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Roux, Erene

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The Dissemination of News on WhatsApp: A study of undergraduate students in South Africa and their motivations for sharing news on WhatsApp

By Erene Roux

2397613

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of the University of Witwatersrand's Master of Arts by Research in Journalism and Media Studies

Johannesburg, March 2023

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts by Research in the Department of Journalism, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.



14 th of March 2023

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Chapter 1: Purpose and Significance of the Study

This chapter delves into the purpose and significance of the study, focusing on the examination of gatekeeping dynamics within the context of how younger people engage with news on WhatsApp.

It is now easier than ever for anyone to create and share news and information (Welbers and Opgenhaffen, 2018). In today's increasingly digital and connected world, the news is no longer solely produced and circulated by traditional journalists and organisations (also known as legacy media) who usually follow a “similar set of established norms and routines for gathering and producing news” (Welbers, 2016: 2-8). There are, rather, numerous independent ‘gatekeepers’ of news. Imagine a gatekeeper as a person or thing that holds the keys to granting or denying access to something. They have the power to decide who gets in and who's left out. The most prominent examples of independent gatekeepers of news in today’s media landscape include Facebook’s algorithm (Koene, 2016) and Google’s search engine (Bui, 2010). And in addition to the emergence of these gatekeepers, we've also witnessed a surge in the sharing of news through end-to-end encrypted instant messaging platforms like Telegram, Signal, Facebook Messenger, iMessage, and WhatsApp (Newman et al., 2019). While these applications provide users with the opportunity to customise their information experiences and reach a global audience, they also contribute to the spread of fake news, disinformation, and hoaxes, influencing people's interpretations of daily events (West, 2017). Fake news can be many things, but it is essentially defined as the spread of information that's intentionally false, with the sole aim of deceiving people. It's worth noting that the term 'fake news' has faced criticism. As highlighted by Ireton and Posetti (2018) fake news has transformed into an emotionally charged and weaponised term, employed to undermine and discredit journalism. As a result, researchers prefer alternative terms such as misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation and disinformation encompass intentionally false or misleading information intended to deceive,

including propaganda distributed by government organisations (Ireton and Posetti, 2018). For the purpose of this study, the term fake news is utilised to encompass both misinformation and disinformation. This choice of terminology allows me to address the broader spectrum of false or misleading information that can potentially mislead or deceive an audience. By adopting the term 'fake news,' I acknowledge its commonly understood connotation and its relevance to the research context. Some scholars suggest that there has been a tremendous increase in false or misleading information over the last couple of years (West, 2017). This has ultimately prompted journalists, researchers, governments and media organisations to ask important questions about information control and the selection and censorship of content (Vos and Thomas, 2018). With the acceleration of fake news and conversations about tighter gatekeeping mechanisms, it is relevant to ask: what and how are individuals sharing news on Whatsapp, and what inspires online users to click the forward button on WhatsApp?

Understanding the dissemination of news on closed instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp is unfortunately not a straightforward process due to increased privacy methods that keep communications secure (Consumer Action, 2020). Over the last couple of years, people have started to avoid disseminating information on public platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram where they are constantly watched and targeted (Dotto et al., 2019). People realised that sharing information in public spaces can expose them to unwanted attention and a variety of potential repercussions (Consumer Action, 2020). People can, for example, lose their jobs as a result of inebriated or poorly thought-out posts on Facebook (Dotto et al., 2019). People losing their jobs after sharing social media posts that violate company policy or contain confidential information has become a real possibility. A company in the United States, for instance, fired a woman over a series of “boudoir” photographs that were posted on Facebook. In the photos that went viral for its views on “body positivity”, the woman wears a swimsuit bottom and a strapless top, which ultimately “concerned” the company she works for (Torres, 2017). The company dismissed the woman,

saying that it was “inappropriate” and that it reflects badly on “a family-oriented company” (Torres, 2017). People are further worried about being monitored by third parties on open networks. Facebook, for example, facilitates “dark ads” and marketing strategies of politicians to “spread awareness, raise money, generate leads, organise events, run online ads, and update supporters on political campaign-related issues” (Bode, 2016 in Hazari, 2022: 21). Facebook ultimately allows marketing managers to target very specific groups through its advertising product, such as “women aged between 32-42 who live in Raleigh-Durham, have children, have a graduate degree, are Jewish and like Kamala Harris’ Facebook page” (Dotto et al., 2019: online). These “dark ads” are one of the features that pushed individuals towards WhatsApp to disseminate news and information (Newman, 2019) as “only you and the person you're communicating with can read or listen to what is sent, and nobody in between, not even WhatsApp” (WhatsApp Help Center, 2022: online). Algorithmic influence is, however, not only limited to news content, but extends into wider forms of “oppression”, according to researcher, Safiya Umoja Noble (2021). As search engines and their affiliated entities such as Facebook continue to gain significance, Noble uncovered an underlying culture of racism and sexism in the formation of online discoverability. In 2011, Noble Googled “Black Girls” to find ideas to entertain her daughter, but instead stumbled on pornography. This prompted her to embark on an extensive investigation into the workings of Google and its failure to provide a platform for a diverse range of ideas, identities, and activities (Noble, 2021). Data scientist Cathy O'Neil also shed light on the perpetuation of inequality by algorithms. In her book titled "Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality," O'Neil (2016) argues that software systems increasingly dictating our lives are infused with human prejudice, misconceptions, and biases. For instance, algorithms seek out patterns. When assessing job applications, algorithms tend to favour characteristics that have historically led to success, often favouring white males. This predisposition can inadvertently filter out women and individuals from diverse racial backgrounds (McGlinchey and Toomey, 2016). Dotto et al. (2019) note that the

move towards closed messaging applications is a pivot to privacy and essentially “only a transition back to the norm, with conversations involving smaller groups of people, especially those with whom you have a higher level of trust or affinity” (Dotto et al., 2019: online). This pivot has, however, made it extremely difficult to track and analyse information and fake news. There is simply “no provenance, [...] no metadata, [...] no way of knowing where the rumours [or news] started and how they travelled through the network” (Dotto et al., 2019: online).

In 2015, a non-profit company in the United States, ‘First Draft’ (2023), made it their mission to fight false information online and share practical and ethical guides to better understand the “challenges of digital journalism in the modern age”. In one of these guides, ‘First Draft’s Dotto et al. (2019: online) stated that it is important to “examine messages shared on instant messaging apps — such as WhatsApp — to have a greater understanding of the impact of messages that travel between trusted connections”. Millions of people are sharing these messages, but it is young people, who are, in particular, embracing new communication technologies. In 2022, the Reuters Institute’s Digital News Report found that young people’s news habits and attitudes have shifted towards newer platforms such as TikTok and WhatsApp and social networks have steadily surpassed news websites as the primary source for younger audiences overall (Eddy, 2022). To fully unpack the dissemination of news among young audiences, It is ultimately important to consider the content of messages as well as these individuals who are now in a position to have a significant influence on other people’s “awareness of issues and the interpretation of these issues” (Welbers, 2016: 1; Welbers and Opgenhaffen, 2018). It is for these reasons that Welbers (2016: 1) outlines that individuals have been “conceptualised as gatekeepers in the digital era, as they have gatekeeping authority over the communication channels through which news enters society”. Additionally, the audience’s gatekeeping influence is gaining momentum (Welbers, 2016; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). In the past, the audience “had little or no opportunity to express their views beyond their direct social circles” (Welbers, 2016: 1). Now they can publish and

share content on social media and instant messaging applications, actively read the news and select the particular stories that relate to their interests (Welbers, 2016). As a result, gatekeepers receive more feedback from their audiences, potentially increasing their influence in the process (Welbers, 2016; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). It is therefore important to identify “the most influential gatekeepers" and examine the channels by which people communicate to fully understand “how the seats of powerful gatekeepers have shifted” to the audience in the modern age (Welbers, 2016: 1-8). The object of this dissertation is to build a better understanding of how students use WhatsApp to engage with news content, as well as the internal processes and external forces that influence young people (particularly undergraduate students from a tertiary institution in Johannesburg, South Africa) and their news-sharing habits and thus analyse this research question fully: When these undergraduate students share bits of information — such as a news link on WhatsApp — do they, in turn, become a gatekeeper of news?

Changes in the dissemination of news: From Facebook to WhatsApp

Events occur everywhere, all of the time — some more newsworthy than others (Shoemaker et al., 2013). Some of these events are turned into news items. Traditionally, what becomes news is decided by journalists who turn events into information pieces that will fit into a newspaper or get published on a website. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) state that almost all news work involves gatekeeping where questions about “what are we going to write about?” and “what will we include and exclude?” central to the topic at hand. These decisions are essentially explored in and through gatekeeping. Since 1951 various descriptions of gatekeeping theory have been applied to social media developments such as Facebook and Twitter (Ukpong, 2013). Scholars also completed studies on the sharing of fake news, disinformation and misinformation on WhatsApp (Ahmad and Asghar, 2021) as well as how the news is disseminated in South Africa, particularly among young people (Madrid-Morales et al., 2021). And while scholars studied gatekeeping and social media

platforms or instant messaging applications such as WeChat (Li et al., 2020) and how "gatekeeping continues to evolve, modify and shift in tandem with media and our culture" (Bro and Wallberg, 2014; Chin-Fook and Simmonds, 2011), there seems to be little research about undergraduate students in South Africa and the gatekeeping mechanisms that take place when they share information on WhastApp itself. To understand how the dissemination of news takes place on WhatsApp, it is important to first understand the very nature of WhatsApp and whether or not it is considered to be a social media platform or just an instant messaging application. Peter Turay (2016: online) asks the question: "When was the last time you said 'Oh, let me text you later on?' Even if you did say that, were you referring to SMS or a quick-and-easy messaging app from your smart device?". Turay (2016) points out that WhatsApp and instant messaging applications have become integral to our lives. That's also why Ibrahim (2015) and Achor and Nnabuko (2019) define WhatsApp as a social media platform as it is an "online network of interacting, engaging, and connecting with virtual users, using particular ideas and content to generate and nurture relationships" (Turay, 2016: online). WhatsApp is also considered to be an online network (Sutjipto et. al., 2022) as well as a microblogging site where individuals can share quick updates and status messages (Achor and Nnabuko, 2019). More importantly, WhatsApp has become one of the "most used messaging applications for news", marking a "potential technological change" for journalism studies (Boczek and Koppers, 2019: 126). For example, news consumption essentially changed from Facebook to WhatsApp and other closed instant messaging applications. According to some indicators, news consumption on Facebook peaked in 2016 and has declined, especially among younger groups (Park et al., 2018) marking a transition period for individuals moving from public places to closed places with more privacy (Dotto et al., 2019). In South Africa, Facebook was the second-most used platform by users in the third quarter of 2021 after WhatsApp (Park et al., 2018). The results greatly differ from 2019, when Facebook was the top social media platform for news in South Africa (Park et al., 2018). Somaiya (2014) argues that Facebook has been turned into a powerful gatekeeper because the website constantly tweaks its algorithm (a set of calculations to decide what

content people see) to control how news is distributed. In 2018, Facebook made significant algorithmic changes to allow users to see “more from friends, family, and groups" and less from "businesses, brands, and media” (Boyd 2019: online). Because of this, news organisations were forced to manipulate the Facebook algorithm to increase traffic to their news stories (Somaiya, 2014) by writing captivating headlines for instance (Tandoc, 2014). In 2018, Vos and Thomas referred to Facebook as the “number one gatekeeper for news”, with its founder and CEO, Mark Zuckerberg also saying that "what it means for a technology company to be a gatekeeper for news and information remains a necessary conversation" (Broby, 2021: online). However, in 2022, WhatsApp became much more than an instant messaging application when it was referred to as a “mobile communication tool” for the production and consumption of news. WhatsApp ultimately changed the way people produce, distribute and consume news (Boczek and Koppers, 2019: 129). Two fundamental differences set WhatsApp and Facebook apart. Apart from the privacy it offers, WhatsApp differs from Facebook in that it does not sort and distribute information based on an algorithm, nor does it feature any targeted advertisements (Olson, 2018); WhatsApp users rather have to select and filter information themselves and decide whether or not to share a news link, image, text or video with their network of friends (Bell, 2019). This puts WhatsApp users at the centre of “personal information networks in multiple, intersecting content flows curated by various actors in varying proportions” (Thorson and Wells, 2015b: 2).

Recent developments of gatekeeping theory

In 2009, Shoemaker and Vos wrote about the significance of gatekeeping, saying that the practice needs to be taken into account in theories of social change and stability. Vos and Heinderyckx (2015) consider recent developments that have increasingly changed the dynamics of gatekeeping theory. The first refers to the “nearly boundless space for publishing online news content” which means that “news is no longer solely produced and circulated” by legacy media such as television, radio or the press, “but also finds its way to the audience through online channels” such as WhatsApp (Welbers, 2016: 2). Seuri and

Ikäheimo (2022: 4) refers to this as a “decentralisation of power” that forms only one part of the picture. Not only were legacy media forced to create websites and news portals tailored for the internet specifically (Tandoc, 2014), but “tech companies [...] have grown into global giants and the gatekeepers of the digital age” (Seuri and Ikäheimo, 2022: 1). News portals — such as Google News and Flipboard — were designed to gather news items from various internet news sites (Singh, 2022). In this case, algorithms were set up to determine which news items are displayed first, which links will perform best, how quickly they do so, what category they belong to and so much more (Hokkanen, 2019). Additionally, an algorithm generates probabilities that are then altered with predetermined rules to determine the newsworthiness of a story (Hokkanen, 2019). The audience can personalise Google News' homepage and act as their own gatekeepers by requesting more or less of a category and having the option to rearrange the categories on the page or download the Flipboard application and “discover and share news stories that shape” their own world (Flipboard, 2019). Readers now have the ability to tailor content to their own interests, by, for example, requesting more international news and less lifestyle information (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016). These "more or less" rules and the order in which they appear on the webpage are subsequently turned into algorithms by specific readers and the news portal's servers keep track of them. As a result, the server can recognise the reader and their preferences when they return to the site (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016). This audience influence has had a direct effect on the routine level of journalists, who are now crafting reports around what they think the audience will find interesting (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014), with the hopes of their article appearing on the month’s “most read” list. The audience thus serves as an example of an “extra-media influence” that has a direct impact on the news agenda (Shoemaker and Reese, 2016) with this influence getting stronger every day (Yang and Peng, 2020). In today’s media environment, readers also have the option of sharing an article with a large group or a single recipient via a range of different channels such as WhatsApp when visiting a certain website or reading an article published on *The New York Times* website, for example (The New York Times, 2018). This means that media organisations do not only

have additional insights into what readers are reading but what they are sharing with their individual networks (Singer, 2014). This is why Singer (2014) believes that audience members are now part of a “secondary gatekeeping” process — which begins when the primary gatekeeping process in mass media ends. And just like previous studies on the editor or individual gatekeeper, who preferred one topic to another (White,1951), readers have personal preferences. Heinderyckx and Vos (2015: 37) notes that this has left “an entire industry [...] constantly experimenting with new ways to process and repurpose content so that media can meet these personalised content expectations…they stretch and manhandle gatekeeping through trial and error, becoming a significant factor in shaping the evolution of gatekeeping”.

Another factor that is shaping the evolution of gatekeeping in the digital age (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2015), refers to “the increasing audience participation in news” as social media sites or WhatsApp allow “audience members to outpace traditional business models for journalism, as it breaks information and live photographs from events” (Tutheridge, 2017: online). This has created what Seuri and Ikäheimo (2022: 4) refer to as a “hybrid media environment” where “information moves within and between various networks, and where practically anyone can be a receiver of information but also a sender and producer of information”. In this media environment, legacy media as well as WhatsApp users and other individuals, constantly evaluate the importance of events [and] regularly make decisions about the bits of information that they receive (Shoemaker et al., 2013):

> “We are participant observers in our own lives, continually making decisions about bits of information. Whereas once we were able to tell only our social circles about news that was relevant to us, those who have the technology and skills to use social media are gatekeepers for people in larger and larger circles” (Shoemaker et al., 2013: 1).

It is these decisions that are at the heart of gatekeeping theory: between the “occurrence of an event” and its publication as news, many decisions are made where anyone who has information about the event has the potential to act as a gatekeeper (Shoemaker et al., 2013). WhatsApp users, for example, can produce content after experiencing an event firsthand and share it with their individual networks. WhatsApp users can also source news links from traditional sources and share them as a WhatsApp status. In both instances, these WhatsApp users can withhold and restrict certain information. WhatsApp users are therefore “consciously or unconsciously changing the information” or withholding information “as if it were merely squeezed from a gatekeeping sponge” (Shoemaker et al., 2013: 1). Shoemaker et al. (2013) theorise that there are now many audiences on social media and on instant messaging applications, some of which are more powerful than others, closely paying attention to content to determine what might be significant enough to share. This is significant in and of itself as this allows WhatsApp users to influence the recipient’s worldview (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2015; Shoemaker and Reese, 2014; Vos and Thomas, 2018) as information that passes through the “gates” — against information that is stopped by the gate — affect how people experience their social realities. Restricting information at the gate essentially stops the flow of information. In other words, people won't be aware of what the media or in some cases their network of friends on WhatsApp isn't telling them (if they haven't witnessed the event first-hand, of course). In some cases, the audience produces the news themselves. The audience now has the ability to go to protests, for example, take videos, conduct interviews and get first-hand experiences of the protest before sharing it on social media and WhatsApp. Researchers commonly label this as 'citizen journalism' (Wall, 2020; Nah and Chung, 2020), wherein the incorporation of user-generated content (UGC) into news segments, notably videos, has become a prevalent practice in newsrooms across the globe. Bruns (2016) writes that UGC has gained widespread acceptance and utilisation across various sectors. Furthermore, it has spurred the development of diverse business models for content hosting and empowering users to

become producers of information and monetise their own creations. However, while UGC and citizen journalism have gained widespread acceptance, it does have real-world implications for societies. A notable example of utilising citizen journalism to address the information gap in rural communities is the Sinelizwi project by 'Food for Mzansi', an agricultural news platform based in South Africa. Recognising the lack of access to locally relevant news in rural areas, 'Food for Mzansi' took the initiative to establish the Sinelizwi citizen journalism project. This initiative aimed to empower citizens from all nine provinces of South Africa by providing them with training and resources to share the untold stories of rural communities and agriculture. Meanwhile, in 2021, the role of social media in instigating and escalating the violence and chaos that initially emerged as 'Free Zuma' protests and eventually evolved into a complex state of anarchy is evident. During the period in question, demonstrators and looters flooded the streets of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa in response to the unrest, which was initially triggered by demands for the release of former President Jacob Zuma from prison (Mokoka, 2021). It was found that 12 central Twitter accounts were responsible for initiating the destructive acts and chaos during the protests while other misleading posts circulating on social media further fueled the violence (Mokoka, 2021). Shoemaker and Vos (2009) reference Bagdikian (1983) who said that the ability to control the flow of information is one of the most crucial tools in "controlling" society. For Bagdikian (1983: 226) providing people with "ideas and information" is just as important as giving them the choice to vote in a democratic society. The president of the Knight Foundation, a non-profit foundation that provides grants for journalism in the United States reiterated that "knowledge is power" and to be "in sync with knowledge [...] you capture the power of communities and the power of democracy" (Ibargüen, 2017: online). It is for this reason that scholars have continued to question the flow and control of information (Ibargüen, 2017: online), and even more so in the digital age, where the internet has made it possible to reach a much larger audience than in the past (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). According to Welbers (2016: 2) this boils down to the "political impact of the internet", "most notably the dissertation that the internet has democratised political communication",

particularly by “increasing the diversity of gatekeepers” and offering a “diverse range of viewpoints”. The internet creates a diversity that is “a fundamental democratic value” with the power to help individuals find information and form opinions in society (Welbers, 2016: 13). According to Udenze (2013: 1) it took legacy media a long time to gain its status as the “fourth estate due to its watchdog function on the three arms of government - executive, legislature, and judiciary”. However, with the advent of the internet, “the news ecology has metamorphosed into yet another sphere” called the ‘fifth estate’. The internet and applications such as WhatsApp subsequently gave “people the power to express themselves at scale [...] alongside the other power structures of society” (Ingram and Collins, 2019: online). In 2019, Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg said that “people no longer have to rely on traditional gatekeepers in politics or media to make their voices heard”, [...] but that platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp “have decentralised power by putting it directly into people’s hands” (Ingram and Collins, 2019: online). It is this decentralised activity that gives each individual and community member a small amount of power, allowing them, for instance, to question or contest the community's norms (Wallace, 2018). In other words, the previously ‘gated’ also have power in the digital age and can exercise power by creating a WhatsApp group(s) for example. Lize Swartz (2020), a South African researcher, considered this decentralised activity on WhatsApp in South Africa in response to the urban water supply crisis in 2018. She studied how residents of three South African towns reacted when their municipal water supply was cut off (Swartz, 2020). Water users in these towns were able to communicate with one another via WhatsApp about the collapse, “including the date that the municipal water supply would be cut off, where they could get water after that, and who needed assistance” (Swartz, 2020: online). When the water ran out, people were able to coordinate at a national level via WhatsApp to gather and deliver bottled and bulk water to towns in need. In this case, users produced and shared knowledge about the causes of the water crisis and how to adapt as a result, informing others of specific strategies on WhatsApp (Swartz, 2020). Ritchie (2020) further considers how Somali women refugees used WhatsApp to share critical health information before and during the covid-19 pandemic.

Before the pandemic, Ritchie (2020) created a WhastApp group with Somali refugee women in Nairobi, Kenya. The group initially took on a social dimension with women sharing inspirational quotes, but soon afterwards turned into a coordination tool when the women started a small business (Ritchie, 2020). However, during the covid-19 outbreak in Kenya, the WhatsApp group became a critical tool and "forum for situational updates and social support" (Ritchie, 2020: online). In this case, WhatsApp not only facilitated the dissemination of critical information, but also added to the importance of news (and diversity of news) for societies, shining a spotlight on the reasons why "keeping information hidden" can have disastrous effects (Welbers, 2016: 11). In these instances highlighted by Swartz (2020) and Ritchie (2020), not knowing about additional sources of water, or the covid-19 outbreak in Kenya, could have posed a serious health risk to citizens.

Examining current social systems and gatekeeping theory

Heinderyckx and Vos (2016: 31) do warn that it is "premature to say that a new digital age has eclipsed legacy media, particularly when it comes to the production of news". In this case, "lessons should be learned from the failed predictions of the demise of the paper book, which were *supposed* to be taken over by e-books" (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016: 31). Not every story is published and information is not equally available to all, which is why gatekeeping theory remains relevant: it "allows us to address important questions that merit public attention and debate" (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016: 33). Apart from the issue of fake news, the creation of new digital tools appears to have contributed to the emergence of new types of press criticism as critics work to discredit the journalistic norms that will influence future reporting (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016). There is no doubt that there are a variety of topics that are subject to this gatekeeping pressure from advocates, such as, for instance, pressures placed on journalists covering climate change (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016). Rodney Tiffen detailed how Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* has covered climate change (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016). According to Tiffen, the owner ── in this case, Rupert Murdoch ── acts as a social institution gatekeeper, swaying newspaper reporting to be more

critical of climate change. This emphasises the argument that news coverage in newspapers cannot be understood without a gatekeeping framework. This also brings Heinderyckx and Vos (2016) to one of their main points: Everyone in a news ecosystem (legacy media and new communication tools) are affected by the social structures and social values, attitudes, and ideas that typically accompany social systems. Therefore, research must consider the parallels and discrepancies in news coverage across nations or other types of social systems. Chapter 3 of this thesis fully examines gatekeeping to understand "how gatekeeping has evolved" (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016: 37). Understanding gatekeeping has, however, become much more complex (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009) in that some scholars (Bastos et al., 2013; Bruns 2005) believe that gatekeeping has become obsolete since "journalism lost its monopoly on news production and distribution" (Erzikova 2018: 2). Given its connection to legacy media, it is not surprising that the gatekeeping theory has been critiqued: After all, whereas editors could only fit one news story out of five in the newspaper in previous decades, the internet paved the way for endless news stories and other information to be published daily. However, this doesn't mean that gatekeeping has become obsolete (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009; Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016; Bro, 2019). As Steele (2017: 42) notes gatekeeping theory simply "attempts to explain the flow of information messages through communication channels and the spread of that information to the public". Its main function has thus not changed:

> "The gatekeeping function refers to those realities of the social, physical, and digital world that inhibit or advance the flow of information....it is these realities that have led scholars to seek to understand and explain the processes by which 'tips, hunches, and bits of information ... get turned into news and how that news is framed, emphasised, placed, and promoted' and how it reaches a reader, listener, or viewer" (Vos, 2015: 4: Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016: 32).

