discursive strategies used in doing so.

In response to these gaps, the current study moves beyond classification-based approaches by examining MDM, fake news, and conspiracy theories as discursively constructed infodemic communication disorders within Zimbabwean mainstream print media. By focusing on *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*, and applying framing theory, representation theory, and CDA, the study provides a context-specific, theory-informed analysis of how infodemic narratives are produced, structured, and contested.

2.4 Media representation and the infodemic: global, African and Zimbabwean Perspectives

Globally, scholarship demonstrates that media institutions played a dual and often contradictory role during the COVID-19 pandemic, simultaneously functioning as sources of public health information and as conduits for infodemic communication disorders (Cinelli et al., 2020). On one hand, media disseminated essential information regarding prevention measures, transmission patterns, and policy responses (Anwar et al., 2020:3). On the other hand, they contributed, intentionally or inadvertently, to the circulation of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories, thereby amplifying public confusion and undermining trust (Kumar & Bhardwaj, 2024:39; Javier, 2020:145).

This contradiction has generated an ongoing debate within the literature: whether media should be understood primarily as corrective institutions that counter misinformation, or as active participants in its production and amplification. While some studies emphasise the media's role in educating the public and promoting health compliance, others highlight how the reproduction of unverified content, sensational reporting, and competitive news pressures contributed to the spread of misleading information (Srivastava *et al.*, 2020:142). This tension suggests that media are not neutral transmitters of information but are deeply implicated in shaping infodemic dynamics.

In African contexts, these dynamics take on additional complexity. Studies indicate that media coverage of COVID-19 is frequently characterised by alarmist and crisis-driven framing, heavy reliance on external or global narratives, and inconsistencies in messaging (Wasserman *et al.*, 2021; Onwe *et al.*, 2020). While such framing may serve to emphasise urgency and attract audience attention, it often contributes to

information overload, fear, and interpretive uncertainty, thereby reinforcing infodemic communication disorders rather than mitigating them.

However, a critical limitation of African scholarship is that it remains largely descriptive and comparative, focusing on identifying dominant frames or patterns (e.g., fear-based reporting) without sufficiently interrogating how these representations are constructed and how they produce communicative effects. In other words, African studies tend to identify the *outcomes* of media coverage (confusion, panic, misinformation), but under-theorise the *discursive processes* through which such outcomes emerge.

This limitation becomes more pronounced in Zimbabwean scholarship. Existing studies provide important insights into how COVID-19 misinformation circulates within a polarised and politically influenced media environment, where competing actors contest authority over truth and legitimacy (Mare & Munoriyarwa, 2022; Ncube & Mare, 2022). They demonstrate that mistrust in government and media institutions, combined with economic and structural constraints, creates fertile ground for infodemic communication disorders.

However, Zimbabwean scholarship also exhibits key gaps. First, it predominantly focuses on misinformation as content, rather than analysing how mainstream media represent and structure infodemic narratives. Second, it places greater emphasis on social media platforms, leaving traditional print media underexplored despite their role in legitimising and amplifying information. Third, there is limited use of theory-driven approaches, such as framing theory or Critical Discourse Analysis, to examine how meaning, power, and ideology are embedded within media texts.

This reveals a clear divergence between global and Zimbabwean scholarship. While global studies offer broad conceptual insights into the media–infodemic relationship, they lack contextual specificity. Conversely, Zimbabwean studies provide contextual depth but lack systematic, theory-informed analysis of representation practices, particularly in print media.

The identified gaps in the literature directly inform the focus of this study:

- **RQ1 (Representation of infodemic communication disorders):** Existing studies do not sufficiently examine how Zimbabwean print media represent

misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories.

- **RQ2 (Elements of the infodemic):** There is limited research on how newspapers identify, define, and prioritise elements of the infodemic within their coverage.
- **RQ3 (Themes and frames):** African and Zimbabwean studies identify dominant frames but lack systematic, theory-driven analysis of framing processes in print media discourse.
- **RQ4 (Debunking and discursive strategies):** Minimal attention is given to how newspapers attempt to correct misinformation and the discursive strategies used to do so.

In response to these gaps, this study moves beyond descriptive and content-focused approaches by examining media not only as transmitters of information but as active sites of meaning production. By focusing on Zimbabwean mainstream print media, specifically *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*, the study provides a context-specific, theory-informed analysis of how infodemic communication disorders are represented, framed, and contested. Through the application of framing theory, representation theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis, the study contributes to bridging the gap between global conceptual insights and local empirical realities, offering a deeper understanding of how media practices shape public knowledge and responses during health crises.

2.5 COVID-19 conspiracy theories

A conspiracy theory is the conviction that events are covertly orchestrated by influential entities with malicious intentions (UNESCO, 2021). It can also be understood as a rationale or explanation provided for historical events in which individuals participate in secret actions that have a significant influence. Conspiracy theories encompass explanations that pertain to clandestine and nefarious behaviours, as well as evil schemes or plots orchestrated by a group of conspirators, as stated by Axelsen and Emberland (2020). These influential individuals frequently generate several explanations or present facts, portraying them as truthful or authentic. According to UNESCO (2021), a conspiracy theory is the conviction that events are covertly orchestrated by influential entities with malicious intentions. A

conspiracy theory is the belief that events and their causes are not random, and that the world may be split into two groups: the (bad) conspirators and the (good) victims of their plot (Önnerfors, 2021:21). The definition outlines the shared characteristics of a particular conspiracy theory, including the belief that nothing occurs by chance, the existence of a clandestine and influential malevolent group pitted against a powerless and innocent majority, the presence of a covert agenda, and the existence of a concealed network responsible for executing this agenda (Önnerfors, 2021:21). The European Commission and UNESCO (2021) provided an analysis of the characteristics of conspiracy theories and identified six recurring elements in such theories:

- A purported clandestine scheme.
- A collective of individuals engaged in a conspiracy.
- Compelling evidence that appears to corroborate the conspiracy theory.
- They inaccurately imply that there are no random occurrences or coincidences; nothing is as it seems, and everything is interconnected.
- The world is dichotomised into categories of good and bad.
- They blame and target individuals and organisations (UNESCO, 2021).

The current study sought to analyse compelling evidence that appears to corroborate the conspiracy theory in the chosen COVID-19 media texts reported in Zimbabwean mainstream print media.

COVID-19 conspiracy theories have been widely conceptualised as explanations that attribute major events to covert actions by powerful actors with malicious intent (UNESCO, 2021; Axelsen & Emberland, 2020). While scholars broadly agree on this foundational definition, there are notable differences in emphasis. Some approaches frame conspiracy theories as irrational belief systems rooted in cognitive bias, while others interpret them as discursive and ideological constructs embedded within socio-political contexts. This distinction is important, as it shifts the analysis from individual belief to systems of meaning production, particularly within media environments.

Common across these perspectives is the recognition that conspiracy theories operate through identifiable narrative patterns: the assumption that nothing occurs by chance, the construction of a hidden and powerful “enemy,” and the division of society into opposing moral camps (Önnerfors, 2021). However, while these characteristics are

frequently outlined in the literature, such descriptions often remain taxonomic rather than analytical, cataloguing features without interrogating how these narratives are produced, circulated, and legitimised within media discourse.

Empirical studies (Bhattacharya & Singh, 2025; Gagliardone *et al.*, 2016) further demonstrate that COVID-19 conspiracy theories were not isolated phenomena but formed part of a broader infodemic communication ecosystem, intersecting with misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. For instance, global scholarship highlights recurring narratives such as the bioengineering of the virus, the 5G network theory, vaccine conspiracies, and claims involving Bill Gates. While these studies provide extensive documentation of conspiracy content, they often prioritise what conspiracy theories exist, rather than how they are discursively structured and represented in media texts.

A critical tension in the literature lies in how conspiracy theories are interpreted in relation to media systems. On one hand, some scholars argue that conspiracy theories are external distortions that infiltrate media through social networks and fringe actors. On the other hand, emerging perspectives suggest that mainstream media may inadvertently reproduce or legitimise conspiracy narratives through practices such as selective sourcing, sensational framing, and the amplification of controversial claims for audience engagement. This raises important questions about whether media function as gatekeepers of truth or facilitators of contested narratives.

In African contexts, and particularly in Zimbabwe, this tension becomes more pronounced due to structural conditions such as media polarisation, political contestation, and low institutional trust. Conspiracy theories—ranging from beliefs about foreign control of vaccines to the denial of COVID-19's existence—often intersect with historical grievances and socio-political anxieties. However, Zimbabwean scholarship tends to frame these narratives primarily as products of public mistrust or political manipulation, rather than examining how they are constructed and mediated within mainstream media discourse.

Moreover, much of the existing literature adopts a descriptive approach, cataloguing conspiracy theories such as the “Wuhan lab origin,” biological weapon claims, or unscientific cures, without critically analysing how these narratives are framed, legitimised, or contested in journalistic texts. This results in an analytical gap: while we know what conspiracy theories circulated, we know far less about how newspapers represent them, whether they reinforce or challenge them, and what discursive strategies are employed in doing so.

From a critical standpoint, it can be argued that conspiracy theories should not be treated merely as misinformation artefacts but as discursive formations that reveal underlying struggles over power, knowledge, and authority. Their persistence within media discourse suggests that they are not simply “false beliefs,” but meaning-making frameworks that compete with scientific and institutional narratives.

In response to these limitations, this study departs from descriptive approaches by examining conspiracy theories as integral components of infodemic communication disorders within media representation practices. Rather than focusing solely on the existence of conspiracy narratives, the study interrogates:

- how they are represented and framed in Zimbabwean print media;
- how they are integrated with other infodemic elements (MDM, fake news);
- how newspapers legitimise, contest, or neutralise such narratives

By applying framing theory, representation theory, and CDA, the study provides a theory-driven and discursive analysis that moves beyond classification to examine how meaning is constructed within media texts.

2.6 Empirical studies focusing on COVID-19 conspiracy theories

Empirical research on COVID-19 conspiracy theories demonstrates that such narratives are not merely fringe beliefs but are embedded within broader socio-political, communicative, and ideological systems. Globally, studies consistently link the rise of conspiracy theories to populism, distrust in elites, and anti-expert sentiments, which create fertile conditions for alternative interpretations of crises (Stecula & Pickup, 2021:3). These studies further show that conspiracy theories are

discursively structured, operating across multiple levels of meaning-making including macro-level narratives, textual organisation, and micro-level linguistic strategies (Shahsavari et al., 2020; Wolf, 2022).

In addition, global digital media studies highlight that conspiracy theories are sustained through intertextuality, emotional framing, and networked dissemination, particularly on social media platforms where misinformation spreads rapidly and often more virally than factual information (Solovev & Pröllochs, 2022:3706). These studies emphasise how conspiracy narratives evolve over time, incorporating elements of existing misinformation, political rhetoric, and cultural anxieties. However, despite their analytical depth, global studies remain heavily platform-centric, focusing predominantly on social media ecosystems, with limited attention to how conspiracy theories are represented within mainstream print media discourse.

In the African context, research similarly highlights the proliferation of conspiracy theories and misinformation during the pandemic, particularly in relation to vaccine scepticism, distrust in global health institutions, and alternative cures. However, African scholarship largely adopts a descriptive and effects-oriented approach, documenting the presence and societal impact of conspiracy theories without sufficiently interrogating how these narratives are constructed within media texts.

Zimbabwean scholarship provides important contextual insights into these dynamics. Studies by Mare and Munoriyarwa (2022) and Ncube and Mare (2022:71-89) demonstrate that misinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories in Zimbabwe are deeply embedded within a politically polarised media environment, characterised by competing “regimes of truth” and struggles over legitimacy. These studies highlight how political actors, journalists, and alternative media sources actively contest authority over what constitutes “truth,” particularly during the COVID-19 crisis. Similarly, evidence from media monitoring and fact-checking initiatives indicates that misinformation in Zimbabwe became part of a broader political and ideological contest, with both state and opposition actors leveraging disinformation to shape public perception (International Media Support, 2020: Online).

Further empirical studies in Zimbabwe show that misinformation and conspiracy theories had tangible public health consequences. For example, false claims about vaccines and the origins of the virus contributed to vaccine hesitancy and reduced compliance with health measures (Midzi et al., 2024:2637). Additionally, misinformation surrounding the origins, treatment, and transmission of COVID-19, often framed through conspiracy narratives, circulated widely across both formal and informal media channels. These findings demonstrate that conspiracy theories are not only communicative phenomena but also have material implications for public health behaviour and trust.

However, despite these contributions, Zimbabwean scholarship reveals several critical limitations when compared to international studies. First, while global research provides detailed discursive and theoretical analyses of conspiracy narratives, Zimbabwean studies tend to focus on contextual and political dimensions, with limited attention to textual and representational processes. Second, most Zimbabwean studies prioritise social media and audience reception, rather than examining how mainstream print media, such as newspapers, construct, frame, and legitimise conspiracy theories. Third, there is limited application of integrated theoretical frameworks (e.g., framing theory, representation theory, CDA) to systematically analyse how conspiracy narratives are embedded within media discourse.

This reveals a clear divergence in the literature:

- Global scholarship which is strong in theoretical and discursive analysis, weak in contextual specificity
- Zimbabwean scholarship which is strong in contextual and political analysis, weak in representation-focused and theory-driven media analysis

The current study addresses the identified gaps by shifting the analytical focus from the existence and circulation of conspiracy theories to their representation, framing, and discursive construction within mainstream print media. By focusing on *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*, the study foregrounds newspapers as critical sites where infodemic communication disorders are not only reported but also constructed, legitimised, or contested. Furthermore, by applying framing theory, representation theory, and CDA, the study provides a theory-informed and context-specific analysis that bridges the divide between global conceptual approaches and Zimbabwean

empirical realities. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how media systems shape public knowledge, trust, and behaviour during health crises.

2.7 Fake news vis-à-vis COVID-19 pandemic infodemic

The concept of “fake news” gained global prominence during the political discourse surrounding Donald Trump, yet its meaning remains highly contested and analytically unstable (Katsirea, 2018:159). While some scholars define fake news as intentionally fabricated information presented as legitimate journalism (Anderau, 2021:197), others argue that the term has become conceptually diluted, often used interchangeably with misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and even legitimate critical reporting. This lack of definitional consensus creates a fundamental tension in the literature: whether fake news should be treated as a distinct category of communication disorder or as an umbrella term encompassing various forms of false and misleading information.

On one hand, scholars such as Anderau (2021) maintain a clear distinction between fake news and related concepts, arguing that fake news is deliberately fabricated and verifiably false, whereas misinformation may be shared unintentionally. In contrast, other scholars, including Munoriyarwa and Chambwera (2020:75) and Chibuwe (2024:1181), collapse these distinctions by treating fake news, misinformation, and disinformation as functionally equivalent, since all produce misleading or false content. While this latter position emphasises the shared effects of these phenomena, it risks analytical oversimplification, obscuring important differences in intent, production, and circulation.

A further point of contention lies in the relationship between fake news and propaganda. Some scholars conceptualise fake news as a modern extension of propaganda, characterised by the strategic use of false or emotionally charged information to influence public opinion (McIntyre, 2018). However, others caution that not all fake news is ideologically driven; in some cases, it is motivated by economic incentives, such as generating online traffic or increasing media visibility. This divergence highlights a broader debate within the literature regarding whether fake news is primarily a political tool, a commercial strategy, or a hybrid phenomenon.

Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, these conceptual ambiguities became particularly pronounced. Studies show that fake news often blended factual information with misleading claims and emotive appeals, making it difficult for audiences to distinguish between credible and false content (Anastasiades et al., 2021:1200). For example, false narratives about the origins, transmission, and treatment of COVID-19 circulated alongside legitimate scientific information, creating what can be described as a discursive grey zone in which truth and falsehood were not easily separable. This supports the argument that fake news is not simply false information, but a hybrid communicative form that derives credibility through its resemblance to legitimate journalism.

Critically, much of the literature remains focused on defining and categorising fake news, rather than examining how it is represented and operationalised within media discourse. This reflects a broader limitation: scholars tend to treat fake news as an external problem affecting media systems, rather than interrogating how media institutions themselves may contribute to its production, amplification, or legitimisation. For instance, the reproduction of unverified information, reliance on sensational headlines, and selective framing practices may inadvertently reinforce fake news narratives, even within mainstream journalism.

From a critical perspective, it can be argued that fake news is best understood not as a fixed category, but as a discursively constructed phenomenon shaped by media practices, audience interpretation, and socio-political contexts. In this sense, its significance lies not only in its falsity, but in its ability to reshape perceptions of truth, authority, and credibility, particularly within what scholars describe as a “post-truth” environment (McIntyre, 2018).

In light of these debates, this study does not treat fake news as an isolated or purely definitional category. Instead, it conceptualises fake news as part of a broader constellation of infodemic communication disorders, alongside misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. The study specifically examines how fake news is:

- represented and framed within Zimbabwean mainstream print media
- integrated with other infodemic elements
- discursively legitimised, contested, or neutralised through journalistic practices

By moving beyond definitional debates and focusing on media representation and discourse, the study addresses a key gap in the literature and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how fake news operates within the COVID-19 infodemic.

2.8 An overview of global, African and Zimbabwean empirical studies on COVID-19 fake news

Empirical studies on COVID-19 fake news have largely focused on identifying and categorising the dominant themes and patterns of misinformation circulating during the pandemic. For instance, Mohammadi *et al.*, (2022:1–16) classify misinformation into broad thematic categories such as remedies and conspiracy theories, while Singh *et al.* (2020:3) identify specific misconceptions related to the origins of the virus, vaccine development, and unverified treatments. Similarly, Brennen *et al.*, (2020), through an analysis of misinformation cases, highlight the role of public authorities, community transmission narratives, and prominent individuals in shaping misleading information flows.

While these studies provide valuable insights into the content and typologies of fake news, they share a common analytical limitation: they are predominantly classification-driven and descriptive. That is, they focus on what types of misinformation exist, rather than interrogating how such misinformation is constructed, represented, and legitimised within media discourse. This reflects a broader tendency in global scholarship to treat fake news as a static object of analysis, rather than as a dynamic discursive process shaped by language, framing, and institutional practices.

A key tension in the literature lies between content-based approaches and discursive approaches. Content-based studies, such as those cited above, assume that identifying categories of misinformation is sufficient for understanding its impact and developing interventions. In contrast, emerging scholarship argues that such approaches overlook the linguistic, rhetorical, and narrative strategies through which fake news gains credibility and influence. From this perspective, fake news is not simply false information, but a communicative phenomenon embedded in meaning-making processes, requiring analysis beyond thematic classification.

This limitation becomes more pronounced in African and Zimbabwean contexts. While African studies acknowledge the spread of misinformation and its effects on public health behaviour, they largely mirror global trends by emphasising descriptive accounts of misinformation content and circulation. Zimbabwean scholarship, in particular, provides important insights into how fake news operates within a politically polarised and low-trust environment, where competing actors contest authority over truth (Mare & Munoriyarwa, 2022; Ncube & Mare, 2022). However, these studies tend to prioritise contextual explanations (e.g., political influence, economic constraints, public mistrust) over textual and discursive analysis of media content.

Consequently, there is a notable gap in the literature. While global studies offer systematic categorisation of misinformation themes, and Zimbabwean studies provide contextual depth, both fail to adequately examine how fake news is constructed through language, framed within journalistic practices, and embedded in media narratives. This results in an incomplete understanding of how fake news operates within mainstream media, particularly in print journalism.

From a critical standpoint, it can be argued that the dominance of classification-based approaches reflects an over-reliance on positivist assumptions, where misinformation is treated as an observable and measurable phenomenon. Such approaches, while useful for mapping trends, risk overlooking the interpretive and ideological dimensions of media communication, where meaning is negotiated rather than simply transmitted.

Therefore, a more nuanced approach is required, one that integrates thematic analysis with discursive and representational analysis.

In response to these limitations, this study moves beyond descriptive and classification-focused approaches by examining fake news as part of infodemic communication disorders that are discursively constructed within media texts. Rather than focusing solely on the types of misinformation circulating, the study investigates:

- how fake news is represented and framed in Zimbabwean mainstream print media;
- how it is integrated with other infodemic elements (misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories);
- how journalistic practices contribute to the legitimisation, contestation, or neutralisation of fake news narratives

By applying framing theory, representation theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study provides a theory-driven and context-specific analysis that addresses the gap between global classification-based studies and Zimbabwean context-driven research.

2.9 Panoramic view of related global, African and Zimbabwean empirical studies on media representation of COVID-19 pandemic infodemic

This section critically examines empirical literature on the media representation of communication disorders associated with the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic. It is structured around three key analytical concerns aligned with the research questions: (i) how the infodemic is represented in the media, (ii) the dominant themes through which it is constructed, and (iii) the forms or types of infodemic communication disorders depicted in media discourse. While existing scholarship provides important insights into these dimensions, it also reveals significant conceptual and analytical limitations.

At the global level, empirical studies widely acknowledge that mainstream media play a central role in shaping the infodemic by influencing how information is selected, framed, and disseminated (Okereke *et al.*, 2020:453). However, there is a notable divergence in how this role is interpreted. Some scholars position the media as corrective institutions, capable of mitigating misinformation through fact-checking and public health communication. In contrast, others argue that media institutions can function as amplifiers of infodemic communication disorders, particularly when driven by sensationalism, speed, and competition for audience attention. This tension highlights a broader debate within the literature: whether media act primarily as guardians of truth or as participants in the construction of contested realities.

In African contexts, scholarship tends to emphasise the latter position, conceptualising the infodemic as a form of communication disorder produced through media practices such as inconsistent reporting, alarmist framing, and reliance on external narratives (Hove & Cilliers, 2023:1–13). These studies suggest that media representation contributes to public confusion and uncertainty, particularly in contexts where access to verified health information is limited. However, while African scholarship effectively identifies the effects of media representation such as confusion, panic, and mistrust, it often stops short of analysing the discursive mechanisms through which these effects are produced. In other words, it describes *what happens* without fully explaining *how and why it happens* within media texts.

Zimbabwean scholarship builds on this by situating media representation within a highly polarised and politically contested communication environment, where competing actors struggle to define authoritative knowledge about COVID-19 (Mare & Munoriyarwa, 2022; Ncube & Mare, 2022). Studies in this context highlight how mainstream media, particularly print newspapers, may reflect institutional interests, reproduce state narratives, or selectively frame information in ways that shape public perception. At the same time, they show that alternative media and social platforms both challenge and reinforce these narratives, contributing to a fragmented information environment.

However, a critical limitation of Zimbabwean studies is that they tend to prioritise contextual and structural explanations, such as political influence, economic constraints, and public mistrust, over textual and representational analysis. That is, while they explain why misinformation circulates, they do not sufficiently examine how media texts construct, organise, and legitimise infodemic communication disorders through language, framing, and narrative strategies. This creates a gap between understanding media context and understanding media discourse.

A key tension across global, African, and Zimbabwean scholarship therefore lies between content-focused and discourse-focused approaches. Content-focused studies categorise misinformation and identify dominant themes, while discourse-focused approaches (which are less common) interrogate how meaning is constructed and negotiated within media texts. The dominance of the former has resulted in an overemphasis on classification and effects, at the expense of analysing representation as a process of meaning-making.

From a critical standpoint, it can be argued that this imbalance limits the explanatory power of existing research. By treating media as channels through which misinformation passes, rather than as active sites of meaning production, much of the literature underestimates the role of journalistic practices, such as framing, sourcing, headline construction, and narrative sequencing, in shaping infodemic communication disorders. Consequently, there remains insufficient understanding of how media representation itself contributes to the production, reinforcement, or contestation of misinformation and related phenomena.

In response to these limitations, this study adopts a discursive and theory-informed approach to the analysis of media representation. Rather than focusing solely on the presence or effects of misinformation, it examines how Zimbabwean mainstream print media, specifically, *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* construct and represent COVID-19 pandemic infodemic communication disorders.

The study contributes to the literature by:

- analysing how infodemic communication disorders are represented and framed (RQ1)
- examining how newspapers identify and prioritise elements of the infodemic (RQ2)
- identifying dominant themes and framing patterns in media discourse (RQ3)
- investigating how newspapers debunk or contest misinformation through discursive strategies (RQ4)

By integrating framing theory, representation theory, and CDA, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts and provides a critical, context-specific understanding of media as active producers of infodemic meaning, thereby addressing a key gap in both global and Zimbabwean scholarship.

2.9.1 Mainstream print media framing of COVID-19 in African contexts

Comparative headline analyses that include Southern African countries show that newspapers rely heavily on alarmist language, numerical case counts, and death statistics to convey the seriousness of the pandemic (Ebrahim, 2022:1-8). While such framing is effective in attracting attention and legitimising emergency interventions, it simultaneously contributes to communication overload by prioritising dramatic developments over explanatory clarity. Within Southern Africa, research indicates that mainstream newspapers often reproduce global narratives supplied by international agencies without sufficient localisation. This practice limits contextual interpretation and creates communicative gaps between reported risks and lived realities. From a critical perspective, these studies suggest that print media representations are not neutral conveyors of health information, but active participants in shaping infodemic conditions through selective emphasis, omission, and repetition. However, much of this literature remains regionally comparative and does not engage deeply with Zimbabwe-specific print media ecosystems.

Studies analysing mainstream print and online newspapers across Africa demonstrate that COVID-19 is predominantly represented through crisis-driven frames that emphasise fear, urgency, and catastrophe (Onwe et al., 2020:1857; Wasserman et al., 2023:333). The reviewed literature indicates that news media are instrumental in informing the public informed during health emergencies and may influence citizens' perceptions of the pandemic. Wasserman et al. (2021:333-350) conducted a content analysis of 681 front-page news articles from eleven English magazines and observed that almost 50 percent of the narratives exhibited a negative and alarmist tone. Over 50 percent of the narratives exhibited a negative tone, and the majority of the magazines presented their reports in an episodic rather than thematic manner. Furthermore, the majority of the narratives focused on impacts of the pandemic and contains significant sensationalism. Notwithstanding the sensational and pessimistic tone of the coverage, the majority of the front-page articles failed to offer strategies for mitigating the spread of the virus or to address misinformation about the pandemic. The study highlights critical concerns regarding the roles and responsibilities of the media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, Wasserman et al. (2021:333-350) indicate that South African newspaper coverage of COVID-19 was predominantly negative, likely to capture audience interest and enhance market share. This sensationalist reporting diminished opportunities for citizens to exercise individual agency and self-efficacy in managing the pandemic.

In the Nigerian context, Onwe et al. (2020: 1857-7881) focus on how three online newspapers framed the COVID-19 pandemic over a period of three months. The study aligns with the broader context of analysing mainstream print and online newspapers across Africa. The main finding is that fear and death, government/political influence, and palliative frames were dominant. This supports the notion that COVID-19 is represented through crisis-driven frames emphasising fear and urgency. The methodology of the study involved both Frame Analysis Theory and Relational Content Analysis, indicating a structured approach to analysing the framing patterns.

Meyer and van Schalkwyk (2024:480-500) analysed a sample of 524 newspaper articles, which provided a substantial dataset for the findings. The main finding of the study was that South African newspapers framed COVID-19 in a way that conveyed a sense of alarm, which aligns with crisis-driven frames emphasising fear and urgency. The methodology involved analysing print media coverage over a 22-month period, which is a significant duration for observing framing patterns. The findings indicated that three South African newspapers presented the COVID-19 pandemic through three predominant frames, expressing a pervasive sense of urgency concerning the pandemic's effects on society. Nonetheless, no discernible framing trend was observed throughout the 22-month duration. This indicates that press coverage of COVID-19 was sporadic, while also revealing that the South African print media emphasised market demands over societal needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.9.2 Zimbabwean media, misinformation, and infodemic communication disorders

The COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe unfolded within a broader global infodemic characterised by an overabundance of both accurate and misleading information, which distorted risk perception, undermined trust, and contributed to harmful health behaviours (Mackworth-Young et al., 2020:85; Ncube & Mare, 2022:71). Globally, studies demonstrate that infodemic communication disorders, including misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories, amplified fear, confusion, and risky practices such as the rejection of vaccines and the adoption of unscientific remedies (Dash et al., 2021; Kisa & Kisa, 2025:94). These findings position misinformation as a “meta-risk”, capable of reshaping public understanding of the pandemic itself.

In Zimbabwe, these dynamics were intensified by a highly polarised media environment, low institutional trust, and contested authority over “truth.” Empirical studies show that COVID-19 misinformation was not merely informational but deeply embedded in political and ideological struggles, where competing actors sought to control narratives about the pandemic (Mare & Munoriyarwa, 2022:63). The state frequently positioned itself as the authoritative source of truth, while delegitimising alternative perspectives as “fake news,” even in instances where official

communication was inconsistent or contradictory. At the same time, mainstream newspapers such as *The Herald* and *Kwayedza* often aligned with state narratives, emphasising stability and national control while downplaying governance failures (Roya & Ngcobo; Tshabangu & Salawu).

Parallel to this, alternative actors, including social media users, influencers, and public intellectuals, circulated competing narratives that both challenged and reinforced infodemic communication disorders. Studies by Hove and Cilliers (2023:1–13) and Mutekwe and Vanyoro (2021:12) demonstrate that contradictory reporting, speculative claims, and politicised interpretations of COVID-19 contributed to widespread confusion, mistrust, and vaccine hesitancy. These dynamics mirror global findings, yet they are more pronounced in Zimbabwe due to structural conditions such as media capture, economic constraints, and limited access to credible health information.

Despite these contributions, Zimbabwean scholarship reveals several important limitations when compared to international research. While global studies provide theoretical and discursive analyses of how misinformation is constructed and circulated, Zimbabwean studies primarily focus on contextual and political explanations, with less emphasis on media representation practices. Specifically, Zimbabwean research has:

- examined the existence and circulation of misinformation within society;
- highlighted the role of political polarisation and mistrust; and
- focused largely on social media and audience behaviour.

However, it has not sufficiently examined:

- how mainstream print media represent and construct infodemic communication disorders;
- how journalistic practices such as framing, sourcing, and narrative structuring shape infodemic discourse;
- how newspapers identify, prioritise, or contest elements of the infodemic;
- how media institutions discursively respond to misinformation through debunking strategies.

As a result, the discursive mechanisms through which Zimbabwean print media produce, reinforce, or challenge infodemic communication disorders remain underexplored.

The limitations identified in Zimbabwean and global scholarship directly inform the focus of this study:

- **RQ1: Representation of infodemic communication disorders:** While Zimbabwean studies document misinformation and fake news, they do not analyse how newspapers such as *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* represent and construct these communication disorders within news discourse.
- **RQ2: Elements of the infodemic:** Existing research does not sufficiently examine how newspapers identify and prioritise specific elements of the infodemic, including misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories.
- **RQ3: Themes and frames:** Although studies highlight politicisation and crisis narratives, there is limited systematic, theory-driven analysis of dominant themes and framing patterns in Zimbabwean print media.
- **RQ4: Debunking and discursive strategies:** There is minimal empirical work on how Zimbabwe mainstream newspapers attempt to correct misinformation and the discursive methods used, including whether such efforts reinforce or challenge infodemic narratives.

Against this backdrop, this study addresses these gaps by shifting the analytical focus from misinformation as content to misinformation as a discursively constructed phenomenon within media representation practices. By examining *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*, the study foregrounds mainstream print media as critical sites where infodemic communication disorders are not only reported but also produced, framed, legitimised, and contested. Furthermore, the study employs framing theory, representation theory, and CDA to provide a theory-informed and context-specific analysis of how infodemic narratives are structured within Zimbabwean media discourse. In doing so, it bridges the gap between global theoretical insights and Zimbabwean empirical realities, offering a more nuanced understanding of how media systems shape public knowledge, trust, and behaviour during health crises.

2.9.3 Synthesis and research gap

Synthesising African and Zimbabwe-focused empirical studies reveals several converging insights. First, mainstream print media representations of COVID-19 are predominantly crisis-oriented and often prioritise urgency over communicative coherence. Second, in Zimbabwe, structural media constraints and politicised reporting environments intensify infodemic communication disorders by producing inconsistent, fragmented, or ambiguous health narratives. Third, although misinformation is frequently examined, less attention is paid to how mainstream print media themselves contribute to the infodemic through representational practices.

While existing African and Zimbabwean studies acknowledge the presence of COVID-19 misinformation and communication breakdowns, there is a significant lack of empirical research that systematically analyses Zimbabwean mainstream print media representation as a source and structuring mechanism of infodemic communication disorders. Most studies privilege social media analysis or adopt broad regional perspectives, leaving the role of print newspapers under-theorised and under-examined. This study addresses this gap by critically analysing how Zimbabwean mainstream print media represent COVID-19 and how such representations contribute to information overload, ambiguity, and public confusion during the pandemic. By foregrounding print media framing and narrative construction, the study contributes context-specific insight into the communicative dimensions of the infodemic in Zimbabwe and advances African scholarship on crisis communication and media accountability.

2.10 Effects of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders on pandemic dissemination

The propagation of false information, intentional misinformation, and conspiracy theories concerning COVID-19 may result in substantial and far-reaching damage and adverse effects. The COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by an unprecedented infodemic, characterised by an overabundance of information, including misinformation and disinformation (Sharma, Joshi, Acharya, Dwivedi, & Sethy, 2022:4236). This infodemic has created confusion, distrust in science-based information, and difficulties in finding reliable sources (Lin, 2021:196-210). Social media platforms played a significant role in spreading false information, making it challenging for health organisations to combat misinformation effectively (Lin, 2021;

Cifuentes-Faura, 2020). The infodemic impacted public perception, decision-making, and potentially increased disease spread (Cifuentes-Faura, 2020). To address this issue, researchers suggested implementing infodemiology as a scientific discipline, improving media communication strategies, and enhancing government transparency (Casino, 2022; Sharma et al., 2022:4236-4239). Additionally, it was suggested that active participation from world agencies, local authorities, healthcare professionals, and the use of artificial intelligence on social media platforms could help control the infodemic (Sharma et al., 2022:4236).

2.11 Chapter summary

This chapter presented and discussed a pertinent conceptual and empirical literature review which helped to ground the research in previous studies. Several definitions of key concepts related to the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic and the research title were operationalised for clarity of meaning.

A discussion of the various forms or types of infodemic communication disorders was presented and elaborated. The issue of pandemic infodemic representation in Zimbabwe mainstream print media outlets and other African countries was explored and it was discovered that most newspapers failed to debunk the pandemic infodemic. A discussion of pandemic infodemic in Zimbabwe has been provided, and it was highlighted that the representation of COVID-19 pandemic infodemic communication disorders was not handled or covered extensively in the previous studies which have been analysed the COVID-19 phenomenon.

The manner in which the pandemic infodemic was reported and covered in the Global South mainstream print media was also explored in the extant literature. Insights and debates from previous studies reviewed has revealed a limited representation of infodemic communication disorders. The reviewed literature built a foundation on which the present study was grounded. It also served as a background against which the manner in which COVID-19 pandemic infodemic was portrayed, framed or represented in the Zimbabwean mainstream print media. This analysis applies some of the methods employed in previous studies. The following chapter presents the theoretical frameworks of the study.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter three theories that were employed as a theoretical lens for this study are discussed as they contribute to the understanding of the research problem. The chapter focuses on the theories which underpinned and framed this present study, namely representation theory, CDA and framing theory. Unlike the literature review, which examined empirical and conceptual debates on the COVID-19 infodemic, this chapter does not restate those discussions but rather operationalises the theories in relation to the study. The purpose is to demonstrate how these theories are integrated, how they interact, and how they collectively address the research problem and questions. The study is premised on the understanding established in Chapter Two, that Zimbabwean scholarship has largely explained the contextual and political conditions of misinformation, but has not sufficiently analysed how infodemic communication disorders are discursively constructed within mainstream print media. This chapter therefore provides the theoretical tools required to move from descriptive accounts of misinformation to a critical analysis of media representation, framing, and discourse.

A theoretical framework is a conceptual framework that provides a structured approach to understanding and analysing a particular research problem (van der Waldt, 2024:1-2). The theoretical framework gives a structure for what to look for in the data, for how to think and how that which the researcher observed in the data fits together, and for how to more effectively describe the results in light of what current theories suggest (Garvey & Jones, 2021: 1-7). It enables drawing connections between the abstract and concrete aspects of the research data (Kivunja 2018). Theory provides the description of a particular domain of apprehending an occurrence, which can be articulated as a problem, subject, or concept. The findings of this study were analysed within the broader context of a theoretical framework based on several models that aided in establishing the link between media representation of COVID-19 pandemic infodemic and communication disorders. The theoretical framework served as a guide to collect the most appropriate information for the study. This chapter will highlight the theories underpinning this study.

