

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF ONLINE MEDIA REPORTAGE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In the wake of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, getting credible information has been a challenge world over. Since the first case of COVID-19 case was announced on the 27th of February 2020 in Nigeria, explosion of information about it has been witnessed in online sources. The pandemic has proved to be a fertile ground for conflicting information, especially misleading information. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) is the country's national public health institute, with the mandate to lead the preparedness, detection and response to infectious disease outbreaks and public health emergencies. This paper therefore reports on the implications of these trends on external communication between the NCDC and Nigerians since the pandemic was recorded in Nigeria. The paper anchors on the framing theory because it holds that issues of communication during a pandemic outbreak such as COVID-19 in Nigeria requires the media to help in framing the right messages with a view to ensuring that the disease is contained and that people do not

unnecessarily die out of a lack of information or a consumption of fake information. Adopting textual analysis as the design, it examined written messages, graphic illustrations, photographs, images that convey symbolic meaning to the sharers. Findings reveal that the NCDC have been able to provide adequate and sufficient information on how people can stay safe during this period which is observing the social distancing, wearing of face masks, the using alcohol-based hand sanitizers as well as reporting of any suspected case of infections to medical authorities. The paper recommends that the NCDC should not relent in her duties of providing adequate and sufficient information on how people can stay safe during this period.

Keywords: Covid-19, Pandemic, NCDC, Media, Messages, Online media, Textual analysis

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, getting credible information has been a challenge world over. This has been complicated further by the fact that this strain of virus is new and even scientists and health professionals are struggling to understand it, including its impact. On February 2nd, 2020 the World Health Organization described a “massive infodemic”, indicating that an over-abundance of reported information, both accurate and false about COVID-19 was making it difficult for people to find trustworthy sources of information and reliable guidance on how to prevent catching and spreading the virus.

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19, a lot of news and misinformation emerged regarding the origin, scale and various other issues about the disease. Some information in online sources claimed that the virus was a biological weapon with a patented vaccine (Duncan, 2020), others claimed it was a population control scheme. Before the first case was reported in Africa, there was misleading

information that African genetics was resistant to the coronavirus. This was also after news spread on social media that a Cameroonian student in China had been completely cured of the virus (Vincent, 2020). In the same month, there were misleading information on untested cures and treatments in Nigeria on platforms such as WhatsApp.

Texts, images, audio-visual recordings, and all sorts of other media innovations have been created and disseminated all over the world on COVID-19 pandemic. Since the media, especially social media platforms play supposedly a neutral political role, they are accessible to users without discrimination in addition to being a lure and target for certain/targeted constituencies. In an article on lessons Italians have learnt in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic by the BBC, Coughlan (2020) indicates that fake news posed a huge social challenge. As there was a huge spread of hoaxes, false cures and conspiracy theories which were being spread on WhatsApp groups. Coughlan (2020) adds that there was an instinct to spread news without verifying it which created panic and lowered the level of trust. It is clear that the spread of fake news and misinformation had the potential to disrupt authentic public health advice and even more difficult to counter the fake information after it begins to spread.

Despite all these downsides of digital media, studies have shown that they are an important part of personal and professional lives of billions of people around the world. A growing number of online users prefer to read their Facebook and Twitter feeds for news, information, and even for health purposes. In fact, many get their news and other information solely through what their friends or news agencies they follow choose to post on social media. This has made the use and popularity of social media to throw open the doors of health-related events.

Since the first case of COVID-19 case was announced on the 27th of February 2020 in Nigeria, explosion of information about it has been witnessed in online sources. The pandemic has proved to be a fertile ground for conflicting information, especially misleading

information. The aim of this paper is to study the communication strategies adopted in Nigeria and the impact such strategy might be having on health communication, and the government's attempt in controlling the Coronavirus pandemic.

The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control is the country's national public health institute, with the mandate to lead the preparedness, detection and response to infectious disease outbreaks and public health emergencies. The first formal step to establish the NCDC took place in 2011 when some departments in the Ministry of Health, including the Epidemiology Division, the Avian Influenza Project and its laboratories; and the Nigeria Field Epidemiology and Laboratory Training Programme (NFELTP) were moved to form the nucleus of the agency. The Bill for an Act to establish NCDC was signed into law in November 2018, by President Muhammadu Buhari.

The mission for the NCDC (2017-2021) is 'To protect the health of Nigerians through evidence-based prevention, integrated disease surveillance and response activities, using a one health approach, guided by research and led by a skilled workforce'.

The core functions of NCDC include:

- Prevent, detect, and control diseases of public health importance.
- Coordinate surveillance systems to collect, analyse and interpret data on diseases of public health importance.
- Support States in responding to small outbreaks, and lead the response to large disease outbreaks.
- Develop and maintain a network of reference and specialized laboratories.
- Conduct, collate, synthesize and disseminate public health research to inform policy.
- Lead Nigeria's engagement with the international community on diseases of public health relevance

To ensure a well-coordinated emergency response, NCDC activated a Level 3 Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) on the 27th of February 2020. Prior to this, the National EOC was in alert mode; monitoring the spread in other countries, carrying out risk assessments and strengthening Nigeria's preparedness. During this time, NCDC developed technical guidelines, response plans and trained health workers across the country. The National EOC includes representatives from the Federal Ministry of Health, other sister agencies and partners.