That is also why Shoemaker and Vos (2009) gave rise to a revised gatekeeping concept by adding three elements to the "classic" gatekeeping theory: the mass media, the audience

who filters information and shares it with their network, and information sources (experts, witnesses). The updated model "demonstrates the complexity of the contemporary gatekeeping process in which information flows back and forth among the channels rather than being one-way, top-down" (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 128). In other words, “not only reporters and editors but also online readers are (potentially) active actors in the process of what becomes news” (Erzikova, 2018: 2). Concepts such as "algorithmic gatekeeping", "secondary gatekeeping”, “network gatekeeping” and more also suggest that the gatekeeping theory is still very much applicable in mass media (Perreault, 2022). “Algorithmic gatekeeping” see search entities such as Google, Flipboard and Facebook’s algorithm act as “editorial gatekeepers that affect the nature and range of news content that users have access to” (Koene, 2016: online). “Secondary gatekeeping”, on the other hand, is the outcome of a “two-step gatekeeping” process, in which users decide to increase or decrease an item's visibility for a secondary audience after initial editorial decisions have been made (Singer, 2014). The Network Gatekeeping Theory (NGT) also adopts a fresh perspective on gatekeeping: By updating conventional ideas and transforming them into a networked theory of gatekeeping, it offers new definitions of gatekeeping and gatekeepers and includes multidisciplinary aspects from information systems, political science, and sociology (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). These examples suggest that the digital environment provides the audience with “increased autonomy and alternatives, or opportunities to choose between two or more courses or propositions” (Erzikova, 2018: 3). There are thus an array of actors who continue to curate, select, organises and filter information into a “collection of manageable size, one that in its smaller shape fulfils an informational or strategic need more efficiently than the buzzing flow of all available options” (Thorson and Wells, 2015b: 313).

Chapter 2: Using WhatsApp to share and restrict news

This literature review highlights prior research conducted on various aspects of WhatsApp. Specifically, I explore the motivations behind news sharing on WhatsApp, the interplay between fake news and WhatsApp, and the profound influence exerted by emerging gatekeepers within the WhatsApp ecosystem and new media. In addition, this chapter delves into the ways in which students and other generations utilise WhatsApp as a platform for engaging with news content.

What's up with WhatsApp

The emergence of WhatsApp had a major impact on how people disseminate news (Masip et al., 2021; Welbers and Opgenhaffen, 2018). WhatsApp was founded by Jan Koum and Brian Acton in 2009 to provide real-time information about the people in your address book (Olson, 2014). The first version did not have a messaging feature and only had a 'status message' feature available, such as "at the gym", "at school", "at the movies", "at work" or "battery about to die" (See Annexure A) (WhatsApp, 2017). What was supposed to be "What's Up", turned into WhatsApp: an instant messaging application and a "powerful tool", giving each user the ability to "reach somebody halfway across the world instantly on a device that is always with you" (Olson, 2014: online). WhatsApp was the first instant messaging application that only required a phone number to add someone to a network. Additionally, it was accessible on all phones (including Nokia and BlackBerry) at the time (Macwan, 2016). Before the launch of WhatsApp, BlackBerry's BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) was popular among smartphone users as an instant messaging service, but it only operated between BlackBerry devices (Olson, 2014). Masip et al. (2021: 1073) later studied news engagement on WhatsApp and found that WhatsApp became one of the "most popular applications for sending messages to individual users or sharing messages in groups". This is due to its affordability, ease of use and multimedia functionalities (Udenze, 2020). As Freyne et al. (2017: 833) point out, smartphones are usually always on and kept close to users where "interactions [...] are completed on the go". WhatsApp also makes use of the

same internet connection as email and web browsing and therefore only requires a wireless (Wi-Fi) connection or data (WhatsApp Help Center, 2022). And even though data charges apply, WhatsApp data charges are low (Magee, 2021). Another factor to consider is WhatsApp's multimedia functionalities. Before instant messaging applications, users had to install multiple applications for different uses (such as Skype for video calls) or rely on Short Messaging System (SMS) (Macwan, 2016). WhatsApp, therefore, integrated voice calls, video calls, voice notes, and text messages for ease of use (Macwan, 2016). Users can use WhatsApp to communicate with their closest confidants in a private space (Masip et. al., 2021) plus create and share information with WhatsApp groups to reach several people (WhatsApp Help Center, 2022). Masip et al. (2021) found that there are two different types of WhatsApp groups on WhatsApp, the first being groups in which users are added for a specific reason. These groups can range from anything between a sports club, neighbourhood or homeowner association, a book club and more. These groups self-regulate because content that deviates from the group's primary goal is flagged as inappropriate and is usually removed. This correlates with a study by Zhu et al. (2022: 1) who found that even though instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp "foster intimate and controlled conversations within small groups and provide safe social settings for political conversations", young people do not necessarily talk about politics in large groups as it is too "personal, offensive, divisive, and depressing". This can, naturally, lead to conflict, and a "negative group culture" which are just some of the reasons why WhatsApp group administrators set up group rules in the first place. Secondly, Masip et al. (2021) found that there are groups that are not set up for specific reasons and consist of family or friend groups, for example. These groups usually share something other than just one specific reason and are "ideologically homogeneous" and "act as echo chambers" as people "tend to hang out with people who are on your wavelength [...] and share your ideology more or less" (Masip et. al., 2021: 1075). More importantly, the news is more likely to flow better as they are not self-regulated, Masip et al. (2021) note:

> “Users of these groups are constantly commenting on different issues. Such groups are less focused, and their content may entail almost any subject” (Masip et. al., 2021: 1073).

Users also follow clear trends when it comes to WhatsApp groups (Masip et. al., 2021). Not only do family groups take top priority and in most cases, are replied to immediately, but WhatsApp users are precise when it comes to the categorisation of WhatsApp groups: There is a sense of urgency when it comes to communication with family or close-friend groups, while secondary groups such as messages from a homeowner’s association or next-door neighbours “silenced” or “stored” until the individual has free time (Masip et. al., 2021: 1073). This is also true for the dissemination of news content as Masip et. al. (2021) found that users tend to trust news content sent from primary contacts much more than secondary connections. There is, therefore, a hierarchy of sorts with the importance of news “hierarchised depending on who sent it” (Masip et. al., 2021: 1074). However, this oftentimes “unfounded trust in the sender, amplifies the scope of misleading information” (Masip et. al., 2021: 1074).

Apart from individual contacts and WhatsApp groups, WhatsApp founder Jan Koum, wrote a blog article, describing why the instant messaging platform decided to introduce a new status feature in 2017 (WhatsApp, 2017). The status feature “allows users to share “end-to-end encrypted photos and videos” (that disappear after 24 hours) “with their friends and contacts on WhatsApp” (WhatsApp, 2017: online). The improved status feature was intended to give users the ability to “keep your friends who use WhatsApp easily updated in a fun, private and simple way” (WhatsApp, 2017). In 2023, however, the status feature became much more advanced, giving users the option to select who exactly sees a status update in their personal WhatsApp network, or the option to share a “voice status” or a “status reaction” (See Annexure B) (WhatsApp, 2023). WhatsApp users also have the option to keep up to date with their close connections of friends by never missing a status update

by using the “status profile ring update” which is “present around your contact’s profile picture whenever they share an update” (WhatsApp, 2023: online).

A generational effect?

The South African youth between the ages of 18 and 25 are particularly relevant to this study. As this age group represents a significant portion of the population (11.3%, according to Kemp, 2022), their perspectives, behaviours, and experiences with platforms like WhatsApp can provide valuable insights into today’s news-sharing habits. The South African youth not only has a significant economic influence but accounts for 6.56% (male) and 7.89% (female) of registered voters (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2023) in the country. This demographic also wields considerable purchasing power driven by cash-based transactions. Moreover, their influence extends beyond their own spending, as they also impact the purchasing decisions of their parents and caregivers (Crouth, 2021). Additionally, as of 2021, the age group with the highest representation on social media platforms in South Africa is individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 as well as 25 and 34 (Statista Research Department 2023). It is therefore important to note that the dissemination of news is different between generations (Ofcom, 2022; Olsen et al., 2022; Ketola, 2022). For Gumpert and Cathcart (1985), generations emerge as a result of shared experiences with specific media technologies or media content. In this instance, the media generational effect can help in explaining the differences between younger and older generations and “the quality control of their media and information diet” (Olsen et al., 2022: 192). A study by Matassi et. al. (2019), for example, analysed WhatsApp to examine how people make use of its features and develop practices applicable to their experiences and needs. They found that for young people in Argentina, “sociability is mainly produced in groups with friends” and “enacted through an always-on availability”, while adults between 35 and 59 years old and adults 60 years and older use it for “work and care responsibilities” or simply to stay in touch with younger generations respectively (Matassi et. al., 2019). Masip et. al. (2021: 1064) state that it is clear “the use of WhatsApp differs depending on the users’ life stage” and that “news in

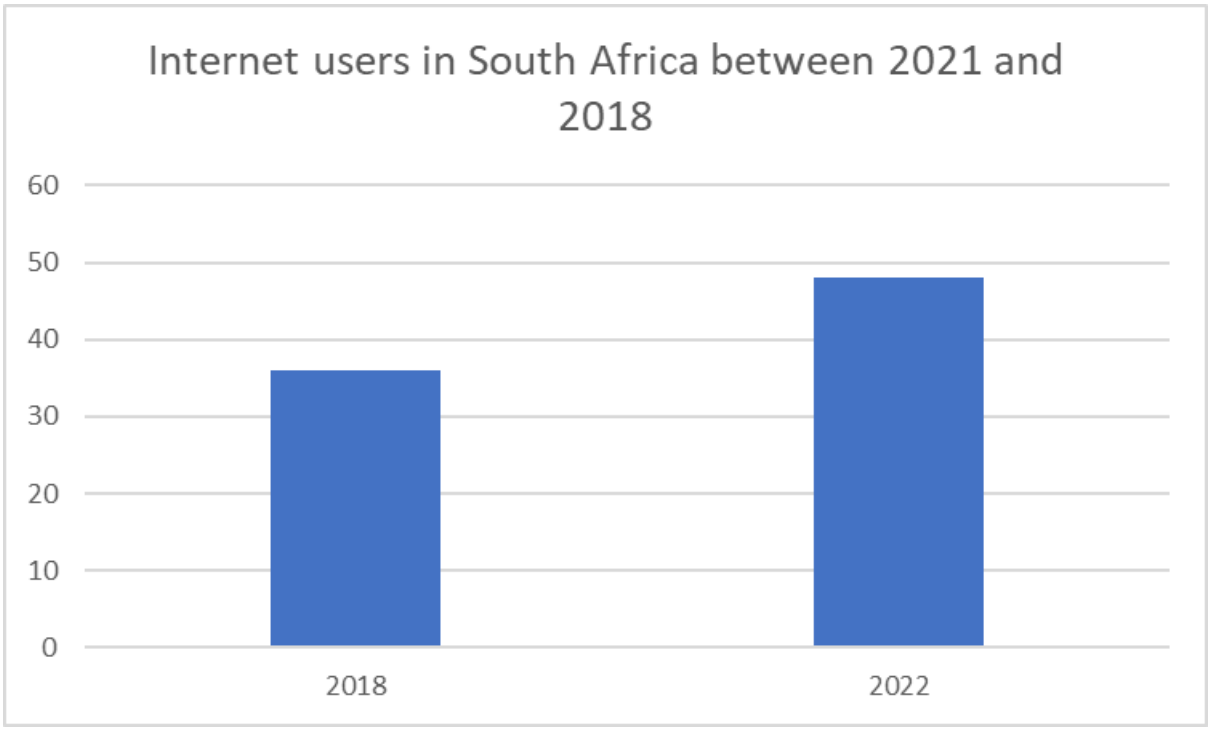
closed networks cannot only be understood in relation to users' individual behaviour but also as a social practice that takes on meaning at a group level". For example, a 2022 study on the dissemination of news in the United Kingdom demonstrates that young adults and middle-aged adults have different needs and experiences (Masip et. al., 2021). According to the United Kingdom's regulatory and competition authority for the broadcasting, telecommunications and postal industries, younger people are turning to Instagram (29%) and TikTok (7%) for news rather than television or traditional newspapers and outlets (Ofcom, 2022). WhatsApp was found to be the seventh most used app among young adults (between the age of 16 to 24-years-old) (Ofcom, 2022) "due to its end-to-end encryption" (Koga, 2021: online) and "people's desire for privacy" (WhatsApp Help Center, 2021: online), as well as its affordance of personalisation (Masip et al., 2021). WhatsApp essentially increased in popularity as a platform for news among adults (above the age of 16 and above) growing from 15% in 2018 to 31% in 2022 (Ofcom, (2022). Younger people are seemingly likely to feel more optimistic about the information environment and are less "dependent" on traditional media (Olsen et al., 2022), while individuals over 45 of age, for example, are more supportive of journalistic gatekeeping (Dusek, 2021). As Ketola (2022: online) states, "for young people, social media is traditional media" and a "multifaceted environment that acts as an extension of a person's self".

The use of WhatsApp in South Africa

Recent data suggests that a growing number of households have internet access in South Africa (Mzekandaba, 2021). Galal (2022b) notes that 48.4 million users in South Africa had access to the internet in 2021, compared to 36 million in 2018 (as seen in Figure 2.1 below). Even before the pandemic, universities and colleges in South Africa and mobile network operators negotiated free access to online teaching for all students (Ndebvu, 2022). This means that students had access to free data even when they are not on campus grounds where there are wireless network protocols available. Data also suggests that many private partners and organisations in South Africa initiated various solutions for the entire tertiary

education and training sector after and during various hard lockdowns in the country (Ndebvu, 2022). Subsidised data packages were made available to students dependent on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) in June 2020, for example, which includes about 30,000 schools and campuses (Ndebvu, 2022). Universities across the country have, therefore "gone online", and students now have access to a variety of teaching and learning materials provided by their universities without incurring data charges (Ndebvu, 2022).

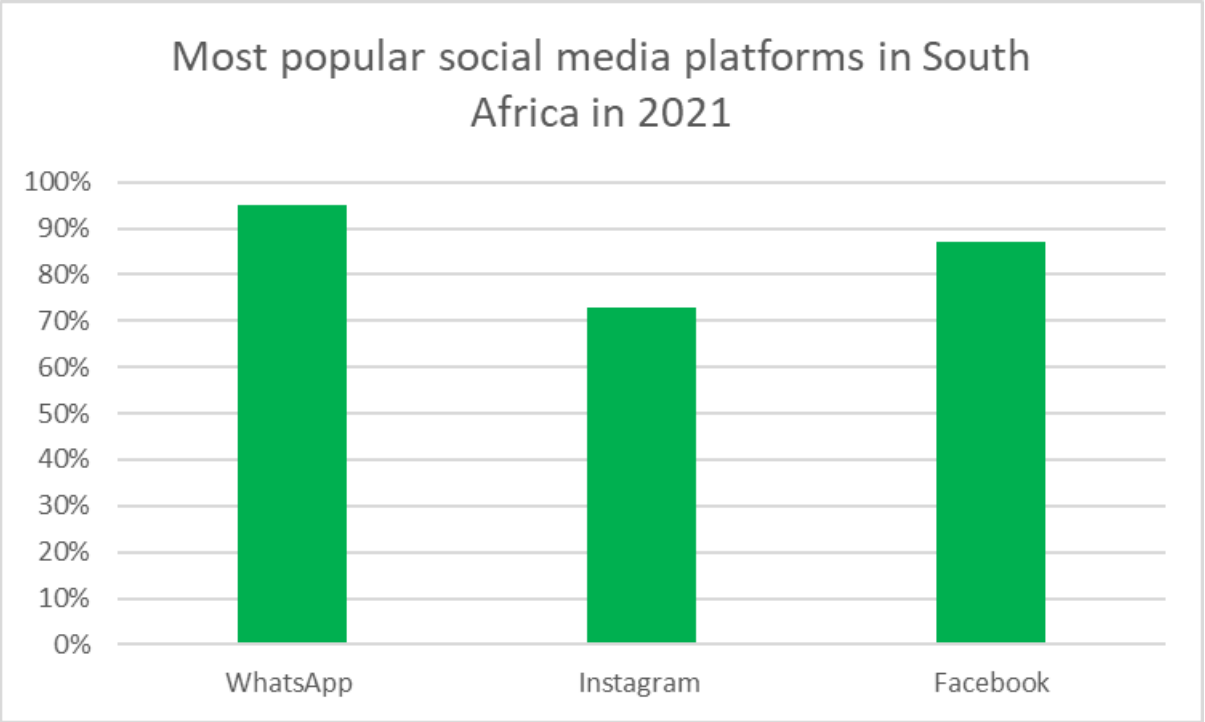
Figure 2.1: Internet users in South Africa between 2018 and 2021 (Galal, 2022b).



In 2018, the Reuters Institute found that the use of WhatsApp for news had almost tripled on a global level since 2014 (Newman et al., 2019). At the time, it was reported that users moved their discussions to instant messaging apps where they can be sure they are talking to "real friends" (Waterson, 2018). South Africa has seen a continuation of these trends. In 2020, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report found that WhatsApp was the most-used platform in South Africa (88%) and the second-most used for news (49%) after Facebook

(57%) (Newman et al., 2020). This has remained consistent as the provider of market and consumer data, Statista revealed that WhatsApp was the most popular instant messaging platform in South Africa at the end of 2021 (Galal, 2022b). WhatsApp's South African user base also increased from 9.1 million in 2021 to 9.9 million in 2022 (Degenhard, 2021), with data indicating that the messaging platform will reach nearly 11.5 million by 2025.

Figure 2.2: The total amount of students enrolled at the private institution versus the students who completed the online survey (Galal, 2022b).



The Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2022) report confirms WhatsApp's popularity in South Africa, stating that WhatsApp (43%) remain one of the key platforms for South Africans to get their news (Newman et al., 2022). However, TikTok (15%) is now on par with Instagram and is increasingly being used as a news channel by news organisations (Newman et al., 2022). Research also suggests that WhatsApp is globally used for news consumption but for everyday communication such as deliveries, business and learning as well (Brouwers, 2022). People ultimately prefer to communicate via WhatsApp rather than a

call centre (Brouwers, 2022). Ofcom (2022: online) also found that people “consuming news via social media remain more likely to get their online news from posts rather than directly from news organisations' websites or apps”.

Sharing information via messaging apps has additional qualities linked to group chats, the immediacy of news pieces shared with numerous individuals, and, the use of a “mediated space” (Kalogeropoulos, 2020). WhatsApp has the potential to bridge knowledge gaps between students and their educators (Rambe and Chipunza, 2013). In fact, the authors argue that its ability to construct personalised environments was used to distribute jointly developed educational resources to previously disadvantaged students (PDS) at a university in South Africa (Rambe and Chipunza, 2013). According to their findings, students saw WhatsApp as a tool for “increasing access to peer-generated resources, improving on-task behaviour, and encouraging meaningful context-free learning” (Rambe and Chipunza, 2013: online). Apart from Rambe and Chipunza’s (2013) study on WhatsApp as an educational tool, Albloy and Mohamed (2020), says that some researchers have looked into students' perceptions of the use of WhatsApp in their educational activities. Malecela (2016), for example, investigated students' perspectives on the use of WhatsApp as a communication tool at a Malaysian university. The findings revealed that the students thought WhatsApp may be useful in facilitating communication with other students, collaborative learning between students and the learning administrator or lecturer as well as access to and dissemination of educational information (Malecela, 2016). However, Baishya and Maheshwari (2019) determined the influence of a teacher's presence in a WhatsApp group conversation and found that communication in any academic WhatsApp group is formal and constrained. Because students didn’t text as much in these groups, there wasn't a surplus of information, and due to the requirement that they behave and respect the lecturer or professor, their presence also decreased conflict among the students (Baishya and Maheshwari, 2019). An administrator does not have any prior knowledge of what will be shared in a WhatsApp group and does not have the option to moderate or censor the

content before it is published (Masip et al., 2021). However, when there is unacceptable content that is shared by members of the group, the administrator would need to act decisively by commenting on the appropriateness of the content and removing the message or even the member of the group (Masip et al., 2021).

Other research also suggests that WhatsApp is most frequently used by people in countries in Latin America and Africa (Oliver, 2021), presenting an important “opportunity for emerging, digital-first titles and smaller newsrooms looking for ways to expand their distribution” (GWI, 2021: online). WhatsApp has therefore been integrated into news organisations' news-gathering and dissemination processes: The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), for example, has incorporated WhatsApp into its news-gathering practices (Lunden, 2014; Frankenhauser, 2015). Udenze (2020) writes that in 2015, *Eyewitness News* was the first media outlet in South Africa to use WhatsApp to communicate with its audience (Robinson et al., 2015). Research suggests that users find WhatsApp particularly appealing as it is a community where everyone can exist (Cronje and Van Zyl, 2022). This ties in with Marshall McLuhan's (1962) well-known metaphor "global village”. McLuhan (1962) referred to it to explain how various channels and technologies will be used in the future to connect people all over the world. WhatsApp’s ease of access and convenience is simply a bonus for users, especially since so much news content is free (Newman et al., 2018; Rutt, 2011). News content in South Africa is also mostly free as the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2019) for South Africa reveals that only 16% of South Africans pay for online news (Roper, 2019). This reduces revenue for news organisations while lowering brand loyalty as well (Roper, 2019). According to researcher Nic Newman, due to the abundance of options, people are not loyal to any specific brands, with the price of most content reduced to nothing (Watkins et al., 2016).

Reimagining gatekeeping theory

A substantial body of research has been conducted to better understand the gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009; Heinderyckx and Vos, 2015; Singer, 2014). Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2018), for example, did look at complex networks of interdependent gatekeepers on Facebook and how “there is a need to reimagine gatekeeping as a concept in the digital era” (Vos, 7:15). Reimagining this concept is also evident in ‘The Social Media and the Changing News Ecology: WhatsApp as a Fifth Estate’ (Udenze, 2019). Udenze (2019) found that WhatsApp is a primary source of news and a reliable tool for journalism. Journalists are actively monitoring WhatsApp for story materials, noteworthy images, ideas, or the mention of potential viral stories. It was found that the internet — and in this case WhatsApp — provides a platform through which networked individuals can form a “Fifth Estate” as the “audience is always defining ways of appropriating and domesticating social media for their benefits” (Udenze, 2019: 15). Other studies on social media have also demonstrated how social media users act as gatekeepers to control information flows on Reddit (Leavitt and Robinson, 2017) and analysed how technology companies, their algorithms, and editorial methods have become the new media gatekeepers (Mehrotra, 2016). However, to better understand how users use their personal networks to act as gatekeepers on an instant messaging application, Li et al. (2020) analysed WeChat, an instant messaging application in China. It is believed that the instant messaging application is comparable to WhatsApp and has most of the same features (Li et al., 2020). According to the authors, WeChat is also known as a friend-based social media service that creates and disseminates millions of messages in the form of text, images, videos or links (Li et al., 2020). The authors define these users as "gatekeepers” who share and comment on content that they like (Li et al., 2020). By using WeChat, a user usually knows every person in their network, unlike Twitter and Reddit where gatekeepers do not necessarily have a close relationship with other users (for example, individuals are usually not close to a famous actor or actress that they follow on Instagram). Much like WhatsApp, WeChat also does not have

an “algorithmically ranked news feed as Facebook” (Li et al., 2020: 3). The authors note that users rather depend on “cues” to determine the importance of a message: Information from a friend, or relative, is considered to be very important, for example (Li et al., 2020) followed by coworkers and school friends (Li et al., 2020). Users also tend to respond or share information when a close friend is regarded as being extremely knowledgeable or reliable about public affairs (Li et al., 2020). The findings further demonstrate the wide variety of content shared on the platform. According to Li et al’s (2020) study, 79.6% of the participants frequently read articles on WeChat. The most-read articles are those with catchy “titles, news and events, practical knowledge, financial and investment knowledge, and humorous stories” (Li et al., 2020: 7). Users further select and repost articles that are different from what they typically read, like current events, stories that are ‘nourishing’ for the soul, “insightful stories, industry trends, and practical knowledge” (Li et al., 2020: 7). According to respondents, “these articles represent ‘what we thought’ and are very relevant to ‘where we are right now’” (current affairs) (Li et al., 2020: 7).