The media representation of COVID-19 can be analysed through various theoretical lenses, highlighting how media constructed and influenced public understanding of the pandemic. Scholarly contributions from the three theories relevant to this study are discussed in this section. The three theories; namely representation theory, CDA and framing theory assisted in the study to effectively investigate the representation of the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic in *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* weekly newspapers in Zimbabwe. These theories are relevant for the argumentative advancement of this study as firstly, representation theory will indicate how COVID-19 pandemic infodemic was portrayed using words by the selected Zimbabwean mainstream print media. Secondly, the representation theory, framing theories and CDA helped to demonstrate how the newspapers framed COVID-19 pandemic infodemic disorders.

3.2 Theoretical Frameworks

The study was guided by three interrelated theoretical frameworks: Hall's Representation Theory, Framing Theory, and CDA. These frameworks provided conceptual and analytical lenses through which the study explored how Zimbabwean mainstream print media represented and constructed meaning around the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying infodemic. These theories are not treated as isolated approaches but as interrelated and mutually reinforcing perspectives that enable a multi-layered analysis of media discourse. Together, they allow the study to examine what is represented (representation), how it is structured (framing), and why it is constructed in that way (CDA). This integrated approach responds directly to gaps identified in the literature review, particularly the lack of theory-driven analysis of Zimbabwean print media discourse, and the overreliance on descriptive accounts of misinformation and infodemic phenomena.

3.2.1 Representation theory

Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory posits that meaning is not simply reflected or transmitted by the media but is actively constructed through language, images, symbols. According to Hall, representation involves the use of signs and codes to produce meaning within a cultural and social context. This theory asserts that media texts are not neutral but are shaped by ideological processes that influence how

audiences perceive events and issues. Media texts therefore do not mirror reality; rather, they produce particular versions of reality shaped by cultural codes, institutional practices, and ideological positions.

In the context of this study, representation theory provides the foundational lens for analysing how Zimbabwean newspapers construct meanings around COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders. As highlighted in Chapter Two, Zimbabwean media operate within a polarised and politicised environment, where competing actors struggle to define “truth.” Representation theory is therefore particularly useful in examining how newspapers symbolically construct misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories; whether as threats, exaggerations, or politically motivated claims. However, representation theory alone is limited in that it explains how meaning is produced, but does not sufficiently account for patterns of emphasis or the underlying power structures shaping these meanings. This necessitates the integration of framing theory and CDA.

3.2.2 Framing Theory

Framing theory, as developed by Goffman (1974) and later expanded by Entman (1993:397), focuses on how the media selects certain aspects of reality and makes them more salient in a communicating text. Frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements, and suggest solutions. Media framing thus influences how audiences interpret and respond to issues. Framing theory was employed in this current study to analyse how Zimbabwean print media framed the COVID-19 pandemic and related infodemic communication disorders. It enabled an examination of which aspects of the pandemic were emphasised or downplayed and what moral or political positions were reinforced through the frames. Framing theory is therefore useful for identifying the patterns of emphasis and omission that contributed to communication disorders during the pandemic.

In this study, framing theory builds on representation theory by explaining how particular meanings are organised and emphasised within media texts. For example, as identified in the literature review, African and Zimbabwean media often employ crisis-driven or politicised frames, which may amplify fear, uncertainty, or distrust.

Framing theory enables the study to systematically analyse these patterns, including which aspects of the infodemic are highlighted, which are downplayed, and how narratives are structured. At the same time, framing theory has its own limitations. While it identifies patterns of emphasis and omission, it does not fully explain why certain frames dominate, nor how they are linked to broader ideological and power dynamics. This gap is addressed through CDA.

3.2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis, as advanced by scholars such as Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (1998), provides a methodological and theoretical approach to examining how language in texts reflects and reproduces power relations and ideologies. It is concerned with the intersection of discourse, power, and society, emphasising how dominant discourses can legitimise certain viewpoints while marginalising others. To a large extent, CDA moves beyond surface-level analysis to interrogate the social, political, and institutional contexts within which discourse is produced.

In this study, CDA provides the critical dimension necessary to understand why certain representations and frames emerge in Zimbabwean media discourse. As established in Chapter Two, Zimbabwean media are embedded in a context of political contestation, institutional mistrust, and competing truth claims. CDA enables the study to uncover how these conditions shape the representation of infodemic communication disorders, including how authority is constructed, how credibility is negotiated, and how misinformation is legitimised or challenged. Thus, CDA complements representation and framing theory by revealing the ideological and power-laden processes underlying media discourse.

3.2.4 Theoretical integration and triangulation

The strength of this study lies in the integration of the three theories into a coherent analytical framework. Rather than applying them separately, the study uses them in a sequential and layered manner, where each theory addresses a specific dimension of media discourse. There is significant overlap (convergence) among the theories. All three share the assumption that media discourse is constructed rather than neutral, and that meaning is shaped by social and institutional contexts. Representation theory and framing theory both focus on meaning construction, while framing theory and CDA

both emphasise selection and exclusion. Representation theory and CDA converge in their concern with ideology and power.

However, the theories also diverge in focus. Representation theory is primarily concerned with symbolic meaning, framing theory with structural organisation of narratives, and CDA with power, ideology, and discourse as social practice. This divergence is analytically productive, as it allows the study to move from:

- What is represented (representation theory)
- How it is structured and emphasised (framing theory)
- Why it is constructed in that way (CDA)

The triangulated framework is explicitly aligned with the study's research questions:

- **RQ1 (Representation of MDM and related disorders):** Addressed primarily through Representation Theory, which examines how misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories are constructed and symbolised in media discourse.
- **RQ2 (Elements of the infodemic):** Addressed through CDA, which analyses how different elements of the infodemic are discursively constructed, prioritised, and embedded within ideological contexts.
- **RQ3 (Dominant themes and frames):** Addressed through Framing Theory, which identifies how media organise narratives, emphasise particular themes, and construct interpretive frames.
- **RQ4 (Debunking and discursive strategies):** Addressed through a combination of CDA and Framing Theory, which together examine how newspapers attempt to challenge misinformation, and the discursive and framing strategies used in doing so.

This integrated framework directly responds to gaps identified in Chapter Two. The literature review showed that Zimbabwean studies largely focus on misinformation as content and context, without analysing how it is represented, framed, and discursively constructed in print media. By combining representation theory, framing theory, and CDA, this study addresses that gap and provides a theory-driven analysis of Zimbabwean newspaper discourse. In particular, the framework enables the study to

examine how media polarisation, political contestation, and low trust (identified in Chapter Two) are reflected in the representation and framing of infodemic communication disorders.

3.3 Detailed Overview and Critical Analysis of the Theories

This section provides a detailed overview of the features, strengths, and limitations; as well as the application of each theory, in the current study.

3.3.1 Representation theory

One of the theories relevant to the current study is the theory of representation by Hall (1997a:24). Echoing many writers before him, including Saussure, Barthes, Borges, and Foucault, Hall (1997a:24) proposed a concept of representation based on a linguistic model. Hall argued that representation is the production of meaning through language. All languages (written, spoken, audio, or visual) are therefore representation systems since they use elements to express a thought, concept, idea, or feeling. The elements used are symbols (connotative) or signs (denotative) that are organised in order to produce and transmit meaning (Hall, 1997b).

Individuals such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Michel Foucault were significant contributors in the development of representation theory. The work of these gurus of representation theory focused on the way people at an individual or group level create meaning. Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss linguist and semiotician. His perspectives on representation and his frameworks for language and representation significantly shaped the establishment of semiotics as a theoretical discipline. According to de Saussure (1959), language constitutes a system of signals that can be spoken, inscribed, or visually represented. De Saussure called these signs the *signifiers*; and the corresponding thoughts, concepts or ideas that these signifiers invoke were called the *signified*. Furthermore, Saussure contended that signifiers lack intrinsic meaning; rather, their significance is generated through the distinctions among *signifiers*. He asserted that meaning could only be produced if the writer or speaker and their reader or listener shared the same code, which Saussure referred to as *langue*, whereas *parole* encompasses the spoken or written word imbued with meaning.

Michel Foucault was a French philosopher, author, and political activist. Foucault examined the interplay between knowledge and power; primarily, the formation of power through *discourse* and its role in producing a consensus that is finally codified in a shared language. Furthermore, Foucault contended that meaning is generated through discourse rather than through structure. Foucault posited that power and knowledge are inherently interconnected, asserting that information need not be “true”; nevertheless, when associated with a position of power, it transforms into “Truth.” This form of power and knowledge establishes a *regime of truth* that, while not necessarily objectively accurate, is sustained because it benefits the existing status quo or power structure.

A representation is a visible, textual, or auditory depiction of an entity or an individual. Hall (1997b) posits that representation fundamentally involves employing a form of language to convey an object, concept, or idea in a manner that is comprehensible to others within the same cultural context as the person who created it. This definition implies that representation is the most important aspect of the process of producing and communicating the meaning of cognitive thoughts via language. Hall (1997b) claims that representation refers to utilising words to express something important about or reflect the world to others. It does require the use of signs and visuals that symbolises or stand in for objects. This theory fundamentally pertains to the significance of images and texts, the meanings they convey, and the processes through which they acquire those meanings. In this study, representation pertains to the meanings linked to manipulated mainstream media texts.

There are two types of representation systems – a sequence of concepts or mental representation, and a language that allows for representation to take place (Hall, 1997b). A mental representation is a collection of ideas that may be linked to the real-world entities and events. It is a set of images, thoughts, and connections in a person’s mind that helps them understand and deal with outside world. Mental representation can be anything from simple ideas to complicated models. They are made through events, learning and cognitive processes. People use them as mental models or maps to find their way around, solve problems, and make sense of what they have seen and done.

The language system is the second system. Concepts must be expressed in an everyday language. This system associates thoughts and ideas with specific spoken or visual words or visuals. Since different people interpret things in a different perspective, the meaning of building process varies from culture to culture and from one group to another.

Representation theory details how an object and subject are portrayed or depicted in the media, in the instance of this study. The researcher critically reflects on the concept mainly from a health communication context, regarding the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic as the subject. This critical reflection is done to advance an argument as to how the mainstream print media (selected newspapers) construct their messages in their textual portrayals of the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic, whether there are cases of misinformation, disinformation, malinformation or fake news.

Hall (1997b) elaborates on the interaction among representations, meaning, and language, asserting that they function within a system of representation. The previously mentioned notions are interconnected in that "representation links meaning and language to culture" (Hall, 1997a:15). Hall (1997b), drawing on the theories of de Saussure and Foucault, asserts that language operates as a system of representation, and defines representation as "the construction of meaning via language." (1997: 16). This indicates that representation is the mechanism via which cultural members utilise language to generate meaning. In representation studies, a distinction exists between the semiotic method, which pertains to explicit meaning drawn from the text, and the discursive or interpretive approach (Hall, 1997b).

Media representation studies involve the analysis of media messages and constitute the predominant form of media research (King & Watson, 2005; Seal, 2003). Building upon the theories of de Saussure and Foucault, Hall (1997b), as noted above, posits that language functions as a system of representations; and defines representation as the mechanism through which meaning is generated and communicated among individuals within a society (1997:15). This communication occurs via language, symbols, and images that signify or represent entities. Media shapes individuals' interpretations of their surroundings and their behaviours (Happer & Philo, 2013). Media, as a social institution, facilitates the establishment of prevailing narratives.

Discourses are varied representations of social existence that often reduce intricate facts and are intrinsically influenced by distinct social actors who see and depict social life differently (Gopal, 2018). In literature, media discourse is characterised as a public, constructed, documented kind of interaction. Media representation refers to the manner in which an issue is depicted in the news media (Msughter & Phillips, 2020). Framing analysis and social representation theory examine how the media depicted the COVID-19 infodemic through textual representation. Consequently, audience interpretations of media content are shaped by media portrayal.

Fundamentally, there are three models or approaches of representation, namely reflective, intentional, and constructionist (Hall, 1997), as described hereafter.

3.3.1.1 Reflective representation model

The reflective representation model indicates that language simply reflects meanings that already exist in the world around us (Radovanovic, 2024:37-38). The reflective model believes that the source of meaning is in an object, person, idea, or event itself and that language only acts as the mirror to reflect this meaning back to the people (Hall, 1997b). This model assumes that meaning is already embedded in things. Language operates through the way it displays meaning like a mirror.

3.3.1.2 Intentional representation model

The intentional representation paradigm posits that language conveys solely what an individual intends to communicate (Hall, 1997b; Radovanovic, 2024:37-48). While individuals utilise language to express their subjective perspectives, it is essential to recognise that communication relies on linguistic rules and codes universally acknowledged by members of a social society (Radovanovic, 2024:37-48). For our own meanings to be communicated and understood by others, it is necessary for them to be included into the rules, standards, and conventions that control language (Hall, 1997b). The intentional model asserts that the writer or speaker is the originator of meaning. For instance, English and French possess completely distinct terms for tree (in French, *arbre*). The spelling and pronunciation are unrelated. In this context, Hall (1997b) asserts that the reflective model is deficient. The purposeful model is problematic as the writer or speaker must convey their understanding of an object through a shared code to ensure comprehension and meaning creation.

3.3.1.3 Constructionist representation model

Constructionist representation theory emphasises that meaning is constructed “in” language and “through” language (Radovanovic, 2024:37-48). According to this model, there is no object, event or phenomenon in this world which possesses any meaning by themselves. Therefore, meaning is constructed through the participation of shared cultural concepts and symbols. To give objects meaning, a broad range of symbolic systems, including language, signs, and other systems are used. According to Hall (1997b) things are meaningless on their own and people construct meaning using a representational system – concepts and signs. This implies that individuals give things meaning. Meaning is created by members of the society so that individuals may meaningfully contribute their own meaning to the world. Hall argues that the constructionist approach surpasses the reflective and intentional models by recognising that the material world lacks intrinsic meaning; instead, meaning is generated through a shared sign system, such as a common language. To explain this perspective, Hall (1997b) elucidates how traffic signals convey significance to the observer. The collective cultural system inexplicably selected green and red to symbolise the concepts of “go” and “stop” in traffic signals. The colours green and red possess no intrinsic significance that compels individuals to select them for traffic management. Nonetheless, it is solely the distinction between the two that enables individuals to convey these concepts regarding the hues employed in that context.

3.3.2. Relevance of the representation theory to the present study

The representation theory is of specific relevance to this study, because it is a theory that can be used as a tool for a critical analysis of media productions. Representation theory, as conceptualised by scholars like Stuart Hall, provides a critical framework for understanding how meaning is created and communicated through media in the context of Zimbabwean mainstream print media's portrayal of communication disorders during the COVID-19 infodemic.

Representation theory emphasises that media does not only reflect reality but actively constructs it. In Zimbabwean print media, the portrayal of the COVID-19 pandemic may have shaped how people understood the virus, its spread, health protocols, and misinformation. The language, metaphors, and imagery used in media coverage play

a central role in conveying specific messages. Therefore, representation theory allows for an examination of how certain terms (like "deadly virus" or "fake news") influenced fear, compliance, or resistance within the public discourse. Analysing media representations helps uncover whether print media coverage built public trust in health authorities or fostered skepticism due to perceived biases or misinformation. By applying representation theory, the study critically examined how Zimbabwean mainstream print media shaped the public's understanding of COVID-19 communication disorders. This approach provides insights into the media's role in constructing narratives, influencing public attitudes, and navigating the challenges of misinformation and disinformation during the pandemic.

3.3.3 Disadvantages and weaknesses of representation as a theoretical lens

Hall's representation theory provides a powerful framework for understanding how the media constructs meaning through language, images, and discourse. However, it also presents several limitations and weaknesses when applied as a theoretical lens in analysing media coverage of a complex phenomenon like the COVID-19 infodemic. The first weakness of the theory is that it relies heavily on subjective interpretation. Researchers' meanings and interpretations of media discourses are influenced by their own cultural, political and ideological backgrounds (Hall, 1997b). This subjectivity can lead to inconsistent or biased conclusions, especially in studies involving politically charged contexts such as Zimbabwe's media landscape, where censorship and propaganda may influence content. Hall's theory primarily focuses on production and encoding of meaning. The theory therefore often overlooks how different audiences decode and interpret those messages (Hall, 197b). In the context of an infodemic, the impact of misinformation depends significantly on audience interpretation, trust, and media literacy, which representation theory does not adequately address. Such an anomaly therefore limits the ability of the theory to explain the public's behavioural or cognitive responses to mediated information about COVID-19. Furthermore, representation theory overemphasises ideological and symbolic constructions at the expense of practical communicative functions. In health communication studies, this might obscure how factual accuracy, scientific communication, or journalistic ethics shape the dissemination of public health information. Therefore, the major weakness of the theory is that it illuminates ideological distortions, and it might underplay the informational accuracy and public health dimensions of media messages. Lastly, the

theory is primarily qualitative and interpretive. It lacks measurable constructs that allow for empirical validation. This can make it difficult to assess the extent of misrepresentation or bias quantitatively across different newspapers. Consequently, it is often criticised for being analytically rich but methodologically weak when researchers seek generalisable findings.

3.4 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis examines words, pictures, and sentences inside a text, examining their perspective, frequency, and interrelations to reveal power dynamics (Wodak & Meyer, 2016) between those in authority and the subaltern or marginalised (Gramsci, 1971:50): it is within the domain of discourse analysis and evaluates the language utilised in relation to society. Van Dijk (2001:95-120) regards CDA as a potent instrument that uncovers the subtle and indirect mechanisms by which language dominates in elucidating matters of ideology and power. The primary objective of conducting CDA is to demonstrate how many elements, including ideology and power, are constructed through language, text, or speech. Van Dijk (2001:95-120) asserts that discourse analysis primarily addresses the political and social context of texts, conversations, or speeches. Discourse analysis establishes a relationship between social-theoretical ambition and social criticism. Meaning and truth are created mostly through discourse.

3.4.1 Empirical studies which have adopted Critical Discourse Analysis as a theoretical lens

Multiple empirical studies in Zimbabwe have employed CDA to examine COVID-19 media coverage and coverage, revealing complex power dynamics and media representations during the pandemic. Roya and Ngcobo (2022:313) utilised CDA as their methodology for assessing the reportage of the COVID-19 crisis in Zimbabwe in the *Kwayedza* newspaper's editorial coverage, finding government-influenced reporting that downplayed certain issues. This study established that the newspaper effectively highlighted COVID-19's socio-economic and cultural impacts on the nation. In addition, the study offered ideas and guidelines for managing the pandemic. In another related study, Ncube and Mare (2022:71-89) investigated fake news dynamics, exposing multiple "truth" regimes in a politically polarised context. The study fused three analytical frameworks; namely Foucauldian discourse, social construction

of the truth, and peripheral actors in journalism. Lastly, Mutekwe and Vanyoro (2021:12-37) analysed ZANU-PF officials' statements, revealing political manipulation of pandemic discourse. These studies collectively provide a nuanced, critical examination of media representations, highlighting the intersection of pandemic communication, political power, and media narratives in Zimbabwe.

3.4.2 Relevance of Critical Discourse Analysis in this study

CDA was relevant for this study because it offers a powerful approach to studying how Zimbabwean mainstream print media represented communication disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic: it is best characterised as an approach or attitude towards textual analysis. Its primary activity is analysing texts. Texts refers to words and images. For that reason, this approach was used in the study. Thomas Huckin (1979) remarks that CDA has a great contribution to the interpretation of a given text, since it endeavours to connect the diverse levels of analysis, encompassing the text, and the tasks of writing, speaking, listening, and reading that generate and understand that text. The selected newspapers facilitated the production and exchange of meaning on the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic among the public. Representation encompasses the utilisation of pictures, language, and symbols. This study mostly examined language via texts.

Critical Discourse Analysis is also significant as it reveals the influence of political, social, and institutional power on media narratives. It uncovers how media discourse may have been manipulated by authorities to control public perceptions of the pandemic. In addition, media representation of COVID-19 infodemic may carry ideological biases, reflecting government or corporate agendas. In this, CDA helps identify whether reports were objective, fear-driven, or framed to promote specific narratives. The choice of language, metaphors, and frames used in news headlines, articles, and editorials can reveal underlying communication disorders. Communication disorders during an infodemic include misinformation, disinformation, and communication overload, and CDA can highlight how such issues were exacerbated or mitigated by media discourse strategies. By and large, CDA was appropriate for this study as it helped to assess and reflect on whether the Zimbabwean mainstream print media upheld journalism practices or contributed to public confusion. In conclusion, applying CDA to Zimbabwean mainstream print media

provides an insightful lens in evaluating how media handled communication disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic. This approach helps assess the role of the media in either fostering informed public discourse or exacerbating misinformation and disinformation challenges.

3.4.3 Disadvantages and weaknesses of Critical Discourse Analysis as a theoretical lens

The theory offers valuable insights into how language, ideology and power converge in media discourses and practices; however, it suffers from significant methodological and theoretical weaknesses, including lack of rigour, vagueness, and inconsistent research procedures. Scholars and academics continue to debate and deliberate on these limitations. Iqbal, Yasin and Sabiri (2025:1545) note specifically the issues that CDA has been criticised for. These include vagueness or subjectivity and bias; lack of methodological consistency; non-transparent research procedures; unsystematic nature, and preference for particular social theories. Subjectivity, vagueness and bias embedded in CDA implies that the researcher's social or political orientations will shape the analysis, leading to selective interpretation of data and confirmation of the researcher's expectations instead of establishing an open empirical investigation. In this regard, Newman (2020:433-455) argues that CDA lacks clarity in distinguishing discourse from other social structures and its theoretical commitments can undermine analytical openness. Additionally, it is criticised for lack of methodological consistency (reproducibility and reliability) because it consistently relies on small, purposively selected corpora and detailed qualitative interpretive work. This makes it difficult for other researchers to replicate the findings. Newman (2020:433-455) notes that its assumptions about structure, agency and discourse are under-specified and this undermines its clarity and rigour. Leotti, Sugrue and Wings-Yanez (2022:260-276) further acknowledge that CDA lacks a "unifying theoretical perspective" and has "no standard formula or essential methods", which contributes to confusion about its precise application. Additionally, CDA's "negative focus" and its emerging status as an "intellectual orthodoxy", suggests potential intellectual stagnation. Moreover, another limitation is its contextual specificity and limited generalisability because the analysis mostly engages with specific texts in specific socio-political contexts. Therefore, the findings are deeply bound to those settings, which implies that it is impossible to draw broader inferences or transferring the findings across contexts.

3.5 The Framing Theory

Framing theory offers an essential lens for analysing how Zimbabwe's mainstream media constructed and represented the COVID-19 infodemic. Originally the theory was introduced by Bateson (1972:97) and advanced by Goffman (1974). The theory elucidates how communicators define and contextualise reality through interpretive schemata that influence perception and meaning. Bateson defined psychological frames as a "spatial and temporary bounding of set of interactive messages" (Bateson, 1972:97) that operates as a form of metacommunication. News framing explains the practice of thinking about news items and story content within familiar context. The concept of framing is related to the agenda-setting tradition but expands the research by focusing on the essence of the issues at hand rather than on a particular topic. The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning (Mass Communication Theory (Online), 2017). Framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called "the frame") influences the choices people make about how to process that information. Frames are abstractions that work to organise or structure message meaning. The most common use of frames is in terms of the frame the news or media place on the information they convey. Unlike related paradigms such as agenda-setting or priming, which determine *what* the public thinks about, framing theory explains *how* issues are cognitively structured and emotionally understood (Entman, 1993:51-58).

At its core, framing involves the selection and salience of specific aspects of reality to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993:51-58). This selective emphasis is neither neutral nor random: it reflects ideological positioning, journalistic norms, and socio-political pressures. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Zimbabwean media's framing decisions shaped public interpretations of the infodemic, influencing trust in institutions, compliance with health directives, and the perceived legitimacy of competing narratives.

Critically, framing theory underscores that media texts are constructed realities rather than transparent reflections of events. Goffman (1974) conceptualised frames as "schemata of interpretation" through which audiences locate and label experience.

Building on this, Entman (1993:51-58) highlighted that frames operate simultaneously at macro (message construction) and micro (audience interpretation) levels, shaping both the production and reception of meaning. This duality is particularly relevant in infodemic communication, where journalists, editors, and audiences co-create meaning amid uncertainty and political contestation.

Scholars such as Gitlin (1980) and Tuchman (1978) have shown that framing entails persistent patterns of inclusion and exclusion that structure political discourse. Through these discursive choices, the media may normalise certain perspectives while marginalising others, thereby guiding public attention and debate. Goffman's (1974) insight that individuals interpret messages through socially familiar contexts is pivotal here: audiences do not merely absorb frames but negotiate them through lived experiences, cultural proximity, and trust in media sources. Thus, framing operates as a reciprocal process of production and consumption rather than a unidirectional transmission of meaning (Parichi, 2016).

In health crises, this dynamic becomes especially consequential. Studies by Apuke and Tunca (2019:168-182) as well as Munoriyarwa (2020:76) demonstrate that African media framed COVID-19 coverage through competing lenses which include responsibility, fear, and misinformation. Each frame produces different emotional and behavioural responses. The Zimbabwean press's framing of infodemic narratives can therefore be seen as both a communicative and ideological act, reflecting political alignments and the constraints of journalistic autonomy (Mutekwe & Vanyoro, 2021:12; Mwale, Tamani & Chisi-Kasunda, 2023:43; Ncube & Mare, 2022:71).

Ultimately, framing theory provides a critical foundation for examining how the media's linguistic and visual choices construct public understanding of crises. It situates news discourse within broader struggles over meaning, authority, and power, showing that what is communicated is as significant as how it is represented. In the COVID-19 context, frames acted as interpretive filters that mediated citizens' comprehension of the causes, responsibilities, and moral implications of the pandemic. By revealing the interplay between media representation and audience interpretation, framing theory enabled this study to interrogate the normative role of Zimbabwe's mainstream press

in either mitigating or exacerbating the communication disorders of the COVID-19 infodemic.

3.5.1 Relevance of framing theory in the current study

Framing theory, as articulated by scholars such as Erving Goffman and subsequently modified by Entman, is crucial for examining how media influences the perception of events and topics. Framing theory offered a crucial perspective for analysing the portrayal of communication disorders in Zimbabwean mainstream print media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic. Framing theory asserts that media organisations deliberately emphasise specific elements of a narrative while disregarding others. This study examined how Zimbabwean print media highlighted particular aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic (such as mortality rates, public health protocols, or conspiracy theories) and whether these representations intensified or alleviated communication disorders.

Media frames define what constitutes the problem in public discourse. Print media may have framed COVID-19 as a public health crisis, an economic disaster, or even a political issue. Understanding how the pandemic and the infodemic were framed helps identify media-driven perceptions of the crisis. Framing theory helps examine how media assigned blame or identified sources of misinformation and communication disorders. Analysing the framing of COVID-19 in Zimbabwean print media helps assess whether media narratives contributed to public compliance with health guidelines or resistance to vaccination. Applying framing theory allowed this study to uncover how Zimbabwean print media shaped public discourse and influenced perceptions of COVID-19 communication disorders. It provides insights into whether media narratives facilitated the spread of accurate information or contributed to the infodemic by amplifying misinformation and fear-driven content.

3.5.2 Disadvantages and weaknesses of the framing theory as a theoretical lens in this study

Using framing theory to examine how Zimbabwean print media represented the COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders was useful but it also brought several limitations that might distort analysis. Firstly, framing theory suffers from conceptual ambiguity. There is no single, consensual definition of what a frame is or how to

distinguish it from related constructs such as agenda-setting, priming and narratives (Entman, 1993:397). This limitation leads to operationalisation challenges as researchers identify frames differently by identifying keywords, coding schemes or inductively. Consequently, this approach significantly impacts reliability and comparability across studies of Zimbabwe's newspapers during the pandemic (Entman, 1993:397). Adopting the framing theory also is limited by unit of analysis problems, especially in the infodemic context. This is because frames can reside in headlines, image-caption combinations, story selection, layout, and media agendas. Therefore, choosing one unit or article may miss multimodal cues which generate most of the persuasive discourses in Zimbabwean print media.

The framing theory demonstrates significant weaknesses in analysing COVID-19 communication disorders, particularly in revealing how personal biases can distort media representation. Mudzingiri and Mangeya (2022:116-130) found that people's frames of reference can generate myths and misinformation without a scientific basis, suggesting the vulnerability of the theory to subjective interpretations. The research indicates that frames can construct and perpetuate conspiracy theories, undermining the theory's analytical rigour. Muchetwa et al. (2021:38-46) further exposed limitations by showing how media frames can be constrained by institutional pressures, such as government censorship, which distorts objective communication. These studies reveal that frames are not neutral analytical tools but can themselves become mechanisms for reproducing problematic narratives about complex health phenomena.

Additionally, framing theory exhibits significant weaknesses when applied to COVID-19 media discourse, particularly in its inconsistent methodological approaches and theoretical limitations. Song (2024:674) further highlighted a "notable gap in better incorporating linguistic perspectives", suggesting the theory lacks comprehensive cognitive linguistic integration. Key weaknesses include inconsistent analytical frameworks, insufficient linguistic nuance, limited interdisciplinary approach, and potential for media bias in frame construction. While these insights are drawn from global studies, there is a lack of studies that specifically address Zimbabwean print media, indicating a critical research gap that requires further investigation.

3.5.3 Overview of media framing of COVID-19 pandemic infodemic

The media engages the public by narrating the crisis tale through framing. Framing recognises the capacity of media messages to delineate a situation and initiate discourse on the problem (Entman, 2003:415). Framing enables the analysis of media coverage about the health crisis induced by COVID-19, facilitating the identification of predominant frames that influence the efficacy of the reportage (Liu & Kim 2011). The media's portrayal of an event influences public information processing and decision-making. Consequently, news frames have the capacity to alter readers' ideas, attitudes, and actions, having considerable impact.

Journalists often contextualise the information they acquire while reporting. Frames either provide information or emphasise certain elements, or fulfil both roles, with the objective of shaping views regarding a specific subject (Leeper & Slothuus, 2018:4). Framing, as a theoretical construct, analyses how humans construct their social realities, generate meanings, relationships, and identities through language and paralinguistic techniques or contextual cues that facilitate audience interpretation and understanding. Gitlin (2003) characterises frames as persistent patterns of perception, understanding, and presentation, that symbol manipulators frequently utilise to structure discourse, both verbal and visual, via selection, significance, and exclusion. Frames emphasise specific information regarding an element that is essential to a particular instance of communication, hence underscoring its importance. Saliency signifies the process of making some information more noticeable, significant, or interesting to audiences (Entman, 1993). Exposure to each frame prompts individuals to create attitudes of news performance that align with the proposals inherent in the frame. Zaklama (2025:75) asserts that the way media frames a social issue might influence societal perception of that problem and the assumptions regarding the necessary interventions. During COVID-19, the media framed aspects such as public health measures, economic impacts, and government responses in ways that influenced how people responded to the pandemic. For example, framing mask mandates as a public health duty versus an infringement on personal freedom led to differing public reactions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, framing analysis was crucial for delineating the problem (Entman, 2003), including the unknown characteristics and societal repercussions of the virus, as well as highlighting specific concerns regarding its implications. Chamegere (2021) investigated the framing of opinions around conspiracy theories in Western Kenya. The findings indicated that participants classified their views on COVID-19 misinformation as a prevalent influenza, a biological weapon, a political tool, and a religious conspiracy theory. In Southern African nations, media coverage of the epidemic predominantly emphasised human-interest accounts, particularly facts concerning the progression of the virus (UNESCO, 2021). Furthermore, the media in Southern African nations exhibited a deficiency in inclusivity in their news reporting, predominantly drawing on male perspectives and official sources while neglecting the vital viewpoints of women, youth, the elderly, and rural populations (UNESCO, 2021). Wasserman et al. (2021: 333-350) express analogous perspectives, asserting that the mainstream media's portrayal of the COVID-19 epidemic predominantly adopted an alarmist and negative tone. A comparable tendency was observed in Nigeria's private media, which predominantly included negative tone narratives primarily conveyed through graphic and animated video (Apuke & Omar, 2021: 168-182).

3.5.4 COVID-19 infodemic news frames in mainstream print media

COVID-19 infodemic news frames refer to the dominant interpretive patterns through which media construct and present pandemic-related misinformation, uncertainty, and contested knowledge. Mutua and Oloo Ong'ong'a (2020:1-8) contended that the media represented the COVID-19 pandemic using crime-related motifs. These encompassed protest frameworks and the gathering of vital supplies during the pandemic. In addition, Mutua and Oloo Ong'ong'a (2020:1-8) discerned xenophobic tropes, particularly in international media. Xenophobic discourses attributed responsibility for the COVID-19 pandemic to China, claiming that these frameworks resulted in the stigmatisation and stereotyping of Chinese citizens, particularly in nations where they constitute a minority.

3.5.4.1 Economic consequences

During a crisis, major corporations and investments are consistently affected economically. The impact may be twofold, providing revenue for some businesses while resulting in losses for others. The financial influence is referred to as economic framing (Iyengar, 1990). The economic and political dimensions of the situation intensify as the epidemic progresses. Government travel advisories influence the economic sector of specific businesses. The removal of the travel advisory restriction allows for limited economic support, while the focus continues to be on health concerns. Stakeholders concentrate on this phase to provide reassurance and essential professional counsel relevant to the circumstances.

3.5.4.2 Human interest and impact frame

During outbreaks, the media has persistently provided human interest narratives pertinent to the epidemics (Iyengar, 1990:19-40). Such narratives encompass those who are impacted, either directly or indirectly. The application of the human-interest frame facilitates the incorporation of a personal perspective or emotional dimension into a news narrative. Individuals impacted by a specific epidemic are poised to provide narratives that are largely disbelieved by news viewers. Consequently, this enhances the news' value and enhances the newspaper's reputation.

3.5.4.3 Attribution of responsibility

When an outbreak occurs, it is often attributed to a certain scenario, individual, or an error that has transpired. Consequently, it is imperative to ascertain the origin of an epidemic to provide critical analysis prior to its reporting. Communication during a public outbreak enhances crisis comprehension by diminishing uncertainty and providing reassurance to victims (Iyengar, 1990:19-40). Thus, this constrains the extent of criticism regarding an epidemic and fosters a shared comprehension for addressing the problem. Consequently, it is contended that the newsworthiness of a story should meet the Ebola criteria. The standards extend beyond sensationalism, significance, and emotional appeal. The importance of proximity and the requirements for attribution align with newsworthiness due to their enigmatic nature and the resultant increase in deaths (Iyengar, 1990:19-40; Pieri, 2019:73-92).

3.5.4.4. Health severity frame

Outbreaks can spread rapidly and cover extensive regions. Their abrupt rise in multiple casualties renders them epidemic. Consequently, this influences more than the anticipated figures within a specific demographic (Iyengar, 1990:19; Pieri, 2019:73). The rapid transmission presents a risk to both local and worldwide domains. The media significantly mitigates the ambiguity surrounding the disease. The management and subsequent transmission of this information necessitate a coordinated effort from many stakeholders engaged. Prompt and precise information reduces the likelihood of disinformation, hence facilitating decision-making. Accurate information dissemination during an epidemic is essential for enhancing illness prevention and reducing its transmission (Iyengar, 1990:19-40; Pieri, 2019:73-92).

3.5.4.5 Episodic vs thematic frames

The theme and episodic framing categories (Iyengar, 1990:19-40) distinguish between frames that contextualise a problem broadly (thematic) and those that concentrate on specific incidents or cases (episodic). Research in political communication regards episodic framing, characterised by personal narratives and experiences, as having a more significant influence due to its capacity to elicit a heightened emotional response (Mavridis et al., 2024:7). Thematic framing may result in reduced emotional responses and may impede news consumers' ability to relate to the topic and discern the connections. Consequently, frame identification is essential for assessing the equilibrium of media portrayal about a specific issue and mitigating potential distortions (Morstatter, Wu, Yavanoglu, Corman & Liu (2018:3).