The NCDC launched the #TakeResponsibility campaign which has formed the cornerstone of public health messaging. This is done by leveraging on social media, mainstream media and other avenues to encourage Nigerians to take responsibility for protecting themselves and loved ones and preventing the spread of COVID-19. Over 150 jingles currently air on radio and television, reaching communities across the country. With the support of Nigeria's telecommunication companies, over 100 million text messages have been sent out since February 2020 reminding Nigerians about measures that can be taken to protect themselves from COVID-19. The NCDC continues to work closely with the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, as well as the National Orientation Agency to educate Nigerians on how to protect themselves.

The NCDC, just like other health organisations in the world today is now functioning in an environment which is forcing them to continuously re-examine their underlying purposes, structures, systems and external relationships. The Nigerian Centre for Disease Control is experiencing greater challenges in the past three months of its entire previous history. This has imposed severe strains on its ability to sustain effective external communications and to develop positive relationships between what Strong and Robinson (1991) have vividly characterised as an enormous variety of often conflicting professional groups. Although, there are indications that these

pressures will diminish after some time, at least when the disease infection curve may have been flattened.

This paper reports on the implications of these trends on external communication between the NCDC and Nigerians since the pandemic was recorded in Nigeria in February 2020. Although there was nothing much in terms of communication and information to Nigerians at the beginning, the NCDC now attend to the quality of communication with the Nigerian publics more than it has ever thought of doing. It is believed that the NCDC as an organisation should derive significant benefits from evaluating this generally neglected aspect of the communication process, hence this study which seeks to use a methodology outlined for conducting an evaluation on the communication efforts and strategies adopted in this period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The term communication audit, which has been used to describe this, is explained and delineated. Although many of the issues examined are pertinent to a broad spectrum of communicative behaviours and contexts the emphasis in this paper is on communication between the NCDC as a health organisation and the Nigerian publics with a view to providing a clearly applied focus for the issues which are raised.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

COVID-19 pandemic has generated immense interest from all concerned. It is a virus that took the entire world by storm, leaving in its way, serious damages to life and economy. One thing is however noticeable here, the pandemic seems to be shrouded in a lot of mysteries owing to the level of information about it, especially from the developing countries of the world, of which Nigeria belongs. The origin and the cause of the pandemic still remains unclear but the world seems to be concerned now about how to get vaccines and be back to normal living.

One major issue that has arisen from the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria is the management of information. At

the beginning, there seemed to be a lack of information or a myriad of misinformation which made many Nigerians to jump into erroneous conclusion to the extent that the existence of the virus or its veracity was being questioned. For instance, many Nigerians held the notion that the Coronavirus is a disease of the rich, which made a lot of them to ignore necessary precautions against contracting the virus.

“People also questioned the remedy for victims, which is why you see them taking all kinds of unapproved medications. Again, the misinformation surrounding the issue of 5G and Coronavirus is another issue. Although the WHO has warned against politicising the Covid-19 pandemic, our politicians still do that a lot. What is going on in Rivers is an example” (Kalu, 2020).

Another information challenge was the lack of access to relevant information by the media which initially gave room for people to find alternative sources and in the process created their versions.

It therefore became necessary for the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), a government agency that is saddled with the responsibility of managing issues of this nature to take up the responsibility of ensuring that relevant information on Covid-19 are released to the media on a daily basis and to allow the media unfettered access for prompt, accurate and reliable information to Nigerians.

It is in the light of the above that this study sought to carry out an audit of the corporate communication output of the National Centre for Disease Control and audience profile

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Objectives of the study include:

1. To examine the format texts on the fight against COVID-19 were presented.
2. To find out the feelings of Nigerians as conveyed in their texts/communication through social media concerning the fight against COVID-19 pandemic.

3. To ascertain the language used in conveying the texts on the fight against COVID-19 posted on social media sites during the period of the study?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What format were texts on the fight against COVID-19 presented?
2. What are the feelings of Nigerians as conveyed in their texts/communication through social media concerning the fight against COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What sort of language was used in conveying the texts on the fight against COVID-19 posted on social media sites during the period of the study?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Framing Theory

The concept of framing is related to the agenda-setting tradition, but expands the research by focusing on the essence of the issues at hand, rather than on a particular topic. The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. The theory assumes that the media draws the public attention to certain topics, it decides where people think about, the journalists select the topics. This is the original agenda setting thought". Thus, a frame refers to the way media and media gate keepers organise and present the events and issues they cover and the way audiences interpret what they are provided (Asemah, 2011).