Motivations for sharing news

While current affairs are an important motivation for sharing news (Li et al., 2020), a number of other studies touched on the motivations for sharing news on social media or WhatsApp (Madrid-Morales et al., 2021; Chadwick and Vaccari, 2019; Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2021; Herrero-Diz et al., 2020). Madrid-Morales et al. (2021) focused on university students from six African countries and their motivations for sharing news on WhatsApp. Users were asked to consider why they share news on social media and revealed that their motivations for sharing information were “civic duty and fun” (Madrid-Morales et al, 2021). Sharing news as part of one's “civic duty” would present a problem because young people tend to settle into undemanding environments, with no place for criticism or debate, where their opinions are regularly reinforced (Herrero-Diz et.al., 2020). They would therefore distribute news (and even fake news) with a clear ideological goal (Herrero-Diz et.al., 2020). Fernández and Fernández (2017) claim that apart from this goal, technology is now considered to be a tool

for self-expression by young people, with many students (and younger people) establishing their digital identities, primarily through instant messaging apps like WhatsApp. Kalogeropoulos (2020) also says that people “display” themselves differently on public platforms such as a blog, Facebook or even Instagram. However, as Kalogeropoulos (2020) points out, the open nature of social networking platforms like Facebook complicates these self-presentations. A fundamental element of instant messaging programs such as WhatsApp is that they provide privacy, allowing users to select the audience of their posts. According to Madrid-Morales et al. (2021), these arguments demonstrate a tendency for civic participation or purpose. These responses tie in with a study by Duffy et al. (2019), who found that individuals share news that has a high information utility ("news you can use") that applies to an individual's reality and social circumstance or have a strong emotional impact. Madrid-Morales et al. (2021: 1204) reference (Duffy et al., 2019), saying that “users are particularly motivated by the emotional impact the news is perceived to have, the relevance it may have for the receiver, and the sender's intention to ‘provide advice or warning’". This suggests that "what is shared and reciprocated is more than just news or information; it is also a marker of trust between sender and recipient” (Madrid-Morales et al., 2021: 3). For example, Madrid-Morales et al. (2021:1204) refer to Bigman et al. (2019: 14) who discovered that race can influence how young social media users choose to be exposed to news on social media. In their study, “black students reported: both viewing and posting more content on race on social media”. (Bigman et al., 2019). They believe their research shows that “selective sharing is likely to result in racially varied retransmission of news with disparate racial impact” (Bigman et al, 2019: 14). Furthermore, Madrid-Morales et al. (2021: 4) contend that additional cultural factors, such as “rumours, satire, and gossip” may influence how likely users are in sharing news on social media, especially in Africa. An alternative news and information circuit have subsequently emerged as a result of the history of unreliable news sources that are frequently owned or controlled by the government or “social elites” (Madrid-Morales et al., (2021).

The Madrid-Morales et al. (2021) study discovered that students frequently share news that is highly emotional and relevant to their own lives, much like the study by Li et al. (2020) and Duffy et al. (2019). In another study, Chadwick and Vaccari (2019: 11) found that respondents in the United Kingdom share news for the following reasons: “To express my feelings”; “To inform others”; and “To find out other people’s opinions”. Some respondents said that they mainly share information related to racial injustices. To analyse how adult social media users in South Africa and five other African countries responded to disinformation about China and Covid-19, Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2021) also found that people were ultimately motivated to click the share button due to a “sense of civic responsibility” and had a preference for social media material that was “humorous” in nature. Another study by Vermeer et al. (2020: 1114) found that online news consumers in The Netherlands “often directly visit their favourite (typically mainstream) news outlet” and “continue browsing within that outlet” with “strong preferences for entertainment news over any other topic”. A study in Spain, on the other hand, looked at teenagers and their motivations for sharing news on WhatsApp and discovered that they are more likely to share content if it “connects with their interests, regardless of its truthfulness” (Herrero-Diz et al., 2020: 1). Wagner (2020) conducted an online experiment in Argentina with 1 066 people who judged health news stories sent to them and then expressed their willingness to share each news item. This was specifically done to examine if people “believe the information they receive through messaging apps, whether the identity of the sender influences the credibility of that information and when people feel more inclined to share content they have received” (Wagner, 2020: online). Wagner (2020) discovered that the participants were more unlikely to spread fake information than correct information and that knowing the sender's name reduced both credibility and willingness to share the stories (Wagner, 2020). This suggests that audiences in Argentina, are, “at least good at differentiating facts from falsehoods and do not blindly accept information from personal contacts” (Wagner, 202: online). In Australia, Park et al. (2022) found that people are motivated by curiosity and a sense of adventure when disseminating news. Almost half (45%) of the participants share

information because they “feel obligated to do so” and because they have a “duty to keep themselves informed” (Park et al., 2022: online), while only a small number indicated that they disseminate news for fun.

Fake news and WhatsApp

As noted in Chapter 1, the definition of fake news is different for scholars (Al-Rawi, 2018: 2; Wardle, 2019). Fake news, according to Wardle (2019: online) is, “good old-fashioned rumours, it’s memes, it’s manipulated videos and hyper-targeted ‘dark ads’ and old photos re-shared as new” (Wardle, 2019: online). False information is also used differently on each platform. In addition to misinformation, which is the "dissemination of false information with the deliberate intent to deceive or mislead," fake news can be misleading in a variety of ways (Bertolin, 2017: 10). Ali Abbas Ahmadi wrote for ‘First Draft’ (2020) saying that fake news is a problem on WhatsApp in particular because tracing on WhatsApp is impossible.

> “Memes, posts, videos and audio clips are forwarded to contacts and chat groups with a tap or swipe and no easy way to see how the content might have travelled between communities...False cures, unscientific preventative measures, and conspiracy theories abound on WhatsApp, and all have a tangible influence” (Ahmadi, 2020: online).

WhatsApp’s end-to-end encryption certifies that only applicable parties can access messages (WhatsApp Help Center, 2022: online). This prevents someone outside of a person’s “network of friends” on WhatsApp (and inadvertently their “circle of trust’) from being able to access their messages (Center, 2015). Al-Rawi (2018: 41) writes that fake news and its effect on “people's social and political beliefs” have made it much more of a problem in today’s fast-paced digital environment. Al-Rawi (2018) references Vosoughi et al. (2018) whose study on fake news found that people are more likely to spread false information on social media due to its partisan or sensational nature, as some individuals permit low-quality information to go viral on instant messaging platforms and social media. In most cases, individuals find it even more credible than traditional media (Vosoughi et al.,

2018). WhatsApp's fake news problem (Center, 2015) also consists of chain messages which ask users to forward some or other message to ten friends or "bad luck will follow you for the rest of your life" (Hughes, 218: online) in most cases. This prompted WhatsApp to limit the spread of "chain letter-style spam messages" and viral fake messages by displaying a notice that the message "has been forwarded many times" and by limiting users from sending a message more than five times (Hughes, 2019). WhatsApp particulalry looked into the spread of high volumes of forwarded messages in India during the first quarter of 2021. Research findings suggest that India is the largest market for WhatsApp in the world and that it takes the lead globally in terms of forwarding messages on the platform (Mitra, 2020). Statistics not only highlight the significant presence and influence of WhatsApp in India but also in Brazil. During Brazil's highly polarised election in 2018, WhatsApp became a political battleground, sparking concerns about misinformation. The platform became overwhelmed with false rumours, manipulated images, decontextualised videos, and hoaxes, all aimed at bolstering the campaigns of either right-wing candidate Jair Bolsonaro or leftist candidate Fernando Haddad (Boadle, 2018). Among the falsehoods that circulated during that time, several included baseless claims such as Haddad intending to transform Brazil into a replica of Cuba and manipulate voting machines. Additionally, a conspiracy theory gained traction, suggesting that Bolsonaro had orchestrated his own near-fatal stabbing at a rally, which conveniently removed him from the campaign trail and subsequent presidential debates.

Research suggests that these credibility issues on WhatsApp can further affect morning television programmes and the way they handle breaking news (Chaver, 2016). Jumping on a story and reporting on information sourced via social media can result in the reporting of false information and jeopardise a journalist's and news organisation's credibility (Farhi, 2013). The number of false information on social media, and the inability to quickly verify the accuracy of the information, challenges traditional news outlets, such as television in particular (Chavers, 2016). Chavers (2016) references the news of a shooting in the United States in 2013 as an example. At the time, numerous news outlets were quick to report on

the story but covered the shooting with different (and inaccurate) details from unverified sources from social media (Chavers, 2016). Wardle and Derakhshan (2019) later tried to analyse instances like this, and how one can begin to understand this “information disorder”. When the coronavirus became an international concern, Wardle (2019) regularly referenced it as a perfect example of the “information disorder”. It was, after all, the first pandemic in history to make extensive use of technology and social media to keep people informed (Abbas et al., 2021). Voice notes, screenshots, images, videos and text messages went viral on social media, with sources claiming that they have “strong evidence that ibuprofen accelerates the multiplication of the virus”, for example (Delcke, 2020: online). This fake news message saw a spike in keyword searches for ”Ibuprofen” and “Corona” on Google (Delcke, 2020). Bangani (2021) considers a fake news story that saw South Africans hesitant to test for covid-19 after it was stated that the test kits were used as a tool to spread the virus even further. This prompted the South African government to issue a fake news alert and arrest the man who invented and distributed the story first (Bangani, 2021). The fake news issue tasked an epidemiologist from South Africa, Salim Abdool Karim to say that people are “clutching at straws [...] to find a miracle cure” and that they need to “wait for more definitive scientific proof” rather than believing everything they read on social media and particularly WhatsApp (Peralta, 2021). The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2020: online) later said that technology amplified an “infodemic” that “undermined the global response and jeopardised pandemic control measures”. An “infodemic” is defined as an abundance of information, including false or misleading information, that can be harmful to one's health and which ultimately fosters distrust in health authorities (World Health Organisation, 2020). With an abundance of information, people are unsure about what they need to do to protect their health and the health of those around them. An “infodemic” can therefore intensify or lengthen outbreaks (World Health Organisation, 2020). Needless to say, the “infodemic” gave rise to concerns over privacy on social media and users’ ability to control their news feeds (Seufert et al., 2022). For Vos and Thomas (2018), this fake news problem directly ties in with new media “usurping journalism’s gatekeeping role”:

> “One of the purposes of professional news media is to act as a gatekeeper for actual facts and honest debate. [New media such as WhatsApp and] blogging, which revolves almost entirely around individuals rather than institutions, leaves readers with a bewildering array of unattributed sources of information” (Vos and Thomas, 2018: 9).

This was particularly evident at the beginning of 2020 when Africa Check and the Africa Centre for Evidence (Theunissen et al., 2020) became central in the fight against the covid-19 “infodemic” and false information on WhatsApp (World Health Organisation, 2020). Their report titled ‘Tackling misinformation on WhatsApp in Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal & South Africa: Effective strategies in a time of Covid-19’ found that while some users do evaluate information by confirming sources, reporting fake news or posting corrections, most social media users either “delete messages, ignore them, or just share the message in any case” (Theunissen et al., 2020: 7). Theunissen et al. (2020: 7) discovered that “the type of content, who had shared it with them, the emotions it triggered, their trust of social media [...] and their tendency towards conformity all shape their behaviour”. This poses a serious risk to society (Theunissen et al., 2020) and ultimately influences gatekeeping as news control (Vos and Thomas, 2018). The financial state of journalism and the immediacy of social media has frequently been blamed for what some claim is the end of the journalist's sole function as a gatekeeper (Vos and Thomas, 2018). However, the growing conversation about fake news became an opportunity for the return of gatekeeping (Vos and Thomas, 2018).

Audience gatekeeping vs editorial gatekeeping

Gene (2017) writes that social media users are now deemed “active” in the sharing of news and decide what is important and “newsworthy” according to their particular interests. Agenda-setting can therefore be defined as the gatekeeper’s “action” in determining what the public thinks and worries about (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Gene (2017) also states that the agenda-setting concept is related to the concept of gatekeeping as it involves the elite selection of whether or not a story is newsworthy enough to be covered (McCombs and

Shaw, 1972). By selecting what stories to cover, the gatekeeper chooses some stories over others, thus “setting the agenda” for topics of discussion among the public (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Heinderyckx and Vos (2015: 39) agree, but state that the relationship between agenda-setting and gatekeeping has become more critical as “some news maintains a place on the public agenda beyond a 24-hour news cycle”. This phenomenon should be analysed, as Chin-Fook and Simmonds (2011) state:

> “Individuals can now emphasise certain news issues or pieces of information to various degrees, highlighting them on social media platforms, blogs, and personal websites. [It is, therefore, important to consider] the ability of individuals to construct and contribute to social reality online [and] change the very nature of how people think and talk about issues” (Chin-Fook and Simmonds, 2011: 17).

To understand this, Shoemaker et al. (2001), developed a “bio-cultural theory” of news to define why some stories make the news, while others do not. Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) later found that events that exhibit some sort of deviance or social significance usually make the news, or are at least rated more newsworthy than those with little news value (Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006). Another prevailing theme that Shoemaker and Cohen (2006 identified includes the fact that “people are interested in information that relates to them personally” (Shoemaker et al. 2010: 60). In today’s digital media environment, the audience has a much bigger say in the news that is being presented to them (Edgerly and Vraga, 2020). A new model that demonstrates the audience's greater influence in the gatekeeping process was therefore inspired by the audience's ability to assess the popularity of news items. Shoemaker et al. (2010) refer to this as "audience gatekeeping" in which viewers share information about their favourite news stories with one another. This audience gatekeeping model illustrates the audience's new function in gatekeeping, demonstrating how online news audiences can affect sources' and journalists' decisions by commenting on news items (Shoemaker et al., 2010) or by news media constantly analysing audience metrics (Tandoc, 2014). This new model demonstrates a “more circular flow of information

and a significant increase in audience power within the gatekeeping process" (Shoemaker et al., 2010: 62). Information on the internet, according to the authors, is ultimately "like sand in an hourglass, creating a small opening in the middle slows but does not stop the flow of information" (Shoemaker et al, 2010: 67).

The role of the audience in the gatekeeping process has become central to communications studies (Welbers, 2016; Shoemaker et al, 2010; Chakraborty et al., 2019; Welbers, 2016). To examine the editorial power of the audience, Chakraborty et al. (2019) analysed news articles from *The New York Times'* website in the United States over eight months. During this period, Chakraborty et al. (2019:) analysed articles recommended by editors, as well as the most popular news items shared by the audience over either Twitter, Facebook or email. It was found that there are major differences in the coverage of news stories chosen by editors than those chosen by the audience (Chakraborty et al., 2019). For example, while editors chose to produce and share "world", "sports", and "business" stories, the audience prefer "opinion" pieces as well as stories on "science", "fashion," and "health" (Chakraborty et al., 2019: 680). Chakraborty et al. (2019) also looked at news stories from *The Guardian's* website and found similar results. Chakraborty et al. (2019) reference Boczkowski and Mitchelstein's (2015) study on this "news gap" between editor selection and audience consumption. Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2015) discovered that although editors prioritise national, international, and business stories, audience preference shifts towards non-public affairs. The "news gap" is also evident in Welber's (2016: 110) study on news selection criteria, where some editors were explicit about their priorities, noting that "news is either important or not important…We have strict selection criteria. We ignore [entertainment news] for a large part". Other editors did admit that audience metrics do have an effect on editorial choices (Welbers, 2016). To address this, Chakraborty et al. (2019: 690) referenced De Castell's (1997) ideas of the "power of identity", saying that media organisations, whose main goal is usually to shape public opinion, try to "create a legitimising identity of their audience by actively highlighting the stories which they deem to be important" (Savolainen,

2020: 11). But, audiences have the power to produce a “resistant identity” by taking a “different path in consuming stories that are at odds with what the media organisations want, thus challenging the news editor´s power” (Savolainen, 2020: 11). And because of the influence of social sharing, “the audience actively creates a project identity by choosing to depict an alternative landscape based on the narratives they believe the general public should be exposed to” (Chakraborty et al., 2019: 690). It is therefore evident that the power dynamic characteristics of traditional gatekeeping have undergone remarkable changes (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2015). Digital technologies thus “allow the audience to produce and broadcast their messages”, interact with gatekeepers and share content due to their preferences (Savolainen, 2020 11).

The impact of new gatekeepers

It is important to consider the impact of gatekeeping by studying its influence (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). For example, there are studies about gatekeeping and gatekeepers and how they affect cultural change (Pescosolido et al., 1997), influence communities (Blair, 2002) or influence the participation of women in politics (Kunovich and Paxton, 2005). Barzilai-Nahon (2009: 37) states that the “transformation of the ‘previously gated’ into a gatekeeper is achieved through the ability to perform an act of information control, the exercising of this control, and the surrounding context”. It is useful to study Sheldrake’s (2011) *The Business of Influence* to further explain an individual's ability to construct and contribute to social reality through WhatsApp in this instance. Sheldrake (2011) states that influence occurs when people "think in a way that they would not have otherwise thought" or when people "do something that they would not have otherwise done", as referenced by (Böttcher, 2014: 22). Sheldrake has different categories of influence, but it is social influencers and well-known peer influencers that are the most applicable here. Social influencers are “everyday people” with the ability to influence other people by sharing reviews on a WhatsApp group, for example (Sheldrake, 2011). Social influencers usually “know the individuals in their network” (Chin-Fook and Simmonds, 2011:18) and are aware

of their influence, while well-known peer influencers, on the other hand, are usually “close to those in their network”, such as family members or friends (Chin-Fook and Simmonds, 2011:18). As a result of their “proximity and the depth of their relationship, well-known peer influencers have the most influence on their peers' decisions” because they can be held accountable (Chin-Fook and Simmonds, 2011:18). It is also this type of influence that has the biggest impact: Sheldrake (2011: 54) demonstrates that “close family and friends” have a “heavy influence on their close peers in spreading awareness about products, services, and organisations” (Chin-Fook and Simmonds, 2011:19). Chin-Fook and Simmonds (2011) later applied Shelrdake’s theory to trace influence and the impact of the “new gatekeepers” saying that each individual has the opportunity to exercise influence within online networks. Chin-Fook and Simmonds (2011: 17) state that the flow of information is now “multidirectional” (rather than unidirectional as first outlined by Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 23) by “which everyday individuals, networked individuals, professional communicators, and institutions all have the potential to influence one another and the flow of information online”. Rusdi and Rusdi (2020) reference news organisations that are constantly implicated by conversations on social media, for example:

> “The media industry, which is currently under increasing competitive pressure, needs an audience engagement. Therefore, market-oriented newsrooms cannot avoid responding to trends in social media. The faster they respond to what is happening on social media, the more likely they are to get engagement from the audience. Vice versa, if they are slow to respond to what is happening on social media, then there will be less audience response to the media (Rusdi and Rusdi, 2020: 543).

In this instance, Wallace (2017) states that by choosing what information to share and what not, WhatsApp users, for example, become information selectors in digital media spaces, and gatekeepers of news, albeit with “different levels of influence”, as outlined by Shoemaker and Reese (2014) and previously discussed in this dissertation.

Chapter 3: The development of gatekeeping theory

This chapter serves as the theoretical framework, focusing on the selected theory of gatekeeping and its relevance to this thesis. This chapter delves into the origins of gatekeeping theory as a significant and valid tool, highlighting the viewpoints of various scholars who advocate for gatekeeping theory as a useful framework for investigating the development of news (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2015; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009) and the dissemination of news among audiences on social media platforms, including WhatsApp (Singer, 2016; Madrid-Morales et al., 2021). These perspectives shed light on the usefulness of gatekeeping theory in understanding the evolving landscape of news consumption and distribution.

To provide a comprehensive understanding of gatekeeping theory throughout its historical trajectory, this chapter emphasises the significance of defining its fundamental concept. By contextualising the study of gatekeeping and news-sharing practices among undergraduate students in Johannesburg, with a specific focus on their motivations for sharing news on WhatsApp, this research aims to contribute to the broader understanding of gatekeeping theory's applicability in the digital age.

Origin of the gatekeeping theory

Gatekeeping theory is one of the original theories to emerge from mass communication research (Roberts, 2005). Gatekeeping theory originated in the 1940s in the United States. The German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947) first coined the term while studying the shopping behaviours of housewives in Iowa during World War II (Roberts, 2005). For people to make careful food choices during the war, Lewin (1947) conceptualised two channels by which food reaches the dining table: the grocery store or a backyard garden. Lewin (1974) divided each channel into whether food will enter the channel or move to the next section. Lewin (1947) then realised that there were various decision-making processes

that the gatekeeper (in this case the housewife or shopper) had to make when buying groceries or choosing vegetables from the garden. Lewin (1947) found that external or internal forces put pressure on people to accept or reject food (Roberts, 2005). The “concept of forces”, as set out by Lewin (1947) in Steele (2017: 48), “addresses the notion that there are factors that influence whether the information is allowed to flow through a gate or is stopped at the gate”. These factors are “either positive in nature” and support a continuous flow through the gate, or negative, “resulting in the closure of the gate” (Lewin, 1947 in Steele, 2017: 48). For instance the freshness of a product could be considered a positive force in the grocery channel and “encourage the shopper to purchase the item, whereas an expensive item would be a negative force and have the opposite effect” (Steele, 2018: 48). As noted by Steele (2017), Lewin (1947) later realised that his gatekeeping model extended far beyond decisions about what to eat, saying that “gatekeeping is not only applicable for food channels but also for the movement of a news item through specific communication channels in a group" (Lewin, 1947: 145). In this case, information moves between communication channels like Facebook or WhatsApp, where "positive and negative forces influence a gatekeeper's decision-making on gate control," (Steele, 2018: 236).

Lewin (1947) is regularly attributed as “the father” of the gatekeeping theory, but it was his student David Manning White (1951) who first applied this approach to mass communication (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). In 1951, mass media institutions held a particular role in the control of public information while the traditional journalist was given the task of compiling information, filtering through such information, selecting the most contextually relevant information, and disseminating it to the public through various mass communication channels (White, 1951). According to Shoemaker and Reese (2014), the gatekeeping theory has always been used to examine how social structures change over time and even how to change them, but White (1951) applied gatekeeping in a way that focused on individual news judgments when the audience did not contribute to the news making process at all. To illustrate this, White (1951) studied a newspaper wire editor to keep track of the content he

published and why he published certain stories and not others. These individual decisions made by the wire editor ultimately affect the flow of information (Reese and Ballinger, 2001). White (1951: 386) found that “the editor’s choices showed how highly subjective, how reliant upon value-judgments based on the gatekeeper’s own set of experiences, attitudes, and expectations the communication of ‘news’ really is”. Erzikova (2017: 2) notes that White (1951) “found that the editor largely based the selection of news on his personal preferences”. White's study continues to be a key contribution to the field of mass communication and has been replicated across new media with different variations (Snider, 1967; Bleske, 1991; Bissell, 2000). In 1956, Gieber introduced more variables to the gatekeeping process. After analysing 16 wire editors, Gieber (1967) found that the process surrounding those who make the decisions is just as important, with work routines and the rush to meet deadlines predominant factors. Gieber (1967) found that “wire editors are at the mercy of the press associations because they can only publish what the wires provide. and are unable to do much to influence the copy they receive” (Steele, 2017: 43).

One of the most fundamental improvements to early gatekeeping theories was the idea of multiple gatekeepers regulating different aspects of the news process (Shabir et al., 2015). Theodore Newcomb’s (1953) co-orientation mode model is applicable here. The initial model proposed that the “attitudes of two parties (A & B) toward an object (X) are influenced in large part by how they perceive each other’s attitudes toward the object” (Seltzer, 2007: 29) Bruce Westley and Malcolm MacLean (1955) later modified Newcomb’s (1953) model and introduced the concept of “C”, the gatekeeper, to understand "who says what through what channels to whom with what effect” (Laswell, 1948). Through their model, Westley and MacLean (1955) were the first to systematically explain how the gatekeeper, and in particular, the journalist, serves as a guide between the general public and world events (Manca, 1999).