Episodic and thematic framing are two methodologies employed by the media to convey information, each affecting public perception in distinct ways (Flintham et al., 2018:4). Episodic frames concentrate on particular events or singular instances, frequently emphasising personal narratives or discrete occurrences. Thematic frames, conversely, offer a wider perspective by highlighting trends, systemic concerns, or overarching themes. The application of framing theory helps elucidate whether the portrayal of COVID-19 infodemic narratives emphasised particular instances (episodic) or overarching trends (thematic). Table 3.1 below provide a summary of the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic generic frames examples prevalent in media reports during COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3.1: Examples of COVID-19 Pandemic infodemic generic frames prevalent in media reports

Frame categories	Definition	Example
Economic consequences	The reported events are examined through the lens of its economic implications for people, organisations, or the nation.	“Shares in pharmaceutical company Gilead Sciences rose by 20% on the news of clinical trials of their antiviral remdesivir for the treatment of Covid-19”. (Ravelli, 2020).
Human interest	Semetko and Valkenburg (2000:93) assert that journalists provide "a human face or an emotional perspective to the depiction of an event, issue, or problem."	“Mother dies from coronavirus hours after giving birth to her first child in Ukrainian hospital”. (Panashchuk, 2020).
Conflict	Semetko and Valkenburg (2000:94) assert that this frame 'highlights conflict among individuals, groups, or institutions to engage audience interest.'	“New York ICU nurse: Battling coronavirus feels 'like a war'". (Hannah-Clark, 2020).
Morality/Religion	The morality frame contextualises the event, problem, or issue within religious doctrines or ethical mandates (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000:95).	“As concern over the spread of coronavirus grows, churches, mosques, temples and synagogues are also changing rituals in an effort to contain the spread of the virus.” (Diseko, 2020, BBC).
Attribution of responsibility	This frame depicts an issue or problem in a manner that assigns responsibility for its origin or resolution to either the government or an individual or group.	New York's coronavirus outbreak came from Europe and other parts of US. (Howard & Holcombe, 2020, CNN).
Politicisation	Politicisation occurs when such frameworks adopt the guise and hues of politics, particularly (Wondemaghen , 2023:2821).	"Accusations won't get rid of the virus" "Smearing and accusations won't get rid of the virus," said Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian at a press conference in Beijing (Jiang, 2020, Beijing: CNN).

3.6 Justification for the Theoretical Choices

These three frameworks were selected because they collectively provide a comprehensive lens for analysing media discourse. Hall's Representation Theory addresses the production of meaning, Framing Theory explains the organisation and emphasis of information, and CDA reveals the ideological and power dimensions embedded in language. Together, they facilitate a nuanced understanding of how Zimbabwean print media constructed, circulated, and legitimised particular narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated infodemic and communication disorders in the public sphere.

3.7 Summary

Chapter 3 presented the theoretical lenses that were employed to examine how Zimbabwe's mainstream print media represented the COVID-19 infodemic. The chapter integrated the Representation Theory, CDA and Framing Theory to explain how meanings are constructed, how power and ideology shape discourse, and how interpretive theories enhance public understanding during a health crisis. Building on Hall's constructionist view of representation, the chapter showed how language and symbols actively produce meaning rather than merely reflect reality, and it used this lens to interrogate how selected weeklies portrayed the infodemic through textual choices, metaphors, and imagery. It acknowledged the strengths of the approach in cultural sensitivity while noting limitations such as researcher subjectivity, an encoding bias that may underplay audience decoding, and limitations with empirical measurement.

Critical Discourse Analysis then situated media texts within political and institutional contexts, drawing on Van Dijk, Wodak, and Foucault to expose how leaders, ideology, and policy priorities surface in pandemic coverage and shape communication disorders like mis/dis/malinformation and overload. At the same time, the chapter recognised critiques of CDA's methodological vagueness, limited reproducibility, and context-bound generalisability, which the study addresses through transparent procedures and triangulated interpretation.

Framing Theory, following Bateson, Goffman, and Entman, clarified how news selects and makes salient problem definitions, causal attributions, moral evaluations, and remedies, distinguishing episodic from thematic presentation and cataloguing generic frames salient to pandemic reporting, including responsibility, human interest, economic consequences, morality/religion, conflict, politicisation/ethnicisation, and fear/hope. Additionally, the chapter also noted the theory's conceptual ambiguity and operational inconsistencies, mitigated by clear frame definitions and explicit coding rules. The three theoretical lenses are complementary:

Representation Theory explains the mechanisms of meaning-making, CDA reveals the power-laden discursive conditions in which meanings circulate, and Framing Theory identifies the interpretive methods that guide audience sense-making. The integrated framework that was applied to the two Zimbabwean mainstream media outlets guided the systematic identification of the selected articles, sourcing patterns, themes, and dominant frames, and links them to the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic communication disorders observed during the reportage and representation of the health crisis. To a large extent, it is argued in the chapter that combining these theories strengthens validity and interpretive depth despite each lens's limitations.

The following chapter focuses on the research methodology which was adopted in the study. and provides details of the research design, sampling, data collection, coding method, and data analysis procedures used to collect and document the key findings. It presents the results and a discussion of the evidence of the representation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders in the mainstream Zimbabwean print media.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed and elaborated on the representation theory, CDA and framing analysis theory that were utilised as the theoretical lens in the present study. These three theories provided a framework and lens for analysing the representation of COVID-19 pandemic infodemic in the Zimbabwean mainstream print media. This chapter elaborates and discusses the qualitative and interpretivist methodology adopted in the present study in order to explore and analyse the representation of COVID-19 pandemic infodemic communication disorders in *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*. The study utilised Hall's representation theory: framing theory and CDA to produce an exploratory, descriptive, and interpretative data which revealed the underlying frames and representation of disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation which was disseminated during the COVID-19 health crisis in Zimbabwean mainstream print media. This study employs an inductive qualitative research approach methodology which reflects quality and rigour required to enhance the integrity of the research output.

This chapter elaborates on and discusses the following research methodology elements: the paradigm, research design, study population, and its features. In addition, it addresses the data collection instrument and procedure, sample strategies, units of analysis, and data analysis approach. Finally, the trustworthiness and ethical considerations related to the study, as well as the strengths and limits identified, are discussed.

4.2 Research Paradigm

Conducting scientific research requires a specific paradigm or philosophy (Mouton, 2019:44-58; Nieuwenhuis, 2019a:80-114). Research paradigm refers to the assumptions and beliefs underlying knowledge development in a specific study (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2023:124). It is what researchers perceive to be reality, knowledge, and truth, and it outlines the values and beliefs that guide the gathering and investigation of data in a study (Ryan, 2018:1-23; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020:39-43). A paradigm fulfils multiple functions for a researcher. Initially, it directs

4.3.1 Selected research approach: qualitative approach

Consistent with the interpretivist paradigm, the current study employed an exploratory and descriptive qualitative methodology utilising a CDA framework. Creswell and Creswell (2018:179-202) assert that qualitative approaches utilise textual and visual data, follow specific procedures in data processing, and incorporate diverse designs. Descriptive qualitative analysis is pertinent to CDA theory since it comprehensively delineates and elucidates the content of texts, alongside the interplay between the texts and their contextual or discursive frameworks (Alejandro & Zhao, 2024:461-473). The data for this study comprised words and sentences that illustrate how *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* reported on the communication difficulties associated with the COVID-19 infodemic. For Minh (2025:81-124), Dehalwar and Sharma (2024:7-15), and Bazen, Barg and Takeshita (2021:241-247) qualitative approach is a method that deeply explores and interprets issues that cannot be quantified.

The qualitative approach usually describes and explores the ideas, feelings, and thoughts that people, or research respondents, have about a specific research issue (Lim, 2024:1-31; Oranga & Matere, 2023:1-9). Qualitative approach is used to explore aspects such as human behaviour, experiences and opinions that are undefinable and unquantifiable. To provide insight in how *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* newspapers represented the COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders, the researcher used the qualitative method through CDA as one of the qualitative method categories to critically analyse the newspaper texts in terms of words and discourses. The researcher used this method as it is unstructured, uses meaning-oriented methodologies relevant for textual analysis, and for the interpretivist paradigm that this study employs. In addition, this research method was largely adopted as the meanings of words or figures of speech used in the newspaper articles could not be defined or explained using numbers (quantitatively). The choice of the approach was based on its efficacy in offering a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted research questions posed (Punziano De Falco & Trezza, 2023:143-170). The qualitative research approach was employed because the study examined narrative discourses (print media texts) that possess social and cultural importance within a community.

4.3.1.1 Advantages of qualitative approach

The qualitative technique provides numerous advantages for addressing complicated research topics by delivering rich, comprehensive, and profound insights into the phenomenon being examined (Usman, Al-Hendawi & Bulut, 2025:81-95) Qualitative research utilises contextualisation to scrutinise the intricate relationship between media representation and society. Unlike quantitative methods that isolate variables, qualitative approaches delve into context, unveiling the underlying meanings, biases, and societal impacts of media representations (Rizvi & Kuznetsova, 2023:122-132). According to Billingsley, Abedin, and Nassaji (2020:177-204), contextualising data is crucial, as it enables an evaluation of the production and consumption contexts of media representations. This contextualisation aids in comprehending subtle messages and power relations. By placing data in context, researchers can uncover biases and blind spots that may arise from a focus on isolated media content (Hamborg, 2023:238). Cultural standards, political objectives, and historical narratives also influence media coverage. Without understanding historical health communication infodemics and societal preconceptions, evaluating the representation of visible communication disorders in mainstream print media news may be incomplete and misleading (Lwin, Lee, Panchapakesan & Tandoc, 2023:160-168). Contextualising the data facilitates the identification of positive representations and prejudices. Contextualisation is therefore vital in qualitative research to grasp the complex interaction between the media and society (Lim, 2024:1-31). Understanding the context of these representations allows for a more profound understanding of the intricate dynamics at play.

4.3.1.2 Criticism of qualitative approach

Although qualitative research has many advantages and gives distinctive perspectives, it also has some drawbacks that should be recognised and carefully considered (Lim, 2024:5-6) This section offers a critical analysis of these restrictions, illuminating their potential effects on the study procedure and the conclusions reached. Qualitative research typically involves smaller, specific samples, which may not represent broader populations (Karunarathna, Gunasena, Hapuarachchi &

4.4 Research Design

A research design is a comprehensive framework that delineates the components and methodologies employed to address research enquiries in an empirical investigation (Mouton, 2019a:238-248). It is founded on philosophical assumptions, the research strategy, research paradigm, data collection methods, and data analysis (Nieuwenhuis, 2019a:80-114). Media and communication research studies can adopt one of the three research designs, namely exploratory, descriptive and explanatory (Asenahabi, 2019:76-89; Sekran & Bougie, 2016). Due to the novelty of the phenomena under study, the present study adopted an exploratory and descriptive research design.

4.4.1 Exploratory design

An exploratory research design is characterised as the preliminary investigation into an unexplored or theorised concept (Olawale, Chinagozi & Joe, 2023:1384-1395). The primary objective is to establish a foundation for subsequent research or to ascertain whether the observed phenomena can be elucidated by an existing theory (Saunders et al., 2023). Exploratory research design is adaptable and responsive to alterations. Exploratory research is performed to acquire understanding of a situation or phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Conversely, descriptive research was suitable for the study as it illustrated the phenomena by examining how the Zimbabwean media portrayed the COVID-19 infodemic. The research design enabled the researcher to address the following inquiry: How does the Zimbabwean mainstream print media depict the Covid-19 pandemic infodemic and vaccination conspiracy theories during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic?

4.4.2 Descriptive design

The research also utilised a descriptive research design to conduct a thorough and detailed analysis of how media representations portrayed infodemic communication disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Creswell (2014), descriptive

research observes problems systematically and accurately against a fact and the nature of a particular object. It means that descriptive research describes and analyses conditions that exist in reality. This design was selected to accurately observe and analyse these portrayals without intervening in variables, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding media communication disorders during this pivotal period. By employing this design, the study aimed to delve deeply into the ways the Zimbabwean mainstream print media newspapers framed and depicted disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation, exploring the nuanced narratives and implications embedded within these representations (Siedlecki, 2020:8-12). This approach facilitated an in-depth examination of the strategies and biases at play within media coverage, illuminating their impact on shaping public perception, fostering societal discourse, and potentially perpetuating or challenging COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders.

4.5 Population, Sampling and Sampling Size

4.5.1 Population

In empirical investigations, the population or corpus represents a collection of objects, humans, or other units from which the researcher extracts a representative sample (Saunders *et al.*, 2023:274). In communication studies "corpus" denotes the population. The corpus for this study consisted of all mainstream weekly print newspapers in circulation in Zimbabwe. The newspapers comprised *Business Weekly*, *The Financial Gazette*, *Kwayedza*, *The Manica Post*, *The Standard*, *The Sunday Mail*, *The Daily News on Sunday*, and *Zimbabwe Independent* (Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC), 2018).

4.5.1.1 Target population

Willie (2024:75) asserts that the target population encompasses the elements about which the researcher intends to draw inferences. It signifies objects or entities that the researcher aims to analyse (Casteel & Bridier, 2021:339). The target population of this

4.6.1 Non-probability sampling

The study utilised non-probability sampling techniques. There are four types of non-probability sampling: convenience sampling, purposive sampling, snowball sampling, and quota sampling. Not all newspapers in the population possessed an equal and probable chance of being included in the sample. The selection of newspaper items was anticipated or regulated by the researcher. Non-probability sampling was utilised due to the qualitative research design, which was suitable for this sample method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:179-202). This non-probability sampling technique enabled the researcher to intentionally choose samples that were most pertinent and instructive in addressing the study enquiries (Andrade, 2021:86-88).

4.6.2 Purposive sampling

The study utilised a purposive sampling strategy to select the most effective sample that addresses the research topic and aims. Purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling in which the researcher selects individuals or items for inclusion in the sample based on specific criteria, which may include expert knowledge of the research topic or the willingness and capability to participate in the study (Shamsudin et al., 2024:38-53). Andrade (2021:86-88) defines purposive sampling as a non-probability sampling method in which subjects are selected from the target population based on their relevance to the study's objectives and specific inclusion and exclusion criteria.

A purposeful sample technique was chosen to guarantee the inclusion of particular population parameters. Bouncken, Czakon and Schmitt (2025:1-37) assert that this sample guarantees the representation of demographic parameters found in the target population. Articles were included in the sample as they aligned with the research objectives. This sampling technique ensured that the qualitative data was rich and nuanced, offering an in-depth understanding and context to the findings (Shamsudin, Hassim & Abd Manaf, 2024:38-53). This sample design facilitated a systematic examination of newspaper media items, emphasising weekly sampling throughout the study period from 1 May to 31 August 2020. The sample facilitated a systematic examination of weekly newspaper media coverage and possible variations across the study period.

The rationale for employing this technique was the prior familiarity of the researcher with the chosen newspapers, which naturally enabled the researcher to identify the components conducive to the examination. In purposive sampling, a researcher selects a sample according to their assessment of which units of analysis are most representative or beneficial (Bouncken, Czakon & Schmitt, 2025:1-37). The primary benefit of employing this technology is its lower cost and high accessibility. Analogous to quota sampling, this method involves meticulous selection of samples aligned with the researcher's aims Andrade (2021:86-88). This indicates that the researcher can utilise their expertise and existing knowledge to select a range of newspaper texts. The researcher was familiar with the newspaper items being analysed in the study. This method is flawed due to its inherent bias: the outcomes are contingent upon the subjective decision-making processes of the researcher. This implies that the integrity of the research conclusions may be compromised, but it may be mitigated by establishing internal consistency between the research objectives, epistemological bias, and the criteria for selecting the purposive sample.

The sample of newspaper articles was generated using purposive selection, selecting two stories from each weekly newspaper during a sequential 40-week period, accounting for the cyclic change in weekly newspaper coverage (Riffe, Lacy, Watson, & Lovejoy, 2023). The study duration was segmented into five four-week intervals from 1 May to 31 August 2020. Secondly, for each purposively picked week, all accessible news stories were obtained from the electronic PressReader through the online UNISA library. Purposive sampling offers the benefit of time, cost, and effort, as well as the ability to circumvent limitations associated with accessing the whole corpus of stories. In addition, the researcher employed the motif technique in order to select the newspaper articles that were examined. The terms "COVID-19 pandemic," "disinformation", "misinformation", "malinformation", and "infodemic" were employed as the designated search terms.

4.6.3 Sample size

To ensure analytical depth while maintaining manageability of the dataset, the study employed purposive sampling to select two news articles per week from each of the two newspapers (*The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*) over a sixteen-week period (1

May to 31 August 2020). This resulted in a total sample of 64 newspaper articles (32 per publication). The sampling logic was guided by three interrelated considerations: temporal representation, analytical sufficiency, and theoretical relevance. First, selecting articles on a weekly basis ensured temporal consistency, allowing the study to capture shifts and patterns in media representation across the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the selection of two articles per publication per week provided a balanced and comparable dataset across the two newspapers, which is essential for identifying similarities and differences in representation, framing, and discourse.

Importantly, the sample size was not arbitrarily determined but informed by the principle of data saturation, which in qualitative research refers to the point at which additional data no longer yields new themes, patterns, or analytical insights. During the coding process, the researcher observed that after approximately 16 articles per publication, recurring patterns in the representation of misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy narratives, and framing strategies began to stabilise. Subsequent articles largely reinforced already identified themes rather than introducing new categories or discursive variations. Thus, the final sample of 32 articles was considered sufficient to achieve both:

- code saturation (no new themes emerging), and
- meaning saturation (sufficient depth in understanding how themes are constructed and framed).

Furthermore, the sample size aligned with qualitative media studies that prioritise analytical depth over numerical representativeness, particularly when employing methods such as thematic analysis and CDA, which require detailed textual engagement. The sample was also directly aligned with the research questions. It provided adequate coverage to:

- examine how infodemic communication disorders are represented (RQ1)
- identify how elements of the infodemic are selected and prioritised (RQ2)
- analyse dominant themes and frames (RQ3)
- investigate discursive strategies used to debunk or reinforce misinformation (RQ4)

content, aimed at analysing how Zimbabwean mainstream print media newspapers represented the subject of communication disorders related to the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic.

4.7 Data Collection Method(s) and Procedures

Data collection for the present study involved gathering newspaper articles from two mainstream print media newspapers in Zimbabwe (*The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*). These newspapers are among the major media organisations and were chosen based on larger circulations and credibility in their print version as well. To ensure manageability and coherence, only news articles from these two weekly newspapers were included, while other forms of electronic media, such as television or radio broadcasts, were excluded. The article selection procedure ensured that the articles matched the research topic. First, the researcher searched for articles from *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* using the digital newspaper repository (PressReader) for the period 1 May to 31 August 2020. This time frame is likely the best representative of the preliminary dissemination of the COVID-19 infodemic and evolving media coverage in Zimbabwe's media space. The procedure resulted in a fairly organised and transparent record for further analysis by Van Dijk and Fairclough's CDA models.

Desktop data collection method was used in this study: this research method employs the gathering and analysis of secondary information published on the internet or in print. Data for the study was collected from two weekly Zimbabwean newspapers (*The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*). The digital newspapers repository, Press Reader, was utilised to access newspaper articles required for analysis in the study. Data was extracted from the selected newspapers for a period of four months, between 1 May and 31 August 2020. The time frame was chosen because it marked a period characterised as the peak of the reportage of COVID-19 infodemic and dissemination of vaccine conspiracy theories. From *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail*, the researcher searched for the words "COVID-19," and "COVID-19 vaccines" to obtain stories on COVID-19 infodemic. The data instrument was a coding sheet designed by the researcher.

For collecting data, four steps were adapted from O'Connor and Gibson (2003:64-90). First, the researcher read over the selected media texts. Secondly, the researcher marked the underlying aspects of the structure of each text, followed by coding and categorising the data.

4.8 Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was designed to directly align with the research questions and the triangulated theoretical framework of representation theory, framing theory, and CDA. Rather than treating thematic analysis (TA) and CDA as parallel techniques, the study integrates them in a sequential and complementary manner, where TA identifies patterns in the data and CDA provides a deeper explanation of their ideological and discursive significance. This integrated approach ensures that each analytical method contributes explicitly to answering specific research questions while remaining grounded in the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter Three.

The analysis proceeded in two interconnected stages. First, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to systematically identify recurring themes, categories, and framing patterns in the newspaper articles. Second, CDA (Van Dijk, 2013) was applied to interrogate how these themes and frames are discursively constructed, and how they reflect underlying power relations, ideological positions, and institutional interests within Zimbabwean media discourse.

4.8.1 Thematic analysis and its link to research questions

The researcher employed TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006:77-101) to examine a significantly larger dataset and attain more substantial findings. Thematic analysis is a technique for detecting, evaluating, and reporting patterns (themes) in data. In CDA, TA reveals repeating ideas, concepts, and discursive techniques within a dataset, aiding in the comprehension of how specific themes contribute to the formation of meaning and the framing of the COVID-19 infodemic.

Thematic analysis served as the primary organisational tool for identifying patterns across the dataset. However, unlike purely descriptive applications of TA, this study

anchored its coding framework in both the research questions and theoretical constructs, ensuring analytical coherence.

The coding framework was structured around two key dimensions derived from the study:

First, infodemic communication disorder categories (misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories) were used to address RQ1 and RQ2. These codes were not treated as neutral categories but as representational constructs, directly linked to representation theory. Through this, the analysis examined how these elements were symbolically constructed, labelled, and differentiated within newspaper discourse.

Second, generic media frames: including conflict, responsibility, human interest, morality, and economic frames, were used to address RQ3. These codes were explicitly derived from framing theory and enabled the study to analyse how newspapers structured meaning, emphasised particular aspects of the infodemic, and guided audience interpretation.

Importantly, the coding process was not purely inductive; it was theoretically informed. This ensured that themes were not only identified but also interpreted in relation to broader questions of representation and framing. For instance, the identification of a “responsibility frame” was linked to how newspapers assign blame or accountability, while “conflict frames” were analysed in relation to political contestation in Zimbabwean media.

Thus, thematic analysis in this study does not merely answer “what is present in the data?” but provides structured insights into:

- how infodemic elements are represented (RQ1)
- how they are identified and categorised (RQ2)
- how they are framed and organised (RQ3)

The following step-by-step guide was used to apply the TA.

Step 1: Data familiarisation

level themes and interrogate how media discourse reflects and reproduces power relations, ideology, and institutional interests.

At the textual level, CDA examined linguistic features such as:

- lexical choices (e.g., “fake”, “false”, “dangerous”)
- metaphors and catchphrases
- headline construction and narrative tone

These elements were analysed to determine how newspapers construct authority, credibility, and legitimacy in reporting the infodemic. At the discursive level, the analysis focused on:

- sourcing patterns (who is quoted and who is excluded)
- intertextuality (how other voices and discourses are incorporated)
- narrative positioning (whose perspective is foregrounded)

This level directly operationalises power, by revealing how certain actors (e.g., government officials, health experts) are privileged as authoritative voices, while others are marginalised. At the social practice level, CDA examined how media discourse is shaped by broader contextual factors identified in Chapter Two, including:

- media polarisation
- political contestation
- low public trust

Here, ideology is operationalised as the underlying system of beliefs and interests that shape how the infodemic is represented. For example, the study analyses how certain narratives may reinforce state authority, delegitimise dissenting voices, or construct misinformation as politically motivated.

Through this multi-level analysis, CDA primarily addresses:

- **RQ2** (how elements of the infodemic are constructed and prioritised)
- **RQ4** (how newspapers debunk or reinforce misinformation through discourse)

4.8.3 Justification for integrating thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis

The combination of CDA and TA provided a robust and comprehensive framework for examining Zimbabwean print media representations of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders. This methodological integration allowed the researcher to capture both what is being communicated and how it is ideologically constructed within broader socio-political contexts. As Braun and Clarke (2021:382) explain, TA offers a systematic yet flexible means of identifying, organising and describing recurrent patterns of meaning across qualitative data, ensuring that key issues such as misinformation, government narratives, or public fear are recognised empirically before deeper interpretation begins. However, TA alone may stop at a descriptive level, lacking the critical depth necessary to interrogate the ideological forces underlying media discourse. To address this, CDA extends the analysis by examining how language operates as a social practice that constructs, sustains, or challenges power relations (Fairclough, 2013).

More importantly, the integration of thematic analysis (TA) and CDA reflects the triangulated theoretical framework outlined in Chapter Three. Within this framework, representation theory is operationalised through the thematic coding of infodemic elements, enabling the study to examine how misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and conspiracy theories are constructed and represented (RQ1). Framing theory is operationalised through the identification and analysis of dominant frames, which structure how these elements are made salient and interpreted within media texts (RQ3). CDA, in turn, is operationalised through a critical examination of discourse, focusing on how power relations, ideology, and authority are embedded in the representation of infodemic communication disorders (RQ2 and RQ4).

This integrated approach ensures that the analysis proceeds systematically from identifying patterns in the data through thematic analysis, to examining how these patterns are organised and emphasised through framing, and ultimately to explaining how they are shaped by power and ideological processes through CDA. In doing so, the study moves beyond descriptive content analysis to a theoretically grounded interpretation of media discourse. Importantly, this approach addresses a key gap identified in the literature review, namely the tendency of Zimbabwean studies to focus

on misinformation as content rather than analysing how it is discursively constructed within media texts.

In the Zimbabwean media context, the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in an environment marked by political polarisation, economic fragility and state influence over mainstream press narratives. In such settings, CDA was valuable because it uncovered how discursive strategies such as the use of patriotic rhetoric, securitisation of health, and vilification of dissent reflect underlying power asymmetries and ideological control (Wodak & Meyer, 2016; Ncube & Mare, 2022:84). Additionally, CDA's strength in critical interpretation was enhanced by TA's systematic coding procedures, which ensure transparency and replicability. Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that the clarity of thematic coding offers a clear analytic trail, reducing the interpretive bias often attributed to CDA's subjective tendencies. This synergy allowed the researcher to first map recurring frames and themes within the Zimbabwean print discourse and then critically interrogate how those themes reproduce or resist hegemonic state ideologies.

Moreover, combining TA and CDA bridges the gap between micro- and macro-levels of analysis. Thematic analysis operates mainly at the semantic level focusing on identifying what is explicitly said while CDA delves into the socio-political structures and discursive mechanisms that give rise to those meanings. Through this integration, the analysis connected specific textual patterns in newspaper articles to wider institutional forces such as political communication strategies, media ownership, and the state's attempts to control public narratives during the pandemic. This is particularly relevant to Zimbabwe, where scholars like Mutekwe and Vanyoro (2021:35) have demonstrated that pandemic discourse was used by political elites to legitimise authority and silence criticism.

Another justification lies in the enhancement of methodological rigour and triangulation. Flick (2022) emphasises that combining qualitative approaches can increase the validity of findings through methodological triangulation. By using TA to inductively identify dominant themes and CDA to critically interpret their ideological underpinnings, the analysis produced findings that were both empirically grounded

and theoretically rich. This mitigates the limitations of each approach: while TA may overlook power relations, CDA may rely on selective textual examples without systematic coverage. In addition, using both approaches encourage reflexivity and transparency which are key to maintaining credibility when analysing politically sensitive media content.

More importantly, the combination of CDA and TA was justified because it produced a multidimensional analysis of how Zimbabwean print media represented the COVID-19 infodemic. TA provided structure, reliability, and a systematic overview of themes, while CDA situated those themes within ideological and political contexts, revealing how discursive constructions of truth, misinformation, and authority functioned during the pandemic. This integrated approach strengthened both the empirical validity and critical interpretive power of the research, offering a nuanced understanding of communication disorders and media power in times of crisis.

4.9 Ethical Considerations

Research ethics include the adherence to moral and human rights principles within the realm of research (Mouton, 2019b: 238-248). The field of ethics can be categorised into distinct domains, which include descriptive, normative, meta-ethics and applied ethics (Drolet et al., 2023: 269-292). Descriptive ethics is an academic discipline that examines human behaviour and the ethical principles that individuals adhere to. Normative ethics is a branch of ethics that focuses on the study of how individuals ought to behave. Meta-ethics focuses on the significance of ethical terminology, the rationale behind moral judgements, and related matters. Applied ethics is a branch of ethics that employs principles and knowledge derived from normative ethics to address specific moral dilemmas within particular contexts (Fouche et al., 2023:119-149). Ethical considerations hold significant importance in every empirical study, hence necessitating researchers to duly acknowledge and address them.

To ensure adherence to ethical research policy, principles, and academic integrity, the researcher obtained an ethical clearance certificate from the UNISA Ethics Committee. The ethical standards of the UNISA Department of Communication Science were observed during the project. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) identify key ethical considerations as safeguarding participants from injury, ensuring voluntary

involvement, preserving participants' privacy, and maintaining honesty with professional colleagues. Deception was avoided by representing the work for what it is (Clark et al., 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Bryman, 2016).

4.10 Research Quality and Rigour: Ensuring Trustworthiness

Ensuring that qualitative research is conducted in a reasonable and trustworthy manner carries a significant ethical responsibility. Ethics refer to rules and morals that guide our behaviour (Creswell, 2014). In the case of CDA, the focus is on understanding how media outlets portray reality, rather than seeking absolute truth. Thus, being neutral is not the main concern (Liu, 2015). The present study did not involve human participants; therefore, the emphasis was on achieving quality and rigour. To ensure rigour, trustworthiness, and ethical research, the researcher adhered to the principles of credibility, dependability, conformability, transferability and authenticity.

4.10.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the degree to which research findings authentically represent the reality experienced by participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers establish credibility through prolonged engagement, continuous observation, and the application of triangulation (Ahmed, 2024:1-4). The sampled newspaper articles were purposefully selected over a longer period of four months in order to have persistent observation over a longer period as this will increase the credibility of the research data (Nieuwenhuis, 2019a:80-114). Additionally, a scopus (or systematic review) of literature was conducted to complement the content analysis of selected newspaper articles. The researcher followed the six steps of content analysis method to increase the credibility of the results of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2022:1-10). Furthermore, the researcher kept an open-minded attitude, recognising personal biases and practicing self-reflection throughout the entire process as suggested by Ahmed (2024). Critical textual analysis also minimised the researcher's bias towards the research. Critical discourse analysis and systematic literature review were integrated as data sources in order to validate findings and enhance their credibility.

4.10.2 Transferability

Transferability is "the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other contexts or populations and the quantity of informants or study participants" (Ahmed, 2024:1-4; Drisko, 2025:102-110). To guarantee transferability, the researcher provided a thorough and detailed description of the study's setting, participants, and methodologies, allowing readers to adapt the findings to their own individual situations (Ahmed, 2024:1-4; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017:26-41). Transferability increased the possibility of generalising the findings to the media field in all countries, by providing rich, comprehensive portrayals of the setting, findings, and participants by the researcher (Drisko, 2025:102-110). This study addressed transferability by providing a comprehensive data collection procedure. Moreover, various strategies to enhance transferability were employed. These strategies encompassed providing a comprehensive portrayal of the chosen sample and utilising thick description as proposed by Lim (2024:1-31). Thick description pertains to furnishing the reader with a detailed and precise framework for understanding the results. In addition, the provision of appropriate evidence was supported by the inclusion of quotes obtained from newspaper articles and relevant documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

4.10.3 Dependability

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define dependability as the likelihood of obtaining identical results if identical research is repeated. Ensuring dependability in qualitative research is crucial for rendering the findings consistent and stable throughout time (Ahmed, 2024:1-4). Dependability refers to the degree to which the conclusions correspond with the collected data, rather than emphasising the replicability of the results. Consequently, dependability emphasises the research design, execution, and data collection methodologies (Nieuwenhuis, 2019a:80-114). The research design entails determining which codes and text to incorporate in data analysis and which to exclude. To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher meticulously documented the methodologies, data collection techniques, and analytical procedures (Ahmed, 2024:1-4). Furthermore, the researcher established and maintained an audit trail comprising a detailed log that recorded the decisions taken during the study process (Kocaman, 2025:317-346). The reporting process was transparent, systematic, and

verifiable. This will enable other researchers to replicate the study in a way that ensures the reliability of the findings (Ahmed, 2024:1-4). Furthermore, the researcher documented all modifications made during the analytical technique and employed member checking to evaluate the data analysis process, hence augmenting the reliability and credibility of the data (Pitney et al., 2024:49-58). Thorough documentation of the data analysis process will enable other researchers to comprehend the researcher's conclusions, the rationale behind those decisions, and the methods employed for data analysis and interpretation (Nieuwenhuis, 2019a:80-114).

4.10.4 Confirmability

Confirmability pertains to the neutrality and objectivity of the results (Ahmed, 2024:1-4; Kyngäs et al., 2019:41-48). Consequently, confirmability is an essential factor in alleviating researcher prejudice and preferences (Nyathi, 2018:138). To establish confirmability, researchers employ many approaches like peer debriefing, member checking, and reflexive journalling. Peer debriefing entails soliciting feedback from peers or experts to validate interpretations and reduce study bias (Amin et al., 2020:1472-1482). Newspaper articles were rigorously assessed and the findings were authenticated through member verification, hence augmenting the degree of confirmability. Reflexive journalling allows researchers to document their thoughts, biases, and reflections, hence enhancing transparency and mitigating subjectivity (Ahmed, 2024:1-4). The suggested study utilised reflexivity to mitigate biases and uphold objectivity.

4.11 Critical Evaluation of the Study

4.11.1 Limitations of the study

The study utilised a qualitative approach and could have incorporated a quantitative research design as a supplementary way to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how print media audiences perceive and evaluate the representation of the COVID-19 infodemic in mainstream print media. Questionnaires or focus groups

could have been employed as a means to gather data from the audience to elucidate their thoughts regarding the communication difficulties associated with COVID-19.

The researcher analysed only two weekly mainstream print media newspapers, whereas he could have also analysed and compared two or three media platforms such as online media sources and broadcast media. The results could then be generalised, because a comparative analysis of three media platforms would have provided comprehensive conclusions about the representation of COVID-19 pandemic infodemic communication disorders.

4.11.2 Strength of the research methodology

The study triangulated three complementary theoretical lenses, namely Hall's representation theory, framing theory, and van Dijk's CDA. With regard to data analysis, the study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) TA, CDA and a textual analysis method. These combinations strengthened the study by integrating macro-cultural, meso-discursive, and micro-linguistic vantage points while also ensuring systematic patterning across the corpus. Hall's representation theory anchored the study in how meaning was produced, circulated and contested through cultural codes, enabling the study to interpret Zimbabwean print media's COVID-19 narratives as historically situated signifying practices rather than neutral reflections (Hall, 1997). Framing theory added a meso-level lens that identified how news texts selected and highlighted certain aspects of the pandemic; thereby revealing the communication packaging through which "infodemic" disorders such as MDM gained salience (Entman, 1993). Van Dijk's CDA then narrowed down the analysis to the micro-mechanics of power/ideology in language, tracing how lexical choices, syntax, transitivity and source attribution reproduced dominance or resistance, and how knowledge, beliefs and group relations were managed in elite discourse (van Dijk, 2009). Methodologically, TA provided a transparent, flexible and replicable route for identifying recurrent patterns across a heterogeneous dataset, creating an auditable bridge between descriptive regularities (e.g. themes of compliance, rights, corruption, uncertainty) and the deeper explanatory work done by CDA and framing analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The textual analysis approach tied these dimensions together by treating articles, headlines, images and captions as interrelated signifying

units, allowing multimodal and intertextual readings while preserving close attention to form and context (Hall, 1997b; van Dijk, 2009).

In combination, the study enabled theory triangulation (converging explanations from cultural, cognitive-organisational and critical-linguistic theories), method triangulation, and level integration (macro codes ↔ meso frames ↔ micro linguistic moves), which collectively enhance credibility, transferability and explanatory depth. This methodological approach also mitigates single-lens weaknesses. This means that TA's descriptiveness is deepened by CDA's power analytics; framing's operational clarity counterbalances CDA's perceived subjectivity; and Hall's cultural coding prevents frames imported from other contexts from flattening local meanings.

4.12 Summary

This chapter examined the methodologies employed in the research as well as the rationale for their selection in relation to the investigation. The study primarily aimed to examine the portrayal of the COVID-19 infodemic in mainstream print media in Zimbabwe. The researcher opted for a qualitative research methodology and the critical research paradigm. The research utilised a blend of TA and CDA, concentrating on the function of language employed by media and the context of the representation of the COVID-19 infodemic in mass media. The research was conducted within the interpretive paradigm, as media exhibits intricate and multifaceted phenomena that allow for several interpretations, aligning well with qualitative research design.

Data was collected through purposive sampling from the selected print media newspaper sources. These included newspapers accessed online. The sample of the study was published within the chosen timeframe (1 May to 31 August 2020), which was from the emergence of COVID-19. Each of the preferred methods was broadly covered, explaining the various steps to be taken from collection to analysis, as well as the pros and cons of each. One of the mentioned limitations of the study was the choice of sample, as a vast number of media have covered the issue since the commencement of the COVID-19 crisis. Another limitation was that the internal biases of the researcher could affect their view on a matter and, in turn, the conclusions drawn from it.

Chapter 5 of this dissertation focuses on the data analysis and interpretation of the results. To achieve the research objectives, qualitative TA was conducted to specifically examine how COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders were represented in the Zimbabwean mainstream media discourses during the pandemic. The analysis aimed to identify instances of MDM as well as conspiracy theories.

CHAPTER 5: PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

In an era characterised by unprecedented global health challenges, the dissemination of accurate information and public awareness through mainstream media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception and their responses to health crises. Against the backdrop of COVID-19 pandemic infodemic communication disorders challenges facing Zimbabwe during the first phase of the pandemic, this present study explored how two Zimbabwean mainstream print media newspapers represented the COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders. The study shed light on the potential impact of the way newspapers' representation, framing and coverage of the infodemic, has on public health outcomes in Zimbabwe.

This chapter delineates the research findings pertaining to the assessment of how two weekly mainstream print media Zimbabwean newspapers, specifically, *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* represented, framed and covered the infodemic communication disorders during the first wave of the pandemic in the Zimbabwean context. A sample of 32 newspaper articles were analysed. The content of articles published between 1 May and 31 August 2020 was analysed. The study used TA and CDA to analyse the secondary data: TA was used to organise and categorise content into descriptive themes based on the research objectives, and in addition, CDA was used to interpret power, ideology and discourse structures underlying the identified themes. The study was underpinned by three theoretical lenses; namely, the representation theory, framing theory, and CDA. These theories also informed the textual analysis of the data obtained from the newspaper articles.

The data analysis was categorised and structured into five broad thematic sections: (1) synopsis of sampled newspaper articles; (2) representation of the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic communication disorders; (3) elements of the COVID-19 infodemic disorders evident in articles; (4) dominant themes and frames evident the newspaper articles; and (5) COVID-19 infodemic debunking efforts evident in the newspaper articles. Firstly, all the 32 articles selected for the current study were

summarised in order to provide an overview of what each article focuses on. This helped to provide context to the representation, framing analysis and CDA frameworks adopted in the study. Thereafter, the representation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders were analysed and presented in depth from the 32 sampled articles. This was followed by an analysis of the elements of the COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders evident in the selected articles. More importantly, the analysis and presentation focused on the dominant themes and frames inferred and represented in the articles. The analysis was based on several themes such as public health narratives, political themes and framing, human interest/hope frame, government theme. Lastly, the presence and absence of the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic communication disorders debunking efforts was explored and will be discussed. The focus was on reading between the lines to identify explicit efforts to debunk false information and the absence of debunking discourse to correct communication disorders, and corrective framing efforts. General conclusions were drawn and the main findings will be presented. All articles were examined in terms of language and content to identify to what extent and in what ways the COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders were represented. The manner in which the newspapers differed in their reportage and representation of the infodemic was explored as well.

5.2 A Synopsis of the Newspaper Articles

During the designated period of 1 May to 31 August 2020, 32 newspaper articles pertaining to the COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders were purposively selected from *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail*. This analysis provides an overview of the COVID-19 infodemic content disseminated by the newspapers. The summary of the sampled articles is necessary in order to provide the first impression on the reader of content which was represented and framed during the period in question. The summaries will also assist the reader to form an opinion about the content of the data which is represented and analysed.

5.2.1 The Standard articles

5.2.1.1 Covid-19 second hand clothes ban sparks outrage (10 May 2020)

This article by Brenna Matendere reports on the Zimbabwean government's controversial decision to ban the sale of second-hand clothes as part of its COVID-19 containment measures. The ban was announced by the Minister of Women's Affairs, Sithembiso Nyoni, who claimed that imported second-hand clothing could potentially transmit the coronavirus. She stated that stopping their import and sale was necessary to protect public health. However, the decision sparked significant public outcry, particularly among informal traders and civil society organisations. Many critics argued that there is no scientific evidence to support the claim that second-hand clothing transmits COVID-19. Several informal traders interviewed expressed their frustration because the second-hand clothing business had been their only source of income.

5.2.1.2 Magufuli on inhaling steam (10 May 2020)

The article discusses former Tanzanian President John Magufuli's promotion of steam inhalation as a method to treat or prevent Covid-19. Magufuli encouraged Tanzanians to inhale steam infused with herbal remedies like neem, claiming it could help kill the virus in the respiratory system even though the WHO have consistently stated that there was no scientific evidence to support the idea that steam inhalation can cure or prevent COVID-19. The article separates misinformation from verified health guidance. It underscores the dangers of relying on unproven remedies during a pandemic and highlights the importance of following science-based recommendations. By and large, the article calls for greater public awareness to combat health misinformation.

5.2.1.3 Covid-19 isolation centres a time bomb (7 June 2020)

This article explores and highlights the poor state of the government's quarantine centers in Harare especially at the Harare Polytechnic College. According to the writer Zimbabwe's positive coronavirus tally has increased to 265 people from 56 recorded in the previous two weeks. The writer also states that almost all the new cases were recorded at quarantine centres across the country. These centres were holding

returnees from Southern African countries. College employees at the Harare Polytechnic College who were responsible for feeding the inmates fled the premises after getting information that 14 returnees from SA had tested positive. The article highlights that inmates in these isolation centres were not getting adequate Personal Protection Equipment (PPEs).

5.2.1.4 Covid-19 opportunity to loot (7 June 2020)

This article by Thandekile Moyo criticises the Zimbabwean government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis. The writer argues that the pandemic was exploited to misappropriate public resources and avoid accountability. Additionally, it was pointed out that the Zimbabwean government habitually blames international sanctions for the country's economic struggles, using this narrative to divert attention from domestic mismanagement and corruption. This rhetoric is commonly repeated at political rallies and in state-controlled media. Moyo asserts that instead of using COVID-19 relief funds to combat the pandemic effectively, the government engaged in looting and misappropriation.

5.2.1.5 Covid-19 and shortness of breath (7 June 2020)

In this article, Dr. Johannes Marisa explains how shortness of breath (*dyspnea*) has become a common and alarming symptom of COVID-19. It highlights the causes, implications, and medical approaches related to this symptom during the pandemic. Dr. Marisa stresses the importance of early diagnosis and management to prevent complications and reduce mortality. He urges people to take COVID-19 seriously, practice good hygiene, and follow medical advice rather than relying on unproven remedies.

5.2.1.6 Zim Covid-19 cases climb to 356 (14 June 2020)

This article by Mukululeko Sibanda reports on the rising number of COVID-19 cases in Zimbabwe. It highlights concerns about the country's handling of the pandemic and its broader implications. According to the article, Zimbabwe had recorded 356 confirmed cases after 13 new infections were identified among returnees from SA and

the UK. The article raises concern from returnees housed in quarantine centers, who complained about poor living conditions that may have contributed to virus exposure.

5.2.1.7 Four family members beat Covid-19 (14 June 2020)

This article tells the story of a Bulawayo family of four who successfully recovered from COVID-19 after a month-long battle. The first to contract the virus was a nurse, who got infected at work at Mater Dei Hospital. Her family members later also tested positive and were isolated at home. The mother had since moved out of the family home and lived separately in self-isolation. The family faced challenges including stigma and fear from their community. Despite being declared virus-free, they shared emotional struggles, such as being avoided by neighbours and receiving insensitive comments. The family members are now cleared and grateful to have recovered. They urge others to seek help early and to follow health guidelines to fight the virus. The family said that they used home remedies such as steaming and lemon juice to fight the symptoms.

5.2.1.8 Covid-19: Zim records 73 new cases, one death (5 July 2020)

According to this article Zimbabwe reported 73 new COVID-19 cases, bringing the total number of infections to 698, with eight deaths. Among the new cases, a 21-year-old Harare woman with underlying health conditions died. According to the Health and Child Care Ministry, most of the new infections were from Zimbabweans returning from SA, while others came from Mozambique, the US, Australia, and Zambia. Eight of the new cases were local transmissions. The country remains under lockdown to control the spread of the virus. However, the response has been challenged by ongoing strikes from health workers demanding better wages and working conditions. Although the government offered US\$75 monthly allowances for three months, unions rejected the offer.

5.2.1.9 Covid-19: Panic as cases soar at SA border (5 July 2020)

This article reports rising panic in Beitbridge, Zimbabwe, as 40 South African soldiers stationed at the border tested positive for COVID-19. The outbreak raised fears of a

major health crisis in the area, which already faces heavy cross-border movement and smuggling. A South African Revenue Service official died of COVID-19 the previous week at the local Musina Police Station, where smuggling suspects are processed. The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) confirmed that one of its units deployed to support COVID-19 lockdown enforcement in Limpopo had been affected.

5.2.1.10 Investing in digital agric can help Africa beat Covid-19 (5 July 2020)

This article by Ban Ki-Moon and Patrick Verkooijen argues that digital agriculture can play a crucial role in helping Africa recover from the economic and food security impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Africa has been heavily affected by the pandemic, not just in terms of health but also economically, with millions pushed into poverty and hunger. Lockdowns and restrictions have disrupted food supply chains and limited access to markets. Digital agriculture offers a solution. Digital tools such as mobile apps, remote sensing, and advisory services can connect farmers to markets, finance, and weather data, helping them maintain productivity despite restrictions.

5.2.1.11 Covid-19 stigma big problem in Africa (5 July 2020)

According to this article, stigma related to COVID-19 remains a major challenge across Africa, as it discourages people from seeking help or getting tested when they suspect infection. This issue was highlighted during a webinar hosted by the Africa Center for Disease Control (CDC) focused on improving Covid-19 reporting. Mercy Korir, a Kenyan medical doctor and health journalist, shared her experiences of community backlash against individuals who tested positive, noting that many still face discriminations. Emmanuel Agogo from Nigeria CDC emphasised that stigma hampers efforts to track, test, and treat COVID-19 effectively. He stressed the need for responsible journalism to ensure accurate public information and combat misinformation. The report revealed widespread myths and misconceptions, including beliefs that drinking lemon or taking vitamin C could prevent infection, or that Africans are immune to the virus.

5.2.1.12 The importance of observing control measures (12 July 2020)

This article emphasises that COVID-19 remains a deadly global threat, claiming over 5,000 lives daily. Countries like Brazil, the US and India have been particularly hard-

hit. Africa, while reporting fewer cases in comparison, is cautioned against complacency. The article explains the epidemiological triangle which includes the host, agent, and environment; and notes that disrupting this triangle is essential for stopping the spread of infectious diseases. To control COVID-19, Dr. Marisa stresses the importance of maintaining proper hand hygiene, wearing masks, disinfecting frequently touched surfaces, practicing social distancing, and correctly using PPE: its usage has increased significantly, especially among healthcare workers, due to their high risk of exposure. The article also warns of the dangers posed by complacency and laxity, especially among medical personnel, which can have fatal consequences.

5.2.1.13 Debunking Covid-19 myths (19 July 2020)

This article by Reuters Fact Check addresses and refutes several false claims circulating on social media regarding the pandemic. It specifically dismantles a viral post that outlines a three-phase conspiracy theory about the virus. Among the debunked myths is the claim that it only causes mild symptoms; since the WHO confirms that the virus can lead to severe illness and death, particularly in vulnerable groups. The article also rejects the notion that serious symptoms result from fear or stress, clarifying that the virus directly affects the respiratory system. It further explains that PCR tests accurately detect the virus' genetic material and are not flawed, contrary to conspiracy claims. Additionally, the belief that 5G radiation harms the immune system or worsens symptoms is dismissed, as WHO confirms no link between 5G and the virus. The article also disputes the idea that mask-wearing, lack of sunlight, and social distancing weaken immunity, emphasising there is no scientific basis for such claims.

5.2.1.14 Covid-19: time to stand up against virus (19 July 2020)

In this article, Dr. Johannes Marisa emphasises the urgent need for proactive measures against the escalating pandemic, especially in Southern Africa where health systems are under strain. He highlights the critical situation in countries like SA and Zimbabwe, pointing out issues such as delayed COVID-19 testing, limited resources, and the underreporting of cases and deaths. Many patients are diagnosed posthumously due to slow testing, while others deteriorate while waiting for results. Dr. Marisa calls for the decentralisation of testing to reach even small clinics and surgeries, along with the accelerated testing of all suspected cases and quick

turnaround times for results. He warns that avoiding testing due to fear or stigma is dangerous and potentially deadly. The article advocates for the use of PPE by frontline workers and stresses the importance of making informed decisions based on accurate statistics to prevent further catastrophe.

5.2.1.15 My experience battling Covid-19 (23 August 2020)

In this story, the author shares a harrowing yet hopeful experience of contracting and recovering from COVID-19. Initially dismissing the virus as distant, the reality struck when the author, despite being asymptomatic, tested positive after routine screening. What followed was a rapid descent into severe illness, including fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, and intense weakness. The situation worsened as breathing became difficult, requiring urgent hospitalisation and oxygen support. The author describes the fear, confusion, and physical toll of the disease, including how medical staff provided constant care while managing limited resources and high stress. The emotional impact was just as profound: fear of dying, loneliness in isolation, and the mental burden of watching fellow patients suffer. Despite these hardships, the author praises the dedication of healthcare workers and underscores the importance of early testing, seeking treatment promptly, and following safety protocols. The experience ultimately deepened the author's appreciation for life and left a lasting message about the seriousness of COVID-19, encouraging readers to take the virus seriously and support those affected by it.

5.2.1.16 Crowded cities struggle to contain Covid-19 (30 August 2020)

This article explores the challenges faced by densely populated urban areas in Zimbabwe; especially Harare and Bulawayo, in containing the spread of COVID-19. It highlights the difficulty of enforcing public health measures like social distancing and handwashing in overcrowded settings, where many families share small living spaces and lack access to clean running water. Urban poverty, informal housing, and water shortages further complicate efforts to prevent infection. Many residents rely on communal water sources or boreholes, making physical distancing nearly impossible. The situation is exacerbated by economic hardships, with residents forced to prioritise daily survival over public health guidelines. The government's efforts, such as lockdowns and the use of water bowsers, have helped somewhat, but infrastructural

limitations remain. Authorities continue to struggle with providing adequate water and housing, leading to inconsistent implementation of health protocols.

5.2.2 Synopsis of *The Sunday Mail* articles

During the designated period, 16 newspaper articles pertaining to the COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders were purposively selected from *The Sunday Mail* newspaper. This analysis provides an examination of the content disseminated by the newspaper from 1 May to 31 August 2020. The analysis focused on elucidating the representation of the infodemic, the elements of the communication disorders present in the articles, the major themes portrayed and the efforts made to debunk the communication disorders covered in some media channels.

5.2.2.1 Covid-19: *We are not off the hook yet (3 May 2020)*

This article supports the government's decision to extend the national lockdown in Zimbabwe by another two weeks, emphasising that the partial reopening of the formal sector should not be misinterpreted as an indication that COVID-19 has been contained. It warns the public that the risk of infection remains high and that strict adherence to preventive measures is still essential. The author urges citizens to continue practicing social distancing, wear face masks, and only travel when absolutely necessary. It also criticises individuals who use the relaxed measures as an excuse to loiter in the Central Business District (CBD) and calls for their arrest to deter such behaviour. Furthermore, it acknowledges that cases are still rising globally and in Zimbabwe, reinforcing the message that every citizen has a responsibility to prevent further spread of the virus. The article ends with a strong appeal for continued discipline and collective responsibility to protect lives and contain the pandemic.

5.2.2.2 *Traditionalists flag local herbs in Covid-19 fight (3 May 2020)*

This article explores growing calls by Zimbabwean traditionalists for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems particularly local herbal remedies in the national fight against COVID-19. With the virus already claiming lives and infecting dozens in the country, traditional healers argue that local herbs, long used in traditional medicine, could serve as alternative or complementary treatments to conventional medicine. Chief Donald Kamba of Makoni emphasises that traditional medicine should not undermine government health efforts, but rather offer home-grown solutions tailored

to Zimbabwe's unique context. He criticises Western medical systems for merely rebranding traditional African herbs and calls for the recognition of local practices in managing the pandemic. The article references Madagascar's controversial herbal remedy, developed by the Malagasy Institute of Applied Research, made from *artemisia* (a plant also used in malaria treatment). In conclusion, the writer notes that while global attention remains on pharmaceutical solutions like Remdesivir and upcoming vaccines, Zimbabwean traditionalists advocate for greater investment in local medicinal knowledge.

5.2.2.3 Covid-19 ravages aviation industry (10 May 2020)

The catastrophic impact of the pandemic on the global aviation sector is outlined in this article. Describing the industry as being on “life support,” the report provides a grim snapshot of widespread airline collapses, massive job losses, and halted operations across the world.

5.2.2.4 Covid-19: Don't overrule local herbs (10 May 2020)

In this opinion piece, the importance of exploring and testing local herbs in the fight against COVID-19 is emphasised. The writer urges collaboration between the Ministry of Health, pharmaceutical companies, and traditional herbalists to investigate the potential of indigenous remedies; and argues that relying solely on Western countries for a vaccine or cure is not a viable strategy, especially when local herbs might already contain powerful medicinal properties. The article calls for government investment in research to explore these possibilities, suggesting that Zimbabwe could even contribute significantly to the global solution. Citing the case of a Malagasy scientist who is believed to have developed a herbal beverage to combat the virus, the author encourages Zimbabwe to intensify its own efforts, especially with drugs like Remdesivir showing some effectiveness in the US. The overall message is that local knowledge systems should not be overlooked but rather developed as part of a broader response to the pandemic.

5.2.2.5 Covid-19 is not over yet: President (17 May 2020)

This article highlights that in a national address, President Emmerson Mnangagwa extended Zimbabwe's Level 2 COVID-19 lockdown indefinitely. The president warned that the pandemic was far from over, despite the country's relatively low number of

confirmed cases. He praised the effectiveness of the lockdown measures implemented since March 30, 2020, which helped prevent widespread local transmission, and stressed that the country must not lose the gains made so far and should gradually ease out of lockdown through a strategic and data-driven approach. Key achievements noted included expanded testing capacity, establishment of isolation facilities across all provinces, training of healthcare workers, intensified public education campaigns in all 16 national languages, and improved sanitation and hygiene practices. However, he also acknowledged ongoing gaps and announced that these would be addressed through a comprehensive response strategy tailored to community-specific risks. In closing, President Mnangagwa called on Zimbabweans to remain disciplined and united in following the regulations, stressing that saving lives is a collective responsibility.

5.2.2.6 Not all gloom and doom post Covid-19 (24 May 2020)

Economist Cornelius Dube explores both the negative and positive implications of the pandemic on Zimbabwe's economy in this article. While acknowledging the heavy toll the pandemic has taken globally, including in Zimbabwe, the author emphasises that the severity of economic impact will vary by country depending on how self-sufficient they are in terms of production and consumption. In Zimbabwe's case, the prolonged lockdown has led to suppressed demand, especially due to the informal sector's shutdown and reduced remittances from the diaspora. Sectors like tourism, manufacturing, restaurants, transport, and agriculture have been significantly affected, while others like mining and communication have experienced less disruption. Despite the grim outlook, the article argues that opportunities do exist post-COVID-19. The article concludes by urging local industry and policymakers to seize this moment to strengthen domestic production capacity, reduce import dependency, and set the economy on a path to sustainable recovery.

5.2.2.7 Turn Covid-19 into opportunity (31 May 2020)

The outcomes of a virtual meeting of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Council of Ministers are highlighted in this article, emphasising the need to transform the COVID-19 crisis into an opportunity for strengthening regional industrialisation and intra-regional trade. Attended by ministers from member countries such as Zimbabwe, SA, Tanzania, and others, the meeting focused on

promoting the local manufacturing of essential health materials like face masks, sanitisers, and ventilators, which have become critical during the pandemic. The article concludes that SADC countries must use the current crisis to accelerate the implementation of regional trade and industrial policies, strengthen cooperation, and build more self-sufficient economies. In doing so, the region can not only withstand global shocks but also emerge stronger through greater economic integration and resilience.

5.2.2.8 Wash face masks before dumping them (14 June 2020)

This article discusses new regulations introduced in Zimbabwe for the safe disposal of face masks and gloves used for prevention, now classified as hazardous waste. The Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for COVID-19 Infectious Waste Management, developed by the Ministry of Health and Child Care in partnership with the Environmental Management Agency (EMA), outlines measures to ensure that both households and medical institutions manage pandemic-related waste responsibly. At the household level, individuals are required to wash used masks and gloves with soap under running water for at least 20 seconds, cut them into pieces to prevent misuse or illegal recycling, and place them in tied plastic bags for disposal with general waste. These steps aim to reduce the health risks associated with improper disposal, particularly as estimates suggest that one million masks and gloves are discarded each week. Overall, the article highlights the efforts of the government to enforce strict waste management protocols to mitigate the risks of transmission through discarded PPE, ensuring both public health and environmental protection.

5.2.2.9 Reawakening the human spirit in Covid-19 fight (14 June 2020)

The integration of spiritual and moral dimensions into the national response to the pandemic are reflected upon in this article. It highlights President Mnangagwa's declaration of a National Day of Prayer and fasting on June 15 as a significant spiritual intervention amid rising infection numbers, particularly among returnees from countries such as the UK, SA, and Botswana. The call to prayer is portrayed not only as a religious gesture but also as a moral rallying point aimed at reawakening the collective human spirit in the battle against the virus. Emphasis is placed on Zimbabwe's Christian identity and the biblical exhortation from 2 Chronicles 7:14, which calls for repentance and divine intervention during times of national distress.

The article ultimately presents a narrative that blends faith-based resilience with governance and public health strategies, illustrating how spirituality was mobilised as part of Zimbabwe's broader national discourse and response to the pandemic.

5.2.2.10 Surge in Covid-19 cases worrying (28 June 2020)

The author of this article expresses deep concern over the rising number of cases in Zimbabwe and warns against complacency, highlighting that although the majority of new infections are reported from quarantine centres, this does not guarantee safety for the broader public. Workers from these facilities return to their homes daily, potentially carrying the virus into their communities. The situation is further complicated by the escape of some individuals from quarantine centres, whose whereabouts and contacts remain unknown, thus posing a serious public health threat. The author also criticises the apparent decline in media vigilance and public awareness regarding COVID-19 risks. He notes with alarm the return to informal trading activities and lax adherence to preventive measures such as mask-wearing in Harare's CBD and surrounding residential areas. He cautions that although society is adjusting to a "new normal," this should not be mistaken for the absence of danger, and he urges continued caution, reduced unnecessary movement, and stricter adherence to safety protocols to curb the spread of the virus.

5.2.2.11 Remain alert, citizens urged (5 July 2020)

Debra Matabvu, the author of this article, highlights the rising concern over the increasing COVID-19 cases in Zimbabwe and urges citizens to remain vigilant. Deputy Minister of Health and Child Care, Dr. John Mangwiro, emphasised the need for Zimbabwe to strengthen and refocus on the preventive measures initially adopted during the March lockdown to prevent a surge in local transmissions. On the day prior to the article, Zimbabwe recorded 73 new cases, bringing the total to 698 cases with eight deaths. Most new infections were among returnees from countries such as SA, Botswana, Mozambique, the US, Australia, and Zambia, with eight cases attributed to local transmission. The article also places Zimbabwe's situation in a regional context, comparing case numbers with neighbouring countries such as Zambia, SA, Mozambique, Namibia, Botswana, and Malawi, the latter having recently recorded a significant increase in cases after easing lockdown measures. Overall, the article

underscores the critical need for continued vigilance as the country navigates the challenges of increasing infections amid gradual reopening.

5.2.2.12 Covid-19's crippling blow on Zimbabwe (26 July 2020)

This article describes the severe impact of COVID-19 on Zimbabwe's economy, healthcare system, and society amid a surge in infections, especially in major cities like Harare and Bulawayo. Over recent weeks, many businesses, including major firms like Cimas Medical Aid, Econet, NMB Bank, and educational institutions, have had to close temporarily after their staff tested positive for the virus. These closures come amid rising operational costs linked to mandatory PCR testing and ongoing screening measures. Health officials report worrying infection rates among healthcare workers due to PPE shortages and complacency. At least 115 health workers in Bulawayo and several others in hospitals nationwide have tested positive. The article concludes with calls for increased public cooperation and a cultural shift toward embracing the "new normal," emphasising that COVID-19 is a persistent threat that requires sustained vigilance.

5.2.2.13 Africa's Covid-19 peak yet to come (9 August 2020)

As highlighted in this article, on this specific date, Africa had surpassed one million confirmed COVID-19 cases, with over 22,000 deaths and more than 690,000 recoveries. The continent reported its first case in Egypt on February 14, 2020, and since then, the virus has spread to all 54 countries. Despite this milestone, health experts warn that the peak of the pandemic in Africa has not yet been reached, especially as many countries have begun relaxing lockdown measures, resulting in a surge in new infections. South Africa remains the worst affected, accounting for more than half of the continent's cases, followed by Egypt, Nigeria, Ghana, Algeria, Morocco, and Kenya. However, the reported numbers likely underestimate the true scale of infections due to limited testing capacity and poor access to reliable data. Experts emphasise that the low testing rates obscure the actual spread of the virus, making it difficult for countries to fully understand its impact and plan accordingly. Nonetheless, stigma and discrimination against COVID-19 patients and healthcare workers hinder efforts to contain the virus, as some individuals avoid treatment due to fear of hostility, while healthcare workers face discrimination. The article also underscores the fragility of many African healthcare systems, which are at risk of

collapse due to shortages of personal protective equipment, insufficient pay, inadequate training, and a lack of transparency from governments. The writer concludes by warning that despite the current reported numbers, the continent must prepare for an expected surge in cases and urgently invest in healthcare capacity, data transparency, and public health measures to manage the ongoing threat.

5.2.2.14 Perceived Covid-19 remedies fly off shelves (16 August 2020)

It is reported in this article that as cases and deaths surged in Zimbabwe, public panic led to widespread demand for unverified treatments and home remedies. From August 9 to 13, (2020), a total of 26 deaths were recorded, heightening anxiety. Many people started purchasing vapour rubs, eucalyptus oil, and unproven drugs like hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine, despite warnings from health authorities and the WHO that no cure for COVID-19 had yet been found. Social media contributed to misinformation, fuelling demand for herbal remedies like *zumbani* (a traditional medicinal herb widely used in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa. It is commonly known in English as lemon bush) and imported traditional Chinese oils. Pharmacies and black-market sellers experienced booming sales, while prices of banned or unregulated medicines skyrocketed. Reports also emerged of counterfeit drugs entering the market. The article highlights the dangers of panic-driven drug use, misinformation, and the exploitation of public fear amid a health crisis.

5.2.2.15 Being Covid-19, HIV+ not a death sentence (23 August 2020)

The personal story of *Lwazi* (not her real name), a Zimbabwean woman living with HIV who also contracted COVID-19, is shared in this article. Initially fearing for her life due to her compromised immune system, Lwazi was anxious because of limited information on how COVID-19 affects people with HIV. Despite her fears, she recovered after self-isolating, continuing her antiretroviral therapy (ART), taking recommended medication, and using immune-boosting home remedies like garlic, ginger, and lemon. Lwazi expressed disappointment with the public health response, as she never received follow-up from the Ministry of Health or the city's COVID-19 response team after testing positive. Her case highlights some gaps in Zimbabwe's COVID-19 contact tracing and support systems. The article also highlights challenges such as stigma, mental health issues, and misinformation, which worsen the burden for people with coexisting conditions. The WHO encourages sharing recovery stories

like Lwazi's to fight stigma and promote hope. Ultimately, the article delivers a message of resilience and urges people living with HIV to maintain treatment adherence, practice COVID-19 prevention, and not lose hope.

5.2.2.16 Coronavirus smell loss 'different from cold and flu (30 August 2020)

This article discusses how loss of smell and taste caused by COVID-19 is significantly different from that experienced with a common cold or flu. European researchers, including Professor Carl Philpott from the University of East Anglia, found that COVID-19-related smell loss is usually sudden, severe, and not accompanied by nasal congestion, unlike in other respiratory infections. COVID-19 patients also experience a true loss of taste, being unable to distinguish between bitter and sweet, suggesting that the virus directly affects nerve cells linked to smell and taste. This sets coronavirus apart from other viral infections and could make smell and taste tests useful for early detection of COVID-19. The article concludes by stressing that while loss of smell and taste is a distinctive COVID-19 symptom, these senses usually return within weeks of recovery.

5.3 Representation of COVID-19 Infodemic Communication Disorders

This section critically analyses how COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders, namely misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and conspiracy theories are discursively constructed, framed, and ideologically embedded in *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail*. Rather than treating these as isolated informational inaccuracies, the analysis conceptualises them as products of representational practices shaped by power, framing, and discourse. Drawing on representation theory, the analysis examines how meaning about COVID-19 is constructed and normalised. Framing theory is used to identify how specific narratives are selected, emphasised, or excluded, while CDA interrogates how power, ideology, and authority shape the production and circulation of these narratives.

5.3.1 Representation of misinformation

The representation of misinformation in the sampled articles is not merely a reflection of false claims but a discursive construction shaped by power, ideology, and meaning-

making practices. Drawing on representation theory, the findings show that misinformation is actively produced and normalised through institutional and cultural narratives rather than simply transmitted. The findings indicate that misinformation is not merely transmitted but actively constructed through institutional authority, cultural narratives, and media practices. From a representation perspective, misinformation emerges as a contested site where different actors (state officials, media institutions, and citizens) compete to define “truth.”

For example, in “*Covid-19: Second-hand clothes ban sparks outrage*”, (*The Standard*, 10 May), the government’s claim that second-hand clothing could transmit COVID-19 is not just misinformation. It is a representational practice that constructs a risk narrative rooted in institutional state authority rather than scientific evidence. Representation theory suggests that meaning is produced through systems of signification; here, the association of “second-hand clothing” with “infection” symbolically constructs a public health threat. This representation legitimises policy intervention while masking the absence of empirical validation.

Therefore, from a representation perspective, meaning is not inherent in the claim but is produced through its association with institutional legitimacy. The state, as a dominant meaning-maker, encodes speculative health claims as credible knowledge, thereby shaping public understanding. This exemplifies how state level actions were framed using speculative reasoning. The article highlights the concerns raised by Ball and Maxmen (2020:371-375) who argued that when government communications lack scientific substantiation, they may inadvertently erode public trust and legitimise pseudoscientific health fears.

From a framing perspective, this narrative operates within a *precautionary health frame*, where the problem (virus transmission) is defined, causality is assigned (imported clothing), and a solution is proposed (ban). However, this frame is selective, excluding scientific counter-evidence, thereby illustrating how frames can prioritise political action over epistemic accuracy.

Through the lens of CDA, this example reveals how power operates in legitimising misinformation. The discourse reflects what identifies as the role of the elite in shaping pandemic narratives. The government’s position enables it to institutionalise speculative claims, demonstrating van Dijk’s argument that elites control access to

“truth” in public discourse. Thus, misinformation here is not simply incorrect information but an ideologically embedded discourse that reinforces state authority while marginalising scientific epistemologies. This finding aligns with Brennen et al. (2020), who found that government and political actors were responsible for a significant proportion of misleading content. Although the banning of second-hand clothes was presented as a precaution it is devoid of evidence, thus illustrating how policy-driven misinformation can become legitimised through official discourse (Ball & Maxmen, 2020:371-375).

Additionally, in “*Magufuli on inhaling steam to treat Covid-19*” (*The Standard*, 10 May), misinformation is constructed through political populism and cultural resonance. From a representation perspective, steam inhalation is framed not as an unverified remedy but as a culturally resonant and accessible solution, thereby aligning scientific uncertainty with familiar practices. Magufuli’s endorsement; which occurred within the context of political populism, reflects how political authority can amplify unscientific claims by embedding them into public discourse and behaviour. Framing theory further reveals that this narrative operates within a populist frame, which positions political leaders and traditional knowledge as more trustworthy than global scientific institutions. This reflects a deliberate reframing of expertise, where authority is relocated from scientific bodies to political figures. CDA deepens this analysis by showing how discursive power enables the circulation of misinformation. The president’s statements function as what van Dijk terms *elite discourse*, which carries disproportionate influence. The repetition of such claims across media platforms illustrates how misinformation is reproduced through hierarchical communication structures, rather than emerging organically.

Furthermore, Magufuli *claimed Tanzanians should pray instead*, encouraging prayer over medical advice also characterised misinformation. This article illustrates the power asymmetry in misinformation spreads: especially when leaders speak, their claims often carry more weight, particularly in health crisis communication contexts. The representation and framing of this article aligns with Islam et al. (2020) who observed that political figures are often central nodes in the spread of misinformation due to their amplified visibility and the public’s deference to their authority during

crises. In this light, Magufuli's case exemplifies how discursive power interacts with misinformation dynamics.

Social media emerged as a significant platform through which personal experiences and unverified cures were shared; often with emotional resonance. The statement: "Social media has been awash with videos of people steaming themselves using eucalyptus leaves" reflects the spread of misinformation on social media. Social media users are implied to be misinformed or reckless. While both newspapers acknowledge the role of social media in amplifying misinformation, *The Standard* adopts a more critical stance by explicitly problematising unverified claims, whereas *The Sunday Mail* tends to reproduce such narratives within broader socio-cultural discourse, thereby normalising them rather than consistently challenging them.

Misinformation is also visible in *Four family members beat Covid-19 (The Standard, 14 June)*. The article exemplifies how personal recovery stories can foster the illusion of effective home-based treatment without medical verification. The family members who recovered from COVID-19 said:

"We used lemon and Mazoe Orange Juice to fight the symptoms."

Such a statement promotes an unverified home remedy for COVID-19, possibly misleading readers into thinking it is a proven cure.

Similarly, *The Sunday Mail* covered a story headlined *Perceived Covid-19 remedies fly off shelves* (16 August). The term "perceived" in the headline indicates that the writer is sceptical about the remedies which are suggested to be a panacea for COVID-19. The story highlights the panic buying of eucalyptus oil, vapour rubs and hydroxychloroquine driven largely by humour and viral social media content. These mechanisms reveal the mechanisms by which personal experiences; often devoid of scientific validation, acquire undue authority in public discourse, particularly in times of crisis. One of the interviewee's commented:

"I learned through social media that hydroxychloroquine and Vicks [are] useful in treating Covid-19."

The above statement serves as a microcosm of the misinformation that was associated with COVID-19 infodemic. This finding aligns with Islam et al. (2020), who showed that social media is often where misinformation becomes "hyperlocal" and

emotionally contagious. When media institutions publish such claims without disclaimers they risk embedding anecdotal evidence into public discourse as fact.

In the report headlined *Covid-19 stigma a huge problem in Africa* (*The Standard*, 5 July) the analysis identifies misinformation in the form of false health beliefs. The report acts as a myth-busting source. According to the report there are numerous myths that Africans believe, such as drinking lemon and Vitamin C-packed products. It also highlights that Africans believe that they are immune to the virus. These are clear examples of unverified health claims and conspiracy-like beliefs.

The representation of misinformation in *The Standard* shows that the newspaper has been both an amplifier and corrector of misinformation. *Debunking Covid-19 myths* (*The Standard*, 19 July) refers to unverified or speculative information presented as fact in the form of a text which was shared by several people on different social media platforms. The article attempts to reconstruct meaning through corrective representation. From a framing perspective, the article introduces a counter-frame, redefining misinformation as false and reasserting scientific authority. However, CDA highlights a critical tension: by reproducing false claims in the process of debunking them, the media may inadvertently amplify their visibility, illustrating the paradox of corrective journalism within an infodemic.

There were several elements of misinformation in the social media text; however, the author focused on debunking four elements of the misinformation namely: (1) COVID-19 causes only “mild symptoms at most,” (2) wearing mask weaken the immune system, (3) exposure to 5G radiation leads to a weak immune system, and (4) flawed testing systems will trigger a positive COVID-19 infection result. The image outlines a three-phase conspiracy theory linked to the pandemic. This form of misinformation diminishes the perceived risk of COVID-19 thereby misleading the public. In this article, *The Standard* attempted to debunk the misinformation, however, these corrections were often reactive rather than proactive.

The article *Traditionalists flag local herbs in Covid-19 fight* (*The Sunday Mail*, 3 May) represents the adoption of local herbs as a panacea for curing COVID-19 ailments.

The article suggests that herbal herbs serve as cures; articulated in statements such as:

- (i) “We might have herbs powerful enough to stop the virus.”
- (ii) “Traditionalists believe the country needs to tap into indigenous knowledge systems by testing the efficacy of some local herbs.”