New models of gatekeeping theory

The internet posed new challenges to traditional gatekeeping models and revealed that the process is far more complicated than first initiated by Lewin or White (Erzikova, 2018: 1). With the advent of the internet Welbers (2016: 2) references (Vos, 2016: 7) who said that “space and outlets are no longer scarce” and “news production is no longer unidirectional”. To understand the complex question of “where does news come from” (Reese, 2019: 1), Reese and Shoemaker (1996; 2014; 2016) consider the hierarchy of influences model. By dividing it “into five levels of analysis” (Welbers, 2016: 4; Reese and Shoemaker, 1996), these levels create a hierarchy of factors that have an impact on journalistic judgment and include “individual, routine, organisational, social institutions and social systems” (Welbers, 2016: 5; Reese and Shoemaker, 1996). The individual level of analysis (Reese and Shoemaker, 1996) is aimed at individuals — or journalists — who write blog posts, emails, webpages or news reports and is, according to Barzilai-Nahon (2009: 3) the “major determinant of gatekeeping”. The individual is at the centre of the model (Reese, 2019) as individual characteristics such as gender, race, class, religion, and politics influence people's attitudes, values, and roles in the workplace and in education. The routine level is mainly concerned with traits of the journalism profession, such as writing in the inverted pyramid style, determining a story’s newsworthiness and proximity and even a journalist’s moral obligation to the profession and the public itself (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016). Reese (2016: 6) notes that these routines are established by a “pattern of practices that serve the needs of the organisation”. These routines are essentially designed to invoke “objectivity” (Reese, 2016: 2) but also “relate to the audience and what they will find acceptable and interesting”. With the advent of the internet, these routines have changed, however, as journalists now have the option to monitor what people want to read with the help of analytical tools and audience metrics. News aggregators, therefore, “have had to develop new routines of screenwork, continually checking the incoming streams of information, monitoring what types of stories drive audience traffic” (Reese, 2016: 6) like monitoring a story or conversations on

a WhatsApp group. The organisational level of analysis mainly concerns different news practices performed by different organisations that have their ways of doing things and their own objectives (Reese, 2019: 2). A small newspaper's gatekeeping decision will differ from that of big, national media companies, for example (Reese and Shoemaker, 2016). According to Usher (2014), *The New York Times* is a great example of an "elite organisation" and is "the embodiment of the journalism profession" (Reese, 2016: 4) whose "routines and practices of news production observed in the golden era of news ethnography" remains constant as noted by Da-Costa (2012: 48) and initially outlined by Usher (2014: 228). The most appropriate way to analyse this level of influence, is, according to Reese (2019: 2), through ethnographic observation (customs, habits, and mutual differences between media organisations). However, Kamboh and Yousaf (2019: 64) note that observations "are often the purview of media economics, with related issues of ownership concentration, cross-ownership, and conflicting imperatives among news, entertainment, and non-media components of the larger firm". This is evident when analysing the media attention Elon Musk received when he purchased Twitter in 2022 and what it meant for journalists and the news itself (Bell, 2022). The social institution level, meanwhile, is concerned with advertisers, governments or activist groups who can have an impact on an organisation's gatekeeping decisions (Reese and Shoemaker, 2016). Reese (2019) notes that this "extra media" level is aimed at the influences outside the media themselves and also captures the effects of media organisations acting together to form a larger unit. *The New York Times*, for instance, acted as an institution when it published the "Pentagon Papers", but when it was joined by *The Washington Post* and other news outlets across the United States, "they were acting institutionally, facing similar legal threats from the courts and political institution, represented by the administration of Richard Nixon" (Reese, 2019: 3).

At the most macro-level of influence, is the social system of analysis, which mostly concerns "abstract forces" such as ideology, economics and politics (Reese and Shoemaker, 2016). Reese and Shoemaker (2016: 296) state that "one can identify the main factors that shape

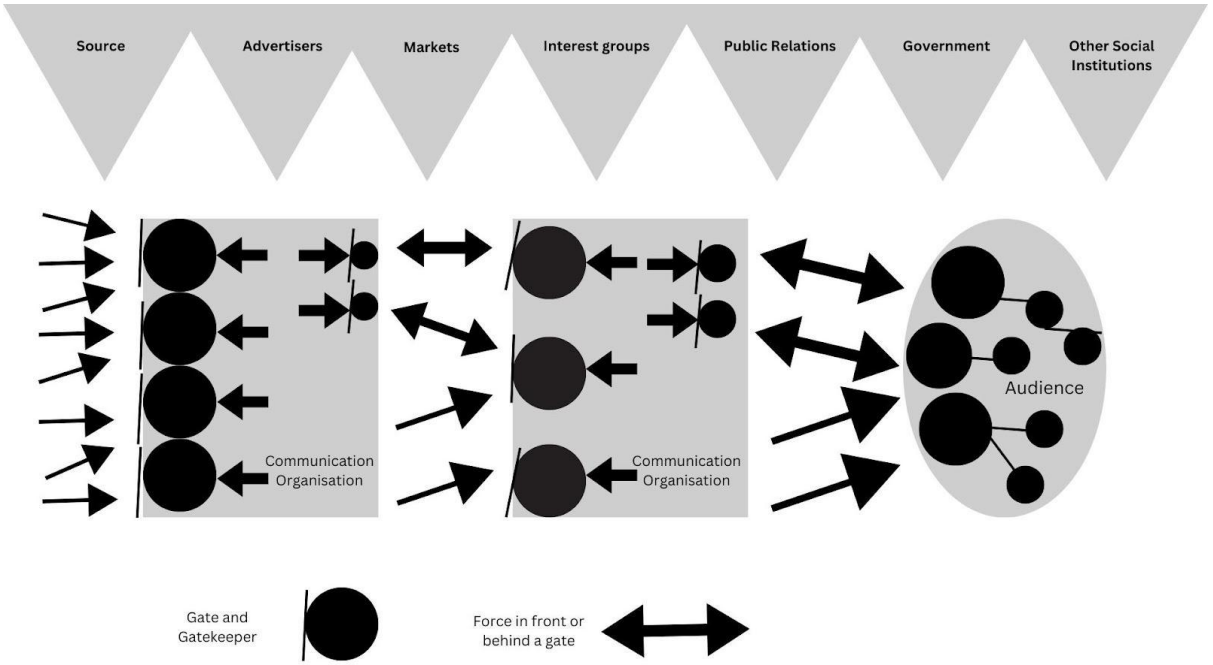
the symbolic reality — revealed through content, constituted and produced by media work — and show how these factors interact across levels and compare across different contexts" at each level. In other words: "how do all the other levels work together to produce a predictable ideological result?" (Reese, 2019: 2). This level tries to capture the "more complex systems within journalism" and "allows for a more global perspective beyond the more traditionally culture-bound work of ideological analysis" (Reese, 2019: 2). Cross-national comparison is thus one method of examining the elements at the social system level (Reese and Shoemaker, 2016). Reese and Shoemaker (2016) list Hanitzsch et. al. (2012), as an example, who assessed the national influence of news organisations in 18 countries and found that "there is evidence for a universal ideology and professional identity" (Reese, 2016: 8). Corcoran and Fahy's (2009) study on Britain's daily newspaper, the *Finacial Times* (FT) also serves as a good example of abstract forces influencing journalists. They found that the *Financial Times* has a core audience among the European elite sphere. In this case, journalists form part of networks that support elite structures "whose material interests stretch beyond national boundaries" (Corcoran and Fahy, 2009: 110) as referenced by Reese (2016: 15).

With a growing number of media literate citizens, there has been an increase in individuals formulating and advocating for their own perspectives and viewpoints. It is not only journalists who report the news. Reese (2007) acknowledges that models like the hierarchy of influences model may not fully encompass the intricate and interconnected nature of the various relationships and dynamics.

Welbers (2016) states that further understanding the idea of channels in gatekeeping theory is crucial. News messages travel through multiple gates before it is published, whereby "the whole path these messages travel, from sources to audiences, can be conceptualised as channels" (Welbers, 2016: 6). Welbers (2016: 6) refers to Bass (1969) who found that "different gatekeepers in the same channel are interdependent because they can all filter and alter the messages, thereby nullifying the choices of gatekeepers before them and

determining the information input of the gatekeepers further down the channel". These channels can be found "within news organisations, between news organisations and news publishers" (Welbers, 2016: 6). To consider a broader perspective, Welbers (2016: 6) states that "channels exist between any person involved in news circulation, which includes the interpersonal channels through which information diffuses throughout social networks". Shoemaker and Vos' (2009) holistic gatekeeping model combines these channels and levels.

Figure 3.1: Shoemaker and Vos' (2009) holistic gatekeeping model



The model demonstrates how information can be delivered to an "audience through various channels" and helps determine the gatekeeper's influence (Welbers, 2016: 6). Individuals or gatekeepers are represented in the circles above, while the vertical bars represent the gates that they control (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). News organisations are represented by large squares, with the audience represented by the ellipse. The arrows are the channels — or forces that influence gatekeeping decisions (such as the audience feedback loop) (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). Other aspects that can influence gatekeeping decisions such as the government or activist groups are mentioned at the very top (Shoemaker and Vos,

2009). This model demonstrates how information can reach an audience via various channels, and how a gatekeeper's influence is determined by their position within these channels (Welbers, 2016). To demonstrate how the audience can influence gatekeeping decisions, Welbers (2016) defines the two large squares as a newspaper and a news agency, respectively:

> "[If a] newspaper receives some of its information through channels connected to a news agency [...] the stronger the gatekeeping influence of the news agency, and the more constrained the newspaper's own gatekeeping influence [or] the more the newspaper responds to audience feedback by giving the audience what it asks for, the less the gates of the newspaper are controlled by the personal intuition and professional routines of journalists" (Welbers, 2016: 8).

Thus, to fully comprehend how "the seats of powerful gatekeepers have shifted" in the modern world (Welbers. 2016: 8), it is important to study new communication channels as well as gatekeeping processes in today's news environment.

Secondary gatekeeping and user-generated content (UGC)

Online-only news outlets and news aggregators have joined legacy media (Wilding et al., 2018). Some organisations' founders have sought to create new business models by concentrating on niche marketing methods and utilising interesting advertising strategies (Cook and Sirkkunen, 2013; Kaye and Quinn, 2011). Others have started non-profit news sites and are looking for funding from foundations or charitable donations (Nevill, 2014). There are also new types of journalists — often younger and more diverse — who are acting as individual gatekeepers (Welbers, 2016). The flow of information in today's digital media environment is not "one-way, top-down, but rather information flows back and forth among the channels" (Erzikova, 2018: 5). In other words, not only reporters and editors but also online readers, "are (potentially) active participants in the newsmaking process" (Erzikova, 2018: 2).

One particularly interesting study on the audience as gatekeepers of news includes Singer's (2014) introduction of "secondary gatekeeping" (also termed "user-generated content" (UGC) according to Ojebuyi et al. (2022). Singer (2014) notes that social media users now have the potential to produce what is regarded as "editorial decisions" about what others should disseminate and what they might disregard or reject. Journalists frequently choose what information to produce "based on a broad understanding of a generally undifferentiated mass audience" (Singer, 2014: 6). The journalist ultimately acts as a gatekeeper for this audience, continuously choosing which items to make visible (Singer, 2014). And even though this role has recently increased public feedback loops, it has not changed significantly (Singer, 2014; Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016). However, these individuals now "serve as secondary gatekeepers for a different group of people, some perhaps among the media outlet's original audience and others likely not" (Singer, 2014: 6).

Although the "user-as-secondary gatekeeper's audience" may be fewer than the audience the original media gatekeepers were able to reach, it is expected to be made up of those who find the item to be particularly valuable due to the focused acquisition process (Singer, 2014). In this instance, users "re-disseminate" information through instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, and sometimes, even reach a larger audience than an outlet first thought possible. Users are essentially acting as gatekeepers for a mass audience that is "different from, yet not ultimately unlike, the one the original outlet serves – a large and unknown group of people who might be interested" (Singer, 2014: 7). This can essentially add real value to a news organisations' website "traffic" (Usher, 2009; Singer, 2014). Singer (2014) later found that many newspaper websites in the United States in February and March 2011 are committed to their public feeds (such as their social media presence), and are not just facilitating but actively inviting users to assess the value of the content and to serve as re-distributors of the information provided. With the advancement of the internet and technology, people can use social bookmarking tools and buttons to organise their bookmarks and share knowledge, stories, and opinions online (Al-Rasheed and Berri, 2014).

News24, for example, includes social media buttons at the top of each story, where users can click on either the Twitter, Email or Facebook button to share a story to a user's network (News24: online). In addition to this, Singer (2014) takes into account the scope to which users are acting in a traditional gatekeeping capacity by determining what information deserves to be shared, as well as their ability to actively re-publish the content they have chosen. Singer (2014) found that 97.1% of the newspapers in the United States asked users to redistribute their content through email, while 93.5% of the papers in the sample allowed users to "share" content using at least one social networking or social bookmarking tool such as WhatsApp. Singer (2014) notes that the ability to share links and thereby make the content visible to people who are not frequent readers, for instance, has been enthusiastically embraced by media organisations eager to increase their audience metrics. The fact that the vast majority have decided to include the widget with a variety of social bookmarking options, as well as polls, messageboards, comments sections, Q&As, blogs, your media and your story (Thurman and Hermida, 2007), suggests that newspaper publishers are attempting to reach as many people as possible. By doing this, they share the function of the publisher with social media users (Singer, 2014).

News organisations have, therefore, given users full gatekeeping responsibilities with this most recent innovation: Users decide which content they believe is valuable for their own personal use and endorse it through "favourite" or "like" buttons or by re-sending it to their contacts or groups, or reply to a link sent on WhatsApp (Masip et. al., 2021; Wallace, 2018; Singer, 2014). Ojebuyi et. al. (2022) also applied Singer's "secondary gatekeeping" theory to online readers in Nigeria to further explore how audiences select information, aggregate and share it with others. In this case, more than 90% of online users filtered through and shared information about the coronavirus (Ojebuyi et. al., 2022). Research from the Consumer Technology Association in the United States also found that user-generator content "accounts for 39% of weekly media hours consumed by Americans" (Spangler, 2022: online). This is particularly evident among younger groups (Spangler, 2022). According to Singer

(2014: 18), this allows news consumers to “make editorial judgments not only for themselves but also for others — and, most importantly, to act on those judgments by serving as secondary distributors of the material they deem worthy”. Wallace (2018: 5) refers to these gatekeepers as “agents of information”. In this case, gatekeeping has gone from information simply “passing through the journalistic gate” to a complex and interactive matter (Suau, 2015). The nature of gatekeeping has shifted to include different levels of visibility and takes place among a spectrum of journalistic control over editorial choices:

> “At one end of the continuum is the traditional process, in which journalists make and enact decisions about virtually all editorial content that appears in their product and is therefore ‘visible’ to the public. On the other is a news environment in which users make all the decisions (SInger, 2014: 19).

The result is a “two-step gatekeeping process” where user decisions to increase or decrease the visibility of an item for a secondary audience come after the initial editorial decisions to accept or reject an item in the newsroom (Singer, 201: 19).

This is the first time that audience influence has ever been as immediate, explicit, and direct (Singer, 2014). With this most recent innovation, news organisations have given users full gatekeeping authority based on how valuable they believe a given news item to be (Singer, 2014). This pattern is consistent with Tandoc and Vos' (2015) assertion that audiences are now major players in the dissemination of news. Additionally, journalists are now guided in their editorial choices by the news consumption and sharing habits of online users. Canter (2014) agrees, stating that news websites therefore routinely include lists of the most shared and emailed articles.

Network gatekeeping and network diffusion theory

Mehrota (2016) states that algorithms and other editorial methods have become the new media gatekeepers. To analyse how “gatekeeping continues to evolve” in today’s digital

environment (Bro and Wallberg, 2014; Chin-Fook and Simmonds, 2011), it is important to consider the network gatekeeping theory, and in particular, the idea of network diffusion theory, according to Pałka-Suchojad (2021).

Barzilai-Nahon (2008) presented network gatekeeping theory (NGT) as a new paradigm, with a focus on technology-created networks, such as the internet and therefore, WhatsApp. The two corresponding theories of “network gatekeeper identification” and “network gatekeeper salience” (Erzikova, 2018) are combined in this paradigm for gatekeeping. According to Erzikova (2018:3), a network gatekeeper has the power to “select, withhold, display, shape, repeat, localise, disregard, and delete information which ultimately introduces the concept of the gated ── meaning those who are subjected to gatekeeping”. Networked gatekeeping turns the traditional top-down gatekeeping model on its head and emphasises the participation of those "upon whom gatekeeping is exercised" (Dovbysh, 2021). Social media tools' sociotechnical affordances let “non-elite, networked publics” control and shape the information flow (Dovbysh, 2021). As a result, rather than just being a recipient of information, the "gated" actively influences gatekeeping decisions. Network gatekeeping also assesses “the relationship between the gatekeeper and the gated” by evaluating the latter's access to “political power, information production, and alternatives available” (Dovbysh, 2021:4), as well as the presence of a relationship with the gatekeeper (Coddington and Holton, 2013 in Dovbysh, 2021:4).

For Coddington and Holton (2013) network gatekeeping is valuable in many ways. It recommends a framework that can be used outside of the mass communication research field's relatively constrained editorial gatekeeping concept. In their study in their paper titled ‘When the Gates Swing Open: Examining Network Gatekeeping in a Social Media Setting’, Coddington and Holton (2013) found that gatekeeping is frequently carried out by actors outside of the media through methods other than editorial ones. Second, it recognises the importance of the people over whom gatekeeping is exercised, acknowledging that it is

frequently done with the consent of those involved in a constantly negotiated relationship rather than necessarily through force (Coddington and Holton, 2013). Third, it is designed to take into account the rapid changes in power than in conventional models. Fourth, network gatekeeping examines how a networked society might affect gatekeeping procedures, taking into account both gatekeepers' and the “gated” and their potential for connectivity, fluidity, and collaboration. In a networked, digitally mediated environment, the testing and application of this concept to specific cases have just started (Coddington and Holton, 2013).

Erzikova (2018:4) did attempt to distinguish between network gatekeeping identification and a network gatekeeper: “Network gatekeeper identification distinguishes between the process and the executor by introducing the notion of gatekeeping mechanisms as a tool or technology used to implement the process of gatekeeping” (Erzikova, 2018: 4). In addition, a “network gatekeeper is defined as any individual, organisation, or government that has the power to exercise gatekeeping through a mechanism within the network” (Erzikova, 2018: 3). Network gatekeeper salience is created from network identification and “helps explain the relationships among gatekeepers, between gatekeepers and the gated” (Erzikova, 2018: 3). In its essence, WhatsApp is dependent on the internet as a smartphone application and is used by users who are required to save an individual contact number, and who ultimately “select, withhold, display, shape, repeat, localise, disregard, and delete information” (Erzikova, 2018: 2). WhatsApp users also have the ability to create groups, act as the admin of these groups and delete or control these groups as they see fit. According to Ceci (2020), approximately 100 billion messages were sent on WhatsApp in the third quarter of 2020. This represents an increase of more than 66% from the fourth quarter of 2017 when WhatsApp users sent about 60 billion instant messages daily. Goel et al. (2012) reference the network diffusion theory, which compares the spread of information on the internet to the spread of contagious diseases among people. This theory holds that for information to reach a large audience of social media users, it is crucial to have both a large number of direct recipients as well as intermediate recipients who can “spread the word” (Goel et al., 2012). It

is clear, by looking at these choices of words, that secondary gatekeeping and gatewatching mechanisms are closely related to the network diffusion theory. The emphasis on the alternative information pathways that social media users have access to is one of the key distinctions between social media and traditional media. “By sharing and promoting only particular pieces of information, social media enables all audience members to filter information” (Chavers, 2016: 11).

Pałka-Suchojad (2021) refers to users who filter information on social media and only post messages from one side of the political spectrum as "gatekeepers". Pałka-Suchojad (2021: 95) further states that all users of social media are “gatekeepers in an increasingly distorted sense of the word” due to this high level of participation and interactivity. Chavers (2016: 10) agrees with Pałka-Suchojad, saying that “every social media user is a gatekeeper with the power to decide what information they will share”, as stated by the network gatekeeping theory. Chavers (2016) further explored elite and non-elite users of social media as an important aspect of network gatekeeping. In contrast to non-elite users, who are usually ignored by the site's other users, elite social media users are those whose ideas and opinions are popularised by the crowd or who have some influence outside of the internet. By utilising media channels like Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp, news organisations can update their audience on current events and foster a loyal readership. However, researchers have discovered that “social media audiences are more likely to rely on user-generated information, even though traditional news organisations have joined social media” (Chavers, 2016: 11). On social media, authority is constantly being given and taken away (Chavers, 2016).

Chavers (2016: 23) states that social media users work together to act as a collective “gatekeeper of information”. According to the network gatekeeping theory, social media posts and content gain popularity by being "liked" and shared by others. Since social media provides people with the option to “like,” share and discuss either text, photos or videos, this may also increase their likelihood of being discussed in other contexts, such as television

(Chavers, 2016). Chavers (2016) utilised the network gatekeeping theory by analysing how well-known television news programmes (such as *Good Morning America)* incorporate social media content in the United States. The findings show how social media has been incorporated into early morning news programming (Chavers, 2016). According to Chavers' (2016: 15) first hypothesis, social media is mentioned in at least "half of the news segments on popular morning television". This finding indicates that social media activity is starting to alter how news is chosen and discussed and that the gatekeepers or producers of these morning news programmes appear to be paying attention when information on social media rises to prominence (Chavers, 2016). By utilising this theory by Chavers (2016), it can be understood that social media messages are regularly incorporated into news segments in South Africa as well. In 2019, for example, a message about water quality in Middelburg and Cradock went viral on WhatsApp and later made the evening news (Pienaar, 2019).

A study by Vu (2013: 12) also confirms Chavers' hypothesis and found that a large sample of editors "explicitly said that online metrics help them plan future content production and/or placement" (Vu 2013). Vu's (2013: 12) study found that gatekeeping practises are "audience-centric", with editors indicating that their "decision to run an article is most affected by audience factors" and what they either think "readers need to know", or if "many readers might read it". The audience is considered to be one of the many "extra media factors in the original hierarchy of influences model" (Reese, 2019: 2), along with sources, advertisers, rival media, government regulations, and economics. However, the audience has become important to online gatekeepers due to increased audience fragmentation and instantly available readers' metrics (Vu, 2013). In the past, audience feedback and research were costly (Vu, 2013). In the digital age, online news consumption is much simpler to track in real time, making audience research both cheaper and more useful (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Additionally, readers frequently comment and share articles on social networking sites which brings to light a crucial problem with gatekeeping dynamics: the entry of numerous new types of channels into the news ecology.

The relevance of gatekeeping theory

According to Heinderyckx and Vos (2016), these claims are being made at a time when the number of actors who distribute news has increased and anyone can share information through a variety of different platforms on social media. This represents a massive expansion of news and information dissemination (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016). As previously noted in Chapter 1, there are now a multiplicity of gates and information will enter the public domain regardless of what legacy media does. Thus, there will always be a gate that is open (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016: 6). Heinderyckx and Vos (2016: 34) consider a debate among journalists in the United States about the “failure” to cover a lead poisoning story and subsequently a “major public health crisis in Flint, Michigan” in the United States as an example. Media critics, “including the public editor of *The New York Times”*, questioned why big media companies paid such little attention to lead poisoning from a large city's public water supply (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016: 34). *The New York Times’* public editor posed a question to the “paper's executive deputy editor” and questioned whether or not they fulfilled the role of a gatekeeper or not (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016: 34). The growth in “news portals and the predominance of social media was supposed to make any attempt at gatekeeping a pointless exercise” (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016), but while legacy media may withhold a story, other social media platforms can open so many entryways that information cannot be contained. Policymakers both inside and outside the state paid little attention to the public health threat (Warren, 2016). But, if gatekeeping, therefore, prevents the information from flowing freely, it appears to be present in the Flint water case and thus merits the author’s theorising (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2015).

Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2018: 4729) state that one must "cautiously distinguish between gatekeeping as a theoretical tradition and metaphor" and keep in mind that it is "not set in stone" but "serves as an interpretative tool" (Heinderyckx, 2015). To support this statement, Heinderyckx and Vos (2016) argue that legacy media are embracing digital tools that enable journalists to perform their jobs in new ways. Journalists are also very aware of their

obligation to “limit certain kinds of news – for example, sensationalism and public relations disguised as news – and to emphasise news of significance” (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016: 33) . It is crucial to remember that social media has given the audience the necessary tools to engage with journalists (or with anyone for that matter) (Bro and Wallberg, 2014). This has resulted in the “flattening of news hierarchies” where audiences and journalists are now co-producers of news and as a result co-gatekeepers of news. Wallace (2017) likes to think about it as digital gatekeeping, saying that every person and every algorithm could be a gatekeeper. Wallace (2017) depicts this digital gatekeeping model as a “matrix of potential gatekeepers”. This model consists of four different types of gatekeepers such as individual amateurs, journalists, individual amateurs and algorithms as outlined by Wallace (2017). These procedures occur in three different stages: information access, decision-making, and publication option (Wallace, 2017). These gatekeepers have different access levels as well as criteria for choosing and utilising the spaces where content may be published (Wallace, 2017). Kim (2002) and Sumpter (2000) note that gatekeeping scholarship has long theorised how audiences can contribute to the creation of news. Today, audiences all over the world have an impact on the decision-making process that determines how news is presented (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). The fact that the audience is more engaged or more present in the creation of news is more of a confirmation of the gatekeeping theory than a change to it (Vos, 2015: 11). Bro (2016) and other scholars have altogether predicted that the internet and in this case, instant messaging applications, has, according to Rosen (2006: 1) simply “busted open the system of gates and gatekeepers" and is, therefore, open to anyone. Gatekeepers ultimately have the power over those on the other side of the gate, those seeking to be informed, as well as those seeking to inform (Craig, 2017).