These statements reflect the intersection of indigenous knowledge systems and biomedical discourse, where cultural epistemologies are elevated without scientific counterbalance. The article suggests unproven treatments but framed within a public health solution context. The article also highlighted that: “Conservatives argue that there are some indigenous plants that can be used as respectable alternatives for conventional medicines.” The article highlights that misinformation can be embedded in cultural narratives and innuendos. The finding is aligned to the observations made by WHO (2020a), when they warned that misinformation embedded in cultural narratives often gained credibility through familiarity, making it particularly resistant to correction.

Furthermore, *Covid-19: Don't overrule local herbs* (*The Sunday Mail*, 10 May) reinforces the belief that Zimbabwe has some herbs that can cure COVID-19, stating: “We might actually have herbs that are powerful enough to stop this virus.” This statement suggests that indigenous herbs could be powerful enough to cure COVID-19. While these representations appeal to cultural heritage and epistemological legitimacy, their lack of scientific framing or public health scrutiny makes them susceptible to misinformation.

Being Covid-19, HIV+ not a death sentence, authored by Vivian Mugarisi (*The Sunday Mail*, 23 August) highlights the misinformation related to COVID-19 cure and treatment. The article highlights cultural/religious tension against non-scientific remedy promoted by peers. Some individuals abandoned pharmaceutical treatment in favour of steaming and herbal remedies guided by spiritual convictions. There are claims that: “Taking herbs, garlic, ginger and lemon all the [COVID-19] signs and symptoms have disappeared.”

Both *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail* coverage reflected the tension between traditional treatment and scientific medicine for curing COVID-19 ailments. These two

newspapers affirm cultural identity on one hand and fail to clarify the scientific limitations of traditional treatments. This duality underscores the need for a journalistic practice that honours indigenous knowledge without undermining scientific rigour as prescribed by WHO (2020b).

More importantly, the representation of COVID-19 misinformation in these two newspapers illustrates how infodemic communication disorders are not an isolated phenomenon but are shaped by intersecting social, political, cultural and media systems. Furthermore, the representation of misinformation in Zimbabwean print media reflects the complex interplay between culture, crisis and communication. While some of the newspaper reports responsibly attempted to expose and bust misinformation a couple of articles inadvertently gave credence or endorsed unverified claims through emotional appeal or cultural sensitivity. Overall, misinformation in these newspapers is best understood not as isolated falsehoods but as discursively constructed narratives shaped by authority, framing choices, and ideological positioning.

Overall, *The Standard* demonstrates a predominantly corrective framing of misinformation, albeit sometimes reactively, while *The Sunday Mail* reflects a more accommodative approach that blends public health communication with cultural and political narratives, thereby illustrating how institutional positioning shapes the representation of misinformation. Across the two newspapers, a clear divergence emerges in how misinformation is represented. *The Standard* tends to frame misinformation as a problem to be interrogated and corrected, often exposing its sources and consequences, whereas *The Sunday Mail* more frequently embeds misinformation within culturally resonant or state-aligned narratives, sometimes presenting speculative claims without sufficient scientific interrogation.

5.3.2 Representation of disinformation

The sub-theme representation of disinformation explores how *The Standard* newspaper represented false or politically motivated narratives surrounding COVID-19 during the pandemic. Unlike misinformation which may arise from ignorance or

misunderstanding, disinformation is characterised by intentional deception. It is often spread to achieve political, ideological or economic objectives (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017:1-107). By and large, disinformation in the analysed articles is characterised by intentional distortion, ideological positioning, and strategic framing, often linked to political actors. From a representation perspective, disinformation constructs alternative realities that serve specific political or ideological interests. The representation of disinformation in *The Standard* reveals a conscious framing strategy that attributes responsibility to political elites, drawing attention to the ways power, ideology and media interact in times of crisis. Characteristically, the textual analysis highlights politically motivated or deliberately false narratives. Focus is on the spread of falsehoods for political gain.

In “*Magufuli on inhaling steam to treat Covid-19*” (*The Standard*, 10 May) described President Magufuli as: “a known Covid-19 sceptic” who has “repeatedly questioned the efficacy of face masks, testing and vaccines.” This statement constructs a narrative of deliberate scepticism and undermining of public health scientific measures by a political figure. What President Magufuli did constitutes disinformation. The article highlights political denialism and religious populism as deliberate tools of disinformation. *The Standard* portrayed Magufuli as both sceptical and subversive. Representation theory suggests that this depiction positions the leader within a broader discourse of anti-expert populism, where scientific knowledge is delegitimised.

From a framing perspective, this narrative operates within a denial frame, which minimises the severity of the pandemic and reframes it as manageable through non-scientific means. This aligns with broader global patterns where political actors frame crises in ways that protect economic or political interests. Moreover, through CDA, this example reveals how disinformation functions as a discursive strategy of power. Political elites use language to reshape reality, influencing public perception and behaviour. The intentional nature of these claims distinguishes disinformation from misinformation, highlighting its role as an instrument of ideological control.

Similarly, *Covid-19: The importance of observing control measures* (*The Standard*, 12 July) portrays the disinformation perpetuated by political leaders. The Brazilian

President Jair Bolsonaro initially dismissed COVID-19 as “a small flu...” This statement reflects pandemic minimisation used by political leaders to preserve economic or political capital. The article highlighted President Jair Bolsonaro’s politically motivated narrative minimising the pandemic. The views presented in the article are linked to political framing of pandemic denial. Bolsonaro’s framing of the pandemic reflects what Entman (1993:51) describes as “problem definition through minimisation.”

By representing both Magufuli and Bolsonaro, *The Standard* highlights the transnational character of political disinformation. By exposing the disinformation perpetuated by political leaders, *The Standard* not only critiques individual leaders but also participates in global media accountability and engages in a form of counter-discourse by naming and shaming actors engaged in COVID-19 pandemic infodemic disinformation. By and large, *The Standard* positions itself as a corrective actor. However, CDA reveals an inherent tension: the act of reporting disinformation may also contribute to its circulation and normalisation, reflecting the complex role of media in the infodemic. Therefore, the findings highlight that disinformation is not simply false information but a strategically constructed discourse that operates through power, ideology, and framing practices.

In comparative terms, *The Standard* explicitly foregrounds disinformation as a politically driven phenomenon, critically exposing how state actors and political elites manipulate narratives, whereas *The Sunday Mail* largely avoids direct confrontation with political disinformation, instead privileging official voices and state-sanctioned perspectives. This contrast highlights a broader ideological divergence: *The Standard* positions itself as a watchdog that challenges disinformation and interrogates power, while *The Sunday Mail* operates within a framework that is more aligned with state legitimacy, thereby limiting its engagement with politically sensitive forms of disinformation.

The article *Debunking Covid-19 myths* (*The Standard*, 19 July) reproduces the claim that: “Flawed testing system picks up any genetic material in the body triggers a positive result.” This statement implies that PCR tests yield unreliable results. While such claims appear to adopt scientific language, they fundamentally distort the purpose and accuracy of PCR tests. Disinformation about PCR testing accuracy

falsely undermines trusted testing methods. This form of disinformation is dangerous because it erodes public trust in testing, which is critical for effective pandemic management. *The Standard's* inclusion of this claim, even while trying to debunk it, reflects the complex role of the media in amplifying or mitigating disinformation.

In view of the above discussion, it is highlighted that the representation of disinformation in *The Standard* reveals a conscious effort to expose how political elites and strategic narratives distort public understanding of COVID-19 infodemic. Effort has been made to actively expose and critique politically motivated falsehoods related to COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders. Through a careful blend of factual correction, political critique and strategic framing, *The Standard* positions itself as a counterforce to disinformation. This stance aligns with broader democratic roles of journalism and the media in crisis contexts. The newspaper adopts a corrective framing stance aiming to delegitimise false claims by highlighting the political motives or logical flaws. However, the presence of such claims also demonstrates how complex and persistent disinformation can be, particularly when embedded in emotive, ideological or populist rhetoric. The presence of disinformation narratives within the newspaper also illustrates the dilemma of visibility. This means that by reporting on disinformation, media may inadvertently amplify it (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017:20-22). Therefore, *The Standard's* representation of disinformation serves both as a lens into the politics of pandemic denial and as a reflection of the media's complex role in the COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders landscape.

5.3.3 Representation of malinformation

The representation of malinformation in *The Sunday Mail* reveals how true - but selectively framed and potentially harmful information - was communicated during the pandemic. Drawing from Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017:20) typology of information disorders, malinformation stands apart from misinformation and disinformation because it is based on factual content that is presented in a way that cause harm, often through exaggeration, distortion, or selective emphasis. In the context of COVID-19 infodemic reporting, this theme shows how alarmist headlines, excessive emphasis on worst-case-scenarios and vivid portrayals of illicit health behaviours may have intensified fear, eroded trust or contributed to moral panic. A comparative reading reveals that malinformation manifests differently across the two newspapers. *The*

Sunday Mail predominantly employs alarmist and state-centred narratives that emphasise crisis and urgency, while *The Standard* presents malinformation through socio-economic critique and emotionally charged reporting on lived experiences.

Malinformation emerges as a particularly complex form of infodemic communication disorder, involving truthful information that is selectively framed to produce fear, anxiety, or social tension. From a representation perspective, malinformation constructs reality in ways that emphasise crisis, danger, and vulnerability. For example, Africa's *Covid-19 peak yet to come* (*The Sunday Mail*, 9 August) is a striking example of malinformation. The reporter presents accurate statistics but constructs a catastrophic narrative of inevitability and impending crisis. The article highlighted that "More than a million people across Africa have now been confirmed to have had the new coronavirus..." To a large extent, the article presents factual but alarming data that may provoke fear due to the scale of infections. In addition, the article indicated that "More than 22,000 people have so far died across Africa..." The presentation of death tolls is factually correct; however, it is framed in a stark, foreboding fear-inducing framing, highlighting a looming crisis. Representation theory suggests that meaning is shaped not only by what is said but by how it is contextualised; here, the absence of recovery data or mitigating factors produces a one-dimensional representation of risk.

The headline suggests the peak is "yet to come," reinforcing a fear-based framing which may have incited public anxiety rather than constructive preparedness. While the figures are accurate, their presentation, particularly the ominous headline, employs what Iyengar (1994) termed episodic framing. Through episodic framing, isolated and dramatic elements are emphasised rather than contextualised within the broader health strategies. By projecting a looming crisis and neglecting to include recovery rates, intervention efforts or comparisons with other global regions, the article implicitly reinforces a sense of inevitable catastrophe. This is consistent with the negativity bias in media reporting, where bad news is more likely to be selected and remembered by audiences. While both newspapers utilise emotionally loaded content, *The Sunday Mail* tends to amplify fear through large-scale, macro-level narratives (e.g., continental statistics and national crises), whereas *The Standard* localises malinformation through human-interest stories and structural critiques, thereby producing different affective responses among audiences.

From a framing perspective, this article employs a fear or crisis frame, emphasising death tolls and future uncertainty while excluding stabilising or hopeful narratives. This selective emphasis aligns with the media's tendency toward negativity bias, where alarming information is prioritised. Through CDA, this framing reflects how discourse can amplify emotional responses and shape public behaviour. While the information is factually accurate, its presentation may contribute to anxiety, illustrating how power operates not only through falsehoods but through strategic emphasis of truth.

Similarly, *Perceived Covid-19 remedies fly off shelves* (*The Sunday Mail*, 16 August) provides a clear example of malinformation representation. The reporter constructs a narrative of panic and disorder. According to the article: "Chloroquine, which had previously been banned has since resurfaced on the black market." It provides a factual report of illegal drug circulation affecting public health. The writer stated that "Chloroquine sales and use are largely illegal used for abortions or suicide." While these claims are not contested as false, their vivid and emotional language which describes "suicide", "illegal use" and "counterfeit medicine" reflects what Entman (1993) terms "problem definition and emotional loading." Reporting harmful uses of drug raises public health concerns and fear. The reporter does not offer mitigating information such as health advisories, official policy responses or public education campaigns. As a result, the factual account risk becoming sensationalised, fulfilling the hallmarks of malinformation by increasing perceived threat without constructive intervention (Tandoc *et al.*, 2018:137-153). The absence of counterbalances in the article indicates a potential failure to meet the demands of responsible pandemic journalism. From a representation perspective, the article portrays society as overwhelmed and irrational, reinforcing a discourse of crisis. Framing theory reveals a sensationalist frame, emphasising illegal drug use and public fear, while CDA highlights how such narratives may reinforce distrust and social instability.

The representation of malinformation in *The Sunday Mail* reveals a critical pattern in COVID-19 infodemic reporting. There was a tendency to communicate accurate but emotionally charged information in ways that may incite fear, anxiety or social alarm. From alarmist headlines and uncontextualised statistics to sensationalised accounts of illicit drug markets, the reporting demonstrates the power of media framing in shaping public perception of COVID-19 risk and crisis.

Malinformation is also evident in *Covid-19: Second-hand clothes ban sparks outrage* (*The Standard*, 10 May). While the government's ban on second-hand clothes is factually accurate, the way it is communicated and perceived contributes to harmful narratives. Vendors and members of the informal sector who are often among Zimbabwe's most economically vulnerable view the ban as disproportionately targeting them rather than serving as a meaningful public health policy. This reflects malinformation, where truthful information is either presented or interpreted in a manner that causes unnecessary harm, stigma, or social tension. The article documents this dynamic by highlighting the frustration and economic despair experienced by the traders. It portrays the ban as an act that exacerbates existing inequalities, especially given that informal trade is a primary livelihood source for many Zimbabweans. The lack of clear government communication, coupled with the absence of empirical justification for the policy's efficacy in curbing COVID-19 transmission, further intensifies public distrust. Importantly, the article does exhibit characteristics of malinformation. The statements attributed to President Magufuli are real; however, they are framed in a context that could cause harm if the public accepts them without scrutiny. The newspaper mitigates this by including fact-checking measures and referencing the WHO and other scientific authorities, who dispute the efficacy of steam inhalation as a treatment or preventive measure for COVID-19. This effort by the newspaper to contrast political statements with scientifically grounded responses demonstrates a conscious attempt to correct harmful narratives.

In analysing *Covid-19 and shortness of breath* (*The Standard*, 7 June) by Dr. Johannes Marisa, published under the Health Talk column, a mild presence of malinformation is detectable. Malinformation involves the use of truthful information in ways that cause harm, fear, or distress when taken out of context or without appropriate framing. While the article accurately describes the symptoms of COVID-19, including respiratory distress, acute respiratory failure, and multi-organ dysfunction, these descriptions are highly clinical and intense. Although medically accurate, the detailed enumeration of severe outcomes may provoke anxiety or fear among readers, particularly in the absence of accompanying reassurance or a balanced discussion about recovery rates or access to healthcare. This unbuffered presentation of grim outcomes, while not intentionally harmful, potentially contributes

to fear-based reactions among the general public during a time of heightened uncertainty and vulnerability.

With regard to *Four family members beat Covid-19*, (*The Standard*, 14 June), malinformation is evident through the article's strong emotional content. The narrative conveys real experiences of stigma, particularly the social isolation and questioning faced by the children in the family, who were "asked weird questions" and treated as if "doing something wrong." These emotional appeals evoke sympathy but may also reinforce fear, guilt, and social division by highlighting community suspicion and rejection of COVID-19 patients. Such framing, while truthful, risks perpetuating stigma and heightening anxiety among both affected individuals and the broader public.

In *Covid-19: Zim records 73 new cases, one death* (*The Standard*, 5 July) malinformation is clearly present in the article's framing. While the statistics and real events presented; such as the surge in COVID-19 infections and the number of deaths are factual, their presentation is likely to provoke heightened fear and anxiety among readers, especially vulnerable populations. The emphasis on rising numbers and the grim reality of fatalities serves to reinforce a narrative of crisis, which, though truthful, may inadvertently contribute to public distress and emotional overload. This illustrates the challenging balance in health reporting between informing the public and avoiding fear-inducing overemphasis.

Malinformation is also evident in *Covid-19: Panic as cases soar at SA border* (*The Standard*, 5 July) as represented in the article's tone and presentation. While the data and events reported are truthful, the language employed such as references to "panic," "fears of a serious outbreak," and "decontamination efforts" is alarmist and fear-inducing. This rhetoric likely intensifies public anxiety and contributes to an atmosphere of tension and hysteria, particularly among readers in border regions. The sensationalism embedded in these descriptions risks amplifying xenophobic and stigmatizing attitudes towards Zimbabwean migrants and cross-border communities.

Covid-19 stigma a huge problem in Africa (*The Standard*, 5 July) presents malinformation which is also strongly evidenced through real-life stories of discrimination and social rejection faced by individuals who tested positive for COVID-

19. The article reports instances where neighbours demand that infected persons relocate due to fear of contagion, thus illustrating how accurate information about infection status can be framed or interpreted in ways that deepen social divisions, fear, and stigma. This emotional and social impact of malinformation reveals the complex dynamics of the infodemic beyond mere factual inaccuracies, emphasising the consequences of how information is perceived and acted upon within communities.

Covid-19: The importance of observing control measures (The Standard, 12 July) contains elements that can be interpreted as malinformation, particularly through the framing of real data and warnings in a manner that could instil fear or anxiety among readers. Phrases such as “grave mistake,” “fatal,” and “catastrophic” emphasise the severity of the pandemic and the consequences of neglecting control measures. For instance, the article references infection rates among medical staff, highlighting 600 health workers affected, and compares the local situation with global hotspots such as Brazil and India. While factually accurate, this alarming language may contribute to heightened public concern, potentially bordering on fear-inducing malinformation if not balanced with reassuring or empowering messaging.

Debunking Covid-19 myths (The Standard, 19 July) avoids any malinformation characteristics, as it refrains from fearmongering or emotionally charged framing. The tone throughout is neutral and scientifically reasoned, focusing on education rather than sensationalism or alarm. This measured approach helps ensure that the audience receives balanced information that encourages rational understanding and compliance with health guidelines.

However, in *Covid-19: Time to stand up against the virus, (The Standard, 19 July)* despite its factual basis, the article frames the information in a manner that emphasises danger and imminent risk, with phrases like “dying undetected” and predictions of “many deaths in the near future.” This framing reflects elements of malinformation, where truthful data is used in a way that may heighten public anxiety and fear, potentially exacerbating psychological distress among readers. In summary, this article presents a nuanced example of infodemic communication disorders through its use of malinformation. While grounded in factual reporting and responsible

health advice, its fear-inducing framing and subtle scapegoating contribute to a heightened sense of public anxiety and social tension.

My experience battling Covid-19 (*The Standard*, 23 August) distinctly exhibits characteristics of malinformation, as it represents real information about systemic inefficiencies within the public healthcare sector, framed in a manner that may increase public fear and mistrust. Specifically, the narrative reveals delays in testing, confusion over patient management protocols, and apparent shortages of healthcare resources. The author details encounters with named medical institutions such as Wilkins and Beatrice hospitals, highlighting prolonged waits for test results and inadequate patient care. These elements are likely to evoke anxiety and concern among readers, as the portrayal of healthcare delays and resource scarcity underscores vulnerabilities in the public health response to the pandemic.

Crowded cities struggle to contain Covid-19 (*The Standard*, 30 August) provides an insightful examination of the socio-economic and infrastructural challenges that exacerbated the spread and impact of COVID-19 within Zimbabwean urban centres, particularly Harare and Bulawayo. However, the article does exhibit malinformation, as it portrays a stark and arguably distressing reality of urban living conditions that could evoke fear, anxiety, and a sense of helplessness among readers. For example, descriptions such as “families in the cities cannot protect themselves from the disease” underscore the hopelessness faced by residents due to systemic infrastructural deficiencies. These facts, while accurate and critical to public understanding, may inadvertently contribute to public anxiety by highlighting vulnerabilities without offering reassuring perspectives or solutions. In summary, this article contributes to the understanding of the COVID-19 infodemic predominantly through malinformation, by presenting real but potentially anxiety-inducing descriptions of urban hardships during the pandemic. It avoids misinformation and disinformation, focusing instead on factual socio-economic realities.

In addition, malinformation is strongly present in *Covid-19 crisis an opportunity to loot* (*The Standard*, 7 June). The article leverages accurate socio-political facts, including budget allocations and poverty statistics, but frames these within a harshly critical and politically charged narrative that accuses government officials of looting and neglecting

their duties. This framing serves to highlight real governance failures but also intensifies political tensions and public distrust. In summary, this article exemplifies infodemic communication disorders primarily through disinformation and malinformation. While it avoids false medical information, it weaponised truthful political and economic facts within a strongly partisan framework that questions the legitimacy and integrity of government pandemic responses.

Across the dataset, malinformation demonstrates that truth itself can become a vehicle of harm when framed within alarmist or decontextualised narratives, highlighting the importance of responsible representation. Although both newspapers contribute to malinformation through selective framing, *The Standard* leans towards critical-explanatory narratives, while *The Sunday Mail* adopts a more alarmist and state-reinforcing framing, reflecting differing ideological orientations and journalistic priorities.

5.3.4 Representation of conspiracy theories

The sub-theme on the representation of conspiracy theories highlights how *The Standard* represented the COVID-19-related conspiratorial discourse. The representation of conspiracy theories reflects a discursive struggle between misinformation and corrective journalism. From a representation perspective, conspiracy theories construct alternative realities that challenge institutional authority and scientific consensus.

A notable distinction between the two newspapers lies in their treatment of conspiracy theories. *The Standard* actively engages with and debunks conspiratorial claims through corrective framing, whereas *The Sunday Mail* engages less directly with conspiracy discourse, often addressing it implicitly or subsuming it within broader narratives of public behaviour and belief.

The analysis demonstrates that *The Standard* adopted a largely corrective framing approach, especially in the article headlined *Debunking Covid-19 Myths* (19 July). The article made reference to the 5G conspiracy theory and deliberate falsehood. The 5G conspiracy theory falsely linked the rollout of 5G mobile technology to suppressed immune systems and COVID-19 vulnerability. *The Standard* directly refutes the 5G

theory, stating that: "The image claims that 5G radiation will further attack the immune system." This statement, though used with the intention of debunking, exemplifies repetition of a false claim even in refutation can reinforce its salience.

Framing theory provides a lens for analysing how *The Standard* constructs its rebuttals. The headline, *Debunking Covid-19 Myths* (19 July) operates as metacommunicative signals that orient the reader towards skepticism, discouraging uncritical acceptance of viral claims. The article employs a debunking frame, guiding readers toward scepticism and critical evaluation. However, framing theory also suggests that repetition increases salience, meaning that even corrective coverage may inadvertently reinforce the visibility of conspiracy narratives.

The efforts also reflect the pervasive presence of conspiratorial thinking in pandemic discourse even within mainstream journalism. Thus, while *The Standard* does not endorse these theories, their inclusion in reporting reflects a broader challenge – how to report on harmful ideas without contributing to their spread. The analysis above shows that the representation of conspiracy theories in *The Standard* demonstrates a clear journalistic commitment to countering harmful narratives particularly those linking COVID-19 to 5G technology and elite manipulation. Through corrective framing and evidence-based rebuttal, the newspaper seeks to neutralise disinformation.

Finally, CDA reveals a fundamental tension in the role of the media, demonstrating that it operates simultaneously as a site of resistance and reproduction. While newspapers seek to dismantle conspiracy theories through corrective and debunking strategies, they also contribute to their circulation by reproducing and recontextualising such narratives within news discourse. This underscores the complex and often contradictory dynamics of communication within an infodemic context.

Across all sub-themes, the analysis demonstrates that COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders are not merely informational anomalies, but are discursively produced phenomena embedded within broader systems of representation, framing, and power. From a representation theory perspective, meanings of COVID-19 are actively constructed through the interaction of institutional authority, cultural epistemologies, and media practices, rather than passively reflecting an objective

reality. Framing theory further elucidates how processes of selection, emphasis, and exclusion structure public understanding by shaping perceptions of risk, responsibility, and appropriate responses to the pandemic. In turn, CDA exposes the role of power and ideology in determining which narratives are legitimised, amplified, or marginalised within media discourse.

Collectively, these findings indicate that Zimbabwean mainstream print media do not function as neutral conveyors of information but as active agents in the production, amplification, and contestation of infodemic narratives. In doing so, they play a significant role in shaping public understanding and behavioural responses to the pandemic. Within this discursive landscape, *The Standard* adopts a more interventionist and explicitly corrective stance in addressing conspiracy theories, whereas *The Sunday Mail* engages with such narratives in a more indirect manner, potentially limiting its effectiveness in explicitly challenging and dismantling them.

5.4 Elements of the COVID-19 Infodemic Identified in Selected Newspaper Articles

Across both newspapers, the core elements of the infodemic (misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation) are evident; however, their articulation differs significantly. *The Standard* tends to identify and critically engage these elements as problematic disruptions to public health communication, whereas *The Sunday Mail* often integrates them within broader socio-political and cultural narratives, sometimes without explicit critique. The COVID-19 infodemic revealed complex communication disorders characterised by MDM that significantly undermined public health responses. Key elements include:

Misinformation: False information shared without malicious intent (Baines & Elliot, 2020:20-26).

Disinformation: Deliberately created false information with malicious purposes (Clemente-Suárez & Fernández, 2022).

Malinformation: Reconfigurations of truth that can harm populations (Baines & Elliot, 2020:20-26).

The WHO (2020a) found that these information disorders could: harm physical and mental health; increase social stigmatisation; threaten public health measures; amplify hate speech; and risk increasing social conflict.

5.4.1 Presentation and discussion of the misinformation elements evident in The Sunday Mail and The Standard newspaper articles

Traditionalists flag local herbs in Covid-19 fight ((*The Sunday Mail*, 3 May) is emblematic of the complex and ambiguous communication that typified the infodemic. The article subtly conveys elements of misinformation and malinformation, blurring the line between hopeful speculation and scientifically validated public health guidance. The text presents a discursive interplay between indigenous knowledge systems and biomedical science, and in doing so, contributes to the communication disorder surrounding COVID-19 that Research Objective 2 aimed to explore.

The letter to the editor titled *Covid-19: Don't overrule local herbs* (*The Sunday Mail*, 10 May) reflects the participatory nature of the infodemic by amplifying public sentiment rooted in cultural identity and scepticism of global scientific narratives. This citizen-authored text contributes to the broader landscape of pandemic communication disorder by disseminating both misinformation and malinformation, despite its apparent intention to advocate for the recognition of traditional knowledge systems.

At the core of the letter is the promotion of unverified traditional remedies as potential solutions to COVID-19. The author argues that local herbs “might be powerful enough to stop this virus,” despite the absence of clinical evidence to support such claims. This statement typifies misinformation, as it introduces scientifically unsupported health information into public discourse. Although the writer does not claim certainty, the speculative phrasing (framed within a confident tone) can mislead the general public into placing faith in unproven remedies, potentially undermining the urgency to seek evidence-based treatment or adhere to public health measures. This misinformation is particularly potent given the context of widespread fear and medical uncertainty at the height of the pandemic.

The letter further exhibits malinformation, as it blends factual references with speculative conclusions that may distort understanding. For example, the author invokes real-world developments such as Madagascar's promotion of its herbal tonic and clinical trials of Remdesivir, using these as a foundation to justify belief in Zimbabwean traditional medicine. While these references are accurate, their framing serves to validate a larger, unproven claim: that local herbs are equivalently effective. This combination of truth and speculation rooted in culturally resonant narratives creates a persuasive but scientifically misleading argument, thereby aligning with the malinformation typology of the infodemic.

In conclusion, the letter *Covid-19: Don't overrule local herbs* (*The Sunday Mail*, 10 May) represents a grassroots contribution to the infodemic, demonstrating how misinformation and malinformation can emerge organically within media platforms. By advocating for local herbal remedies without empirical support and framing these arguments within ideological narratives, the letter contributes to a discursive environment where cultural identity is used to legitimise speculative health claims. Its intertextual structure, emotional tone, and political undertones all reflect the communicative complexities of the pandemic era, where facts, beliefs, and ideology frequently intersect often to the detriment of public health clarity. This analysis reinforces the need for responsible editorial moderation of citizen contributions, especially during public health emergencies where the stakes of communication are high.

Covid-19 is not over yet: President (*The Sunday Mail*, 17 May) primarily reflects a deliberate effort to counteract misinformation. The article provides scientifically accurate public health information, reinforcing that the pandemic is ongoing and that continued vigilance is necessary. The president's message corrects premature public assumptions that the virus has been defeated. This is a classic example of misinformation being addressed through fact-based communication. Though the term "infodemic" is not explicitly mentioned, the content targets common infodemic themes, such as public misunderstanding and resistance to guidelines, by clarifying the importance of surveillance, community mobilisation, multilingual messaging, and sectoral regulation. From a CDA perspective, there is an observable political framing, as the address aligns with state-centric crisis communication narratives, commending

government efforts in managing the pandemic. However, this ideological positioning is not excessive or propagandistic, and the article maintains a public health focus. Consequently, rather than contributing to the infodemic, this article functions as a corrective communication tool aligned with WHO guidelines on pandemic messaging by addressing misinformation and promoting rational, data-driven public health compliance.

In contrast, *Not all gloom and doom post Covid-19* (*The Sunday Mail*, 24 May) contributes to the mitigation of the infodemic by resisting panic-driven and alarmist discourse. It exemplifies this by addressing exaggerated pessimism and promoting optimism rooted in economic evidence. It does not perpetuate misinformation or malinformation; rather, it reconstructs the public narrative through economic data from ZimStat and reference to the government's \$18 billion stimulus plan.

Moreover, *Turn Covid-19 into opportunity* (*The Sunday Mail*, 31 May) largely avoids contributing to the COVID-19 infodemic. Instead, the article offers a constructive narrative that focuses on regional industrialisation and economic resilience in response to the pandemic. Nonetheless, a critical analysis informed by thematic and discourse approaches reveals subtle dynamics that may intersect with the broader contours of infodemic communication disorder, namely MDM, even when these elements are not overtly present. No explicit misinformation (false claims presented as truth) or disinformation (intentional falsehoods) is present in the article. While the article does not promote or generate infodemic content in the traditional sense, its selective discursive framing and thematic focus may contribute to indirect elements of communication disorder, particularly malinformation by omission or recontextualisation.

Furthermore, *Wash face masks before dumping them* (*The Sunday Mail*, 14 June) provides an interesting case for examining how infodemic-related communication disorders may be present not necessarily in overt falsehoods, but in the nuances of public health messaging and the framing of risk. However, through TA and CDA, it becomes evident that certain communication disorders associated with the COVID-19 infodemic subtly emerge particularly in the form of misinformation and malinformation. The article implies that washing a used face mask before throwing it away reduces the

risk of infection. This advice is scientifically ambiguous and potentially misleading. The idea that washing a mask before disposal would neutralise SARS-CoV-2 on the surface might not align with actual virological guidelines regarding biohazard waste. There is no cited scientific evidence supporting this specific practice as an effective or necessary step in mask disposal. Thus, this guidance introduces an element of misinformation which could create confusion or false assurance in the public mind regarding viral transmission and waste hygiene practices. The article exhibits subtle elements of misinformation through scientifically unsupported recommendations, and malinformation through omission of critical contextual health data. These communication disorders, although not overtly harmful, highlight the complexities of COVID-19 media reporting during a health crisis, where even well-intentioned advice may inadvertently contribute to the infodemic if not carefully aligned with validated scientific guidance.

In “*Reawakening the human spirit in Covid-19 fight*” (*The Sunday Mail*, 14 June) the communication strategies employed reflect subtle but significant elements of the COVID-19 infodemic as defined under the research objective RO2: *To identify and describe the elements of the COVID-19 infodemic the two newspapers identified.* Specifically, the article presents a discursive blend of religious nationalism and emotional appeal that introduces misinformation and malinformation elements into the public discourse on the pandemic. From a TA perspective, the article demonstrates misinformation through its elevation of prayer and religious unity as the central remedy against the pandemic. Although not overtly false, the portrayal of spiritual solutions as sufficient, in the absence of equal emphasis on scientific protocols such as vaccination, testing, and public health education, potentially misleads readers. This subtle form of misinformation risks diverting public trust and behaviour away from science-based solutions, especially in communities where religious authority holds strong influence.

Perceived Covid-19 remedies fly off shelves (*The Sunday Mail*, 16 August) exemplifies the multidimensional communication disorders associated with the COVID-19 infodemic. The most prominent element is misinformation, demonstrated through the public's belief in, and rush to purchase unproven remedies such as hydroxychloroquine, mentholated ointments, and herbal mixtures like *tsunami*,

zumbani, and *moringa*. These substances were widely assumed to be effective in treating or preventing COVID-19, despite a lack of scientific validation. Although the article makes efforts to correct these falsehoods by citing medical experts like Dr Mahomva and Dr Benson, the initial reporting of such widespread public belief illustrates how misinformation can still take root and spread. This aligns with the infodemics' defining feature: an overabundance of information, including false or misleading content, which complicates the public's ability to discern credible sources. While *The Standard* frequently exposes misinformation through expert voices and fact-checking mechanisms, *The Sunday Mail* may reproduce similar claims within culturally legitimised frameworks, thereby illustrating how the same infodemic elements are differently mediated across newspapers.

Coronavirus smell loss 'different from cold and flu' (The Sunday Mail, 30 August) demonstrates a markedly different approach to the communication of COVID-19 information compared to more problematic infodemic reporting. Instead of perpetuating confusion, panic, or stigma, this piece acts as a corrective mechanism that aims to clarify misconceptions and enhance public understanding of COVID-19 symptoms. In direct alignment with Research Objective 2 (RO2) the article engages with the theme of misinformation, though not by promoting it, but by actively dispelling it. The misinformation addressed involves the public's confusion between COVID-19 symptoms and those of the common cold or flu. Specifically, the article focuses on the symptom of smell and taste loss, which early in the pandemic had been widely misunderstood or misattributed. The narrative draws on scientific findings and expert commentary to clarify that COVID-19-induced anosmia (loss of smell) is clinically different in onset and mechanism from that associated with traditional respiratory infections like influenza. This distinction is critical because it supports early detection and appropriate health-seeking behaviours, thus preventing the spread of the virus and reducing unnecessary fear.

Covid-19: Second-hand clothes ban sparks outrage (The Standard, 10 May) offers rich insight into how elements of the infodemic; particularly disinformation and malinformation, manifested in local reporting. Although the article does not explicitly propagate misinformation in the traditional sense such as false cures or exaggerated symptoms, it contains characteristics of disinformation and malinformation. The article

subtly implies that the government's ban on second-hand clothing, ostensibly for health reasons, may have alternative motives. For example, traders and informal business owners interviewed suggest that the ban has little to do with genuine COVID-19 precautionary measures and instead serves political or economic purposes. One vendor explicitly accuses the government of "using COVID-19 to push personal agendas," which signals a perceived manipulation of public health directives for partisan gain. This type of framing introduces a strong element of political disinformation that fosters public suspicion and undermines the legitimacy of health interventions. The article exemplifies how a real and legitimate health policy can be received as both disinformation and malinformation in a communication environment characterised by low trust, inadequate transparency, and pre-existing political tensions.

In line with Research Objective 2 (RO2), which seeks to identify and describe elements of the COVID-19 infodemic as portrayed in newspaper articles, *Magufuli on inhaling steam to treat Covid-19 (The Standard, 10 May)* offers a critical example of misinformation and malinformation being circulated within political discourse. The article reports that Tanzanian President John Magufuli publicly endorsed the inhalation of steam as a method to prevent or treat COVID-19. This recommendation, lacking scientific backing, falls squarely within the domain of misinformation.

Covid-19 isolation centres a time bomb (The Standard, 7 June) presents a rich case for examining the elements of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorder. The article explicitly engages with all three core typologies of the infodemic (MDM) while also thematically embracing the concept of an "infodemic" in line with the WHO framing. Misinformation is clearly present in the article through its discussion of common myths that circulated widely during the pandemic. For example, the article references false claims such as "drinking hot water could prevent COVID-19." These statements, although incorrect, were widely believed and shared during the early stages of the pandemic, especially across social media platforms. The article, however, does not merely repeat these claims but actively debunks them, thus demonstrating the media's role in acknowledging and correcting public health misinformation.

The article titled *Covid-19 and shortness of breath* by Dr. Johannes Marisa (*The Standard*, 7 June) under the Health Talk column, is notably clinical in tone and does not engage in the spread of false or misleading information. It adheres strictly to medical discourse and focuses on educating the public about the clinical symptoms of COVID-19, specifically the symptom of shortness of breath, and the potential complications that might arise from severe cases. There are no mentions of unscientific remedies or myths surrounding COVID-19 prevention or treatment. Rather, the article is grounded in evidence-based medical guidance, emphasising the pathology of the virus and the importance of early detection and medical intervention. Similarly, no traces of disinformation are present in the article: it maintains a neutral and factual tone throughout, aimed at informing readers rather than influencing them politically.

Zim Covid-19 cases climb to 356 (*The Standard*, 14 June) presents accurate case numbers, referencing testing outcomes and statements from authoritative institutional sources such as the Ministry of Health and Child Care, the president, medical experts, and civil society organisations like the Community Working Group on Health. While the article does not disseminate outright misinformation it does exhibit subtle elements of malinformation. This is apparent in the framing of certain facts and social conditions in a way that could inadvertently provoke fear or anxiety among readers, particularly vulnerable populations. For example, the article highlights “poor living conditions,” restrictions preventing the reopening of informal businesses, and the possibility that pregnant women may avoid antenatal care due to pandemic-related concerns. While these statements are truthful, their presentation without contextual balance or reassurance can contribute to heightened public fear. Such framing exemplifies malinformation, where accurate information may have unintended negative psychological or social effects.

Four family members beat Covid-19 (*The Standard*, 14 June) reveals nuanced infodemic communication disorders, particularly around misinformation and malinformation, although it refrains from explicit political discourse or conspiracies. Regarding misinformation, the article subtly promotes potentially misleading ideas by implying that home remedies such as lemon juice and prayer contributed significantly to the family’s recovery from COVID-19. While these elements resonate culturally and

emotionally with many readers, their presentation risks fostering misconceptions about effective treatment modalities, potentially discouraging adherence to medically approved interventions. This form of implied misinformation does not stem from deliberate falsehood but from a lack of clear scientific framing. The article contributes to the COVID-19 infodemic landscape primarily through subtle misinformation via implied efficacy of unproven remedies.

Covid-19 stigma a huge problem in Africa (The Standard, 5 July) offers a nuanced portrayal of how misinformation and social stigma intertwine to exacerbate the challenges faced by affected individuals and communities during the pandemic. Additionally, the article clearly identifies misinformation as a key issue. It documents widespread myths such as the belief that Africans possess an innate immunity to the virus, and the misconception that drinking lemon juice or Vitamin C can cure COVID-19. These erroneous beliefs represent classic misinformation that undermines scientifically accurate public health guidance. The article highlights the persistent gaps in public understanding and the vulnerability of populations to unverified and potentially harmful health advice.

The differences between the two newspapers underscore how media institutional positioning shapes not only the identification of infodemic elements but also their discursive treatment, with *The Standard* leaning towards corrective journalism and *The Sunday Mail* reflecting a more state-aligned and culturally embedded communication approach.

5.4.2 Presentation and discussion of disinformation elements evident in the selected newspaper discourses

Notably, *Covid-19 ravages aviation industry (The Sunday Mail, 10 May)* does not contain misinformation or disinformation. There are no demonstrably false claims, fabricated statistics, or intentional attempts to deceive the public. Furthermore, the article refrains from scapegoating individuals or propagating politically motivated narratives, thereby avoiding both conspiracy theory frameworks and ideological manipulation. Nevertheless, the communication disorder lies in how the information is framed: the tone is unrelentingly bleak, its narrative devoid of balance, and its structure focused overwhelmingly on collapse without reference to ongoing responses or

historical precedents of aviation recovery after crises. This absence of counterbalancing information skews the reader's perception, leading to possible overestimation of the pandemic's long-term impact on the industry. The result is a text that, while not deceptive, contributes to the broader infodemic environment by heightening emotional responses and suppressing critical engagement with the subject matter.

Perceived Covid-19 remedies fly off shelves (The Sunday Mail, 16 August) also exhibits disinformation, albeit indirectly, through reference to the profiteering actions of individuals and businesses exploiting the public's desperation. The emergence of black-market sales for hydroxychloroquine and herbal concoctions suggests a deliberate manipulation of information for financial gain. The targeting of vulnerable communities with pseudo-scientific claims to boost sales points to disinformation (false content shared with the intent to deceive for profit). These activities are not merely incidental but are part of a broader, unethical commercial strategy that thrives in an environment of fear and uncertainty.

Being Covid-19, HIV+ not a death sentence (The Sunday Mail, 23 August) presents a nuanced engagement with the infodemic, particularly focusing on the intersection of HIV status and COVID-19 risk perception. The article reflects misinformation and malinformation, though it ultimately aims to correct misconceptions and promote informed health behaviour. Misinformation emerges primarily through the theme of vagueness and omission in health communication. The article highlights the experience of Lwazi, an HIV-positive individual, who expresses confusion and fear about his vulnerability to COVID-19 due to unclear information from both social media and formal health communication channels. The use of phrases such as "underlying conditions" without further clarification is shown to have contributed to widespread public uncertainty. This kind of misinformation typifies the Infodemic communication disorders' subtler, yet damaging, forms. Lwazi's confusion underscores how vague and uncontextualised risk communication can function as misinformation by omission, leaving people to speculate or rely on social media myths and hearsay.

Covid-19 isolation centres a time bomb (The Standard, 7 June) contains elements of disinformation. The article points to stories that accused specific governments of either

manufacturing or concealing the virus for strategic or political advantage. These narratives suggest intentional efforts to manipulate public perception, often rooted in geopolitical rivalries or domestic power struggles. The inclusion of such politically motivated fabrications supports the identification of disinformation as a key element of the article's coverage.

Covid-19 crisis an opportunity to loot (The Standard, 7 June) displays prominent disinformation elements, where the government's pandemic response is portrayed as a deliberate façade to mask systemic corruption and to justify repressive policies. The article's language suggests intentional manipulation, exemplified by statements such as: "The government is trying to use COVID-19 to evade the burden of fixing problems." This implies that the pandemic is exploited as a political tool rather than managed as a public health emergency.

Zim Covid-19 cases climb to 356 (The Standard, 14 June) reveals an implicit political dimension, evident through the mild presence of disinformation and political bias. Although the article does not overtly spread falsehoods or conspiracy theories, it quotes President Mnangagwa's defense of continued lockdown measures amidst criticism, which serves as a form of strategic state messaging. This messaging can be interpreted as an attempt to deflect or pre-empt deeper scrutiny of the government's handling of the crisis. The tone remains cautious and somewhat supportive of state policies, aligning the narrative with official perspectives while downplaying dissenting voices. Such alignment reflects an ideological bias consistent with government communication priorities during the pandemic, revealing the subtle ways political influence permeates health reporting.

Covid-19: Panic as cases soar at SA border (The Standard, 5 July) clearly exhibits disinformation characteristics through its strategic framing of Zimbabwean nationals crossing the border as primary culprits in spreading the virus. The strong emphasis on "smugglers," "illegal crossings," and "violations" implicitly attributes blame for the pandemic's potential escalation to this group. This is presented without proportional evidence or contextualising systemic failures in border management or public health infrastructure. This framing aligns with classic disinformation patterns, where attention is diverted from institutional shortcomings toward marginalised populations, thus politicising the health crisis.

Covid-19: Zim records 73 new cases, one death (The Standard, 5 July) highlights possible disinformation which manifests subtly through the article's treatment of the health workers' strike. The report notes that health workers demanded salaries in US dollars but offers limited context on the economic hardships facing these workers, such as inflation and inadequate government compensation. By doing so, the article implicitly shifts blame towards the striking health professionals, portraying them as uncooperative during a public health emergency. This framing risks obscuring deeper systemic failures on the part of the government, representing a form of discursive management of information that aligns with state interests, even if not overtly deceptive.

5.4.3 Presentations and discussion of malinformation elements evident in the selected newspaper discourses

Malinformation involves the use of accurate information in ways that mislead, manipulate, or provoke harm, particularly by reinforcing fear or control. *Covid-19: We are not off the hook yet (The Sunday Mail, 3 May)* reveals that media narratives in Zimbabwe during the early stages of the pandemic were not merely vehicles of public health information, but also sites where ideological, political, and psychological frameworks were embedded. These frameworks shaped public understanding in ways that may have amplified fear, entrenched obedience, and legitimised state control, while sidelining pluralistic or critical perspectives. Although the article refrains from disinformation or factual distortion, its framing aligns with the characteristics of malinformation, underscoring the need for media literacy and critical engagement in times of crisis. Additionally, this newspaper article adopts a tone and structure that, while ostensibly rooted in factual reporting, subtly embeds elements of fear amplification and emotional priming. The recurring emphasis on rising infection rates, with phrases such as "cases are increasing globally, and "Zimbabwe is contributing its share," positions Zimbabwe not merely as a victim of global trends but as an active participant in a worsening crisis. However, while the article avoids falsehoods or fabrications, the tone and structure of the article are layered with linguistic and rhetorical strategies that frame the pandemic in emotionally heightened and ideologically suggestive ways. These discursive choices are central to understanding how the article may contribute to the broader infodemic. This framing, though based

on factual epidemiological data, implicitly attaches a sense of culpability to the national narrative. It creates an impression that Zimbabwe is failing to contain its share of the burden, thus encouraging feelings of guilt or anxiety among readers.

Furthermore, the headline, *Covid-19: We are not off the hook yet* (*The Sunday Mail*, 3 May) is particularly indicative of the article's emotive framing. The metaphor evokes a sense of entrapment, ongoing danger, and unfinished crisis, effectively priming the reader to remain in a heightened state of vigilance and concern. Such phrasing, while it is well-intentioned in encouraging public compliance with safety measures, operates on a psychological level that may distort rational assessment of the risk. It evokes a sense of moral panic, especially when placed in conjunction with imperatives such as "It is not time to relax." These kinds of statements introduce a normative subtext: that deviation from expected behaviour is not merely risky but morally irresponsible. Rather than contextualising the figures with details on recovery rates or mitigation progress, the article selects only those elements that reinforce a narrative of escalating danger. More explicitly, scapegoating and blame emerge as dominant features of the article. The article targets specific groups particularly "those who roam aimlessly" during lockdown and asserts that "such people must be arrested without fail." This rhetoric constructs a binary between compliant citizens and irresponsible individuals, effectively blaming social indiscipline for the potential spread of the virus. The emphasis on law enforcement responses rather than public education strategies frames the pandemic as a moral and disciplinary issue rather than a complex public health challenge. Such scapegoating echoes broader patterns observed in crisis reporting, where marginalised or dissenting groups are blamed for systemic failures. The information conveyed in the article is factually accurate, yet its presentation through anxiety-laden metaphors, selective statistics, ideological alignment and scapegoating, skews public perception. Rather than promoting informed, balanced engagement with the pandemic, the discourse invites fear, submission, and conformity. This is emblematic of an infodemic environment, where even truthful media content may contribute to confusion, panic, and reduced critical awareness, especially when mediated through political or emotional filters.

Traditionalists flag local herbs in Covid-19 fight (*The Sunday Mail*, 3 May) exemplifies malinformation by including real information about Madagascar's use of herbal

remedies and WHO's cautious stance on traditional medicines. This information is framed within a broader narrative that implicitly questions the exclusivity of Western scientific approaches. By juxtaposing WHO guidelines with expressions of indigenous knowledge and references to Madagascar's Covid-Organics herbal tonic, the article lends implicit legitimacy to unproven remedies. In doing so, it subtly undermines confidence in biomedical science, while promoting a culturally resonant but scientifically unverified alternative. This discursive strategy capitalises on real facts yet frames them in a way that may contribute to public confusion or misplaced trust in unproven interventions, which is a defining feature of malinformation in the infodemic.

Covid-19 ravages aviation industry (The Sunday Mail, 10 May) presents a vivid illustration of how malinformation can shape public understanding during a crisis. While the article does not disseminate false information or propagate conspiracy theories, its tone, structure, and selective reporting contribute to an imbalanced and emotionally charged narrative that reflects a key feature of the infodemic. From the beginning, the article adopts a stark and dramatic tone, describing the aviation industry as "ravaged" by the pandemic. It proceeds to catalogue a series of high-profile global airline disruptions, including job losses, grounded fleets, and bankruptcy filings. These references, while factually accurate, are presented without adequate explanatory context or economic analysis. The repeated enumeration of affected entities and the scale of the disruption framed through phrases such as "tens of thousands of jobs lost" and "aircraft parked indefinitely" generates an overwhelming sense of crisis, uncertainty, and despair. This selective presentation of data aligns with the malinformation typology. The article draws on real-world facts and events but presents them in a way that potentially amplifies public anxiety. Crucially, it omits contextual elements such as industry-wide resilience strategies, emerging recovery plans, or localised Zimbabwean perspectives that could offer a more balanced understanding. The absence of commentary on mitigation efforts or adaptation measures leaves the reader with a one-sided portrayal of catastrophe. By neglecting to frame the facts within a more nuanced or solution-oriented narrative, the article risks fostering a sense of helplessness driven communication disorder. Through this lens, the article contributes to the emotional saturation and informational imbalance characteristic of infodemic media reporting.

In *Reawakening the human spirit in Covid-19 fight* (*The Sunday Mail*, 14 June) malinformation is also evident. The article disseminates factual information, including COVID-19 case statistics and references to global prayer events, yet it frames these within a highly emotional and nationalistic rhetoric. Statements such as “Zimbabwe could be the saviour” and calls for the nation to “raise their voices to the Maker” are examples of emotionally charged language used to inspire hope and solidarity. However, this kind of framing, while factually grounded, may distort the seriousness of the health crisis by recasting it in moral or spiritual terms, potentially reducing the urgency for evidence-based health interventions. Overall, while the article appears to promote national unity and hope during a time of crisis, it contributes to the infodemic by merging spiritual and political discourse in a way that underrepresents the importance of science-based health responses. The implicit misinformation and malinformation present in the emotionally and ideologically framed content risk undermining the clarity and credibility of public health messaging, thereby complicating efforts to effectively manage the pandemic.

The letter to the editor titled *Surge in Covid-19 cases worrying* (*The Sunday Mail*, 28 June) provides a compelling example of how citizen-generated content can reflect and contribute to the infodemic, particularly through malinformation. Thematically, the letter is grounded in real and observable events: non-compliance with mask-wearing, crowding in vendor areas, and breaches in quarantine protocols. These facts are accurate and verifiable, aligning with the typology of malinformation, where truthful information is framed or presented in a manner that increases public anxiety and emotional distress. The letter’s alarmist tone highlights fear about worsening infections and societal fatigue. This contributes to an atmosphere of heightened worry without offering balanced context or constructive solutions. This tone risks amplifying public fear and may exacerbate feelings of helplessness or distrust toward health directives and authorities. In summary, the text exemplifies how factually accurate citizen commentary, when presented with an alarmist and emotionally charged tone, can perpetuate malinformation, intensifying anxiety and complicating public health communication efforts.

Covid-19’s crippling blow on Zimbabwe (*The Sunday Mail*, 26 July) takes on a more emotive and dramatic tone, reflecting the severe impact of the pandemic on

Zimbabwe's economy and healthcare system. Although factually accurate and based on credible sources, the article introduces elements of malinformation. It uses powerful, sometimes exaggerated language to describe the social and economic fallout of the pandemic, contributing to heightened public anxiety. For example, phrases portraying Zimbabwe as being on the brink of collapse or invoking despair around informal sector livelihoods are accurate but framed in a way that may intensify public panic. Moreover, the article subtly engages in scapegoating by suggesting that the informal sector, non-compliant healthcare workers, and certain community behaviours are responsible for the surge in infections. This tendency to assign blame overlooks deeper systemic challenges such as limited state capacity, poverty, and lack of institutional preparedness.

The malinformation present in *Africa's Covid-19 peak yet to come* (*The Sunday Mail*, 9 August) is subtle but notable. It manifests through the article's framing and tone, which emphasises dire statistics and worst-case scenarios such as collapsing healthcare systems, untested millions, and escalating stigma and discrimination. While the facts are accurate and drawn from credible sources, their presentation in a cautionary, almost fatalistic tone may amplify public fear, anxiety, and a sense of helplessness particularly in communities already grappling with under-resourced health infrastructures and socio-economic instability. This tone may overwhelm the reader emotionally and create a heightened sense of doom rather than promoting rational engagement with the crisis. By focusing on "the peak yet to come" and the structural vulnerabilities facing Africa as a whole, the article mirrors common malinformation dynamics. Truthful content is presented in a way that may trigger alarm rather than informed action.

Perceived Covid-19 remedies fly off shelves (*The Sunday Mail*, 16 August) depicts malinformation in its discourse. While the reporting is based on factual information such as the rise in COVID-19 deaths, shortages of medicines, and the illegal sale of unregistered products, it is presented in a tone that could heighten public anxiety. The choice to emphasise spikes in mortality and the chaos of self-medication, though factually accurate, amplifies fear rather than calm. This truthful but emotionally charged reporting contributes to a climate of dread and helplessness, especially in

already strained healthcare environments. Thus, while malinformation does not involve falsity, its impact on public perception is equally profound.

Being Covid-19, HIV+ not a death sentence (*The Sunday Mail*, 23 August) presents malinformation in the form of stigma and psychological distress. Although the information around HIV and COVID-19 co-infection is not inherently false, the way it is discussed in society has led to social rejection and panic among HIV-positive individuals. The article surfaces these concerns by exploring how Lwazi feared being labelled as terminally ill if he contracted COVID-19, reflecting the emotional and social harm that can result from poorly framed, though factually correct, information. This use of true information to reinforce anxiety or reinforce harmful social judgments meets the criteria for malinformation, as defined by infodemiology frameworks.

5.4.4 Synthesis of the infodemic communication disorder elements evident in the selected newspaper discourses

The *Sunday Mail's* coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates a multifaceted engagement with the infodemic, exhibiting notable elements of MDM, as conceptualised in infodemiology. While not all reporting is deliberately misleading, several articles contain subtle yet consequential communication disorders that potentially distort public understanding, risk perceptions, and trust in health interventions.

Misinformation was frequently observed in the form of unverified health remedies, ambiguous advice, and speculative claims. Articles such as *Traditionalists flag local herbs in Covid-19 fight* (3 May) and *Covid-19: Don't overrule local herbs* (10 May) introduce speculative traditional remedies without empirical support, creating uncertainty and undermining evidence-based approaches. Similarly, advice like “wash face masks before dumping them” though seemingly practical, lacks scientific validation, risking public confusion. Another example is *Reawakening the human spirit in Covid-19 fight* (14 June) where religious and spiritual appeals, though culturally resonant, subtly promote non-scientific solutions to a public health emergency. These reflect the insidious nature of misinformation which inadequately contextualised and potentially misleading.

Disinformation appears less frequently in *The Sunday Mail* coverage and reportage but is identifiable in instances such as the article *Perceived Covid-19 remedies fly off shelves* (16 August) which details intentional profiteering from public fear. Black market sales of hydroxychloroquine and unverified herbal remedies reflect intentional exploitation of misinformation for commercial gain. While not directly propagated by the newspaper, reporting on such manipulative behaviours without critically framing them as harmful disinformation contributes to their normalisation. These dynamics show how economic opportunism in crises intersects with infodemic spread.

Malinformation is the most pervasive disorder in *The Sunday Mail's* COVID-19 reporting. Factually correct content is frequently presented in emotionally charged, ideologically framed, or alarmist ways. Articles such as *Covid-19 ravages aviation industry* (10 May), *Africa's Covid-19 peak yet to come* (9 August), and *Covid-19's crippling blow on Zimbabwe* (26 July) use exaggerated language and selective statistics to heighten fear and portray a sense of hopelessness.

In addition, scapegoating narratives appear in pieces like *Covid-19: We are not off the hook yet* (3 May) and *Surge in Covid-19 cases worrying* (28 June) where non-compliant citizens are blamed for the pandemic's spread, rather than acknowledging systemic issues. Even editorials and letters to the editor often citizen-generated reproduce malinformation through tone, omission, and ideological rhetoric, reflecting how grassroots discourse can mirror institutional communication failures. Articles promoting religious nationalism or traditional beliefs without balancing scientific input, such as *Reawakening the human spirit in Covid-19 fight* (14 June) reinforce cultural and emotional appeals at the expense of public health clarity.

The *Sunday Mail's* infodemic reporting exhibits a complex interplay of truth, belief, and ideology, with all three infodemic elements present in varying degrees. While some articles serve corrective functions and promote fact-based public health guidance, others especially those centred on traditional remedies, alarmist projections, and moralised narratives undermine public understanding through MDM. The synthesis highlights the need for balanced, transparent, and scientifically grounded journalism, particularly in health crises, where the societal cost of communicative missteps can be profound. Strengthening editorial oversight, improving media literacy, and integrating

multidisciplinary expertise in health reporting are essential strategies to mitigate the enduring impact of the COVID-19 infodemic.

The analysis of *The Standard's* coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic reveals a complex web of communication disorders namely MDM as classified by the WHO's infodemic framework. These disorders manifest through various themes, narratives, and discursive strategies, which collectively shape public understanding and emotional responses to the pandemic. Misinformation was present in several articles, often unintentionally shared through cultural or anecdotal beliefs. For instance, articles suggested the efficacy of steam inhalation: *Magufuli on inhaling steam* (10 May); and lemon juice or prayer: *Four family members beat Covid-19* (14 June), despite a lack of scientific validation. Even when these beliefs were culturally resonant, they risked misleading readers by implying alternative treatments. Disinformation was evident in articles that contained strategically framed political messaging or scapegoating. For example, *Covid-19 crisis an opportunity to loot* (7 June) suggested government exploitation of the pandemic for corrupt purposes, while *Covid-19: Panic as cases soar at SA border* (5 July) implicated Zimbabwean migrants in spreading the virus. This is an example of xenophobic framing. Even without explicit falsehoods, the selective quoting of government or opposition voices to shape perceptions constitutes subtle disinformation. Malinformation was the most pervasive disorder in *The Standard*. It was often found in factually accurate reporting framed in ways that provoked fear, stigma, or public anxiety. Articles like *Covid-19: Zim records 73 new cases, one death* (5 July), *Covid-19: Time to stand up against the virus*, (19 July) and *My experience battling Covid-19* (23 August) emphasised death, systemic failures, or socio-economic despair, which, though truthful, were emotionally distressing due to a lack of contextual reassurance.

Across *The Standard's* COVID-19 reportage, the thematic and critical discourse analysis reveals that some articles contain overlapping features of all three communication disorders. For example, *Covid-19 isolation centres a time bomb* (7 June) mixes misinformation (hot water myths), disinformation (accusations of virus concealment), and malinformation (emotive depictions of health system failure). While *The Standard* sometimes perpetuates misinformation or malinformation, other articles actively debunk myths and promote scientifically valid control measures, for example,

Debunking *Covid-19 myths* (19 July), and *The importance of observing control measures* (12 July) highlighting a dual role in both propagating and correcting infodemic content. Many articles reflect distrust in government, amplified through political framing, ideological bias, and lack of transparency. Disinformation and malinformation are frequently tied to critiques of governance, corruption, and economic hardship, indicating that pandemic coverage became a proxy for broader political discourse. The textual analysis largely revealed that *The Standard's* COVID-19 coverage provides a rich case study of how information disorders evolve in a socio-politically complex setting. While the newspaper did not promote blatant falsehoods, it frequently fell into subtle disinformation and emotionally charged malinformation, thus illustrating how even reputable media can become vectors of infodemic communication disorders. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced, ethical, and interdisciplinary approach to pandemic reporting in future crises.

5.5 Dominant Themes and Frames in the Selected Newspapers Articles

This section analyses the dominant themes and frames through which COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders are constructed in *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*. Moving beyond descriptive categorisation, the analysis conceptualises themes and frames as discursive mechanisms through which meaning, authority, and ideology are produced and contested. Drawing on representation theory, the section examines how recurring themes construct particular versions of reality about COVID-19 and its associated communication disorders. Framing theory is used to analyse how these realities are organised, emphasised, and made salient through specific interpretive frames. CDA interrogates how these thematic and framing choices are embedded within power relations, institutional interests, and ideological struggles, particularly within Zimbabwe's polarised media environment identified in Chapter Two.

5.5.1 Public health narratives

Public health narratives emerged as a dominant theme across various articles published in *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail* between 1 May and 31 August 2020 during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe. These narratives were primarily framed around public awareness, health education, behavioural recommendations, infrastructure challenges, stigma reduction, and the integration of

traditional and biomedical approaches. The articles consistently sought to inform, caution, and guide the public through both scientific knowledge and relatable human experiences, thereby constructing a multidimensional public health discourse.

In *Magufuli on inhaling steam to treat Covid-19 (The Standard, 10 May)* the threat to public health is represented through Magufuli's wayward beliefs and suggestions for curing COVID-19. In the article, the public health concern was framed around misinformation and the dangers of unscientific remedies. By warning against steam inhalation as a self-treatment method for COVID-19, the article reinforces the importance of relying on verified health guidance. This cautionary tone emphasizes the broader public health messaging on avoiding unproven treatments that may cause harm.

Similarly, *Covid-19 and shortness of breath (The Standard, 7 June)* offers a detailed clinical breakdown of COVID-19 symptoms and severity levels. By referencing medical statistics and established guidelines, the article contributes to public education and awareness by enhancing understanding of the clinical spectrum of COVID-19. The use of technical terms such as "mild pneumonia" and "multi-organ dysfunction" aligns with global public health efforts to promote community health literacy. The article in its reportage integrates evidence-based medical information with clear public health guidance, supporting informed community responses to the pandemic.

A heightened sense of urgency is seen in *Covid-19: Panic as cases soar at SA border (The Standard, 5 July)* which reports on infections among South African soldiers stationed at the Zimbabwean border. This article highlights cross-border vulnerability and the need for strict precautionary measures, reinforcing public health behaviour through a fact-based but emotionally charged tone. The call for community members to "take all necessary precautions" aligns with preventive health communication strategies. In addition, this discourse encourages positive public health behaviour and aligns with preventive messaging. It stated that: "All members of the community are advised to take all necessary precautions."

Covid-19 stigma a huge problem in Africa (The Standard, 5 July) explores stigma as a barrier to health-seeking behaviour. The article notes how fear of social rejection

deters individuals from testing and treatment. The emotionally resonant language used in describing stigma as a “hindrance” draws attention to a crucial public health challenge, urging the adoption of socially sensitive interventions. The article states that "Across the continent, stigma is still a big hindrance in stopping people from seeking help when they suspect they have contracted Covid-19." This highlights a key public health barrier to effective public education.

Education remains a core theme in *Covid-19: The importance of observing control measures* (*The Standard*, 12 July). The article references the epidemiological triangle to explain transmission dynamics. By promoting scientifically grounded preventive measures such as hand hygiene and mask usage, and warning against inadequate health system support, the article uses both instructive and alarmist framing to advocate for stronger healthcare infrastructure and public compliance. The journalist promotes factual health measures such as mask-wearing and hand hygiene. This shows corrective discourses which promote the best practices. In addition, the alarmist framing is portrayed through the word "catastrophic" which has been used to emphasise importance of capacity-building in public health response.

In *My experience battling Covid-19* (*The Standard*, 22 August) the narrative reflects public health themes by detailing symptoms, acknowledging past behavioural lapses (like failure to sanitise or wear a mask), and ultimately reinforcing WHO-aligned preventive actions. This testimonial style effectively personalises the public health message, deepening its emotional resonance. The writer vividly describes COVID-19 symptoms, contributing to public education on what to look for. This reflects public health strategy and corrective narrative for managing the pandemic.

Crowded cities struggle to contain Covid-19 (*The Standard*, 30 August) highlights the lack of basic services and challenges of public health infrastructure. It also reveals the health risks posed by overcrowding and poor sanitation. The article reveals the dire sanitation and hygiene challenges in high-density urban areas, highlighting lack of running water and overcrowded living conditions. These infrastructural inadequacies are presented as high-risk factors for virus transmission, pointing to systemic neglect in urban public health planning.

The Sunday Mail also strongly contributes to the public health discourse. The article titled *Covid-19: We are not off the hook yet* (*The Sunday Mail*, 3 May) warns against public complacency as lockdown measures are relaxed. By emphasising continued risk, it reiterates core prevention measures such as mask wearing and physical distancing. The call for collective responsibility is framed in hopeful and civic-oriented language, reinforcing national unity. Furthermore, the article cautions that “Opening up the formal sector does not mean that the coronavirus has been contained.” It emphasises the continued public health risk and using modality to convey uncertainty. The statement “We must continue to observe various measures to stop the further spread of the virus” reinforces public health responsibilities, particularly adherence to guidelines.

Leadership perspectives are incorporated into the public health narrative in *Covid-19 is not over yet: President* (*The Sunday Mail*, 17 May). Significantly, the article promotes continued vigilance through authoritative framing, thereby reinforcing compliance and risk mitigation. For example, the statement, “we must maintain the pandemic curve flat to prevent the loss of life” combines a public health concern with implicit fear-based framing, intended to strengthen the perceived urgency of adherence. Furthermore, the directive that “The wearing of face masks remains mandatory” reflects prevention guidelines aimed at reducing transmission. Collectively, these elements create a discourse of authority, urgency, and precaution, designed to sustain public engagement in preventive behaviours.

A technical and practical public health narrative orientation is evident in the article *Wash face masks before dumping them* (*The Sunday Mail*, 14 June) that provides detailed guidance on proper PPE disposal. By citing environmental expert estimates and outlining specific disposal protocols, the article underscores the intersection between public health and environmental safety. For example, the instruction that “Individuals disposing of either face masks or gloves are now expected to wash and shred the materials before dumping them” reflects government-regulated waste management procedures designed to prevent infection. Furthermore, the estimate that “one million masks and gloves are thrown away weekly” not only emphasises the scale of the public health challenge but also draws on expert data to enhance credibility. In addition, the guideline to “wash the used face masks and gloves with soap under

running water for 20 seconds” serves as a public health education measure, promoting hygiene to minimise viral transmission from used PPE.

In *Remain alert, citizens urged* (*The Sunday Mail*, 5 July) the author states that “Zimbabwe needs to strengthen and refocus on measures... to avert a local transmission crisis.” This highlights the urgency of a health threat and the need for renewed vigilance, using a cautionary tone. The article emphasises a rise in infections and fatalities, contributing to fear-inducing public health framing.

In *Surge in Covid-19 cases worrying* (*The Sunday Mail*, 28 June) the focus is on public health risks. The journalist uses concern-raising language like “high chances.” Additionally, the article warns of the consequences of non-compliance, using strong language to emphasise behavioural lapses. The reference to the “new normal” is used rhetorically to underline the ongoing need for public health caution.

Finally, *Being Covid-19, HIV+ not a death sentence* (*The Sunday Mail*, 23 August) explores the public health information gap for people living with HIV. It emphasises the importance of continued ART adherence and cautious behaviour while also spotlighting mental health as an emerging concern during the pandemic.

Collectively, the selected newspaper articles from *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* demonstrate how Zimbabwean mainstream print media during the pandemic played a critical role in shaping, reinforcing, and disseminating public health narratives. Through varied framing strategies ranging from cautionary, educational, and alarmist to supportive and collaborative the articles encouraged preventive behaviours, addressed structural barriers, dispelled misinformation, and promoted resilience. The newspapers thus functioned not merely as a conduit of information but as a strategic actor in the national public health response to COVID-19.

5.5.2 Political themes and framing

Political themes and framing is a theme which focuses on the use of COVID-19 to justify political actions and the use of COVID-19 pandemic to support political agendas or discredit opposition. The media either blames opposition political parties or protects the ruling political party and government by presenting and framing them in a positive

manner. *Covid-19: Second-hand clothes ban sparks outrage* (*The Standard*, 10 May) reflects a prominent political framing in its critique of the government's use of COVID-19 regulations. While the official rationale for the ban on second-hand clothing is ostensibly rooted in public health (preventing potential virus transmission through used garments) the article presents an alternative interpretation that questions the legitimacy of this justification. The politically charged statement that "critics argue that the ban is more of a control strategy than a health strategy" introduces the notion that the government may be exploiting the pandemic to consolidate authority, suppress informal trade, or assert dominance over marginalised economic actors. This framing reflects a broader political narrative in which COVID-19 is seen not merely as a health crisis but also as a tool for expanding state control or silencing dissent. The article thus frames the government's actions as potentially politically motivated, casting doubt on whether health concerns are the genuine drivers of policy. This aligns with the wider political theme evident in pandemic reporting where COVID-19 becomes a lens through which power struggles, economic control, and governance issues are both scrutinised and contested in the public arena.

5.5.3 Human interest / hope frame

The human interest and hope frame within Zimbabwean media coverage of COVID-19 played a vital role in reinforcing public morale, promoting unity, and emphasising the capacity for resilience and recovery in the face of the pandemic. This framing emerged through personal stories, collective messages of encouragement, and narratives linking health response with cultural identity and national development. Human interest themes are also evident, particularly in stories highlighting individual experiences, suffering, or community responses. From a representation perspective, these narratives personalise the pandemic, constructing COVID-19 as a human-centred crisis rather than an abstract public health issue. From a framing perspective, this corresponds to the human interest frame, which uses emotional appeal to engage audiences. Such framing emphasises personal stories, struggles, and lived experiences, often making the issue more relatable and immediate. However, CDA reveals a critical tension. While human interest framing can foster empathy and awareness, it may also emotionalise and individualise structural issues, diverting attention from systemic factors such as policy failures or institutional constraints. In this sense, emotional framing can function ideologically by depoliticising broader

structural dynamics, presenting the crisis as a series of personal tragedies rather than a systemic challenge.

Covid-19 and shortness of breath (The Standard, 7 June) stated that “I agree there is the deadly Covid-19, but it should never be an excuse for failure to assist our fellow countrymen.” This statement uses loaded language (“deadly Covid-19”) but ends with a hopeful, responsible community-focused message. The article combines clinical explanation with a community-focused call to action, arguing that COVID-19, though deadly, must not be used as an excuse to neglect those in need. This blend of concern and moral responsibility introduces a hopeful tone centred on compassion and social solidarity.

The article *Zim Covid-19 cases climb to 356 (The Standard, 14 June)* introduces a hopeful tone amidst the crisis, focusing on potential health system improvements. The writer states: “there is likely to be a significant increase in health and human progress made since the turn of the millennium.” The article maintains optimism by suggesting the pandemic may catalyse long-term health system improvements. This forward-looking message aligns with hope narratives, focusing on progress beyond the crisis.

In *Four family members beat Covid-19 (The Standard, 14 June)* four members of a Bulawayo family narrated how they survived COVID-19. The article tells a personal recovery story, framing the family as resilient survivors. Through expressions of emotional relief, excitement, and ongoing prayers for a still-hospitalised mother, the article highlights the human dimension of the pandemic and promotes optimism and faith amidst adversity. It positions the family as resilient survivors, framed the recovery as a hopeful, uplifting outcome by representing personal resilience and emotional optimism despite ongoing uncertainty. In the article *Covid-19: The importance of observing control measures (The Standard, 12 July)* the writers highlighted that “We ought to remain vigilant. Stay alert. Practice good hygiene!” The tone is motivational. By urging continued vigilance and good hygiene, the article fosters individual and collective responsibility, reinforcing resilience through consistent public engagement.

Additionally, in *Covid-19: Time to stand up against the virus (The Standard, 19 July)* the writer explicitly invokes national unity, encouraging citizens to confront the

provides a powerful message of hope and encouragement for people living with HIV. The article dispels fatalism by promoting treatment adherence and emotional strength, reinforcing the importance of resilience and continuity of care. The write uses uplifting framing to combat stigma and fear.

Overall, the human interest/hope frame reinforces public health values through personal narratives, national pride, spiritual solidarity, and economic resilience. By highlighting survival, adaptation, and opportunity, the Zimbabwean mainstream print media shaped a constructive narrative that encouraged citizens to remain hopeful, united, and engaged in the collective fight against COVID-19.

5.5.4 Government framing

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Zimbabwean mainstream print media frequently highlighted government actions and institutional responses as central to the public health narrative. This narrative largely centred on the state's responsibility in containing the virus, enforcing preventative measures, and managing the socio-economic fallout. A key theme identified in the narratives was the state's regulatory and enforcement role, particularly through measures such as lockdowns, border control, and quarantine protocols. Articles such as *Covid-19: Zim records 73 new cases, one death* and *Covid-19: Panic as cases soar at SA border* (*The Standard*, 5 July) underscored the government's role in instituting lockdowns and quarantine arrangements, portraying a controlled and responsive state. Similarly, *Crowded cities struggle to contain Covid-19* (*The Standard*, 30 August) depicted the implementation of lockdowns as necessary but challenged by poor infrastructure and social conditions, revealing the gap between policy and lived realities.