Criticisms of gatekeeping theory

Ernste (2014: 3) states that “gatekeeping theory cannot capture the interactive structure of a news diffusion process that now occurs through the fluid relational interplay between the

various incumbent and emergent players in networked gatekeeping process". Heinderyckx and Vos (2016: 10) list two fundamental criticisms of the gatekeeping model, stating that "outlets and space are no longer in short supply and that news production is no longer unidirectional" — which indicates the need for new gatekeeping dynamics in journalism.

> "The concept of gatekeeping was sufficient to describe the control–communication infrastructure based upon sender–receiver roles and source–destination directions. But when digital networks superseded centralized wired networks, it became possible to communicate with millions of users at little or no cost. The previous sender-to-receiver role became increasingly obsolete, as the gated could also act as the source of information. Even information filtered by gatekeepers could be later redistributed or changed as it moved through the gateways. Hence, the traditional notion of source–the destination was no longer a meaningful way to describe information control in information networks" (Bastos, Raimundo, and Travitzki (2013: 261).

The emergence of new media and its adaptability thus raises the question of whether White's gatekeeping theory still applies. Fray et al. (2018: 8) ask the question: "Isn't the open nature of the internet such that the concept of a gatekeeper is no longer relevant?" According to Bruns (2005), the emergence of "cooperative media outlets and news aggregators" has overthrown the previous "regime of control". This, subsequently, has a lot of implications for previous gatekeeping models as well as audiences acting as co-producers of news (Bruns, 2005).

Erizkova (2018: 2) according to this perspective, "virtually every online reader is a gatekeeper having the ability to pass along and comment on news items found on organizations' official websites and social media channels says that almost every online reader is a gatekeeper with the ability to forward and comment on news items". Gatekeeping theory has been utilised in recent years as a helpful concept for focusing attention on the role played by digital platforms in the presentation of news through supplemental concepts like "algorithmic gatekeeping" or "gate programming," as opposed to becoming obsolete

(Bor, 2019). Computers and artificial intelligence are performing gatekeeping tasks more and more (Bro, 2016). There are three distinct gatekeeping models in this case, each of which emphasises information, communication, and elimination (Bro, 2019). The goal of the information model is to inform the public, and journalists choose what news is covered or excluded in the news media as a result of their interactions with news sources. The goal of the second model is to ensure communication. Gatekeeping occurs through a facilitative process in which citizens and decision-makers engage with journalists and work together to create the final news story (Bro, 2019). The third model excludes journalists from the procedure. Through the use of social media technologies, citizens and decision-makers can interact directly and create and publish their own news. According to Bro (2019), this final model actually recalls a “bygone era of direct communication”, when institutions took it upon themselves to communicate with citizens directly. Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2018: 4731) state that the “notion of gatekeeping on social media requires a different conceptualisation than the one used by White (1950) to describe the work of Mr Gates”:

> “In the traditional gatekeeping literature, the gatekeeper is someone who guards discrete gates that determine which news does and does not reach the audience. In a strict following of this definition, it can be argued that there will not be any gatekeepers in the digital age because the redundancy of channels ‘undermines the idea that there are discrete gates through which information passes: if there are no gates, there can be no gatekeepers” (Welbers and Opgenhaffen, 2018: 4731).

Erizkova (2018: 2) references Bruns (2008) who said that this change shows that "gatewatching," in which online readers "gatewatch" “news sources, compile and share reports, and publicise rather than publish news”, has replaced gatekeeping. Instead of producing and disseminating content, “gatewatchers” identify the source and make it accessible to other network users (Bruns, 2005). “Gatewatching” therefore requires a greater level of participation from consumers and producers of information. As a result, “gatewatching” is a "constant collaborative endeavour as users weigh in by criticising and

expanding the initial report" (Erzikova, 2018: 3). Bruns (2005) and other critics of the gatekeeping theory also state that audiences now understand the attempts made by legacy media to control the flow of information as they now have the same access to information. The credibility of legacy media is now in doubt as a result of this exposure (Bruns, 2005).

Chapter 4: Methodology

In this chapter, I will discuss the research approach, data collection methods, sampling techniques, and data analysis procedures utilised in this study.

This quantitative study uses an approach based on descriptive research to examine the dissemination of news on WhatsApp among undergraduate students from a tertiary institution in Johannesburg. The point of this study is to examine the internal processes and external forces that influence undergraduate students' news-sharing habits and motivations for sharing news on WhatsApp, and whether they are gatekeepers of news by analysing these motivations in and through the context of gatekeeping theory. Apart from the fact that researchers do not have direct access to the public's use of WhatsApp as it is encrypted and not public domain (WhatsApp Help Center, 2021), conducting research on the dissemination of news on WhatsApp can add insight into the impact of this instant messaging platform on society and culture (Das, 2020). The analysis of students' "power to decide which messages may and may not pass through their channels" (Welbers and Opgenhaffen, 2018: 4728) was therefore carried out through an online survey, which is a commonly used data collection method in descriptive studies (Kumar and Sharma, 2017).

As previously noted in the literature review, new technologies have had an impact on all generations from Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials to Generation Z who were born between 1997 to 2012 (Hecht, 2022). As a journalism and media studies lecturer at a private institution in Johannesburg, I was privy to this "generational effect" among young, undergraduate students. I had various discussions with students about the dissemination of news on Facebook and WhatsApp upon which I quickly noticed certain characteristics in the way in which these individuals consume news. I also noticed that there were differences in the way that the students and some of my older counterparts consume news. Due to the proximity, and years after I lectured at this private institution (when students I knew already graduated), I decided to complete my research by surveying undergraduate students at this

private institution in Johannesburg. This allowed me to discover to what extent these individuals utilise instant messaging services like WhatsApp to consume news. This also gave me the opportunity to examine the rise in the use of smartphones for news consumption (Silver et al., 2019), especially among young people (Chan, 2015) and more specifically these individuals who are primarily between the ages of 18 and 23 years old, according to information obtained from the institution (IIE, 2022). Individuals of this age are often described as young, urban and possibly of 'Generation Z' (also known as 'Gen Z' or 'Zoomers') (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). Neil Howe and William Strauss's (1991) research on the "idea of generations" confirms that the first digital 'Generation Z' was born during a time of peak technological innovation:

> "'Generation Z' was "born into a world of peak technological innovation - where information was immediately accessible and social media increasingly ubiquitous" (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021:30).

Research suggests that 'Generation Z' can provide extraordinary insights into the current media environment (Haddouche and Salomone, 2018) as they have an abundance of information readily available allowing them to broaden their knowledge and be proactive in their learning (Haddouche and Salomone, 2018). In 2001, Marc Prensky introduced the term "digital natives" to describe the emerging generation of students who have grown up in a world saturated with technology (Prensky, 2001). Despite the widespread presence of technology, it is important to acknowledge that certain households all across the globe and in South Africa still lack access to the internet. This divide creates a significant disadvantage, particularly for adolescents, as it deprives them of the opportunity to fully leverage the potential of the internet. However, considering that three out of five first-year students in South Africa have a mobile phone (Thinyane, 2010) and in most cases, access to the internet at college, researchers further point out that younger individuals find the technology useful to "shift out of traditional roles in the office or the classroom" (Vigo, 2019: online; Haddouche and Salomone, 2018). But, apart from technology being a defining characteristic

of ‘Generation Z’, Vitelar (2021) states that another factor to consider is the fact that these individuals are essentially content creators. One of the main characteristics of “digital natives” is, therefore, the need to use social media as a means to curate their “own personal brand” and use it as an “expression of their values and identity” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021: online). Personal branding involves managing “reputation, style, look, attitude and skill set the same way that a marketing team would run the brand for a bag of Doritos or bottle of shampoo.” (Wight, 2009: 6). Vitelar (2019) points out that these individuals consider their reputation and image as part of their personal brand, which is essential for influence, opportunities, and “getting a job” or “inspiring the necessary confidence that encourages investors to trust your brand” (Vitelar, 2019: 260). In South Africa, ‘Generation Z’ accounts for over 27.5 million individuals (Lerm, 2022). They were "born free", or after apartheid ended in 1994, and like generations before them, they bring a distinctive viewpoint to the world, one of which is “being social” (Lerm, 2022).

Susilawati and Supriyatno (2020) also add that instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp are inextricably linked to this study selection, as these individuals are not only interested in the latest developments in technology and social media but continue to demonstrate a growing interest in the news (Zaman, 2022). This growing interest goes far beyond entertainment, sports, social justice or traditional news sources, however, as these selected individuals’ engagement with news mainly aligns with concerns about societal issues, including climate change, unemployment, and health care (Auxier and Arbanas, 2022).

After obtaining ethical clearance from the tertiary institution (See Annexure E) and the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (non-medical) at the University of the Witwatersrand (See Annexure F), I carried out the online survey. I proceeded to create the online survey on Google Forms — a cloud-based data management tool used for designing and developing web-based questionnaires — to measure students’ use of WhatsApp and

dissemination processes. Google Forms is easily accessible on either a mobile device or a desktop (Google, 2023). Even though the survey was presented in English due to the fact that more than 80% of students in South Africa learn in English from Grade 4 onwards (Howie et al., 2008) and the fact that the institution presents its classes in English (IIE, 2022), many students in South Africa speak other languages. South Africa has eleven official languages, with individuals speaking different languages within their households (Galal, 2022a). I corresponded with the Head of Academics at the institution to distribute the survey via a link on the institution's online database for learning to help identify news trends and WhatsApp behaviours among students (Qualaroo, 2020). The online survey (See Annexure C) was split into two parts: the first alluded to undergraduate students' personal information (such as their age, gender, language, if they have access to the internet and if they live in a family home or are studying full time). Collecting demographic information for this dissertation provides a descriptive overview of the participants involved in the study. This information helps to understand the study group in terms of key demographic variables such as age, gender, and ethnicity and other relevant factors. By including demographic data, I had the opportunity to provide a clearer picture of the sample group and consider any potential demographic influences or patterns in the research findings. The second part was specifically about the student's use of WhatsApp and WhatsApp groups, as well as fake news. The second part was essential to clarify whether or not students are 'active' in the sharing of news and how they ultimately decide what is important and 'newsworthy' according to their particular interests. The answers to these questions could potentially show whether or not students have "the power to exercise gatekeeping within a network" (Erzikova (2018: 4).

The link to the online survey was shared with the 2 507 students who were registered at the campus at the time (IIE, 2022). Data obtained from the institution showed that 925 of the students were male, 1 578 students were female, three students were non-binary, and one student preferred not to disclose their gender (IIE, 2022). All of these students could access

the link to the Google Forms survey throughout May and June 2022 by using the institution's wireless (wifi) network on campus or its designated computers in the library (IIE, 2022). The Head of Academics at the institution sent out two reminders of the online survey to the students, upon which I collected a total of 77 responses through Google Forms. As noted by Vasantha (2016), one benefit of using Google Forms is that the researcher does not have to manually enter data, reducing the chance of data coding errors. Responses to survey questions are therefore automatically stored on an individual's Google Drive. I further made use of Google Forms' ability to store and organise survey results in a spreadsheet with Google Sheets.

In my initial proposal, I included an additional component which involved conducting a semi-structured interview (via a video-communication service) with each student who participated in the study. I believed that incorporating semi-structured interviews that are qualitative would be valuable in exploring the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of normative behaviour related to WhatsApp. By gathering real-life examples of messages exchanged between individuals, the interviews could offer insights into the dynamics and communication patterns within WhatsApp. Masip et al. (2021: 1068) explain that semi-structured interviews are particularly useful when exploring "offline communication patterns" on WhatsApp as "its main purpose is interaction with contacts that one knows personally — or, in other words, interpersonal communication with close ties" (Zarouali et al. 2021: 252).

Regrettably, despite being informed and agreeing to participate in the semi-structured interview through the completion and submission of the online survey, the students did not demonstrate any interest in taking part in the interview. Only one female student ended up participating in the semi-structured interview. This finding is unexpected and surprising, considering that a significant majority of the students (70 out of 77) expressed their willingness to be contacted via email for the semi-structured interview. I contacted each student individually to schedule a time and date for the semi-structured interview to take

place via the video software platform Google Meet. I chose Google Meet as it is considered to be "a very useful video communication tool" and allows users "to meet face to face directly and effectively, while also being incredibly light and fast" (Pedroso et al., 202: 3985). It is also easily accessible via an online meeting request from Gmail (a free email service by Google) and only requires a steady internet connection (Google, 2023). One of Google Meet's most beneficial features is its ability to record a meeting, which could assist in transcribing interviews, in this case. After I extended my timeline for the completion of my semi-structured interviews until the end of August 2022, I encouraged each student to participate in the semi-structured interview by sending two email reminders to individual participants over the course of two months. I indicated that the interview will not take up much time, and that they can stop the interview at any time. I realise that it would have been more effective to conduct the interviews in person and on campus. However, I was unable to do this due to covid-19 restrictions and remote work. Between 2020 and 2022, the pandemic significantly impacted various aspects of work and limited opportunities for in-person interactions. While I had to adapt my approach accordingly, I prepared for the semi-structured interview by setting up an interview guide (See Annexure D) in which general topics of interest are noted with sub-questions (Busetto et al., 2020). These topics of interest were mainly about undergraduate students' motivations for sharing news on WhatsApp as well as explanations of the nature of their WhatsApp contacts and groups. These questions were initially guided by pre-determined themes from earlier literature, studies, and an initial approach to data collection, such as document analysis or casual observations (Braun et al., 2020). And as I gained more knowledge of the subject, I knew that the topic list could be modified and enhanced at the beginning of the data collection procedure (Braun et al., 2020). According to Kvale and Brinkmann (1996), the interview guide allowed me to ask in-depth questions — and ultimately provide insight into participants' "life world", their experiences, and the importance of those experiences. In addition, an interview guide usually allows interviewers the ability to "read between the lines"

and create questions for the participant based on that reading (Kvale and Brinkmann, 1996). An interview guide, with closed- and open-ended questions such as “for what reasons do you use WhatsApp on a daily basis (if any)?” or “how do you use WhatsApp on a daily basis?” therefore provided insight into my proposed research question. Upon completion of the one semi-structured interview, I transcribed interview answers and entered them into a spreadsheet for further analysis. While this interview offered a more in-depth understanding of individual experiences on WhatsApp, it is important to note that the primary data source for the study is the online survey. The survey data, collected from a larger sample of participants, provide a broader perspective and allows for a deeper analysis of trends and patterns among undergraduate students. The interview data only serves as a supplementary component, enriching the study with insights from a single participant's perspective.

In support of quantitative and descriptive research

When it comes to analysing and presenting quantitative data, researchers often rely on descriptive research (Fox and Bayat, 2007). Descriptive research allows researchers to describe the characteristics of a sample or population using percentages or averages (Cresswell, 1994; Fox and Bayat, 2007) and can be used to organise, categorise, and identify patterns of behaviours, attitudes, and other group characteristics when it comes to the use of WhatsApp. Descriptive research further utilises visual aids, such as graphs and charts, to enhance the reader's understanding of data distribution. By utilising quantitative data from the online survey, I had the opportunity to gain valuable insights into the trends and characteristics of undergraduate students' use of WhatsApp. Studies about the dissemination of news on WhatsApp are often conducted with the use of online surveys (Kumar and Sharma, 2017) and have been particularly helpful in exploring how closed platforms such as WhatsApp shape people’s experiences of news in everyday life (Masip et al., 2021). The online survey was also appropriate for this study as it gave participants the benefit of completing it at their own pace and on their own schedule, and because of the absence of an interviewer, participants could experience less “social desirability bias” than

they would with interviewer-administered forms (Jansen, 2019). Designing an online survey proved to be beneficial for this study as it minimised the period it would normally take to get a survey into the field and complete data collection (Evans and Mathur, 2006), and showcased an opportunity to set up diverse questions. Regmi et al. (2017: online) state that online surveys are "capable of question diversity (such as multiple-choice questions [...] and open- and closed-ended questions (qualitative data) through a text box". Setting up a range of diverse questions was particularly useful when it came to organising the data as online surveys can be very focused and dense with information (Braun et al., 2020). The data collected from the online survey was further amenable to tabulation, with, for example, variables such as 'hours spent using WhatsApp' or the frequency of utilising specific features of the application. Additionally, the study also included the description of categorical information, such as age or patterns of interaction within the group using WhatsApp, to provide a comprehensive overview of the research subject.

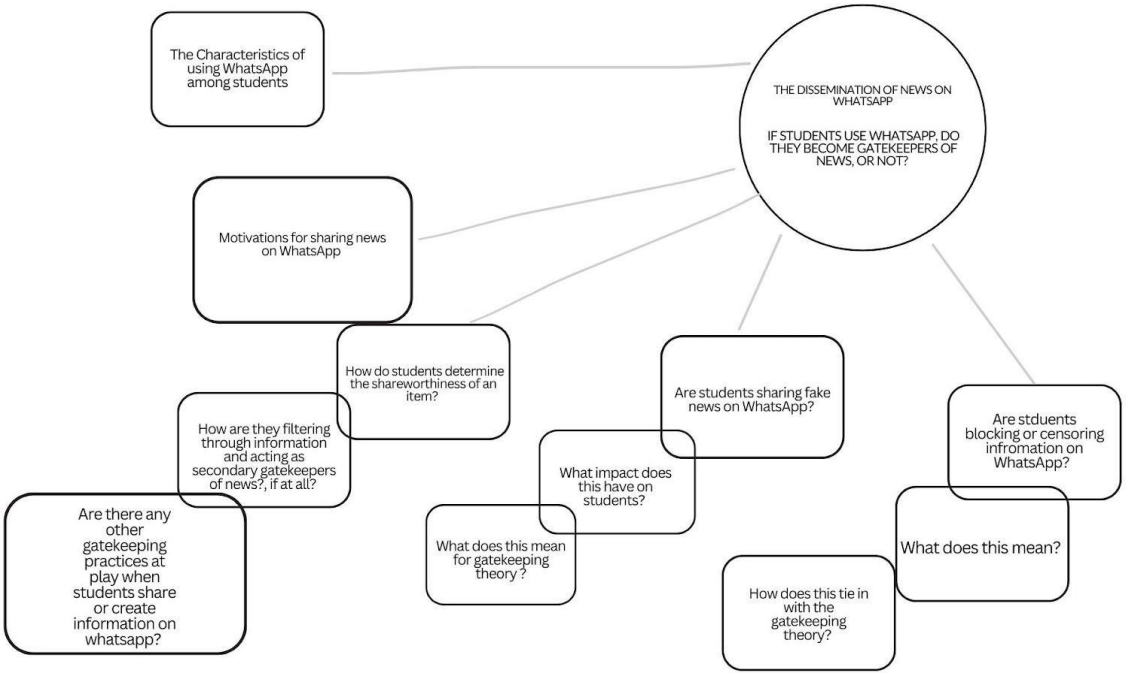
Data analysis

The data I captured during phases one and two of my study was analysed using an approach based on descriptive statistics. This involved the process of characterising and summarising the data in percentages and averages to be displayed in tables and diagrams. I then applied quantitative analysis and thematic analysis to further analyse the findings. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) note that there are various advantages of thematic analysis. One of them is the fact that thematic analysis is a method rather than a methodology (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). This indicates that, unlike many qualitative techniques, it is not limited by a certain theoretical or epistemological approach (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Thematic analysis can thus be approached in a variety of different ways. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework is considered to be the most “influential approach” for thematic analysis “because it offers such a clear and usable framework for doing it,” according to Maguire and Delahunt (2017: 3353). I utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps for conducting thematic analysis by “familiarising myself with the data, generating

initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 91). By following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, I first had to read (and re-read) survey findings and interview transcripts in order to become completely "immersed" in the data and write down my initial thoughts. My initial thoughts were influenced by background information that was discussed in the literature review. I then used descriptive coding methods (such as reading through qualitative data and coding passages according to topic) to "organise data in a meaningful and systematic way" (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017: 3355). As previously noted, to gather data for this study, participants received the online survey via Google Forms which automatically displays the data using graphs or figures with the option to export the raw data for further analysis using other statistical software (Vasantha, 2016). I exported the responses into a Google Sheet to analyse the raw data and set up codes where necessary. Student demographics were coded, for instance, to clearly show how many participants are female or male, their age, main language, ethnic group, whether they live in a family home, and if they are full-time students or not. I further relied on the data organised into graphs and figures by Google Forms to identify intriguing aspects of my study issue. By looking at the data, I could see that students are actively using WhatsApp and all its features, sometimes for hours at a time to share anything from lifestyle news to information about video games, for example. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that generating initial codes are more detailed than themes and provides an indication of the context of the information. After identifying codes, the researcher usually sets out to search for themes (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). However, if the researcher has a short data set, there may be considerable overlap between the coding stage and identifying preliminary themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). When I looked at the codes in this case, some of them made up obvious themes. For example, I had a number of students indicate that they use WhatsApp as their main means of communication with their friends (89.6%) and with their family (79.2%). I was also able to identify and review themes such as an increase in the use of technology in the classroom, the motivations for sharing news on WhatsApp, and how students filter information on WhatsApp. According to Braun

and Clarke (2006: 91) after steps one to four, the researcher must decide whether to “merge, improve, separate, or eliminate initial ideas” after a thorough evaluation of the themes that have been identified. To identify the “essence of what each theme is about” according to Braun and Clarke (2006: 92), it is important to identify what each theme is saying and how the themes connect to each other. By analysing sub-themes, and how it interacts with the main theme, the researcher should, at this point, be able to present “a unified story of the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I, therefore, defined each theme, and sub-themes and connected it to my overall research question. I also tied the answers of the semi-structured interview to each theme, to see if it is applicable to my research question. To illustrate this, I created a thematic map to showcase the relationship between themes.

Figure 4.1: My initial thoughts and thematic map



I developed five themes, including ‘The Characteristics of using WhatsApp among students’, ‘Motivations for Sharing News on WhatsApp’, ‘Determining the Shareworthiness of an item on WhatsApp’, ‘The Issue of Fake News on WhatsApp’ and ‘Blocking and Censoring Content on WhatsApp’. This helped me with the final step of Braun and Clarke’s (2006)

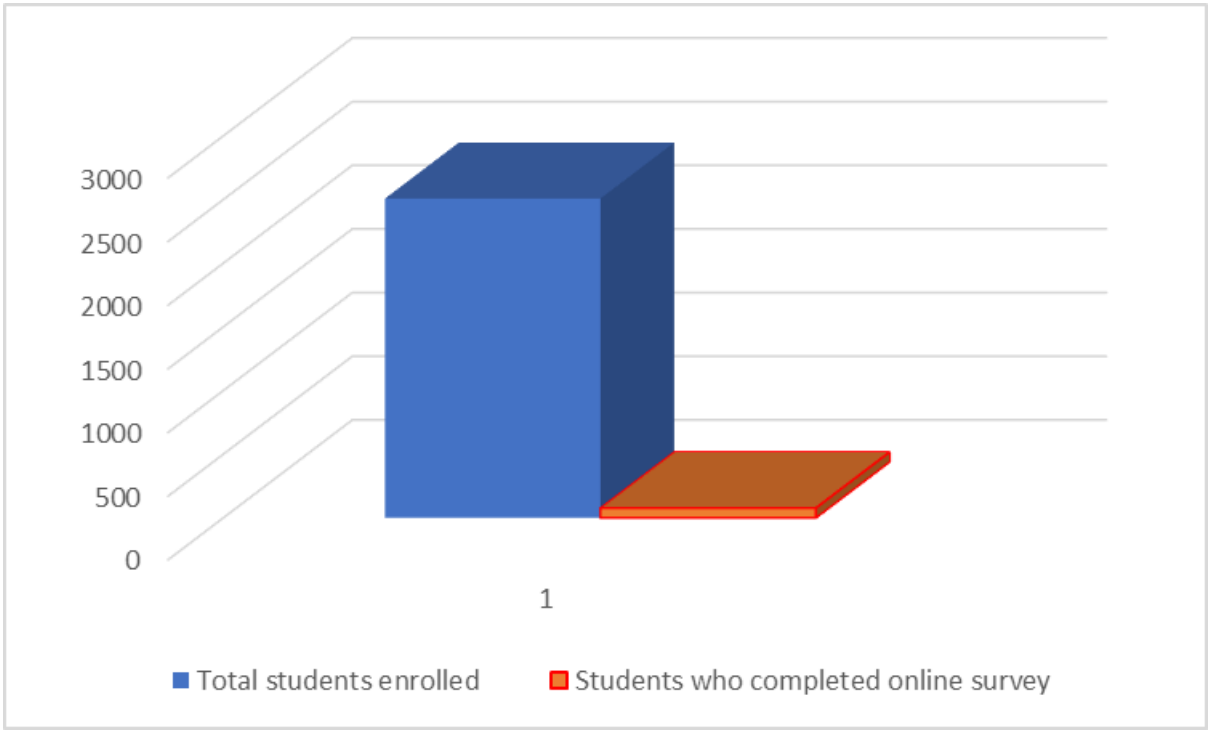
framework: Transforming the analysis into an “interpretable piece of writing by using vivid and compelling extract examples that relate to the themes, research question, and literature” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 92) which I attempted to do in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: The dissemination of news on WhatsApp among undergraduate students

The findings chapter in this study examines the data collected from the online survey, with a specific focus on the dissemination of news via WhatsApp among undergraduate students in Johannesburg. By employing gatekeeping theory as a framework, the chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the patterns and dynamics observed among undergraduate students' news-sharing practices on WhatsApp. In Chapter 6, I will fully explain gatekeeping theory and how it is applicable in this case.

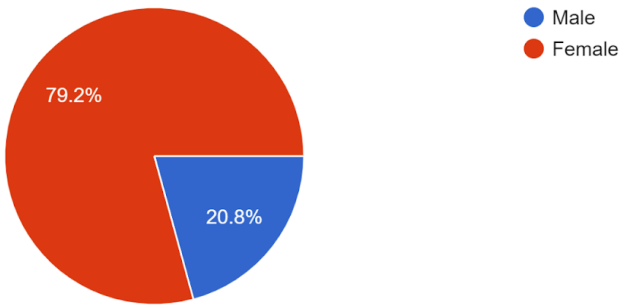
Data from the online survey found that students between the age of 18 to 21-years-old (71.4%), 22 to 25 years old (18.2%) or 'older' (10.4%) are not only active on this particular instant messaging application but are also actively sharing news and information by using a range of WhatsApp features, most notably voice notes and screenshots.

Figure 5.1: The total amount of students enrolled at the private institution versus the students who completed the online survey



Out of 2 507 students who were enrolled at the private institution's operating college in 2022, 77 students ended up completing the online survey via Google Forms. Of the 77 participating students that completed the online survey, 61 (79.2%) indicated that they are female, while 16 (20.8%) said that they are male. This corresponds with the college's data, which indicates that there were more female students registered in 2022. In 2022, there were 2 507 students enrolled at the institution, of which 925 of the students are male, 1 578 students are female, three students are non-binary, and one student preferred not to disclose their gender (IIE, 2022) (IIE, 2022). Given the small sample size and the limited scope of participants, it is important to note that the results of the study is not considered representative of a larger population or generalised to all undergraduate students. Instead, the findings are descriptive and can be seen as providing insights into WhatsApp usage among the specific group of participants involved in the study, serving as a proxy for South African youth in this context.

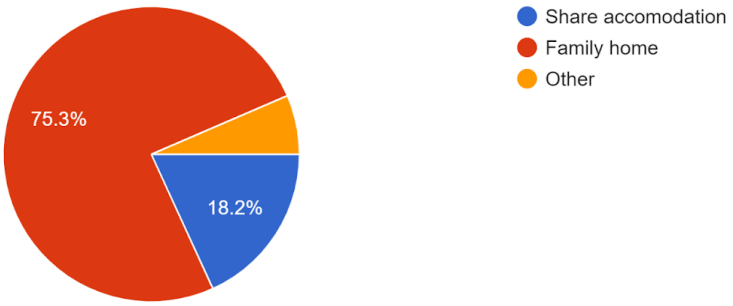
Figure 5.2: Of the 77 participating students in the online survey, 79.2% indicated that they are female, while 20.8% said that they are male



Out of the 77 respondents, 4% (70) of the students shared their email addresses with the intent of participating in the semi-structured interview. However, as explained in the methodology chapter, only one female undergraduate student ended up completing the semi-structured interview.

The institution presents most of its classes in English (IIE, 2022), even though only 55.9% of the participants said that it is their main language. While South Africa has eleven official languages (South African Government, 2019), a diverse range of students completed the online survey, particularly participants speaking Afrikaans (6.2%), English (55.8%), Sepedi (3.9%), Setswana (3.3%), Southern Sotho (2%), Siswati (1.9%), Tshivenda (2.1%) or Xhosa (1.3). Of the students that participated, 63.6% indicated that they are black, 19.5% are white, 11.7% are Indian, 2.6% are coloured and 2.26% are 'other'. While these students are studying at the IIE's college in Johannesburg, 58.4% of them are living in Johannesburg. Others live in Pretoria (14.3%), in the East Rand (18.2%) with 9.1% indicating that they live someplace else. This study also found that most of these students live in a family home (75.3%), in shared accommodation (18.2%) or simply 'other' (6.5%).

Figure 5.3: Students indicated whether they live in a family home, shared accommodation or 'other'

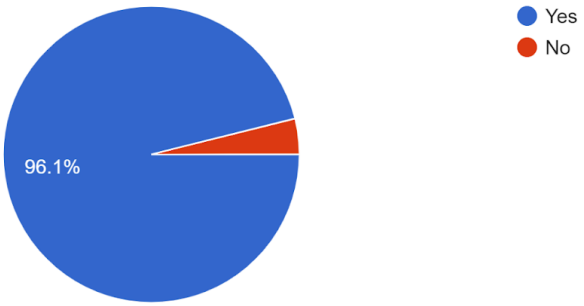


Increased use of cell phones and the internet in South Africa

South Africa experienced an increase in internet connectivity similar to the rest of the world throughout the pandemic (Mzekandaba, 2021). In fact, a post-pandemic survey found that 74.1% of households in South Africa had at least one person who had access to or utilised the internet in places such as their homes, place of employment, place of study, cyber cafes,

or via public hotspots (Mzekandaba, 2021). With 89.6% of respondents indicating that they do use WhatsApp on a daily basis, it is relevant to make the assumption that these students at this particular college in Johannesburg do own a cellphone, or at the very least a computer, with the ability to download WhatsApp. More than 90% of the students indicated that they have access to the internet (other than at the college), with only 3.9% indicating that they do not.

Figure 5.4: Most of the participants indicated that they do have access to the internet other than at college

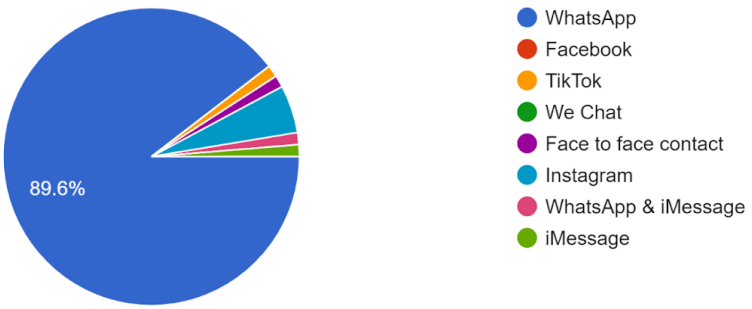


Students in Johannesburg and their main means of communication in 2022

The online survey found that participating students use WhatsApp as their main means of communication when communicating with their friends. This was followed by the social media platforms Instagram and Facebook, iMessage (an instant messaging service from Apple Inc), WeChat, TikTok (a short-form video hosting service) and 'face-to-face contact'. Students indicated that communication on WhatsApp takes place through individual chats or within WhatsApp groups. WhatsApp groups allow multiple individuals, up to a maximum of 512 users (as of the information available in Masango, 2022), to convene in a single application, enabling them to engage in discussions and share information collectively. These groups are either open or closed. Closed WhatsApp groups are characterised by restricted participation or where only administrators alone have the ability to send messages.

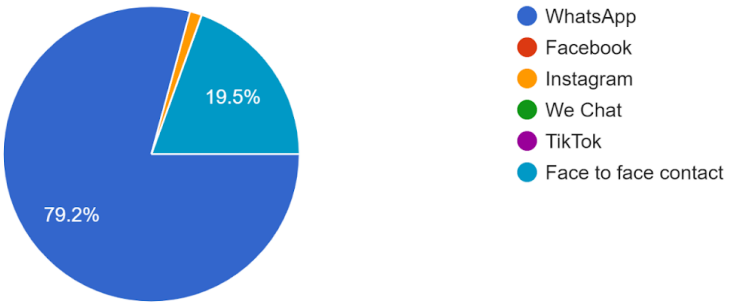
These groups often serve as platforms for specific purposes, such as class discussions, project collaboration, or focused topic discussions. In such regulated groups, the gatekeeping function is typically centralised with the administrators, who control the flow of information by determining what content is shared. On the other hand, open WhatsApp groups allow all members to freely discuss and share information as they wish. These groups can encompass a wider range of topics and often foster more open and participatory conversations among students. In this scenario, gatekeeping functions are distributed among the group members themselves, as they collectively determine which content is shared, discussed, and given prominence within the group. Similar to how students curate their own WhatsApp contact lists, individuals who serve as administrators or moderators of a WhatsApp group have the authority to control membership. They can decide whom to add or remove from the group according to their preferences and guidelines. This administrative role usually empowers individuals to curate the information flow on the group, ensuring that it aligns with their intended purpose and maintains a suitable environment for communication and information sharing. By having the ability to manage group membership, administrators and moderators can exercise control over the dynamics and content within the WhatsApp group.

Figure 5.5: Undergraduate students' main means of communication when it comes to staying in touch with their friends



However, even though WhatsApp was identified as their main means of communication from a range of different channels and platforms available, this study reveals that students use WhatsApp to a lesser extent when communicating with their family (79.2%) as opposed to communicating with their friends.

Figure 5.6: Undergraduate students' main means of communication when it comes to staying in touch with their families



The data does not, however, imply that the respondents do not value interpersonal interaction. When it comes to staying in touch with their family, students said they not only rely on WhatsApp to communicate, but they also rely on 'face-to-face contact' (19.5%) and Instagram (1.3%). The available data suggests that undergraduate students tend to have more frequent 'face-to-face contact' with their families compared to their friends.

It is further interesting to note that a limited number of participants chose Facebook as one of their main communication channels for their friends or family. Data suggesting that Facebook usage is in decline compared to private messaging applications and WhatsApp is indicative of changing user preferences and shifting trends in social media in this case. This decline could be attributed to several factors. Firstly, as mentioned in Chapter 1, privacy concerns arising from Facebook's past privacy controversies may have led users to seek alternative platforms that prioritise data protection and privacy. Additionally, private messaging applications and WhatsApp have evolved to offer comprehensive messaging

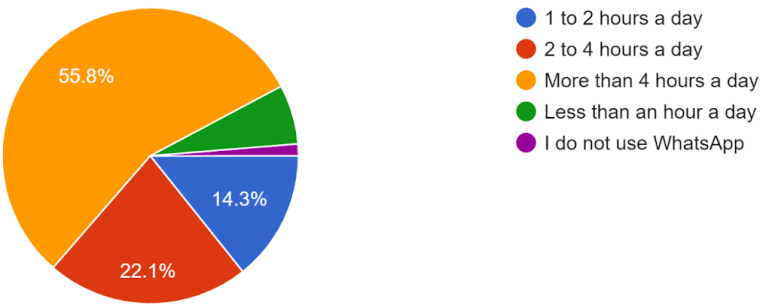
features such as encrypted communication, voice and video calling, and group chats, attracting users who prioritise secure and direct communication. Furthermore, if younger users are driving this shift away from Facebook, it reflects evolving preferences within this demographic. The mobile-centric experience provided by private messaging applications and WhatsApp, along with their ability to meet the need for more focused and intimate communication, might also contribute to their increasing popularity. However, it's important to consider that regional variations, cultural preferences, and individual motivations can also influence user behaviour and platform choices.

Measuring the popularity of WhatsApp

The amount of time each participant spent using WhatsApp on a daily basis was extremely informative in further extending the platform's popularity. Most of the participating students (67.5%) indicated that they use multiple instant messaging platforms to communicate on a daily basis, however, when it comes to WhatsApp, 55.8% of students indicated that they are active on this particular instant messaging platform for more than four hours a day. In some cases (1.3%) of participants use both WhatsApp and iMessage to communicate. iMessage works the same as WhatsApp and also requires an internet connection with recurring data to function (Apple Support, 2022). Other respondents indicated that they are active on WhatsApp for at least two to four hours a day (22.1%), for one to two hours a day (14.3%) or at least an hour a day (6.5%).

It should be noted that when it comes to WhatsApp, it is likely to be used intermittently. For example, someone may use WhatsApp while writing emails, studying for an exam, or even while watching a movie. In this context, the mention of four hours does not necessarily represent the continuous usage of WhatsApp. Instead, it suggests that during a typical day, a student may spend a few minutes here and there on WhatsApp, adding up to a total of approximately four hours. These four hours do not necessarily occur in a single continuous block.

Figure 5.7: Undergraduate students in Johannesburg regularly use WhatsApp, intermittently for hours a day



The fact that more than 50% of the respondents use WhatsApp intermittently for more than four hours a day also confirms its value among participants, correlating with the results of similar studies conducted by Ma and Liu (2004) and Shambare (2014). Shambare (2014) says that the amount of time students spend on WhatsApp a day is particularly important and meaningful when these hours spent are compared to an individual's productive time each day. Four hours is a considerable amount of time, especially considering that these are mostly full-time students (81.2%) enrolled at this particular college. Other respondents indicated that they have part-time work (13%), while more than 5% of these students are freelancing while completing their studies.

Motivations for using WhatsApp

The number of features that are available on WhatsApp, including text, photos, memes, audio and video notes, the ability to send Word documents and PDF files, as well as emoticons, stickers, GIFS (Graphics Interchange Format), contact numbers, your exact location and even direct access to the camera of the mobile device from which it is used, can explain why these respondents use WhatsApp every day. But, for this study, it is important to understand their motivation for sharing news. Participants indicated that instant messaging applications are a great way to share content that is "fun" (20.8%), to simply "stay in touch"

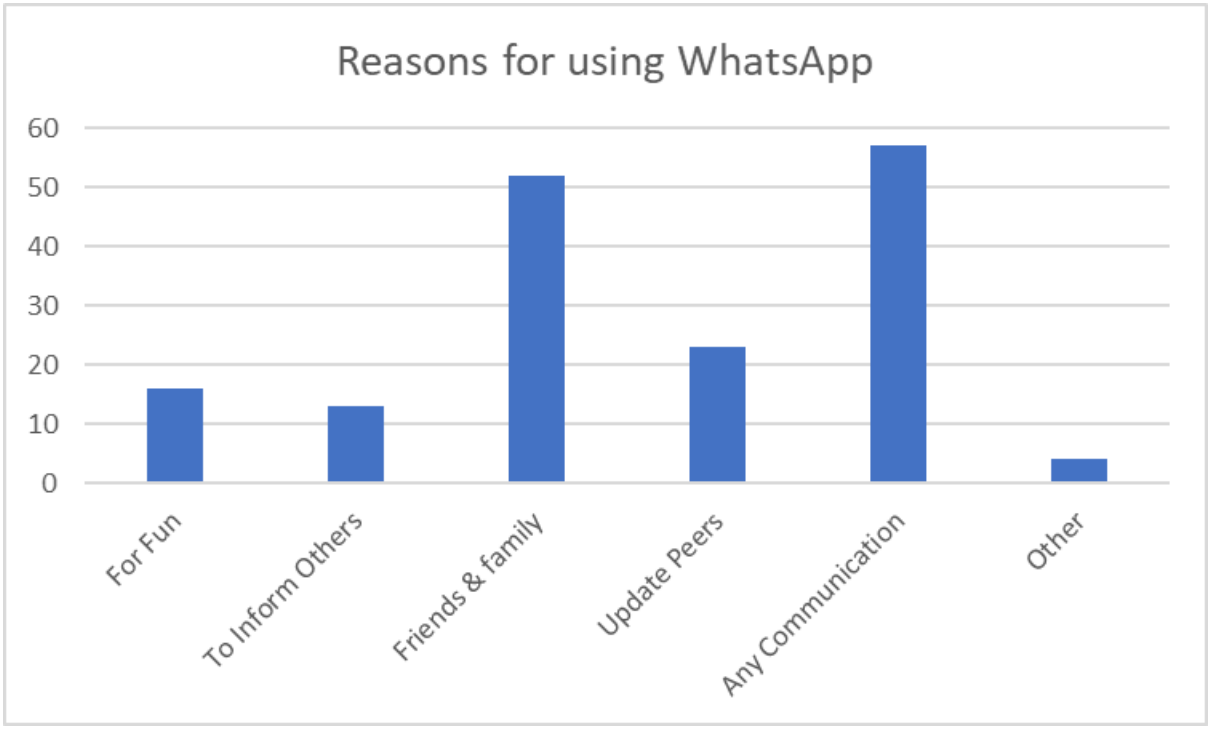
(67.5%), for “any communication” (74%), to “share updates with peers” (29.9%) or to “inform others of any news” that is “newsworthy” and where “personal relevance” is strong enough (16.9%). When it comes to content that is considered "fun," it often encompasses humorous memes. Memes, which can take the form of images, videos, or text accompanied by relatable or comedic content, are widely shared on online platforms. They have the ability to rapidly spread across the internet, attracting a broad audience through cultural references and inside jokes.

The concept of staying in touch is closely tied to the connected nature of students, who can reach anyone around the world through WhatsApp at any time. Students have expressed that they utilise the various features of WhatsApp to communicate with others effectively. For instance, if they need to share a pin location for a delivery, WhatsApp's built-in location service allows them to do so conveniently. Similarly, when they need to contact Vodacom's customer services to address billing issues, they can employ the mobile communications company's WhatsApp Ticket system.

Moreover, when students come across news items they consider "newsworthy" or personally relevant, they can readily share them with their network of friends. In the second phase of this study, the focus extended to exploring the participants' preferences and sources for obtaining original news items. Do they source their news from email newsletters, TikTok influencers or the family WhatsApp group? Do students obtain news items from the News24 application or through a Google search? Alternatively, they might receive news items from individual contacts on WhatsApp. Of course, it is important to note that there isn’t a definite answer for what constitutes news (Vu, 2013) as it is different for individuals. Vu (2013) references Boortsin (1961) who said that “news is anything that makes a reader say ‘Gee Whiz!’ The term “news” itself has “always had more than one meaning” and can be “what you got in your newspapers and televisions and radio sets; on the other hand, news was also information about you, your family, and others important to you” (Chakrabarti et al.,

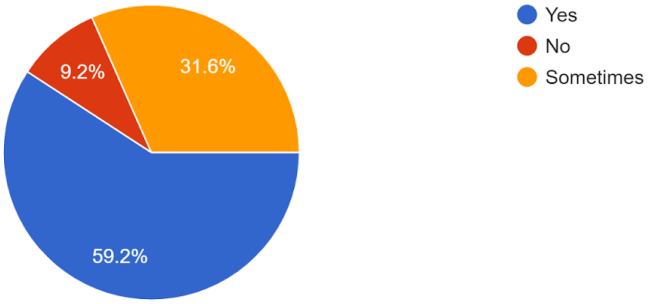
2018: 19). However, in using the online survey as primary data source, participants indicated that they ‘always’ share what they consider to be news on WhatsApp (33.8%). Certainly, it is clear that what students perceive as newsworthy can encompass a wide range of topics and can be highly subjective. It can include various aspects of their personal lives and immediate surroundings. For instance, students may find news about their cousin coming to visit as important and worth sharing with their friends or family on WhatsApp. Similarly, information related to their examinations, such as exam schedules, study materials, or updates from their educational institutions, could be considered significant and shared among their peers. This ultimately demonstrates that students have their own gate, “as they send news items to others” in their WhatsApp network “when the interaction between newsworthiness and personal relevance is strong enough” (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 124). This ultimately emphasise the audiences’ role in the gatekeeping process and how they have the power to shape the news. In this context, students possess an “extra-media” level of influence, enabling them to exercise their power to make a story ‘go viral’ or by boycotting a newspaper or other media outlets, for example.

Figure 5.8: Participants listed a number of reasons why they think people use an instant messaging app



Students further indicated that they share news to “hear more about other people’s opinions" (47.4%), “provide advice or give out a warning” (44.7%) or simply to “express themselves” 35.5%). To “provide advice or express warning” appears to be consistent with the findings of Madrid-Morales et al. (2021), as well as other literature on sharing practices in other countries (Duffy et al., 2019: Chadwick et al., 2019). According to Chakrabarti et al. (2018), this motivation can be seen as an act of civic duty and a sense that information is democratic and should be shared. For many students, the concept of civic duty was highly applicable. In consequence, participants indicated that they find it especially important when something newsworthy happens in their vicinity, either at home or where they study. In particular, 80.3% of these students said that they will share a news update with their friends, family or peers when there is a coronavirus outbreak at the college, for example. Participants also indicated that even while they tend to share news that closely affects their lives with their peers, they have an even greater responsibility to share important information with their most personal contacts such as family and friends.

Figure 5.9: Participants feel a sense of responsibility to share important news with their most personal contacts on WhatsApp

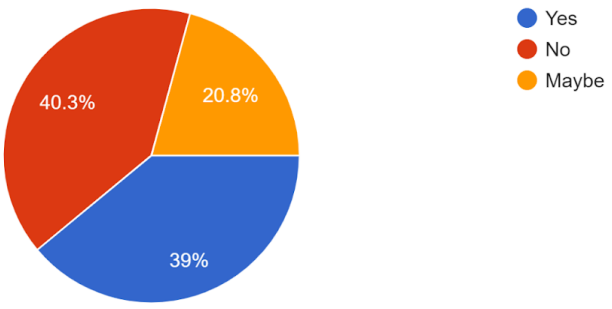


Going viral: Determining the share-worthiness of a news item

While it has been established that participants share information that they deem to be part of their “civic duty” to inform others (64.5%), 39% of the respondents indicated that they have shared what media outlets would consider “viral stories” on WhatsApp. In this case, the concept of network diffusion, as highlighted by Valente (1995), holds significant interest. When it comes to a news organisation's outreach, the scope of their impact is not solely determined by the number of direct recipients. It is important to consider whether these recipients themselves engage with the content and actually click on the forward button, contributing to an ongoing process of diffusion. This phenomenon ties in with “secondary-gatekeeping” (Singer, 2014) and “gatewatching” (Bruns, 2005) as well as network theory (Welbers and Opgenhaffen, 2018). A widely used metaphor for this process likens it to the spread of a virus, which primarily occurs through interpersonal connections but can swiftly disseminate throughout a population. On WhatsApp, this virus-like propagation of content through interconnected individuals explains the rapid dissemination of news to a wide audience, often referred to as "going viral," without relying on traditional mass communication channels. Importantly, since the contagion mechanism is dependent on how users engage with the content, every person in the network actively plays a role in

shaping the information flow. In this case, Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2018) note that it is important to analyse the gatekeeping influence of each student. When WhatsApp users utilise the platform to publish their own news items or share links to relevant content, it significantly influences the overall diffusion of these items. They have the ability to amplify the visibility and dissemination of news content in this case. The act of sharing news items or linking to them on social media allows for a broader audience to access and engage with the information, potentially leading to increased exposure and wider circulation. In this way, the actions of WhatsApp users directly impact the extent to which news items are spread and reach a larger audience within the digital landscape. Due to the absence of student participation in the second phase of this study, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to determine the specific influence of each participant on WhatsApp.