Media coverage also highlighted public health enforcement. For example, the article *Covid-19: We are not off the hook yet* (*The Sunday Mail*, 3 May) used firm language such as "must be arrested without fail" to show how the state used punitive measures to enforce lockdown compliance. These articles collectively framed the government as a central actor in enforcing discipline and managing health risks during the crisis. Simultaneously, the media acknowledged government limitations and systemic challenges. The article *Covid-19's crippling blow on Zimbabwe* (*The Sunday Mail*, 26 July) pointed to the shortage of personal protective equipment and overstretched

security agencies, subtly shifting part of the responsibility to individuals by advocating behavioural change. Similarly, in the article *Crowded cities struggle to contain Covid-19* (*The Standard*, 30 August) also illustrated infrastructural inadequacies, such as water shortages and dysfunctional boreholes, which undermined public health measures and exposed weaknesses in service delivery.

In several *The Sunday Mail* articles, the government was portrayed positively for proactive measures such as introducing stimulus packages and strategic planning. *Not all gloom and doom post Covid-19* (24 May) and *Turn Covid-19 into opportunity* (31 May) framed the state as forward-looking, using the crisis to promote industrialisation and regional integration. Similarly, “Wash face masks before dumping them” (14 June) and “Remain alert, citizens urged” (5 July) showcased efforts in waste management and random community testing, respectively, reinforcing the narrative of a structured state response. Lastly, public health discourse was extended to indigenous knowledge systems. Articles such as *Covid-19: Don’t overrule local herbs* (*The Sunday Mail*, 10 May) advocated for state support in researching traditional remedies, suggesting a fusion between modern and traditional health strategies under state coordination.

In summary, the selected Zimbabwean mainstream print media articles during the first phase of the COVID-19 crisis; in particular, *The Sunday Mail*, broadly framed the government as the principal actor in managing the pandemic through enforcement, regulation, health communication, and economic intervention. While state actions were often presented in a positive light, several articles also illuminated institutional shortcomings, infrastructural limitations, and the need for integrated and inclusive strategies that considered the country’s socio-economic and cultural contexts.

5.5.5 Fear-Inducing theme inherent in the framing of the infodemic discourses

An analysis of COVID-19 media coverage in *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail* reveals a consistent pattern of fear-inducing framing and the use of emotionally charged language to emphasise the severity of the pandemic. A dominant pattern across the dataset is the construction of COVID-19 through crisis and fear-oriented themes, which position the pandemic as an escalating and uncontrollable threat. From a representation perspective, this theme constructs COVID-19 as an existential

danger, often privileging narratives of uncertainty, mortality, and systemic vulnerability. Meaning is therefore produced through discourses of urgency and alarm, rather than balanced public health communication. This rhetorical strategy served multiple purposes: to heighten public awareness, evoke emotional responses, and underscore the urgency of compliance with public health measures. However, it also had the potential to exacerbate public anxiety and social stigma.

From a framing perspective, this corresponds to a crisis (or alarmist) frame, where the problem is defined in catastrophic terms, causality is often generalised, and solutions are presented as urgent and sometimes drastic. Such framing foregrounds death tolls, infection rates, and projections of worsening conditions while backgrounding recovery, resilience, or uncertainty in scientific knowledge. This selective emphasis reflects Entman's notion that framing involves both inclusion and exclusion, shaping how audiences interpret risk.

Through CDA, the crisis frame can be understood as a discursive strategy that both reflects and reinforces broader institutional and media logics, including the prioritisation of attention, immediacy, and public compliance. In the Zimbabwean context, this framing may also serve to legitimise state intervention and control measures, aligning with power structures that position the state as the central actor in managing the crisis. However, this also creates a tension: while fear-based framing may encourage compliance, it may simultaneously contribute to panic, mistrust, and susceptibility to misinformation, particularly in already fragile information environments.

Several articles adopted dramatic metaphors and vivid descriptions to portray the virus as a global catastrophe. For instance, *The Standard* (7 June) reported that "Covid-19 continues to tear the world apart," a phrase that evokes a sense of destruction and despair. Similarly, *The Sunday Mail* (10 May) described the aviation industry as being "on life support," highlighting the severe economic consequences with emotionally loaded phrasing. These portrayals not only reflect the real-world impact of the virus but also amplify fear by invoking imagery of devastation and collapse.

Several articles used personal stories and individual suffering to make the crisis relatable. A feature in *The Standard* (14 June) titled *Four family members beat Covid-19* followed COVID-19 survivors, including a nine-month-old baby, and described their isolation as “like being in prison.” Such accounts, while informative, are also emotionally resonant and capable of eliciting empathy and fear in readers. Similarly, a first-hand account *My experience battling Covid-19* in *The Standard* (23 August) described a patient's fear upon being admitted to the ICU, emphasising the physical and psychological toll of the virus. The patient narrated: “I had no appetite, couldn't even lift my hand.” Statements like “the virus is real and it kills” present the pandemic in stark, unambiguous terms designed to provoke caution and reinforce behavioural change.

Another common theme is the personalisation of death and youth to heighten emotional impact. *The Standard* (5 July) reported the death of a 21-year-old woman, a detail likely to stir alarm among younger readers and families. Similarly, multiple headlines such as *Covid-19: Panic as cases soar at SA border* (*The Standard*, 5 July) used words like “panic” and “soar” to evoke anxiety and urgency, particularly around fears of uncontrolled outbreaks.

In addition to emotional appeals, many articles presented statistical data and warnings from authorities in a tone that stressed the ongoing danger. Phrases such as “claimed four precious lives” (*The Sunday Mail*, 14 June) and “the menace exploded” (*The Sunday Mail*, 26 July) framed the virus as an aggressive and relentless force. Reports of death tolls, for example “26 people succumbed in five days” (*The Sunday Mail*, 16 August) were often paired with cumulative figures that underscored the virus's spread and lethality. While factually correct, this mode of reporting contributes to an atmosphere of persistent threat.

The socio-economic impacts of the pandemic were also discussed in emotive terms. The aviation industry was described as suffering “devastating” losses (*The Sunday Mail*, 10 May), while broader national struggles were highlighted through descriptions of business closures, unemployment, and declining remittances. These portrayals linked economic collapse to the health crisis, contributing to a multifaceted sense of fear both for lives and livelihoods.

The coverage also engaged with issues of stigma and psychological burden, particularly in relation to comorbid conditions such as HIV. For instance, in the article *Being Covid-19, HIV+ not a death sentence* (*The Sunday Mail*, 23 August), a patient's inner turmoil is conveyed through questions such as "Is HIV an underlying condition?" The rhetorical expression reflects public uncertainty and fear, likely stemming from inadequate health communication. Moreover, the article acknowledges the fear of social discrimination, thereby illustrating how the emotional impact of the pandemic extended beyond the domain of physical illness to encompass social and mental wellbeing. Collectively, these insights foreground the intertwined nature of medical, psychological, and social dimensions in shaping public health experiences during COVID-19.

Although much of this reporting was intended to raise awareness and promote caution, the recurring use of emotionally intense language also risked contributing to public panic and misinformation. In some instances, it blurred the line between informative health communication and fearmongering. References to "crippling economies," "distant threat being over," and "uncertain contacts" reinforced a sense of helplessness and a lack of control. In summary, the selected media's COVID-19 coverage in Zimbabwe heavily relied on fear-inducing language and emotional narratives to communicate the seriousness of the pandemic. While these tactics were effective in underscoring the urgency of the crisis and encouraging public health compliance, they also had the potential to heighten public anxiety, fuel stigma, and diminish critical engagement with health information. The framing of news during the pandemic, therefore, played a dual role such as informing and alarming, cautioning and, at times, overwhelming the audience.

Across the dataset, the dominant themes and frames demonstrate that media representation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders is not neutral but is shaped by selective emphasis, institutional positioning, and ideological dynamics. Through representation theory, the findings show that media construct COVID-19 as a crisis, a moral issue, a site of conflict, and a human experience. Additionally, through framing theory, these constructions are organised into identifiable frames such as crisis, responsibility, conflict, human interest, and corrective frames, which guide

audience interpretation. More importantly, through CDA, these frames are revealed as discursive practices embedded in power relations, reflecting broader socio-political dynamics in Zimbabwe. By and large, the interaction of these frames contributes to the production and reinforcement of the infodemic. Crisis and conflict frames may amplify fear and polarisation, responsibility frames may shift blame, and corrective frames may both challenge and reproduce misinformation.

5.6 COVID-19 Infodemic Debunking Strategies

This section addresses Research Objective 4 (RO4), which aims to critically assess how the selected newspaper articles endeavoured to debunk or correct misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysed articles concentrated on public health education, risk communication, and behavioural guidance, while also existing within a media landscape plagued with misinformation, conspiracy theories, and contradictory assertions (a communication scenario commonly known as an infodemic). In this context, the role of print media transcended basic reporting to encompass fact-checking, dispelling myths, and affirming scientifically validated information. The subsequent paragraphs examine the degree to which the sampled coverage achieved its corrective role, the strategies utilised to combat misinformation, and the efficacy of these interventions in fostering evidence-based public comprehension. This positions mainstream print media newspaper reporting within the dual obligation of educating the public while aggressively countering the dissemination of destructive views.

A significant theme relates to efforts by newspapers to debunk misinformation and provide corrective information. From a representation perspective, these articles construct the media as authoritative knowledge actors, positioning themselves as defenders of truth against misinformation. Additionally, the framing perspective aligns with a corrective or debunking frame, which identifies misinformation as a problem and offers scientific or factual clarification as the solution. This frame attempts to reassert epistemic authority and guide audiences toward credible information. However, through CDA, this process reveals a paradox. The act of debunking often requires the reproduction of misinformation, which may inadvertently increase its visibility and circulation. This reflects the “discursive dilemma” of infodemic communication, where efforts to counter falsehoods may simultaneously contribute to their persistence.

Additionally, the authority claimed by the media in these contexts raises questions about whose knowledge is privileged, particularly in a media environment characterised by low trust and competing truth claims.

5.6.1 Explicit efforts to debunk false information

Mainstream print media in Southern Africa, particularly newspapers like *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail*, have played a pivotal role in combating the COVID-19 infodemic by employing explicit myth-debunking and corrective discourse strategies. These publications regularly featured articles that juxtaposed misinformation with scientifically grounded facts, often using “Myth vs Fact” formats and expert commentary to clarify misconceptions.

A notable example is found in *The Standard* (10 May) article *Magufuli on inhaling steam to treat Covid-19*, which explicitly cited the WHO in stating, “*There is no evidence that inhaling steam kills the virus.*” This correction was bolstered by further expert input from Dr Matshidiso Moeti, who cautioned that steam inhalation could cause scalding injuries, thus illustrating how authoritative medical perspectives were used to directly challenge harmful health myths. Similarly, in the article titled *Covid-19 stigma a huge problem in Africa* (*The Standard*, 5 July) widespread belief in false health narratives was identified as a pressing issue, with the report itself acting as a myth-busting tool. Another *Standard* article from 19 July, *Debunking Covid-19 myths*, flatly refuted conspiracy theories by stating, Covid-19 and 5G networks are not connected,” clearly illustrating how the media aimed to confront disinformation head-on.

Transparency and data-driven reporting also featured as corrective strategies. In *Covid-19: Time to stand up against the virus* (*The Standard*, 19 July), the call to “avail the correct statistics” underscores an appeal for accuracy in public discourse, reinforcing the importance of reliable information during health crises. *The Sunday Mail* also contributed significantly to corrective discourses, particularly around the use of unproven traditional remedies. The article *Traditionalists flag local herbs in Covid-19 fight* (3 May) quoted Madagascar’s Academy of Medicine expressing doubt over a herbal concoction’s efficacy, with further expert commentary pointing out the

limitations of traditional treatments for fatal diseases. This represents a crucial form of expert-led discourse aimed at curbing reliance on unverified therapies.

Moreover, in *Perceived Covid-19 remedies fly off shelves* (*The Sunday Mail*, 16 August) journalist Emmanuel Kafe presented a comprehensive overview of misinformation surrounding self-medication and traditional remedies. The WHO and local health authorities were repeatedly cited to refute the existence of a cure or approved treatment for COVID-19 at the time. Clear warnings were issued against the use of substances like hydroxychloroquine and homeopathic remedies, which had gained popularity despite lacking scientific validation. The article emphasised that such treatments could be harmful, especially when used without medical supervision, and highlighted calls from the Pharmaceutical Society of Zimbabwe and other watchdog bodies for evidence-based medical approaches.

Across all these articles, expert authority was central to the media's strategy to counteract misinformation. The consistent quoting of WHO officials, national health authorities, and professional medical associations reflects a deliberate effort to promote scientifically accurate, safe health practices and to discredit conspiracy theories and pseudoscience.

In summary, the Zimbabwean mainstream print media adopted a multi-pronged debunking strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic. These included expert-driven clarifications, myth-busting features, transparency through data, and repeated citations of global and local health authorities. Such approaches significantly contributed to fostering public understanding, discouraging harmful practices, and promoting health literacy in the country.

5.6.2 Absence of debunking discourse to correct the communication disorders

A critical theme that emerges in the analysis of Zimbabwean print media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic is the glaring absence of debunking discourse. This is an essential component in countering misinformation and ensuring public health literacy. Despite the widespread circulation of misleading or unverified claims, several articles failed to include authoritative corrections or scientific clarifications, thereby contributing to communication disorders during the health crisis. For example,

The Standard's article titled “*Covid-19: Second-hand clothes ban sparks outrage*” (10 May) illustrates the lack of corrective reporting. The piece features a quote from a trader stating, “No one can show us proof that second-hand clothes carry coronavirus,” without providing a scientific rebuttal or consulting health experts to address the concern. The article not only omits a fact-checking element but also notes that the Zimbabwe Ministry of Health (MoH) spokesperson was unavailable for comment, further exacerbating uncertainty and allowing misinformation to persist unchallenged. The absence of an expert voice or debunking response reflects a critical gap in responsible health communication.

Similarly, in *The Sunday Mail* article titled *Covid-19: Don't overrule local herbs* (10 May) speculative reporting is evident. The article claims that “a certain scientist in Madagascar might have discovered a beverage that fights the virus.” This unverified claim, which originated from social media, is presented without journalistic scrutiny or scientific evaluation. The use of speculative language (“might have discovered”) and the failure to interrogate the legitimacy of the claim reflect a misrepresentation and a missing debunking mechanism. The piece thus reinforces uncertainty and potentially misleads readers who may interpret such speculation as fact.

However, a limited effort toward corrective discourse appears in another article from *The Standard* titled *Covid-19 stigma a huge problem in Africa* (5 July) The article quotes expert Agogo as stating, “Responsible reporting will go a long way in ensuring that Africans are given the correct information.” While this highlights the importance of ethical journalism, the article stops short of actively debunking specific misinformation or challenging false narratives already in circulation. Nonetheless, it gestures toward a normative standard of media responsibility and positions expert voices as pivotal in addressing infodemics.

Collectively, these examples underscore a significant communication failure in the mainstream print media during the pandemic. The lack of authoritative clarification, limited engagement with scientific expertise, and failure to actively challenge false claims contributed to an infodemic, where uncertainty thrived and public trust in health messaging was potentially undermined. The findings suggest an urgent need for media outlets in Southern Africa to adopt evidence-based reporting practices,

integrate debunking strategies, and strengthen collaboration with health experts to ensure accurate and reliable public health communication in future crises.

5.6.3 Synthesised presentation of the debunking techniques in mainstream print media discourses on COVID-19 in Zimbabwean mainstream print media

An analysis of mainstream print media in Zimbabwe, particularly *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail*, reveals a mixed implementation of debunking strategies during the COVID-19 infodemic. Several articles demonstrated a clear effort to provide valuable and correct information on various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic in Zimbabwe. However, there was a notable gap in the coverage by neither implicitly nor explicitly addressing or debunking prevalent misinformation and educate the public using authoritative sources. The coverage reflected significant gaps in corrective discourse and scientific clarification.

In terms of effective debunking techniques, fact-checking and myth-busting articles were key tools employed by the media. For instance, *The Standard's* article titled *Debunking COVID-19 myths* (19 July) directly addressed and dismissed several conspiracy theories using reputable sources. The WHO was cited to discredit the claim that wireless technology such as 5G caused COVID-19, stating that no scientific research supports a link between wireless exposure and adverse health effects. Furthermore, *Reuters* was referenced to dismantle race-based misinformation, asserting that the virus does not target specific ethnic groups. The article also differentiated between valid health advice and misinformation, noting that while poor diet and 5G exposure do not weaken immunity, factors such as lack of nutrition, sunlight, and social support can negatively affect health. This integration of myth correction with scientifically grounded health guidance represents a robust form of debunking that both dispels falsehoods and promotes public health literacy. Similarly, *The Sunday Mail's* article *Coronavirus smell loss different from cold and flu* (30 August) provided empirical evidence to differentiate COVID-19 symptoms from those of other illnesses. The piece highlighted that COVID-19-related smell and taste loss was more profound, with patients often unable to distinguish between sweet and bitter flavours. This use of scientific data served to correct misconceptions and inform the public about unique symptoms of the virus, contributing to more accurate self-assessment and reduced anxiety from misinformation.

Another notable strategy is the use of recovery narratives and institutional endorsements to counter stigma. In *The Sunday Mail* article, *Being COVID-19, HIV+ not a death sentence* (23 August) WHO-led awareness campaigns were reported as promoting stories of recovery to combat fear and stigma. This approach not only reassures the public but also repositions the narrative toward resilience and factual understanding, aligning with evidence-based health communication principles.

Despite these strengths, substantial gaps remain in the consistent use of debunking strategies across Southern African print media. For example, *The Standard's* article *COVID-19: Second-hand clothes ban sparks outrage* (10 May) failed to provide authoritative clarification regarding the rationale behind the ban. A trader's sceptical comment: "No one can show us proof that second-hand clothes carry coronavirus" went unchallenged, and the absence of input from the Ministry of Health left the misinformation unchecked. This silence not only allowed public uncertainty to persist but also exemplified a broader communication disorder where media coverage did not fulfil its corrective function. Likewise, in *COVID-19: Don't overrule local herbs* (*The Sunday Mail*, 10 May) speculative claims about an herbal cure from Madagascar were repeated without verification or scientific scrutiny. The use of vague language such as "might have discovered a beverage that fights the virus" perpetuated unverified claims and highlighted the lack of editorial vigilance in preventing the spread of misleading information. Conversely, there are instances where media acknowledged the importance of responsible reporting. In *The Standard's* article *COVID-19 stigma a huge problem in Africa* (5 July) the role of journalists in ensuring the dissemination of accurate information was emphasised. The quote from Agogo that "responsible reporting will go a long way in ensuring that Africans are given the correct information" reinforces the media's potential as a platform for scientific literacy and public trust if used responsibly.

In summary, while some Zimbabwean mainstream print media outlets employed commendable debunking strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic such as using expert voices, fact-checking, and myth-busting there was an uneven application of these practices. The absence of authoritative input, unchallenged misinformation, and speculative reporting in some articles undermined public health communication and

contributed to the infodemic. Going forward, consistent implementation of verified information, expert commentary, and critical interrogation of claims is essential in combatting misinformation and restoring public trust.

5.6.4 Corrective framing or updates

In the Zimbabwean mainstream print media discourse, corrective framing and scientific updates emerged as critical debunking strategies during the infodemic. Journalists and editors employed authoritative corrections and evidence-based messaging to rectify misinformation and reframe public understanding around contentious claims. A notable example is found in *The Sunday Mail* (3 May 2020), in the article *Traditionalists flag local herbs in Covid-19 fight* which counters misinformation about herbal remedies by clearly stating that “all malaria strains are treated with artemisinin-based combination therapies (ACTs) recommended by WHO.” By referencing globally recognised scientific authorities, such as the WHO, the article not only provides accurate medical guidance but also implicitly discredits unverified local herbal claims without discrediting traditional knowledge systems altogether. Furthermore, the mention of the US government’s approval of Remdesivir as a treatment that could shorten COVID-19 recovery time introduces alternative, clinically tested therapies, thus shifting public focus toward scientifically validated solutions. Similarly, the *Sunday Mail* article, *Coronavirus smell loss ‘different from cold and flu* (30 August) employs scientific distinctions to clarify the unique symptoms of COVID-19. The description of smell loss in COVID-19 as “sudden and severe,” and unaccompanied by nasal blockage, distinguishes it from similar symptoms caused by common colds or flu. This correction helps the public identify potential COVID-19 infections more accurately. Moreover, the directive that “anyone with these symptoms should self-isolate and arrange to have a swab test” strengthens the article’s public health messaging, aligning it with broader national and global containment strategies.

These examples demonstrate how corrective framing anchored in scientific evidence and global health guidelines served to counter myths, dispel confusion, and reinforce responsible behaviour. By explicitly correcting earlier misconceptions and integrating institutional voices, these media pieces contributed to a more informed public discourse during a time of uncertainty.

5.7 Summary

This chapter presented, interpreted, and discussed the findings of the study on how *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* represented, framed, and covered COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders in selected Zimbabwean mainstream print media outlets between 1 May and 31 August 2020.

Using TA and CDA, the chapter demonstrated that the two newspapers played both corrective and contributory roles in the country's COVID-19's infodemic landscape. The findings revealed that both newspapers reflected the complex interplay between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, with their reportage often influenced by cultural, political, and ideological factors. While *The Standard* was more proactive in identifying and debunking misinformation, *The Sunday Mail* frequently aligned its framing with state-centric narratives and patriotic communication, occasionally amplifying politically or culturally motivated claims. This duality underscores how mainstream print media can act as both agents of public education and vectors of communication disorder during crises.

The chapter also established that misinformation in the two newspapers commonly took the form of unverified health claims about traditional herbs, steaming, and home remedies, which were often legitimised through anecdotal testimonies or political authority figures. Disinformation was primarily political, manifested through denialist or populist statements by political leaders such as Magufuli and Bolsonaro, which were covered and critiqued by *The Standard*. Malinformation, meanwhile, appeared through the emotive and fear-inducing framing of true information particularly in reports emphasising death tolls, panic, and economic collapse which contributed to public anxiety and stigma. The findings further demonstrated that infodemic communication was not solely about factual inaccuracy, but about how facts, ideologies, and emotions were represented and interpreted. Both newspapers exhibited tendencies toward sensationalism, selective framing, and uncritical repetition of viral narratives. However, *The Standard* more consistently employed corrective journalism through myth-busting and evidence-based reporting (e.g., *Debunking COVID-19 Myths*), while *The Sunday Mail* integrated religious and cultural frames to sustain national solidarity narratives (e.g., *Reawakening the Human Spirit in COVID-19 Fight*).

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings of the study reaffirm Representation Theory, Framing Theory, and CDA as powerful lenses for understanding how pandemic communication intersects with politics, culture, and media ideology. Representation theory elucidated how media texts constructed reality around the pandemic; framing theory revealed how headlines and narratives shaped interpretation and public emotion; and CDA exposed the power dynamics and ideological undercurrents influencing media discourse.

In summary, this chapter concludes that the selected Zimbabwean mainstream print media outlets were active but uneven participants in shaping the COVID-19 communication environment. Both *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail* reflected the global tension between scientific and populist discourses, often navigating the delicate balance between informing, persuading, and politicising. The findings emphasise the need for evidence-based, ethically responsible, and transparent journalism in mitigating future infodemics. By promoting critical media literacy, enhancing editorial oversight, and fostering collaboration with health authorities, Zimbabwean mainstream print media outlets can move beyond reactive myth correction toward a proactive, trust-building role in public health communication especially during pandemics.

The next chapter provides a comprehensive discussion of the findings in line with the literature review and theoretical frameworks which provided the lens for the current study.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the findings emerging from the textual analysis of the selected articles from *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail* mainstream print media outlets in Zimbabwe. This chapter discusses and interprets the findings of the study in relation to the central research question: How did Zimbabwean mainstream print media outlets represent and frame the COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders such as MDM and conspiracy theories during the first phase of the pandemic in 2020, and what implications did this have for responsible journalism and public health understanding? The purpose of the study, as outlined in Chapter 1, was to explore and describe how the Zimbabwean mainstream print media outlets represented the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic communication disorders to establish a descriptive foundation for further research in this field of study. To achieve this purpose, the study pursued four key objectives: (1) To explore how *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* represented the proliferation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders such as MDM, fake news, and conspiracy theories during the first phase of the pandemic; (2) To identify and describe the elements of the COVID-19 infodemic the two newspapers identified in their coverage of the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic; (3) To identify and categorise the dominant themes and frames of the COVID-19 infodemic as reflected in the news coverage and editorial content of both newspapers; and (4) To critically analyse whether and how *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* attempted to debunk or correct false information, and the discursive methods used to do so. Building upon the detailed results and findings presented in Chapter 5, this chapter aims to synthesise the key findings, connect them to the study's objectives and theoretical framework, and situate them within the broader body of scholarly and academic literature discourse on media representation, crisis communication, and the politics of information in the Global South.

The chapter starts by summarising the key findings and articulating their significance in addressing the primary research question. It then contextualises the results through engagement with existing studies on infodemics, media framing, and misinformation management. By drawing comparisons with previous research, the discussion will

demonstrate both convergence and divergence between this study and established literature. The goal of the comparative analysis is to highlight the nuances of Zimbabwe's media landscape, where ideological, political, and cultural factors shape how health crises are represented and understood. Additionally, the chapter will explore how the findings align with and extend the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study (representation theory, framing theory, and CDA). The discussion also seeks to show how the Zimbabwean media's portrayal of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders both supports and challenges these theoretical perspectives. Moreover, the chapter also reflects on the practical implications for responsible journalism, ethical reporting, and media literacy in contexts of crisis and uncertainty. Ultimately, this discussion underscores the contribution of the study to the academic and professional understanding of infodemic communication by offering new empirical evidence on how mainstream print media construct, legitimise, or contest misinformation and disinformation in a politically polarised environment. The chapter concludes by linking these insights to broader debates about media responsibility, public trust, and the role of journalism in promoting informed citizenship during public health emergencies.

6.2 Summary and Discussion of the Key Findings

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the Zimbabwean mainstream print media's representation of COVID-19 pandemic infodemic communication disorders in order to provide a descriptive basis from which further research on the representation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders can be based and addressed. The discussion of the findings is organised according to the research objectives as outlined in Chapter 1 of the study.

6.2.1 Representation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders

The first research objective sought to explore how *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* represented the proliferation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders such as MDM and conspiracy theories during the first phase of the pandemic. The findings revealed that both newspapers played contradictory roles as both producers, mediators, and correctors of infodemic narratives. *The Sunday Mail* which is aligned with state ideology tended to reproduce official discourses and patriotic communication, often amplifying misinformation through its emphasis on herbal and

religious cures. *The Standard*, by contrast, positioned itself as a corrective actor, frequently debunking falsehoods and challenging government denialism. These findings are consistent with global research showing that media systems in politically polarised environments often oscillate between information correction and ideological reinforcement (Eysenbach, 2020:1-6). However, the Zimbabwean case extends this literature by revealing a distinctive cultural dimension. Misinformation was frequently embedded within indigenous health epistemologies rather than solely within digital or populist rhetoric. While previous studies (Eysenbach, 2020:1-6; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) acknowledge journalism's ambivalent role, this study demonstrated that in Zimbabwe this ambivalence is not episodic but structural. The findings reveal that the representation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders in *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* is not a neutral reflection of reality but a discursive construction shaped by ideology, institutional positioning, and cultural meaning-making practices.

Importantly, these dual roles are not always consistently maintained. Instances where *The Sunday Mail* adopts corrective discourse and where *The Standard* amplifies fear narratives highlight the presence of discursive anomalies, which suggest that media behaviour is shaped by competing ideological, professional, and structural pressures rather than fixed editorial positions.

From a representation theory perspective, meaning is actively produced through symbolic and linguistic practices rather than mirrored from biomedical reality. In this study, COVID-19 is constructed through competing representational regimes: *The Sunday Mail* encodes the pandemic within nationalist, cultural, and religious discourses, while *The Standard* constructs it within a scientific-rational and watchdog journalism framework. These representational differences demonstrate that misinformation is not simply "false information," but a product of meaning-making systems that privilege particular epistemologies over others. For example, *The Sunday Mail's* promotion of herbal and religious cures reflect a discursive strategy that aligns public health narratives with nationalist ideology and cultural authority. Apuke and Omar (2021:168) and Mare and Munoriyarwa (2022:63) similarly reports cultural embedding of misinformation. This form of representation suggests that misinformation prevalent in the coverage and reportage of COVID-19 infodemic was

not simply tolerated but it was strategically accommodated to reinforce dominant power structures. On the contrary, *The Standard* positions itself as a corrective media house which aligns with normative ideals of watchdog journalism.

The Zimbabwean mainstream print media outlets selected for this study represented the convergence of cultural identity and public health communication. By privileging traditional remedies and religious interpretations, these media outlets sought to localise global health discourses, but in doing so, they inadvertently validated misinformation (WHO, 2020a). Therefore, the COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders representation and coverage in the selected media outlets in particular *The Sunday Mail* was both a site of cultural affirmation and epistemological tension. The findings also align with Brennen et al. (2020), who observed that government actors and political elites are often primary sources of misinformation. In this study, much of the misleading content originated from official sources. In the main, the findings demonstrated how power and authority shape truth production in times of crisis as reflected in the CDA analysis of discourse and power (Fairclough, 1995). In conclusion, both *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* reflected the dual role of journalism during crises as they simultaneously make effort to combat and perpetuate misinformation. This paradox is affirmed by Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017:28-30), who assert that journalism is "implicated in both spreading and correcting information disorders." The Zimbabwean case reflects this dilemma of visibility, where journalism struggles between reporting falsehoods and avoiding their reinforcement.

The infodemic was represented as a struggle not only over facts but over authority, identity, and meaning. The mainstream print media editorial orientation largely shaped whether journalism acted as a filter or a megaphone. The findings indicate that responsible journalism in crisis conditions requires more than factual accuracy. Instead it demands reflexive framing, contextualisation, and scrupulous attention to the risks of amplifying harmful narratives. These findings align with African journalism studies which document the pandemic as an information and governance crisis and not merely a biomedical one.

The Sunday Mail was more prone to malinformation through alarmist headlines and fear-inducing statistics. Reports such as *Africa's Covid-19 peak yet to come* employed

episodic framing (Iyengar, 1990:22), emphasising dramatic figures without contextual balance. By failing to balance factual but alarming accounts with constructive public health messaging, the newspaper contributed to heightened fear and mistrust. On the other hand, *The Standard* engaged conspiracies primarily through corrective framing, especially in myth-busting articles. While the newspaper attempted to counter the 5G conspiracy theory, the repetition of false claims risks the “familiarity backfire effect.” Nonetheless, the use of corrective headlines such as *Debunking Covid-19 Myths* shows the newspaper’s efforts at favourable reportage.

From a framing theory perspective, these representations are structured through distinct patterns of salience. *The Sunday Mail* foregrounds culturally resonant narratives, such as herbal remedies and divine protection, thereby expanding the boundaries of legitimate knowledge to include indigenous epistemologies. In contrast, *The Standard* narrows these boundaries by privileging scientific authority and expert discourse, framing misinformation as a problem requiring correction. This illustrates Entman’s (1993) argument that framing operates through selection, emphasis, and exclusion, where what is made salient determines how reality is interpreted.

Through Critical Discourse Analysis, these differences reflect deeper power relations and ideological struggles over authority and truth. *The Sunday Mail*, as a state-aligned publication, reproduces discourse that legitimises official narratives and reinforces institutional authority, even when such narratives intersect with misinformation. Conversely, *The Standard* adopts a counter-hegemonic position, challenging state discourse and asserting alternative truth claims. This demonstrates how the infodemic is fundamentally a struggle over discursive power, where competing actors seek to control the production and circulation of meaning. Thus, the Zimbabwean infodemic is not merely about misinformation, but about who has the authority to define truth, highlighting the intersection of media, power, and knowledge in crisis communication.

Importantly, these findings cannot be fully understood in isolation, as misinformation, political framing, and cultural narratives operate as interconnected meaning-making processes. Misinformation gains legitimacy when embedded within political and cultural frames, while corrective journalism simultaneously challenges and reproduces

these narratives. This interaction highlights that the infodemic is not fragmented but structurally integrated within media discourse.

6.2.2 Interpreting contradictions and anomalous findings

While the findings generally position *The Sunday Mail* as government-aligned and *The Standard* as corrective, several anomalies complicate this binary distinction. These contradictions are not methodological inconsistencies but are analytically significant, revealing the fluid and contested nature of media discourse during crises. *The Sunday Mail* occasionally adopts corrective positions by debunking misinformation or promoting scientifically grounded health guidelines, despite its broader alignment with state discourse. From a framing theory perspective, this reflects strategic frame adjustment, where the newspaper selectively incorporates corrective frames to maintain credibility and audience trust. Rather than signalling ideological neutrality, these corrective moments function as legitimising mechanisms, allowing the publication to sustain its authority while continuing to privilege state-aligned narratives.

From a CDA perspective, this anomaly reveals how power operates not through rigid consistency but through discursive flexibility. By occasionally aligning with scientific authority, *The Sunday Mail* strengthens its position as a credible information source, thereby enhancing its capacity to legitimise other ideologically embedded narratives. In this sense, correction becomes part of hegemonic maintenance, rather than a purely journalistic function.

On the other hand, *The Standard*, despite its corrective and watchdog orientation, at times amplifies fear-inducing narratives and malinformation. From a framing perspective, this reflects the dominance of crisis and alarm frames, which prioritise urgency, risk, and emotional impact. These frames increase news salience and audience engagement but may inadvertently reproduce the very communication disorders the newspaper seeks to challenge.

From a CDA perspective, this contradiction highlights how even counter-hegemonic media are embedded within broader discursive economies of attention, where emotional intensity and sensationalism shape news production. The amplification of fear is therefore not simply editorial inconsistency but reflects structural pressures within journalism, including the need to attract readership and maintain relevance during crises.

Taken together, these anomalies demonstrate that Zimbabwean mainstream print media cannot be categorised as purely corrective or purely ideological. Instead, they operate within a hybrid discursive space, where correction, amplification, and ideological positioning coexist. This finding advances the study's theoretical contribution by showing that infodemic communication disorders are sustained not only by misinformation but also by the contradictory practices of journalism itself.

6.3 Forms or Elements of the COVID-19 Infodemic

The second research objective aimed to identify and describe the elements of the COVID-19 infodemic the two newspapers recognised in their coverage of the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Singh et al., (2020) and WHO (2020a) conceptualises misinformation as a phenomenon which is mainly unintentional however, findings emerging from the current study complicate this binary. The repeated endorsement of herbal myths and fallacies by *The Sunday Mail* in particular indicates a blurred boundary between misinformation and ideological influence in Zimbabwean mainstream print media. The findings present a significant theoretical issue highlighting that the differentiation between misinformation and disinformation becomes analytically precarious in politicised and polarised media environments like Zimbabwe. The current study therefore challenges the sufficiency of Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017:26-28) typology by illustrating that institutional disinformation can be structurally deliberate, despite being rhetorically presented as cultural affirmation.

This blurring of boundaries is further intensified by the interaction between misinformation and political framing, where culturally embedded claims are reinforced through ideological narratives. As a result, misinformation is not merely circulated but institutionally stabilised through framing practices, complicating efforts to distinguish it from disinformation.

From a representation perspective, these elements are constructed through overlapping narratives that blur boundaries between truth and falsehood. For example, culturally embedded remedies are represented simultaneously as legitimate knowledge and contested misinformation, illustrating how meaning is negotiated rather than fixed. In addition, from a framing perspective, the differentiation between misinformation and disinformation becomes unstable because both are organised

through similar narrative structures. What distinguishes them is not only intent but how they are framed; whether as culturally legitimate, politically strategic, or scientifically invalid. This supports the argument that framing determines interpretive boundaries, shaping whether information is perceived as credible or misleading. Through CDA, the findings reveal that these categories are deeply embedded in power relations. Disinformation, in particular, emerges as a strategic discourse of authority, where political actors manipulate narratives to maintain legitimacy. Meanwhile, misinformation is often circulated through cultural and affective channels, reflecting historical trust in traditional knowledge systems. More importantly, the Zimbabwean case demonstrates that infodemic elements are not external disruptions but are produced within media systems themselves, challenging the assumption that journalism operates as a neutral corrective force.

6.3.1 Misinformation

Both newspapers reproduced and occasionally corrected *misinformation* surrounding steaming, herbal remedies, and divine protection. These narratives were culturally resonant but scientifically unsound. This finding shows that *misinformation* often spreads through affective and culturally familiar channels rather than deliberate deceit. The Zimbabwean context illustrates that *misinformation* is as much cultural as it is informational, shaped by historical trust in traditional knowledge.