Figure 5.10: Participants indicated if they have shared a story that was considered to have gone 'viral' by media outlets



Filtering information and sharing this over that

Even though the second part of my study was supposed to better outline students' sources of news and what they consider news to be, students did give an indication of the type of content that they prefer to share on instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp during phase one. It has been established that a decision to share one sort of content or information over another may be motivated by a desire to establish one's own identity, to

demonstrate a connection with the beliefs of others or by a common interest (Marwick, 2018). In consequence, students in this study indicated that they share lifestyle news (48.8%), political news (13.2%), crime news (11.8%), health news (9.8%) and sports news (7.9%) on a regular basis via WhatsApp. Participants also indicated that they share "business news" and "current news" as well as "news about their favourite movies or video games", "electronics", "anime", "comedy or memes", "work-related news in either "construction or interior" or "arts and music" content. The results further indicated that female participants are interested in lifestyle, health, political and business news among their top preferences, while their male counterparts prefer content about sport, lifestyle and political news.

Figure 5.11: Female participants indicated that they are most interested in lifestyle news

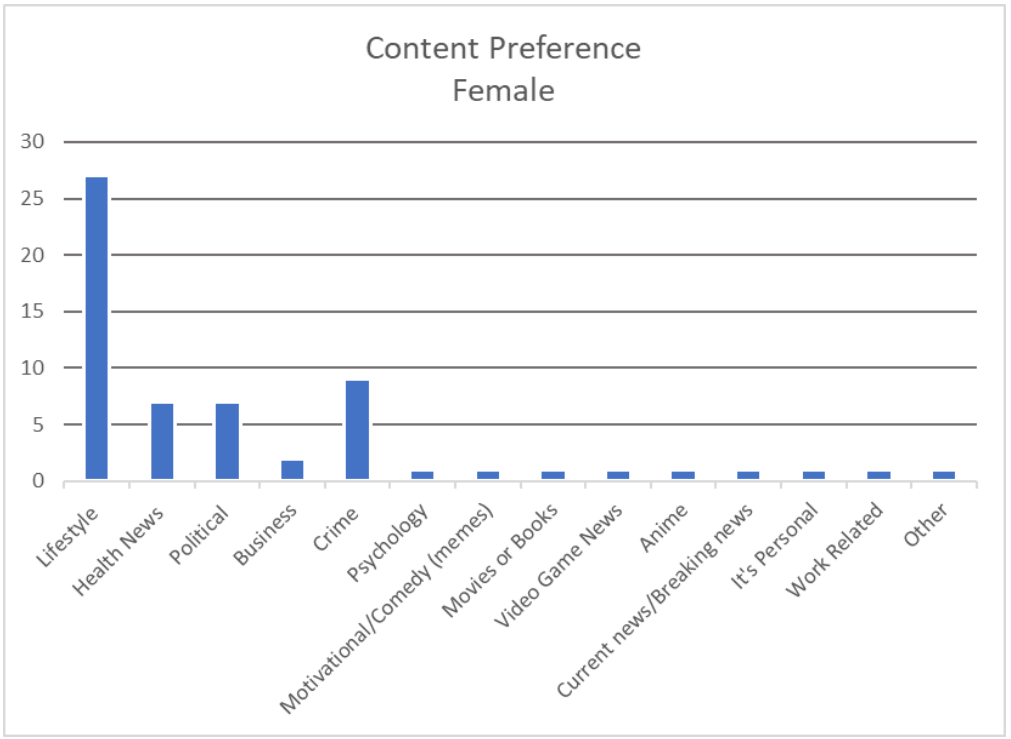
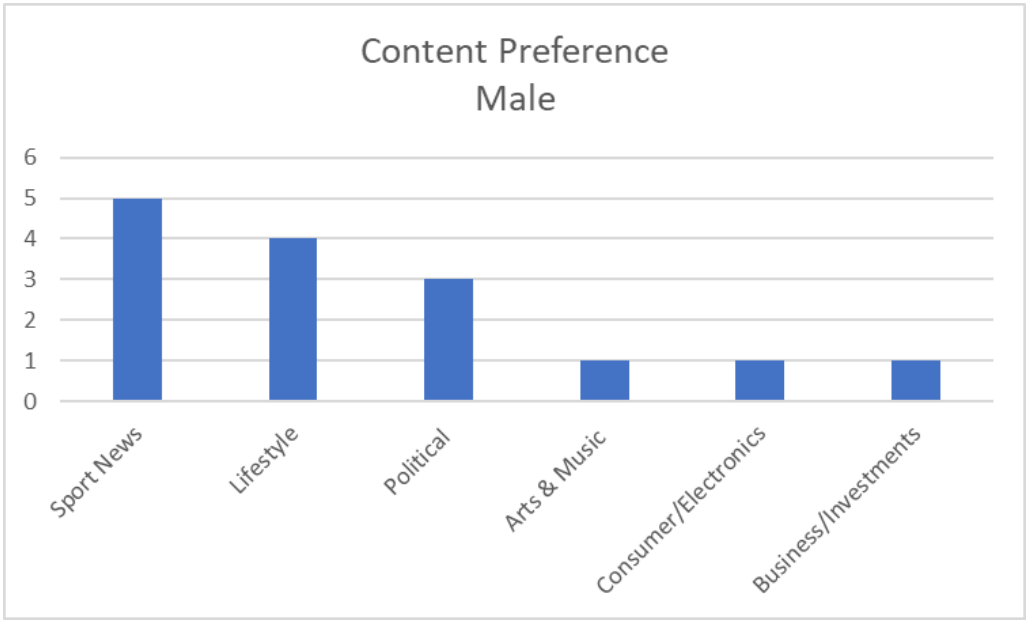
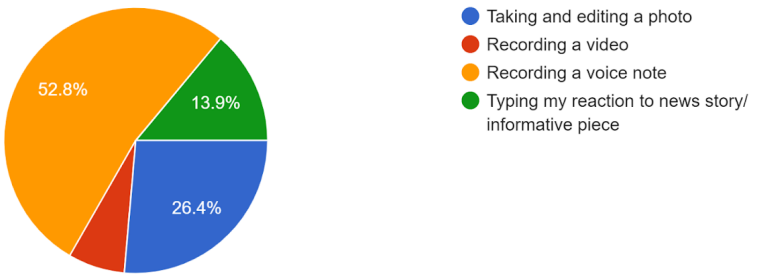


Figure 5.12: Male participants indicated that they prefer to consume sports, lifestyle and political news



Respondents indicated that they also regularly create and distribute their own user-generated content on WhatsApp as a means to distribute it. In this consequence, 52.8% share their own content via the recording of a voice note, by taking and editing a photo (26.4%) or by “typing” or ”reacting to a message” (13.9%). Only 6.9% of students said that they record and share their own content in the form of a video.

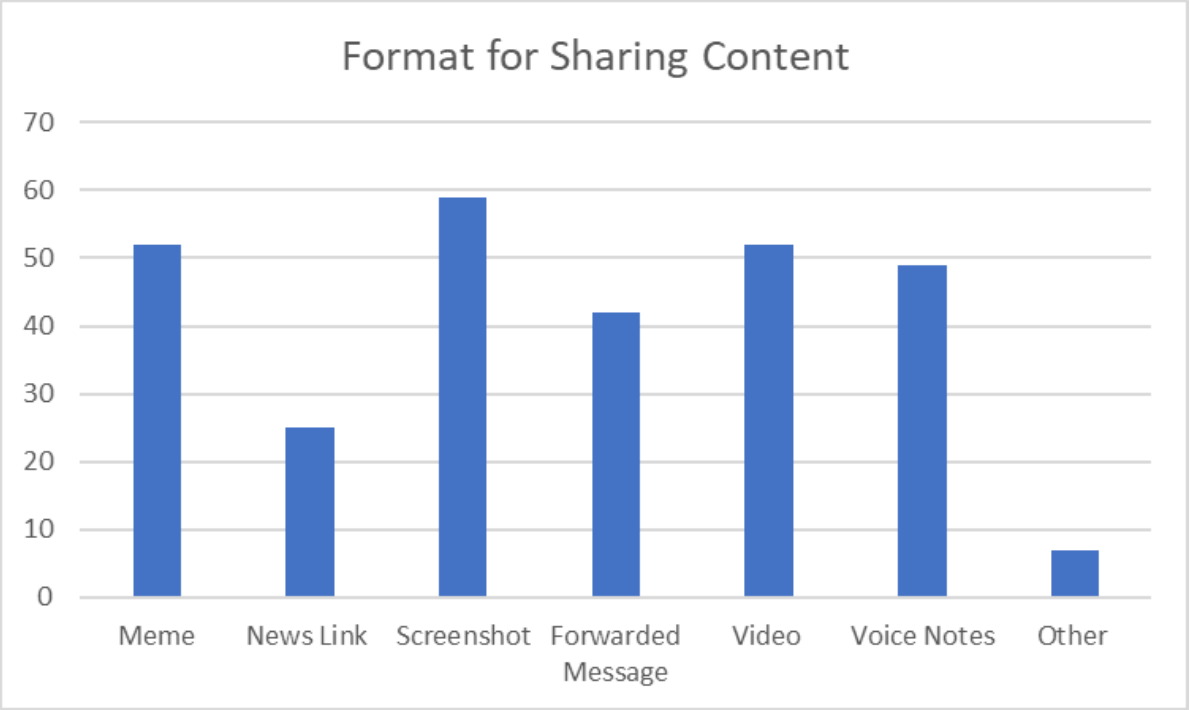
Figure 5.13: Undergraduate students create their own user-generated content (UGC) by using different features on WhatsApp



Using WhatsApp and all its features

This study found that participants regularly make use of WhatsApp's built-in features. Any news or topic they deem interesting to share with their friends and family is either done in the form of a screenshot (76.6%), a meme or a video (67.5%), as a voice note (63.6%), as a text message (54.5%) or as news link (32.5%). Herrero-Diz et.al. (2020: 7) notes that sharing information via a screenshot as a "trend of toward the contrary" sees "exact conversations or content made and transferred through the messaging platform end up as a screenshot, that is, an image, on some other open social network, as accessible content".

Figure 5.14: Participating students share content through a range of formats



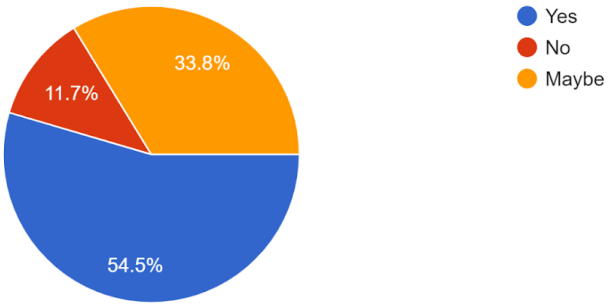
In the second phase of my study, the female participant did indicate that she also updates her WhatsApp status regularly. As previously stated, the WhatsApp status allows users to share text, images, video, and GIF updates with their contacts that disappear after 24 hours, and that is also end-to-end encrypted (WhatsApp Help Center, 2022). With WhatsApp status, individuals can select their audience by making their status updates private, or

selecting certain people or groups that are not allowed to see any updates (WhatsApp Help Center, 2022). Individuals can also share voice notes, react to status updates from their contacts or share news links (See Annexure D) (WhatsApp Help Center, 2022).

The issue of fake news on WhatsApp

For this study, most of the respondents (54.5%) indicated that they do in fact know how to spot what was labelled as fake news, as opposed to 11.7% who admitted that they cannot. More than 30% of the respondents were unsure, saying that they “might” be able to spot fake news. The second phase of this study did attempt to elaborate on how students would define fake news and also why students share fake news, but as previously established, the results are limited. It is therefore important to consider that given the subjective nature of this concept, it should be acknowledged that students may have different interpretations and criteria for identifying what they consider to be fake news. Students may define fake news in various ways and can include, for example, sensationalised or exaggerated headlines or even satirical content. Exploring and understanding these individual perspectives would therefore require further research and investigation. The data does indicate that the sharing of news and comment is “less open and less transparent” (Newman et al., 2019) than in previous years. And although social media in general is a means for the way through which false information spreads among friends and followers as "automatic facts" (Wardle, 2019: online), WhatsApp is the method via which this false information circulates most efficiently. As previously stated, this was exacerbated during the covid-19 pandemic when people shared several false remedies, unscientific preventative methods, and conspiracy theories, all of which had (and still have) significant consequences (Wardle, 2020). With a rapid increase of fake news, disinformation and misinformation being circulated on various social media platforms and instant messaging applications, it has become significantly difficult to stop the spread of fake news and fact-check information. Whatsapp’s encryption makes this even harder (WhatsApp Help Center, 2021).

Figure 5.15: Participating students are not entirely sure if they can tell fake news from factual news



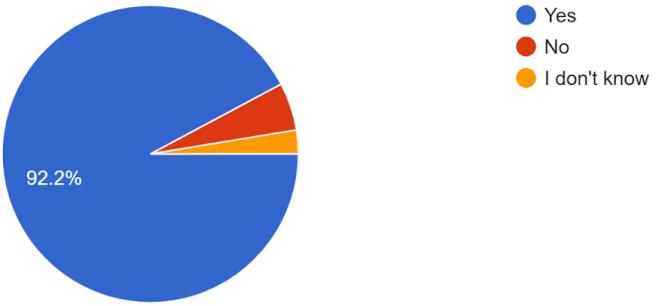
In the second phase of my study, the young female student from the institution indicated that she knows how to spot fake news, saying that it is important to look for “credible sources and authors”. The young female also indicated that she does not forward chain messages that promise any “monetary gain” or messages “that are clearly scams”.

However, not being able to identify fake news does not stop participants from sending it on to their personal contacts or WhatsApp groups. Most of the participants (53.2%) said that they’ve shared fake news with their friends or family whereas 96.6% believe that they’ve received fake news items on an instant messaging platform such as WhatsApp.

Curating your very own contact list

WhatsApp users can simply delete, add or block a person whenever they want to do so (WhatsApp Help Center, 2021). Participating students indicated that they use an instant messaging app such as WhatsApp due to the fact that they can control who is on their contact list and who they ultimately communicate with. Over 90% of the respondents indicated that they consider WhatsApp beneficial due to the fact that they can control who they talk to or not.

Figure 5.16: Students consider WhatsApp to be beneficial because they can control their own contact list



Conversational gatekeeping

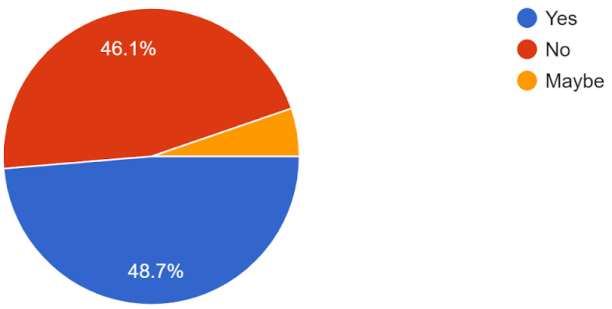
The participating students indicated that they have the ability to gatekeep their conversations and establish their own norms by determining what content or actions are considered appropriate on WhatsApp. This aspect of gatekeeping implies that audiences can play a role in online settings through their conversations. They can highlight misunderstandings, prioritise the need for clarification, provide reassurances, and correct factual errors that require attention, repair, assurance, or correction. This dynamic allows for a collaborative process where the audience shape the discourse to ensure accuracy, accountability, and the dissemination of reliable information. On WhatsApp, this can be achieved through various means, such as providing reassurance to contacts and utilising moderation tools like removing or blocking individuals from a group. DeIuliis (2015) states that elements such as removing or blocking (censoring) a person or controlling access to private information on WhatsApp can essentially transform the basic paradigms of information flow on WhatsApp.

In the case of curating their personal contact list on WhatsApp, a significant majority of participants (97.4%) reported having removed or blocked at least one person. When considering DeIuliis's (2015) gatekeeping mechanism of "security" or controlling access to

private information, this study revealed that 48.7% of the students have removed or blocked a person on an instant messaging application such as WhatsApp group where they are the “administrator” or moderator”.

It is not clear exactly why students removed or blocked a person on WhatsApp, but in certain cases, WhatsApp groups may have administrators or moderators responsible for establishing and enforcing group rules that members must follow. These administrators have the authority to monitor the information shared within the group and take action if necessary. They can issue warnings to members who violate the group rules or even remove them from the group entirely. This level of moderation allows administrators to have some control over the information that is circulated among the group members, ensuring adherence to the established guidelines and maintaining a certain standard of communication within the group.

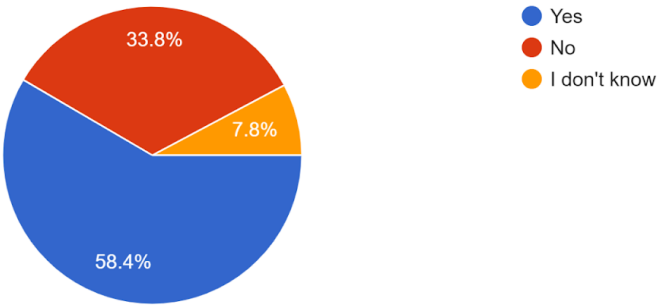
Figure 5.17: A number of students (48.7%) have removed or blocked a person on an instant messaging application such as WhatsApp



Participants may have chosen to remove or block individuals due to personal dislike or conflicts. In such cases, the decision could be based on interpersonal dynamics or negative experiences with the person in question. Additionally, participants might have taken such actions if the individual consistently shared undesirable or objectionable content individually or in a group that did not align with their preferences or values. While the exact motivations

for removing or blocking someone on WhatsApp may vary from person to person, these actions can be seen as a means of exerting control over their personal messaging environment and ensuring a more tailored communication experience.

Figure 5.18: Students indicated that they are administrators of a group on an instant messaging platform



Chapter 6: Undergraduate students as gatekeepers of news

The discussion chapter builds upon Chapter 5, delving into the internal processes and external factors that shape the behaviours of individual gatekeepers, with a specific focus on WhatsApp. The primary objective of this chapter is to provide insight into the gatekeeping practices adopted by students and to examine the subsequent impact of these practices on the dissemination of news.

Exploring information flow and news engagement on WhatsApp

The concept of gatekeeping aligns with the study's focus on how students engage with news on WhatsApp. Gatekeeping involves the careful selection and shaping of information, determining which messages reach the audience amidst the overwhelming volume of available information. The gates represent decision points where various forces come into play to facilitate or restrict the flow of information from one point to another within a communication channel. In the context of students and news consumption on WhatsApp, gatekeeping can be observed in their active role as curators of information. Students are likely to filter and choose specific news items or stories to share within their groups, acting as gatekeepers in determining what content reaches their peers. They have the power to shape the information flow within their social circles by selecting and forwarding news articles, videos, or other media that they find relevant, engaging, or trustworthy. The gatekeeping theory provides a valuable framework or metaphor for understanding this dynamic process of information selection, curation, and transmission among students on WhatsApp. It emphasises the pivotal role of individuals in controlling the flow of news, influencing what their peers consume and shaping the narratives that circulate within their social networks.

Internal processes and external forces that influence individual gatekeepers

The act of gatekeeping typically involves a deliberate decision made by a gatekeeper to control the flow of information and determine what is disseminated to the audience. As discussed in Chapter 3, some researchers challenge the application of gatekeeping theory in the online realm. Critics of gatekeeping theory argue that the decision of WhatsApp users not to share a news clip within a specific group should not be interpreted as an intentional gatekeeping action. They argue that the decentralised and user-driven nature of the internet, including platforms like WhatsApp, allows for a more democratic and participatory flow of information. However, gatekeeping theory can be still used as a tool to understand gatekeeping in the 21st century. Gatekeeping theory remains relevant because it recognises that not every story or piece of information is published or equally available to all individuals. This is particularly important because gatekeeping decisions can have significant implications for public attention and the issues that receive prominence in society. And while WhatsApp is not traditionally considered a media channel, it has become an influential platform for the dissemination of information. In this case, the role of gatekeepers within WhatsApp may be attributed to individual users who control the flow of information within their personal networks. Similar to journalists or editors in traditional media channels, individual WhatsApp users act as gatekeepers by deciding which information they forward or share with others in their contacts. They have the power to select, filter, and shape the information that reaches their audience on the platform. In this case, it is important to question the extent to which the process of gatekeeping aligns with the straightforward depiction outlined by Lewin in 1947. According to Lewin (1947), gatekeepers make decisions about which information should pass through the "gate" and reach the individuals or groups beyond, and which information should be blocked. Gatekeepers typically have the power to control the flow of information within a social system. They may allow certain information to pass through the gate based on personal preference, experience, social influences, or biases. Lewin’s (1947) concept of gatekeeping recognises that food reaches the dining table

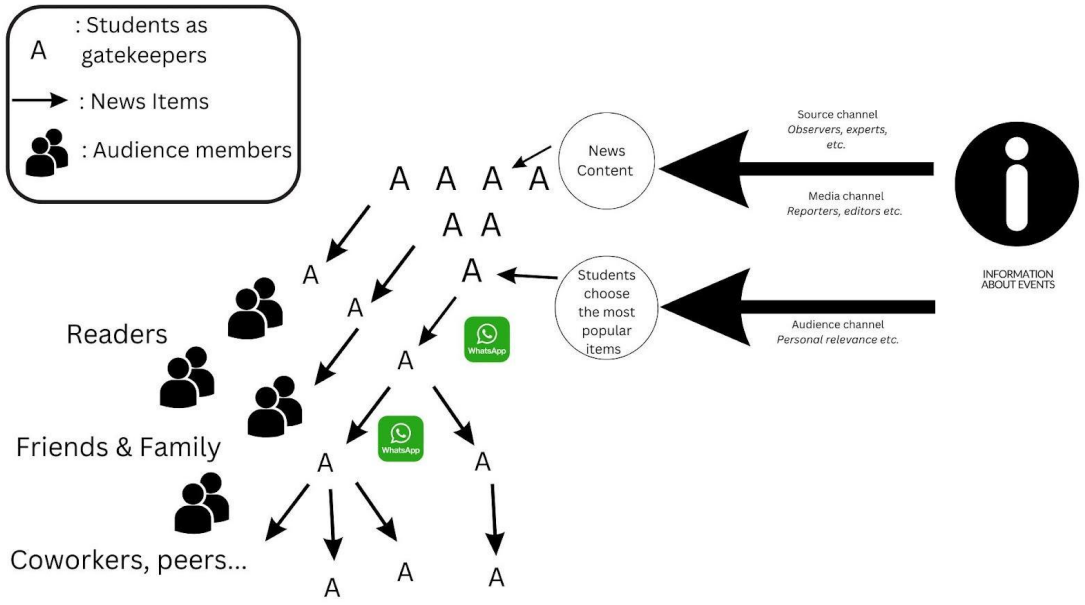
through various channels. After obtaining the food, there are indeed additional decision-making points that need to be considered. Just as in the gatekeeping process, where information is selected and filtered, the food procurement process involves further steps and choices. For example, different circumstances or significant events determine whether the food should be stored in the fridge or pantry, cooked immediately, or kept in the freezer. Ultimately, it reaches the table. Similarly, how does information reach each participant's network of friends on WhatsApp? Or, as stated by Lewin (1947), what are the patterns of forces in the different channels, and what are the main variables that influence these forces? By applying Lewin's idea of channels to the context of students receiving and sharing information on WhatsApp, it can be observed that students receive various information in the form of links, images, text, audio, or videos, each serving as a different avenue for information to be disseminated. After reviewing the information, students decide whether to pass it through their own gate by sharing with others. They have the ability to filter through the information and only forward certain pieces of information from the original message. Just as Lewin (1947) highlighted the presence of significant conflict during the initial stages of buying food, a similar conflict can arise among students when deciding which information to forward on WhatsApp. In the context of information dissemination, students may encounter conflicts or influences that affect their decision to share or withhold certain information. In this case, students expressed their motivations to inform others, seek opinions from others, or provide advice and warnings as some of the main influences when they choose to share information or withhold it. It is clear that there are different items that compete to pass through the gate, and it is the strength of the forces attached to the gate that determines the success of these items in reaching a wider audience. Just as food can be unattractive or "too expensive", students indicated that they share information based on the idea that it is fun, or a way to stay in touch, to simply communicate, or to inform others where "personal relevance" is strong. There can thus be opposing forces at play. These opposing forces can create a conflict within students as they navigate through the information they receive. On one hand, they may feel a sense of responsibility to share

important or valuable information with others. On the other hand, they may have their own preferences and criteria for what they find fun, interesting or relevant. This conflict of opposing forces highlights the complex nature of information sharing and the various factors that influence students' decisions in determining what information to withhold or pass on. This complex nature of the gatekeeping process is further influenced by the notion of subjectivity. Early research revealed that an editor of a small newspaper can be highly subjective (White, 1951). This understanding highlights the inherent subjectivity and personal nature of the gatekeeping process, illustrating the significant impact that gatekeepers can have on the information that reaches the intended audience.