6.3.2 Disinformation

Disinformation emerged largely in political reporting, with *The Standard* exposing denialism by leaders such as John Magufuli, and *The Sunday Mail* legitimising state actions through selective framing. These results mirror Bennett and Livingston's (2018) "disinformation order," where elites strategically manipulate uncertainty for political advantage. The similarity between Zimbabwe and other global cases (Brazil, US, Tanzania) underscores the universality of political disinformation, even though its expression is locally contextualised. Unlike Western populist contexts where disinformation is often leader-centric (Ball & Maxmen, 2020:371), the Zimbabwean media context reveals a more diffused institutional architecture of disinformation which involves editors, state agencies and nationalist discourse networks.

public health education was central (WHO, 2020a). However, the Zimbabwean newspaper reports and frames uniquely intertwined these messages with socio-economic challenges, exposing infrastructural deficiencies such as lack of running water in cities, delayed test results, and economic barriers. These results differ from earlier research in Global North countries which focused on individual behaviour change. The integration of personal testimonies (e.g., survivors' accounts) into public health narratives humanised the crisis, making technical information relatable. However, the use of alarmist tones (e.g., "catastrophic," "panic") often make newspaper coverage more inclined into *malinformation*, by amplifying fear rather than balanced awareness.

6.4.2 Political themes and framing

The selected Zimbabwean media outlets frequently framed COVID-19 infodemic through a political lens by either legitimising government actions or casting doubt on their motivations. For example, bans on second-hand clothing were framed as potential tools of state control rather than purely health measures. This confirms Hall (1987b) theory of media framing, where news functions as a site of ideological contestation. The Zimbabwean infodemic terrain fits this pattern, however the country's long history of political polarisation amplified suspicion of government motives. To a significant extent, the pandemic became both a health and political story and this revealed sharper polarisation due to entrenched mistrust between the media and the state.

6.4.3 Human interest and hope frames

Human interest and hope frames provided emotional counterbalance to fear and political division. Stories of survival, recovery, adaptation, and even indigenous solutions (e.g., local herbs) reinforced resilience, unity, and national pride. This aligns with Wahl-Jorgensen (2020:175), who noted that emotional storytelling can strengthen community morale during crises. However, Zimbabwe's case was distinct in how hope was framed not only around personal recovery but also around cultural identity and economic revival ("home-grown solutions," "turning COVID-19 into opportunity"). This reflects a postcolonial narrative in which crises are reframed as opportunities for sovereignty and self-reliance.

a dual media role. It emerged that while journalists sought to inform and protect the public, they also inadvertently perpetuated misinformation and ideological biases. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017:28-30) showing that traditional media occupies a complex space in the infodemic ecosystem, balancing between correction and amplification. However, this study contributes new evidence by revealing how cultural identity, political alignment, and resource constraints uniquely shaped the Zimbabwean media response. The implications of the findings are significant. They call for renewed attention to media ethics, editorial independence, and collaboration with scientific authorities in crisis reporting. Strengthening these areas could mitigate future infodemics and restore public trust in journalism. Above all, the findings highlighted that responsible journalism is not merely about factual accuracy but about how truth is framed, contextualised, and represented. This study contributed to the body of knowledge by illuminating the ideological, cultural, and communicative dimensions of pandemic reporting in the Global South; in particular, the Zimbabwean mainstream print media landscape, by highlighting both the vulnerabilities and transformative potential of journalism in times of a pandemic.

The following chapter will provide the summary and conclusion of the study.

CHAPTER 7: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discusses the findings of the study. This final chapter concludes the study by synthesising the major insights gained from analysing how Zimbabwean mainstream print media represented and framed COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders; namely MDM and conspiracy theories during the first phase of the pandemic in 2020. It encapsulates how the researcher comprehends the notion of COVID-19 pandemic infodemic communication disorders and its representation in the mainstream print media in Zimbabwe. Limitations of the study as well as suggestions for further research will be discussed. The chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the research process, summarises key findings, highlights the theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions, and offers recommendations for journalism practice, policy formulation, and further academic research. In line with the purpose of the study, this chapter also reflects on the limitations encountered and outlines potential directions for future research within the field of crisis communication, media ethics, and public-health journalism in Zimbabwe and other African contexts.

7.2 Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe how the Zimbabwean mainstream print media represented the COVID-19 pandemic infodemic communication disorders, thereby providing a descriptive foundation for future research into the intersection of media, misinformation, and crisis representation. This objective was achieved through a qualitative analysis of selected articles from *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*, representing state-aligned and independent media respectively. The primary research question asked how Zimbabwean mainstream print media represented and framed the COVID-19 infodemic and what implications this had for responsible journalism and citizens' public-health understanding. Four sub-questions guided the analysis: the extent and nature of representation; the elements of the infodemic identified; the dominant themes and frames, and the ways in which the newspapers attempted to debunk or correct misinformation.

The findings revealed that both newspapers simultaneously amplified and countered misinformation. *The Sunday Mail*, as a government-aligned publication, tended to reproduce official narratives and patriotic discourses, often reflecting cultural epistemologies that elevated herbal and religious remedies without adequate scientific scrutiny. *The Standard*, conversely, critiqued political actors and employed corrective or diagnostic framing. This duality underscores the fact that Zimbabwe's print media acted as both agents of correction and conduits of distortion, confirming earlier findings that journalism during the pandemic was entangled in political power relations and resource limitations (Mare, 2022; Ncube & Mare, 2022).

The study also established that misinformation in Zimbabwe was not simply a matter of fake news, but a complex cultural phenomenon. Many narratives drew legitimacy from traditional beliefs and community-based practices, reflecting an epistemological overlap between biomedical science and indigenous knowledge systems. This finding aligns with Midzi et al. (2024:1174) who note that public health communication in Zimbabwe was influenced by longstanding tensions between spiritual and scientific worldviews. Disinformation in the press was largely political, with *The Sunday Mail* legitimising official responses while *The Standard* exposed elite manipulation. Malinformation was particularly evident in alarmist or sensational reporting that exaggerated fear, deepening public anxiety. This was consistent with Wahl-Jorgensen's (2020:175) concept of "emotional contagion" and reflected Zimbabwean journalists' struggles to balance urgency with empathy in an environment of uncertainty and mistrust.

In relation to corrective efforts, the study observed that debunking and fact-checking strategies were inconsistently applied. *The Standard* often published myth-busting features, drawing on experts from the WHO and local health authorities, while *The Sunday Mail* relied more heavily on government spokespersons. Although these corrective initiatives sometimes succeeded in clarifying misinformation particularly around conspiracy theories such as 5G and vaccine myths they also risked amplifying falsehoods through repetition. Collectively, these findings confirm that Zimbabwean print journalism outlets during COVID-19 were both an essential public-health actor and a site of ideological negotiation. The results align with media research that portrays journalism during crises as a contested terrain, where information accuracy

competes with institutional loyalty, cultural legitimacy, and survival imperatives (Hove & Cilliers,2023).

7.3 Contribution of the Study

This study makes a theoretical, empirical, and methodological contribution, with particular emphasis on advancing the application of Representation Theory, Framing Theory, and CDA in the study of infodemic communication disorders.

7.3.1 Contribution to representation theory

This study extends representation theory by demonstrating that COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders are not merely distortions of reality, but are actively constructed through cultural, political, and institutional processes of meaning-making. The findings indicate that misinformation in Zimbabwean print media is often encoded through cultural epistemologies, including references to herbal remedies and religious interpretations, which are presented as alternative forms of knowledge. In this context, media representations do not simply reflect biomedical truth; rather, they construct competing realities shaped by ideology, identity, and socio-cultural frameworks. Accordingly, the study advances representation theory by illustrating that, within Global South contexts, meaning is produced through the intersection of scientific, cultural, and political codes, rather than through a singular, dominant epistemological framework.

7.3.2 Contribution to Framing Theory

This study contributes to framing theory by demonstrating that infodemic communication disorders are sustained through the interaction of multiple and overlapping frames, rather than through isolated framing devices. The findings reveal that crisis and fear frames play a significant role in amplifying malinformation by foregrounding urgency, risk, and uncertainty, while political frames serve to legitimise or contest disinformation depending on the ideological positioning of the media institution. In addition, human-interest frames contribute to the normalisation of misinformation by embedding it within emotionally resonant narratives that foreground lived experiences and cultural beliefs.

Importantly, the study introduces the concept of hybrid infodemic framing, whereby multiple frames coexist within single media texts, generating layered and often contradictory meanings that simultaneously inform, alarm, and legitimise particular interpretations of reality. This finding extends framing theory by illustrating that salience is not singular or linear, but rather multi-layered and contested, especially within polarised media environments where competing narratives vie for dominance.

7.3.3 Contribution to Critical Discourse Analysis

The study advances CDA by critically demonstrating that infodemic communication disorders should not be conceptualised as external aberrations within media systems, but rather as phenomena that are structurally embedded within relations of power and ideological production. The findings indicate that state-aligned discourse does not merely transmit information but actively legitimises particular forms of misinformation by embedding them within culturally resonant and nationalist narratives, thereby naturalising contested claims as authoritative knowledge.

Moreover, the analysis problematises the assumed neutrality of corrective journalism by revealing its inherently power-laden character. Corrective discourse, while positioned as a mechanism of epistemic clarification, simultaneously privileges institutional and expert knowledge systems, thereby reinforcing existing hierarchies of authority and marginalising alternative epistemologies. In this regard, the study challenges the binary distinction between misinformation and correction, demonstrating that both are implicated within broader structures of discursive power.

Furthermore, the findings conceptualise media discourse as a site of ongoing epistemic struggle, wherein competing actors contest the authority to define truth, credibility, and legitimacy. This struggle is not merely informational but ideological, reflecting deeper tensions between state power, journalistic autonomy, and culturally embedded knowledge systems. Consequently, the study extends CDA by reconceptualising the infodemic as a dynamic discursive field of power in which misinformation, corrective discourse, and ideology are not discrete phenomena, but are co-produced, mutually constitutive, and continuously negotiated within the media landscape.

7.3.4 Integrated Theoretical Contribution

By triangulating Representation Theory, Framing Theory, and CDA, this study develops a holistic theoretical model of the infodemic that moves beyond linear or reductionist explanations of misinformation. Within this integrated framework, representation theory elucidates how meanings of COVID-19 are actively constructed through symbolic and discursive practices; framing theory explains how these meanings are selectively organised, emphasised, and made salient within media texts; and CDA reveals how such constructions are shaped by underlying relations of power and ideological positioning.

Taken together, these theoretical lenses demonstrate that the COVID-19 infodemic cannot be adequately understood as a mere information disorder. Rather, it constitutes a complex and dynamic system of meaning production, narrative structuring, and ideological contestation, in which competing actors, knowledge systems, and institutional interests continuously negotiate the boundaries of truth and credibility within the media landscape.

7.4 Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the representation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders in Zimbabwean mainstream print media, several limitations methodological and analytical limitations should be acknowledged. While this study provides valuable insights, several methodological and analytical limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study is based on a qualitative, interpretivist approach, which prioritises depth over generalisability. Although Thematic Analysis and CDA enabled rich interpretation, the findings are context-specific and cannot be statistically generalised beyond the selected newspapers.

Secondly, the sample size and sampling strategy present limitations. The use of purposive sampling (32 articles across two newspapers) ensured relevance but may have excluded other significant narratives present in the broader media landscape. This may limit the representativeness of discursive patterns. The research focused exclusively on two newspapers, that is, *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* during the first phase of the pandemic, over a period of four months. This limited scope may not fully capture the diversity of infodemic representation across other print media outlets, such as independent newspapers, regional publications, or digital-only platforms, and

therefore may limit the generalisability of the findings. The focus on the early phase of the pandemic also presents a limitation. As the COVID-19 situation evolved, media framing, public perception, and the nature of misinformation likely shifted, meaning the findings may not reflect media practices in later stages of the pandemic or during future health crises.

Thirdly, the study relies solely on textual analysis, without incorporating: audience reception data, newsroom ethnography, and journalist perspectives. As a result, the study cannot empirically verify how audiences interpreted media representations or how journalists negotiated editorial decisions. Methodologically, the study adopted an exploratory and descriptive qualitative approach, primarily relying on content analysis of news and editorial material. While this allowed for in-depth exploration of framing and representation, it did not provide quantitative measures of the prevalence or impact of misinformation, nor did it assess audience reception or the effectiveness of corrective interventions.

Fourthly, the cross-sectional design (May - August 2020) captures only the early phase of the pandemic. Given that infodemic dynamics evolve over time, the findings do not account for longitudinal shifts in framing, discourse, or public perception. Finally, as with all qualitative research, the interpretation of themes and discourse is subject to researcher positionality and interpretive bias, despite efforts to ensure analytical rigour through coding frameworks and theoretical triangulation.

Finally, the study focused solely on print media and excluded other influential channels such as radio, television, social media, and online news platforms. Given the growing role of digital media in shaping public understanding, this limitation restricts a comprehensive view of the COVID-19 infodemic across all media formats. Despite these limitations, the study offers a foundational understanding of how Zimbabwean mainstream print media represented COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders, providing a descriptive basis for further research in this important area of health communication.

7.5 Recommendations

Based on the findings and limitations, several recommendations are proposed for journalistic practice, media policy, and future research. The recommendations

presented in this section include recommendations for journalism practice; journalists and media; policy and public health communication; policy makers, and public health institutions.

7.5.1 Recommendation 1: Institutionalise Infodemic-Sensitive Journalism

Media organisations should institutionalise structured editorial frameworks for reporting during health crises that move beyond ad hoc or reactive practices. Such frameworks should foreground the systematic incorporation of expert knowledge through consistent engagement with qualified health professionals and authoritative bodies, while also embedding rigorous verification protocols for culturally embedded claims that may carry social legitimacy but lack scientific substantiation. In addition, a clear demarcation between evidence-based reporting and speculative or interpretive content is necessary to prevent the blurring of epistemic boundaries.

From a critical perspective, the absence of such institutionalised practices risks enabling journalism to inadvertently legitimise misinformation by granting visibility and narrative coherence to unverified claims. Therefore, strengthening editorial governance is not merely a procedural adjustment but a necessary intervention to reconfigure how authority, credibility, and knowledge are constructed within crisis reporting.

7.5.2 Recommendation 2: Adopt Contextual and Balanced Framing

Journalists should move beyond predominantly alarmist modes of reporting by adopting more contextually grounded framing practices that prioritise balance, nuance, and interpretive depth. This entails presenting mortality data alongside recovery rates and preventative measures in order to avoid disproportionately emphasising risk at the expense of resilience and response. It also requires a critical re-evaluation of the reliance on fear-based narratives, which, while increasing immediacy and audience engagement, may inadvertently contribute to anxiety, misinformation, and distorted risk perception.

Furthermore, integrating socio-economic context into public health reporting is essential for situating the pandemic within the lived realities of affected populations, thereby enhancing the relevance and accessibility of information. From a critical perspective, such contextual framing not only mitigates the production of malinformation but also contributes to a more informed and reflective public discourse

by reshaping how meaning, risk, and responsibility are communicated within media narratives.

7.5.3 Recommendation 3: Strengthen Collaborative Infodemic Management

There is a need for sustained and institutionalised collaboration between media organisations, public health authorities, and fact-checking bodies in order to address the systemic nature of infodemic communication disorders. Such collaboration should not be episodic or crisis-driven, but embedded within coordinated communication frameworks that enable the timely exchange of verified information and the alignment of messaging across institutions.

From a critical perspective, this collaborative approach should prioritise the development of integrated myth-busting strategies, the establishment of rapid response mechanisms to counter emerging misinformation, and the promotion of consistent and transparent communication practices. By doing so, it can mitigate the fragmentation of public discourse and reduce the circulation of contradictory narratives that undermine public trust. Moreover, institutional collaboration enhances epistemic coherence by ensuring that authoritative knowledge is not only produced but also effectively disseminated and reinforced across multiple communicative platforms.

7.5.4 Recommendation 4: Develop Public Media Literacy

Governments and civil society actors should prioritise sustained investment in media literacy initiatives as a structural response to the infodemic. Such programmes should move beyond basic awareness campaigns to develop citizens' capacity to identify and critically interrogate misinformation, evaluate the credibility of diverse information sources, and navigate the cultural and digital dimensions through which misinformation is produced and circulated.

From a critical perspective, strengthening media literacy redistributes epistemic responsibility from media institutions alone to a broader public, thereby reducing overreliance on journalism as the sole corrective mechanism. In doing so, it fosters a more resilient information environment in which individuals are better equipped to engage with competing narratives, negotiate meaning, and make informed decisions within complex and contested communicative landscapes.

7.6 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should broaden the scope of inquiry beyond Zimbabwe by conducting comparative studies across African countries to explore how cultural, political, and media contexts shape the representation of infodemics. Such cross-national analyses would help identify regional variations and common patterns in the framing and dissemination of health misinformation.

In addition, audience reception studies are critical to understanding how Zimbabweans interpreted and acted upon media representations of COVID-19 information disorders. These studies would provide insight into the effectiveness of corrective strategies, the degree of public trust in media and health authorities, and how citizens negotiated between scientific knowledge and cultural beliefs.

Longitudinal studies should investigate how misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories evolve over time and across different crises. This would shed light on the long-term impact of information disorders on public trust in media and government and provide valuable lessons for strengthening crisis communication frameworks and institutional resilience.

7.7 Conclusion

Finally, this study concludes that Zimbabwean mainstream print media played a paradoxical role during the COVID-19 pandemic, simultaneously mitigating and amplifying MDM and conspiracy theories. The representation of the infodemic was shaped by the intersection of cultural epistemologies, political authority, and journalistic practices. While newspapers occasionally adopted corrective frames, they frequently reproduced harmful content without adequate contextualisation, inadvertently legitimising false claims. Disinformation associated with political elites emerged as the most strategically harmful form of information disorder, undermining trust in science and public health guidelines.

Analysis of *The Standard's* coverage illustrates the complex interplay between MDM, with malinformation being the most prevalent. Misinformation largely reflected cultural practices, whereas disinformation was politically framed, and malinformation often

emerged through alarmist reporting. Although the newspapers sometimes acted responsibly by debunking myths and promoting WHO guidelines, they also contributed to the infodemic through omission, speculation, and sensationalist framing. Coverage was dominated by public health and government frames but was strongly influenced by politics, hope, and fear, highlighting the dual role of the press as both a responsible public health actor and a potential vector of infodemic content. The Zimbabwean case reflects global patterns in pandemic reporting but also reveals unique challenges linked to low trust in governance, infrastructural weaknesses, political polarisation, and the entanglement of indigenous knowledge with biomedical discourse. These findings demonstrate that media are not passive conveyors of information but active constructors of meaning, shaping public trust, compliance, and resistance.

Overall, the study reinforces the understanding that pandemics are both biological and communication crises. Zimbabwean mainstream print media, while striving to inform the public, often reproduced the very disorders they sought to counter. Recognising the interplay of MDM underscores the urgent need for ethical, culturally grounded, and transparent journalism in future health emergencies. The COVID-19 infodemic highlights the dual power of journalism as both a guardian of public health and a potential amplifier of misinformation, illustrating the importance of consistent, evidence-based reporting that fosters resilience, trust, and informed citizenship.

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APPENDIX A: ETHICS RESEARCH COMMITTEE APPROVAL CERTIFICATE



Date: 13/09/2024

Dear: Mr Tapuwa Mahefu

College of Human Sciences CREC Department of
Communication Science

**Decision: Ethics Approval from 13 September
2024 to 12
September 2025**

NHREC Registration # : (Rec-240816-052)
Ref #: 3009
Name: Mr Tapuwa Mahefu
Student #: 60117664

Researcher: Mr Tapuwa Mahefu

952 HANSKEKANA VIEW MAJANENG

HAMMANSKRAAL PRETORIA

60117664@mylife.unisa.ac.za 0739626573

Supervisor: Miss Mercy Pheladi Bvuma bvumamp@unisa.ac.za

An Analysis of Zimbabwean Mainstream Print Media Representation of COVID-19 Pandemic Infodemic Communication Disorders

Qualification: MA COMMUNICATION

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the College of Human Sciences_CREC for the above-mentioned research study, Ethics approval is granted for one year.

The **negligible-risk application** was **reviewed** by the College of Human Sciences_CREC on **13 September 2024** in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the College of Human Sciences_CREC.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.

5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children’s act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
5. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
6. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date (**12 September 2025**). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal, for Ethics Research Committee approval.

Additional Conditions

1. Disclosure of data to third parties is prohibited without explicit consent from Unisa.
2. De-identified data must be safely stored on password protected PCs.
3. Care should be taken by the researcher when publishing the results to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the university.
4. Adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Research and Publication practices, principle 7 referring to Social awareness, must be ensured: “Researchers and institutions must be sensitive to the potential impact of their research on society, marginal groups or individuals, and must consider these when weighing the benefits of the research against any harmful effects, with a view to minimising or avoiding the latter where possible.” Unisa will not be liable for any failure to comply with this principle.

Note

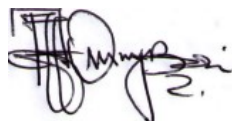
The reference number 3009 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,

Prof Khatija Khan

Chair of College of Human Sciences

CREC E-mail: khankb@unisa.ac.za



Professor Omwoyo Bosire Onyancha

Executive Dean / By delegation from the Executive Dean of
College of Human Sciences CREC E-mail:

onyanob@unisa.ac.za

APPENDIX B: LIST OF *THE STANDARD* NEWS ARTICLES

Number	Title	Date (2020)
1	<i>Covid-19 second hand clothes ban sparks outrage</i>	10 May
2	<i>Magufuli on inhaling steam</i>	10 May
3	<i>Covid-19 isolation centres a time bomb</i>	7 June
4	<i>Covid-19 opportunity to loot</i>	7 June
5	<i>Covid-19 and shortness of breath</i>	7 June
6	<i>Zim Covid-19 cases climb to 356</i>	14 June
7	<i>Four family members beat Covid-19</i>	14 June
8	<i>Covid-19: Zim records 73 new cases, one death</i>	5 July
9	<i>Covid-19: Panic as cases soar at SA border</i>	5 July
10	<i>Investing in digital agric can help Africa beat Covid-19</i>	5 July
11	<i>Covid-19 stigma big problem in Africa</i>	5 July
12	<i>The importance of observing control measures</i>	12 July
13	<i>Debunking Covid-19 myths</i>	19 July
14	<i>Covid-19: Time to stand up against virus</i>	19 July
15	<i>My experience battling Covid-19</i>	23 August
16	<i>Crowded cities struggle to contain Covid-19</i>	30 August

APPENDIX C: LIST OF THE SUNDAY MAIL NEWS ARTICLES

Number	Title	Date (2020)
1	<i>Covid-19: We are not off the hook yet</i>	3 May
2	<i>Traditionalists flag local herbs in Covid-19 fight</i>	3 May
3	<i>Covid-19 ravages aviation industry</i>	10 May
4	<i>Covid-19: Don't overrule local herbs</i>	10 May
5	<i>Covid-19 is not over yet: President</i>	17 May
6	<i>Not all gloom and doom post Covid-19</i>	24 May
7	<i>Turn Covid-19 into opportunity</i>	31 May
8	<i>Wash face masks before dumping them</i>	14 June
9	<i>Reawakening the human spirit in Covid-19 fight</i>	14 June
10	<i>Surge in Covid-19 cases worrying</i>	28 June
11	<i>Remain alert, citizens urged</i>	05 July
12	<i>Covid-19's crippling blow on Zimbabwe</i>	26 July
13	<i>Africa's Covid-19 peak yet to come</i>	09 August
14	<i>Perceived Covid-19 remedies fly off shelves</i>	16 August
15	<i>Being Covid-19, HIV+ not a death sentence</i>	23 August
16	<i>Coronavirus smell loss 'different from cold and flu</i>	30 August

Article 1: Covid-19: We are not off the hook yet

Covid-19: We are not off the hook yet

THE extension of the national lockdown period by another two weeks is most welcome.

However, Zimbabweans should be reminded that opening up the formal sector does not mean that the coronavirus has been contained.

We must continue to observe various measures to stop the further spread of the virus.

Most people rely on public transport to go to work and while Government will ensure regular disinfection of the buses, we need to take extra safety measures.

There are those who would want to take the partial relaxation of the lockdown to aimlessly roam the Central Business District.

Such people must be arrested without fail. Where we have no reason to travel, let us stay in our homes and continue to observe social distance.

We must also take seriously the need to wear face masks because we are still at risk.

Cases of Covid-19 are increasing globally and Zimbabwe is also contributing its share.

There is need for every Zimbabwean to continue playing their part in making sure that we do not lose more lives and see an increase in new infections.

It is incumbent upon all of us to be responsible during this period.

Concerned

Article 2: Traditionalists flag local herbs in Covid-19 fight

Traditionalists flag local herbs in Covid-19 fight

 Andrew • SundayMail • May 3, 2020 •  0 Comments



Article 3: Covid-19 ravages aviation industry

Covid-19 ravages aviation industry

COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on the aviation industry. The 100-year-old industry is on life support: Herewith snippets.

- Virgin loses more than 3 000 people including 600 Pilots;
- Virgin Australia files for bankruptcy;
- Air Mauritius goes into administration
- South African Airways close to bankruptcy;
- you grounds 22 planes and fires 4 100 people;
- Ryanair grounds 113 planes and fires 900 pilots and 450 more in the coming months;
- Norwegian stops long-haul activity, returning 787s to lessors;
- SAS returns 14 planes and fires 520 pilots.
- Scandinavian states are studying a plan to liquidate Norwegian and SAS to rebuild a new company;
- Etihad cancels 18 orders for A350, grounds 10 A380 and 10 Boeing 787. Lays off 720 staff;
- Emirates grounds 38 A380s and cancels all orders for the Boeing 777x (150 aircraft, the largest order for this type). They "invite" all employees over 56 to retire;

- Wizzair returns 32 A320s and lays off 1,200 people, including 200 pilots, another wave of 430 layoffs planned in the coming months. Remaining employees' wages reduced by 30 percent;
- IAG (British Airways' parent company) abandons the takeover of Air Europa (and will pay €40 million compensation for that);
- IAG (Iberia) grounds 56 planes;
- IAG (British Airways) grounds 34 planes and looks to make up to 12 000 employees redundant;
- Luxair reduces its fleet by 50 percent (and associated redundancies);
- CSA abolishes its long-haul sector and keeps only 5 medium-haul aircraft;
- Eurowings goes into bankruptcy;
- Brussels Airline reduces its fleet by 50 percent (and associated redundancies);
- Lufthansa plans to ground 72 aircraft (in two instalments).
- Hop is studying the possibility of reducing fleet and staff by 50 percent;
- 60 new aircraft stored at Airbus with no buyers in sight (order cancellations) including 18 A350s;
- Experts forecast a minimum of 8 000 grounded planes by September.

Article 4: Covid-19: Don't overrule local herbs

Covid-19: Don't overrule local herbs

IN your previous issue, there was a story on testing the efficiency of local herbs in the fight against Covid-19.

This is one avenue that cannot be ignored and I think the ministry of health, pharmaceutical companies and traditional herbalists need to be working together to see how best they can utilise our own local herbs in this fight.

We cannot just sit around and wait for the West and other developed countries to come up with a vaccine or cure.

We might actually have herbs that are powerful enough to stop this virus and Government needs to invest in the research of such.

There is nothing wrong in research. In fact, we could be the saviour of the world.

There is a story that has been doing rounds that a certain scientist in Madagascar (although several countries are now claiming him) might have discovered a beverage that fights the virus.

With Remdesivir recently proving to be the solution against Covid-19 in the United States, I think we should up the search for a vaccine.

Citizen.

Article 9: Reawakening the human spirit in Covid-19 fight



Article 10: Surge in Covid-19 cases worrying

Surge in Covid-19 cases worrying

THE increase in Covid-19 cases is worrying. While the figures are rising in official quarantine facilities and the impression is that they are contained, this is no reason to celebrate. The risk of infection is growing by the day because we have people working in these centres who go back to their homes after work. They have high chances of being exposed and exposing their families and friends to the virus. Also, cases of people running away from quarantine centres should be taken seriously. Most of these people have not been accounted for and we are all guessing where they are and whom they have been contacting. I think the media is tiring fast in contin-

uously telling the audience about the threat posed by the disease. We are now in a new normal, but that should not mean everything is normal. Unnecessary movement should be discouraged. I was shocked last week to see vendors lining up an assortment of wares including shoes, woollen hats and cellphones in Harare central business district (CBD). The wanton disregard of facial masks in most residential areas is alarming. We are still in danger and Covid-19 is a reality.

Peter MUSAIGWA, Mbare.

APPENDIX D: CODING FRAMEWORK FOR THEMATIC & CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

RO1: To explore how The Sunday Mail and The Standard represented the proliferation of COVID-19 infodemic communication disorders

Thematic Codes (TA)

Code	Description	Sample indicators
MIS-REP	Representation of misinformation	Unverified claims, social media rumours
DIS-REP	Representation of disinformation	Deliberate distortion, politically motivated content
MAL-REP	Representation of malinformation	True info used to incite panic or fear
FAKE-NEWS	Use or discussion of the term “fake news”	Headlines or body text explicitly naming “fake news”
CONS-THE	Representation of conspiracy theories	5G, lab-leak, population control claims

CDA Codes

Code	Description	Analytical focus
CDA-ACTOR	Social actor representation	How sources are described (experts vs. “anti-vaxxers”)
CDA-LANG	Emotive or ideological language use	“reckless lies”, “truth seekers”, etc.
CDA-MODALITY	Certainty/uncertainty in claims	Use of “may”, “allegedly”, “definitely”
CDA-SOURCE	Attribution and authority	Whose voices dominate – state, experts, WHO, etc.

RO2: To identify and describe the elements of the COVID-19 infodemic the two newspapers identified

Thematic Codes (TA)

Code	Description	Sample indicators
INF-TYPE1	Misinformation elements	Exaggerated symptoms, wrong treatments
INF-TYPE2	Disinformation elements	Blame game, political misinformation
INF-TYPE3	Malinformation elements	Real information with harmful framing
INF-THEME	Mention of infodemic as a theme	Use of the term “infodemic”, information overload

CDA Codes

Code	Description	Analytical focus
CDA-INTEXT	Intertextual references	Mentions of other news, social media, gov. sources
CDA-SCAPE	Scapegoating and blame	Identifying who is blamed for misinformation
CDA-POL	Political/ideological bias	Language aligned with ruling party or opposition views

RO3: To identify and categorise dominant themes and frames

Thematic Codes (TA)

Code	Description	Sample indicators
THEME-PUBLIC	Public health narratives	Warnings, safety measures, vaccine info
THEME-POL	Political framing	Use of COVID-19 to justify political actions
THEME-CONF	Conflict frame	Public vs. government, or expert vs. myth
THEME-HOPE	Human interest / hope frame	Recovery stories, heroes, unity themes

CDA Codes

Code	Description	Analytical focus
CDA-FRAME	News framing strategy	Crisis frame, fear frame, reassurance frame
CDA-POS	Positionality of the newspaper	State-supportive vs. critical stance
CDA-VIS	Visual discourse	Images reinforcing panic or safety (if visuals are analysed)

RO4: To critically analyse whether and how the newspapers attempted to debunk or correct false information

Thematic Codes (TA)

Code	Description	Sample indicators
DEBUNK-STRAT	Debunking techniques	Fact-checking, myth-busting articles
CORRECTIVE-MOVE	Corrective framing or updates	"Earlier reports were incorrect..."
AWARENESS	Public education efforts	"What you should know about COVID-19 myths"

CDA Codes

Code	Description	Analytical focus
CDA-CORR	Corrective discourse	Use of conclusive evidence or scientific rebuttals
CDA-TRUTH	Representation of truth/knowledge	Who is positioned as knowing the truth?
CDA-DIALOGUE	Dialogic strategies	Use of Q&A, interviews, FAQs to counter fake news

CODEBOOK TEMPLATE AND DATA EXTRACTION MATRIX

Here is a sample codebook template followed by a data extraction matrix designed for a manual approach. These are tailored to your study on the media representation of the COVID-19 infodemic in *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*, using Thematic Analysis (TA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CODEBOOK TEMPLATE

Code name	Definition	Indicators/Examples	Relevant RQ/RO	Code Type
MIS-REP	Representation of misinformation	Articles reporting unverified treatments or COVID myths; Claims about COVID-19 cures without evidence, myths from social media	RO1, RQ1	TA
DIS-REP	Representation of disinformation	Politically motivated or deliberately false narratives; Falsehoods spread for political gain, e.g., claims that virus is a hoax	RO1, RQ1	TA
MAL-REP	Representation of malinformation	Factual info used to provoke fear (e.g., graphic death counts); Truth used harmfully: e.g., personal data leaks, exaggerated death stats	RO1, RQ1	TA
FAKE-NEWS	Explicit references to "fake news"	Articles warning about or propagating false news	RO1, RQ1	RO1, RQ1
CONS-THE	Representation of conspiracy theories/Conspiracy theories coverage	References to 5G, bioweapon theories, vaccine control	RO1, RO2, RQ3	TA
CDA- ACTOR/ CDA-SOC- ACTOR-POS	Social actor positioning - Positive representation of social actors	Use of "experts", "anti-vaxxers", "government officials" - Government, health officials as protectors/saviours	RO1, RO2, RO3, RO4	CDA
CDA-SOC- ACTOR-NEG	Negative representation of social actors	Social media users or opposition depicted as harmful	RO3, RO4	CDA
CDA-LANG	Ideologically loaded language - Ideological language use – fear	Use of fear-inducing or partisan terms like "reckless", "heroic" - "Deadly plague", "invisible enemy", "killing thousands"	RO3, RO4	CDA
CDA-LANG- HEROIC	Ideological language use – heroism	"Frontline heroes", "COVID warriors", national duty rhetoric	RO3	CDA
CDA- MODALITY	Use of certainty/uncertainty in language	"Definitely", "likely", "may be", "no evidence"	RO4	CDA
DEBUNK- PRESENT	Explicit efforts to debunk false info	"Myth vs Fact" sections, expert clarifications	RO4	TA
DEBUNK- MISSING	Absence of corrective discourse	No evidence of efforts to correct false info	RO4	TA
DEBUNK- STRAT	Debunking strategies used	Articles correcting previous info or myth-busting columns	RO4, RQ4	TA

CDA-CORR	Corrective discourse strategies	Quotes from WHO, medical professionals used to dismiss falsehoods	RO4	CDA
THEME-PUBLIC	Public health themes Public health education themes	Education campaigns, vaccine safety info, health warnings Vaccination safety, mask use, social distancing	RO2, RO3	TA
THEME-FEAR	Fear-inducing framing	Death tolls, panic headlines, emotional imagery	R03	TA
THEME-HOPE	Positive/resilient framing	Recovery stories, national unity, community support	RO3	TA
THEME-GOVT	Government action/inaction frame	Lockdowns, health regulations, enforcement reporting	RO2, RO3	TA
THEME-POL	Political themes and framing; Political blame/shield framing	Use of COVID to support political agendas or discredit opposition; Media blaming opposition or protecting the state	RO3	TA
CDA-INTERTEXT	Use of intertextual references	WHO guidelines, scientific data, use of quotes	RO3, RO4	CDA
CDA-OTHERING	Use of 'us vs them' rhetoric	Framing foreign nations, migrants, or political groups as threats	RO3	CDA

APPENDIX E: CERTIFICATE OF EDITING

Erna Jörgensen

Professional Language Editor and Survey Research Expert

CERTIFICATE OF EDITING

Title: AN ANALYSIS OF ZIMBABWEAN MAINSTREAM PRINT MEDIA REPRESENTATION
OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC INFODEMIC COMMUNICATION DISORDERS

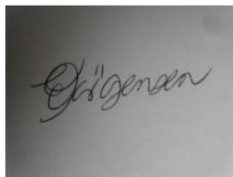
Author: Tapuwa Mahefu

Institution: University Of South Africa

Degree: Master Of Arts (Communication Science)

This certifies that the above document was proofread and edited by Erna Jörgensen and returned to the author on 27 January 2026.

The document was edited for proper English language, grammar, punctuation, spelling, inconsistencies, and overall style, according to the guidelines of the institution. The editor endeavoured not to change the author's intended meaning, and all amendments were tracked with Microsoft Word "Track Changes" which the author had the right to accept or reject. The final document remains that of the author.



27 January 2026

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The Copy-editing and Proofreading Course (SA Writers' College)
Bachelor of Arts Honours in Social Behavioural Studies around HIV AIDS (Unisa)
Certificate in Marketing Management and Marketing Research (Unisa Bureau of Market Research)
Diplôme de Langue Française (Alliance Française, Paris, France)

APPENDIX F: TURNITIN REPORT

Similarity Report

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