Understanding gatekeeping mechanisms: Exploring the three-channel process

To put these gatekeeping practises in perspective, it is beneficial to study the gatekeeping mechanisms that are applicable to this study in correlation with Shoemaker et al's (2010: 76) "three-channel gatekeeping process" where information about events "flows to sources and the media" before it is "transformed into news". In this case, students "transmit news about the events to other people" — particularly via WhatsApp — "providing information about the popularity of news items to sources and the media" (Shoemaker et al., 2010: 76). Students have the ability to share their own user-generated content as well as "comment and share information that journalists already have regarded as newsworthy", as defined by Salonen et al. (2022) and originally initiated by Singer (2014), on WhatsApp. This ultimately suggests that information travels through multiple gates before it is published (Welbers, 2016). Welbers (2016: 6) refers to Bass (1969) who found that "different gatekeepers in the same channel are interdependent because they can all filter and alter the messages, thereby nullifying the choices of gatekeepers before them and determining the information input of the gatekeepers further down the channel".

Figure 6.1: Shoemaker et al's (2010: 76) three-channel gatekeeping process reimagined with undergraduate students as gatekeepers of news



While gatekeeping theory is often associated with the field of journalism, its principles can be applied to various contexts beyond traditional media. In the case of students receiving information on platforms like WhatsApp, the traditional concept of gatekeeping is relevant, even without a network analysis to explicitly illustrate the flow of news. In the past, news was primarily a product of a top-down, centralised approach, with stories being produced independently of news audiences. However, with the advent of digital technology, and particularly WhatsApp, audiences have become interactive members of the news process. WhatsApp facilitates interaction among individuals (sharing links, “liking” a post) which allows for greater engagement and participation. When a student shares a news link, in this case, news organisations have the capability to gather detailed and quantifiable data about audience news consumption. Through various tracking mechanisms, news organisations can collect information such as the number of clicks on articles, the amount of time spent viewing specific content, the number of shares on social media platforms, and the level of engagement from the audience. In this case, the audience can have a direct impact on the news agenda, with the opportunity to shape what their networks of friends on WhatsApp talk and think about. Their ability to impact both news consumption and production is therefore evident in this dissertation. This influence extends to the routine level described by Shoemaker and Reese (2014), where students can shape journalists' perceptions of

audience preferences and content consumption. The integration of digital platforms, like WhatsApp, into the news ecosystem has resulted in a significant shift. This development has empowered audiences, providing them with an active voice and transforming journalism into interactive conversations between journalists and their audiences. This directly ties in with network gatekeeping, which challenges the notion that individuals who were traditionally seen as the "gated" are passive recipients of information. Instead, it recognises their active role and influences in shaping gatekeeping processes.

Participating students ultimately demonstrate that they use certain gatekeeping practices such as selecting and filtering information, much like traditional journalists and editors. Students have the ability to spread information via their own WhatsApp networks, with the power to “influence the audience's perspective” (Li, 2022: 1). The holistic gatekeeping model proposed by Shoemaker and Vos (2009) references the role of individual social media users as gatekeepers of news within their social circles. The model depicts individuals as gatekeepers who control the flow of information and illustrates how information can reach an audience through different channels, highlighting that a gatekeeper's influence is determined by their position within these channels (Welbers, 2016). To demonstrate the audience's influence on gatekeeping decisions, Welbers (2016) uses a newspaper as an example, that might receive information through channels connected to a news agency such as Agence France-Presse. As fully explored in Chapter 3, the gatekeeping influence of the news agency becomes stronger in this example, constraining the newspaper's own gatekeeping influence. Alternatively, if the newspaper responds to audience feedback and provides news that aligns with the student’s preferences, the gates of the newspaper become less controlled by journalists’ professional routines (Welbers, 2016).

Fake news remains an issue

It should be noted that while there is a range of motivations for students to share news, Kalogeropoulos (2020) notes that it is almost impossible to ignore a WhatsApp message. Compared to Facebook news exposure, sending messages on WhatsApp is a much more "targeted experience" (Kalogeropoulos, 2020). By controlling their own contact list, students in this study can use WhatsApp for the privacy it offers, a fact that participants consider beneficial. This study, therefore, demonstrates that fake news influences the behaviour of students who contribute to the "distribution, and sometimes virality, of false, erroneous, or unverified information", as Herrero-Diz et al. (2020: 2) points out. Herrero-Diz et al. (2020) note that fake news appeals to the emotions of WhatsApp users by enticing them to distribute it impulsively. As previously noted, these messages usually entice the reader by prompting them to "send this to 10 of your friends and you can win the lottery". The one female participant in the semi-structured interview did note that she is able to spot fake news, even though the majority of participants of the online survey (11.7% did say 'no' while 33.8% said 'maybe') did contend that they are often unable to discern between fake news and the truth. In this case, Middaugh (2019) "appeals to the ethics" of young people and their obligation to share information in this situation:

> "When young people use the media to communicate, to create content, for their peers or for the general public, they should be invited to consider the impact of their words, actions and images" (Middaugh, 2019: 53-54).

It is useful to also consider that participants are living in their own "filter bubbles" (Hokkanen: 2019: online). Google, Facebook and other search engines are continuously personalising information on the internet with the use of algorithms. Hokkanen (2019: online) points out that "the more personalised the information feed is for the unique user, the more relevant the platform seems to be for the individual… [which means that] the "information shown to us is chosen, edited and tailored, but this time on an individual level". The result is that individuals

are living in isolation from other information. By further sharing content on WhatsApp, individuals can become even more entrapped by their own “filter bubbles” as “most of the people in our networks share similar views”, and usually repeat “the same ideas, beliefs, and values” (Hokkanen: 2019: online).

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This study does not only shed light on the internal processes and external forces that influence individual gatekeepers that disseminate news on social media and in particular WhatsApp but also provides insight into what students from this particular institution in South Africa like to share on instant messaging platforms. Most respondents are actively “conversing” about news to either inform others, express themselves, find out more about other people’s opinions or provide advice and warning about “viral news stories” in some cases, but also “for any communication that needs to be done”. Students are increasingly engaged in the creation of user-generated content and actively participating in the dissemination of news on WhatsApp. Students are doing this by either conversing with their individual network of friends or within different types of WhatsApp groups. The findings of this study suggest that students are actively sourcing and creating information with the intent to distribute it with their family and friends on WhatsApp. Students are sharing either news links, memes, screenshots, forwarded messages, videos and voice notes by actively filtering through the information that they deem important or interesting. Students are sharing information that they consider to be “newsworthy” or “personally relevant”. This could be an essential update from the Minister of Health in South Africa or details of the week’s grocery list shared on the family WhatsApp group chat. In this case, students regularly share lifestyle news, political news, crime news, health news and sports news on a regular basis via WhatsApp. In other cases, students indicated that they share “business news” and “current news” as well as “news about their favourite movies or video games”, “electronic” or “arts and music”.

This study further demonstrates that participants have different criteria for choosing information that they find “shareworthy”. Their reasons to forward a message strongly resonate with their "civic duty" (Madrid-Morales et al., 2021) to “inform others” (64.5%), however, their interests are very much centred around entertainment news (lifestyle and

sport). By selecting which items to share and by giving special prominence to some, participants in this study regularly suggest which people, issues, and events are especially deserving of attention (Pałka-Suchojad, 2021; Althaus and Tewksbury, 2002) or “deemed unworthy of that deemed worthy” (de Grazia, 1963: 1219). It also suggests that these students are "establishing their digital identities" (Herrero-Diz et al., 2020: 2) or “virtual homes” (Turkle, 1995: 259).

Students not only indicated that they exercise some sort of control when they “downgrade or upgrade content” (Singer, 2014), but who they allow onto their personal WhatsApp network or WhatsApp groups in the first place. These groups are further ‘’regulated” as students noted that they have, in most cases, removed or blocked individuals. This directly ties in with Barzilai-Nahon’s (2008) gatekeeping mechanisms called “censorship” where “activities such as filtering, blocking or deleting messages or users are aimed at suppressing or deleting anything considered undesirable, to prevent it from entering the network or circulating through it” (Seuri and Ikäheimo, 2022: 16).

The findings of this study further adds insight into the news-sharing practises of undergraduate students on WhatsApp. WhatsApp simply allowed individual users to participate in the sharing of information, altering gatekeeping selection processes and news flow patterns forever. It is feasible to suggest that WhatsApp has evolved into something much more than a chat app: it's “a one-stop shop for everyone, from small businesses to government agencies, to manage everything, from transactions to relationships” (Bonafe-Pontes et al., 2021: 1575). It’s all about being social, which is ultimately what social media, and WhatsApp, is about:

> “This is when the power of the architects of conversations - of the platform designers, moderators, and administrators - becomes evident. It is a power that derives from their ability to shape and enforce the rules of the conversation. It comes not from telling people what to

> talk about but from regulating who talks about what, when, and where. It is the power of the context provider as opposed to that of the text creator and publisher." (Kavada, 2015: n.d).

Certain defining characteristics of the use of WhatsApp emerge from the findings of this study. The first suggests that communication technologies are constantly evolving; instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp are expanding, while open networks such as Facebook are not. Students indicated that they share information on WhatsApp due to the privacy it offers, but also for "fun", to simply "stay in touch", for "communication", to "share updates with peers" or to "inform others of any news". Participants are particularly motivated to share information on WhatsApp to "hear more about other people's opinions", "provide advice or give out a warning" or simply to "express themselves". From lifestyle news to sports news, participants are actively filtering information and regularly promote content to their private networks of friends. Students also indicated that they regularly restrict and block individuals on instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp and carefully choose with whom they share news links, as well as their own user-generated content. In some instances, participants have the ability to make news items popular among their contacts on WhatsApp once they click on the forward button. This correlates with Singer's (2014) "secondary gatekeeping" mechanisms that take place after publication, but of course depends on the influence of each participant (Sheldrake, 2011). The findings that are presented in this study further suggest that the focus of gatekeeping shifted in tandem from traditional media editors, producers and reporters to the audience — or those who Barzilai-Nahon (2009) refers to as the "entity [previously] subjected to a gatekeeping process" or simply the previously "gated" (Brems et al., 2017). This dissertation further demonstrates that there is a need to study how individuals filter through information as some participants indicated that they struggle to identify false information on WhatsApp or on other social media platforms. This correlates with Olsen et al's (2022) findings that the "gates to information — good, bad, true, and false — are indeed open in the hybrid media system as the infodemic has forcefully demonstrated". In this instance, Olsen et al. (2022) suggest that

the news media has a role to play as a gatekeeper (or “safekeeper”) of trustworthy and relevant news, where people can find reliable and useful information that can help them.

The findings that are presented in this dissertation further outline some of the reasons why we should study WhatsApp — or other new communication channels — in and through the context of gatekeeping theory. With an abundance of new communication platforms and more people shaping the type of news that reaches the public (Heinderyckx and Vos; 2016), gatekeeping theory can help scholars answer questions that are still important. In a review of Shoemaker and Vos’ gatekeeping theory, Shaw points out that “we use gatekeeping to explain how we make choices in many contexts and how our choices shape the cognitive worlds in which we all live” (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009).

Gatekeeping theory therefore not only helps scholars analyse the quality of information but also helps them determine whether the original metaphor of gatekeeping still accurately captures how newsworthy events take place. It also helps researchers understand if the gatekeeping process is controlled by recognisable gatekeepers or not. By looking at gatekeeping theory as “the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day” (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 1), it is clear that gatekeeping theory is and will continue to be important “as long as news” is “processed and disseminated to an audience” (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2016: 36). Kigatiira (2022) references political scientist Matthew Hindman, who, when discussing the concept of gatekeeping within the current media system, made the following observation: Even in the digital age, gates and gatekeepers are still a vital part of the information landscape. WhatsApp is now considered to be a part of this information landscape and has, in this case, changed the very nature of communication between undergraduate students and their network of friends and family, as well as the way in which they share information.

Future research

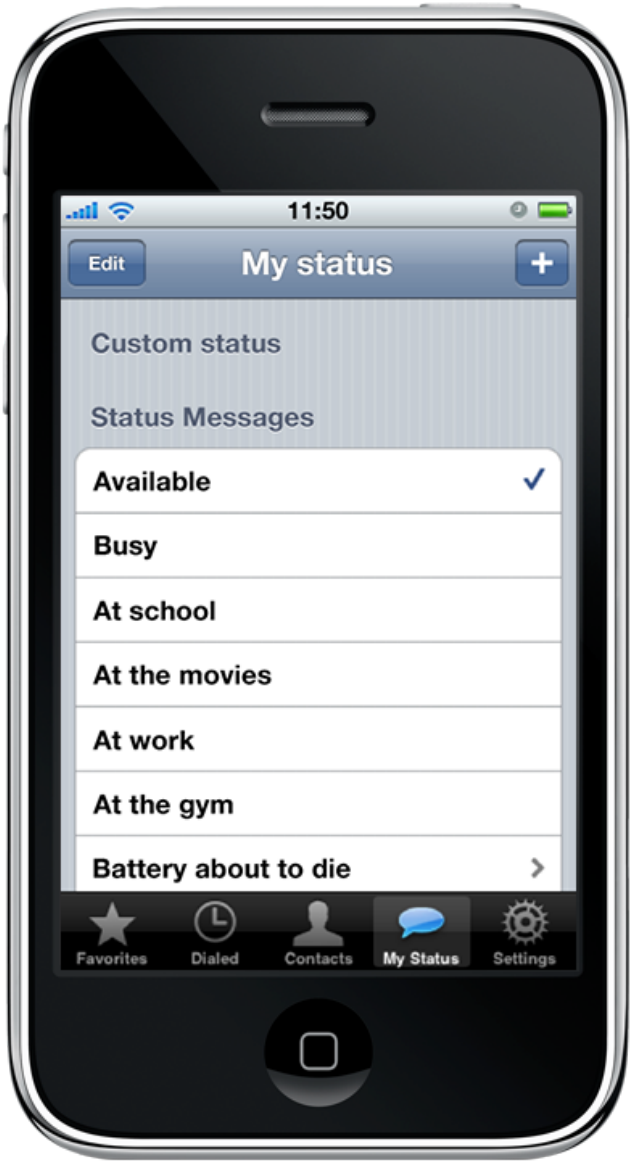
This study demonstrates that the theoretical idea of gatekeeping continues to provide a useful framework for examining the dissemination of news on new communication channels such as WhatsApp (Heinderyckx and Vos, 2015). Shoemaker and Vos (2009) assert that gatekeeping scholarship is both a significant theoretical tradition and a type of practical research. However, the results of this study are only representative of a limited number of students from a private institution in Johannesburg. These participants only represent a handful of WhatsApp users out of millions in South Africa and subsequently the world. This highlights the importance of more international and national studies on the dissemination of news on WhatsApp. Generational studies, in particular, could yield interesting results on how people of different ages, and in different locations, use WhatsApp. Although the findings in this dissertation suggest that the motivations for sharing news among 'Generation Z' is universal, it is critical to test and demonstrate the motivations for sharing news in various contexts. Research on the influence of undergraduate students can also add exceptional insight into the reach of each student on WhatsApp and how big their individual networks of friends are. Studies on the motivations for sharing fake news among different demographics can further contribute to the understanding of fake news' impact on society, as well as its impact on the country's political landscape. Measuring fake news and its impact on the political landscape of South Africa, as well as other democratic countries, is of great importance as it has the potential to spark unnecessary conflicts or even exacerbate existing ones. Indeed, studying gatekeeping within WhatsApp groups can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of information sharing, disagreements, and the actions taken by administrators or members in response to misinformation or fake news. Examining instances where members disagree with each other or when administrators intervene to address problematic content can shed light on the complexities of gatekeeping within these groups. Exploring these instances can help understand how gatekeeping functions operate within the group, as members engage in discussions, debates, or fact-checking processes to challenge

or corroborate the veracity of the shared content. Additionally, with new communication channels being added, new questions about gatekeeping will arise. Singer (2014: 23) asks: “changes might be observed over time, as journalists become more savvy Internet citizens and as internet citizens become more savvy ‘journalists’?” What else can we learn about the ever-changing, and “increasingly shared, nature of media work in a networked environment such as WhatsApp?” (Singer, 2014: 23). Such insights could contribute to “ongoing efforts” to define the meaning and value of journalism and gatekeeping theory (Singer, 2014).

Annexures

Annexure A

The first version of WhatsApp as shared by WhatsApp co-founder, Jan Koum (WhatsApp, 2017).



Annexure B

WhatsApp introduced new updates to its status feature early in 2023 (WhatsApp, 2023).



Annexure C

The online survey questions were distributed to students at a private tertirary institution in Johannesburg.

Online survey questions	
1. What is your gender?	*A. Male* *B. Female* *C. Other*
2. What is your age?	*A. 18 to 21 years old* *B. 22 to 25 years old* *C. Older*
3. What is your main language?	*A. Open question*
4. What is your ethnic group?	*A. Black* *B. Coloured* *C. White* *D. Indian* *E. Other*
5. Are you a student in full-time education?	*A. Yes* *B. No, I also have a job* *C. I freelance on and off*

6. *Where do you live?*	A. *Open question*
7. *Do you live in: student or share accommodation or in a family home?*	A. *Student accommodation* B. *Shared accommodation* C. *Family Home* D. *Other*
8. *Do you have access to the internet (other than at college)?*	A. *Yes* B. *No*
9. *Which of the following is your main means of communication when it comes to staying in touch with your friends?*	A. *WhatsApp* B. *Facebook* C. *TikTok* D. *We Chat* E. *Face-to-face contact* F. *Other*
10. *Which of the following is your main means of communication when it comes to staying in touch with your friends?*	A. *WhatsApp* B. *Facebook* C. *TikTok* D. *We Chat* E. *Face-to-face contact* F. *Other*

12. If you use WhatsApp as one of your main means of communication, how regularly do you use it?	*A. 1 to 2 hours a day* *B. 2 to 4 hours a day* *C. More than 4 hours a day* *D. Less than an hour a day* *E. I do not use WhatsApp*
13. How frequently do you share content on an instant messaging app, such as WhatsApp?	*A. Always* *B. Often* *C. Sometimes* *D. Rarely* *E. Never*
14. Do you use multiple mobile applications other than WhatsApp to regularly communicate?	*A. Yes* *B. No* *C. Sometimes*
15. Would you say an instant messaging app such as WhatsApp is beneficial because you can control who is on your contact list?	*A. Yes* *B. No* *C. I don't know*
16. Why do you think people use an instant messaging app?	*A. For Fun* *B. To inform others* *C. To stay in touch with my friend or family* *D. To share updates with peers* *E. For any communication needs* *F. Other*

17. What type of content down below are you most interested in?	*A. Sports News* *B. Lifestyle (celebrity news)* *C. Political News* *D. Crime News* *E. Health News* *F. Other*
18. Do you ever share content in one or more of the following formats:	*A. Meme* *B. News Link* *C. Screenshot* *D. A message forwarded to you* *E. Videos* *F. Voice Notes* *G. Other*
20. If applicable, why would you share information (such as news in particular)?	*A. To inform others* *B. To express my feelings* *C. To find out other people's opinions* *D. To provide advice or warning* *E. Other*
21. Do you think it is important to share information if it is directly applicable to your life? (Such as a news link to a coronavirus outbreak at the college?)	*A. Yes* *B. No* *C. Sometimes*
22. Do you feel a sense of responsibility to share important news with your most personal contacts/ family/friends?	*A. Yes* *B. No* *C. Sometimes*

23. Do you create your own content (as a means to distribute it) in one of the following ways:	*A. Taking and editing a photo* *B. Recording a video* *C. Recording a voice note* *D. Reacting to an informative piece/news story*
24. Have you ever shared a story considered to have gone 'viral' by media outlets?	*A. Yes* *B. No* *C. Maybe*
25. Are you an admin on an instant messaging platform? You have your own WhatsApp group where you are admin for example.	*A. Yes* *B. No* *C. I don't know*
26. Have you ever removed/blocked someone from an instant messaging group where you are admin?	*A. Yes* *B. No* *C. Maybe*
27. Have you ever removed/blocked a person from your contact list on an instant messaging app?	*A. Yes* *B. No* *C. Maybe*
28. Do you think you've ever SHARED a fake news story on an instant messaging app such as WhatsApp?	*A. Yes* *B. No* *C. Maybe*

29. Do you believe that you have RECEIVED a fake news message on an instant messaging app such as WhatsApp?	*A. Yes* *B. No* *C. Maybe*
30. Do you think you can tell fake news and factual news apart?	*A. Yes* *B. No* *C. Maybe*

Annexure D

Semi-structured interview questions.

Semi-structured interview: interview guide
1. *What are your main interests for using WhatsApp?*
2. *Can you please look at your WhatsApp 'chat' list, and explain the relationship to your top five chats?*
3. *Can you show me or give me an example of what you sent each of these contacts?*
4. *How many times a day would you say you send a message on WhatsApp overall?*
5. *Do you rely on WhatsApp for news/information?*
6. *If yes, can you give me an example? (must answer the following: Where did you get the news? In what format?)*
7. *Do you share news that directly implicates your life or the lives of your friends and family? Why?*
8. *Where do you get this news? Can you show me an example?*
9. *Can you explain the nature of this news? Is it political? Regarding someone's health? What is the reason that you shared this particular news?*

10. *Do you think you have a duty to inform others of something that might be of interest to them regarding their health, politics, or anything personally related to them? Explain.*
11. *Do you regularly share humorous content on WhatsApp?*
12. *Do you tend to share news that is applicable to your life? Can you give me an example?*
13. *Do you think any of those examples (that you showed/discussed with me) might be related to fake news/disinformation or misinformation?*
14. *How would one spot a fake story in your opinion?*
15. *Are you careful (in that you make sure that the information is true and factually correct) with the messages you share on WhatsApp?*
16. *Has any person been removed from a group on WhatsApp that you are aware of?*
17. *Have you ever come across group rules on WhatsApp? What did they entail?*
18. *Can you give me the context of these groups? Why were they created?*
19. *What do you share on one of these groups? Examples and explanations.*
20. *Why do people share information on these groups? For what purposes?*

Annexure E

Ethical clearance from The Independent Institute of Education (IIE).

THE INDEPENDENT INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

Reference: R. 15647 / RPGS015
Enquiries: research@iie.ac.za

12 April 2022

Re: Gatekeepers Letter (Institutional Consent Form)

Dear E Roux

Consent form to conduct research at company/organisation/association	
I, Dr Willy Engelbrecht, in my capacity as Dean: Research and Postgraduate Studies of The Independent Institute of Education, grant permission to Erene Roux to conduct research at the The IIE. This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve for the people I represent. I also reserve the right to remind the people I represent that their participation in this study is completely voluntary and that this permission does not imply their participation. I reserve the right to withdraw this permission at any time. I also understand that research reports are made available in IIE Libraries as well as on the IIE Repository. I indicate the conditions below.	
Conditions concerning the anonymity of the company/organisation/association:	
The company/organisation/association must be kept anonymous in the research report. x The company/organisation/association may be identified in the research report. ☐	
Conditions concerning the publication of the research report:	
The research report will be made available on the IIE Repository... Immediately after completion. x After a specified number of months has elapsed. ☐	
Number of months, if selected:	
	12 Apr 2022
Signature	**Date**

SCHOOL OF HOSPITALITY & SERVICE MANAGEMENT
A school of The IIE

Annexure F

Ethical clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

Research Office

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)
R14/49 Roux

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: H22/01/29**
PROJECT TITLE	The Dissemination of News on WhatsApp: A study of undergraduate students in South Africa and their motivation for sharing news on WhatsApp
INVESTIGATOR(S)	Mrs E Roux
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT	Literature, Language and Media/
DATE CONSIDERED	28 January 2022
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved Risk Level: Minimal
EXPIRY DATE	23 March 2025
DATE 14 April 2022	**CHAIRPERSON** (Professor J Watermeyer)

cc: Supervisor : Dr N Brodie

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Secretary at Room 10004, 10th Floor, Senate House, University. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/We fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to submit an amendment of the protocol to the Committee. **I agree to completion of a regular progress report. For Minimal and Low studies, this is due annually on 31 December. For Medium and High Risk studies, this is due twice annually on 30 June and 31 December.**

Signature _____ Date _____/_____/_____

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

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