Framing theory and the concept of framing bias suggests that how something is presented (the frame) influences the choices people make. Communication itself comes with a frame. The elements of the communication frame include: A message, an audience, a messenger, a medium, images, a context and especially, higher-level moral and

conceptual frames. The choice of language is, of course, vital, but it is vital because language evokes frames — moral and conceptual frames. Baran and Davis (2009, p.35) explain that the framing theory examines the idea about how people use expectations to make sense of everyday life. The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. This field of meaning can have an effect on the audience's beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, by connecting a particular meaning or interpretation on an issue. This theory was deemed best for this study because it holds that if issues of communication during a pandemic outbreak such as COVID-19 in Nigeria requires the media to help in framing the right messages with a view to ensuring that the disease is contained and that people do not unnecessarily die out of a lack of information or a consumption of fake information. By helping to frame the right messages, the media will be helping an agency like the NCDC to ensure that the pandemic is contained and that Nigerians remain safe.

Communication Audit on COVID-19 in the period of study

Nature of messages: During the period of study, the paper looked at the nature of messages sent out by the government through the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and found that the agency was responsible for majority of the messages on awareness concerning COVID-19 pandemic in the country. Although, some messages did come from the Presidential Task force on COVID-19, health experts and corporate organisations, many Nigerians still shared messages that were not from authorized or professional sources.

The nature of the NCDC messages showed that their messages were in various formats; audio, video, texts, photographs and infographics. All were prepared and distributed through various mass media, especially the social media which has a very large followership in the country today. This approach by the NCDC created avenues for

people to access credible information and be more aware of the virus and the efforts being made by the government to contain it.

An analysis of the messages by the NCDC reveals the following:

Technical: The messages were not technical as efforts were made to ensure that medical jargons were not often used so that every Nigerian, irrespective of their educational status and can read were able to understand them without much explanations. The simplicity of the NCDC messages made the communication easier as most of them were straight to the point and devoid of technicalities that can confuse people and create confusion in the minds of the audience

Languages used: giving the nature of the country and considering the multiplicity of languages, the NCDC messages on COVID-19 were packaged in the three main languages spoken in Nigeria, i.e., Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. This is outside the usual English language and pidgin which is mostly spoken in the country.

The idea of couching these messages in the local dialects gives room for everyone to get the messages and be able to digest them without needing an interpreter to get the meanings. There were also attempts by other minor tribes to get the messages translated into their languages for their people and this was also noticed, especially through social media channels.

Receptivity: This was and still remains a major challenge to the communication on COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Right from the beginning, many Nigerians refused to accept the realities on ground that the virus is in the country. Every message that were put out there by the NCDC and other concerned persons were rebuffed as scam. Many went as far as claiming that the virus was just an advanced malaria and questioned why the country was being shut down for a scam by the government.

There were some other groups who believed that the virus was truly in existence and called for caution but they however didn't help matters when they claimed that the government was under-reporting the infection rate in the country and people needed to get the accurate figure. These same people have soon turned and called the whole thing a scam when the figures emanating from the NCDC started going up.

In all, the receptivity of NCDC messages on COVID-19 remains an issue that scholars may need to look at with a view to ascertaining the motifs behind their actions and reactions to the messages as this would help in tackling the issues of obeying or accepting the guidelines from health agencies and experts on pandemic outbreaks in the country.

Belief systems: Belief systems of the people was another issue in context in this paper. Nigerians being such a religious people did not disappoint in the aspect as they were quick to find religious solace in the pandemic. At first, the closure of religious or worship centres by the government with a view to containing the spread of the virus was a major problem as many believed it was a violation of their religious rights. Many religious leaders made comments that questioned the reality of the virus in Nigeria as one did say that the government's refusal to give state government's money was the reason why they were locking down states and not necessarily the existence of the virus.

A very revered religious leader in the country did question why churches will be closed when markets are allowed to open in specific days. Some religious leaders also claimed that they have healed persons with the virus, even though no evidence(s) were presented in this regard. There was also a report of a pastor who got infected as a result of praying for an infected patient in Rivers State. Another even challenged the government to grant them access to isolation centres so that they can go and heal the patients there if truly they are infected with the virus.

All these contributed to the receptivity of the message which were put out there by the NCDC. Religious leaders are influential persons with millions of followership in the country and can also help in swaying public opinions on issues such as this pandemic. It is therefore not surprising that a lot of religious faithful's chose to see the pandemic from the prism of their religious leaders whom they most of the time listen to or believe before they can accept anything around them as normal or abnormal.

Channels used: The messages on COVID-19 emanating from the NCDC and other professionals and individuals were mostly distributed through the mass mediums of radio, television, print media and mostly the social media. The messages on the social media are more due to the number of active social media users in the country and the fact that virtually all government officials and agencies, multinationals and local companies have strong presence and followership in the social media today. So, it was not surprising for this paper to carry out this audit on the social media as it afforded the grounds to also look at the audience views and perceptions which the mainstream media would not be able to do immediately.

Message content: The content of the messages by the NCDC were very simple and direct. They were mostly informative, educative and for enlightenment. The communication provided information that educated Nigerians on what the virus is all about, the status of the virus which was novel and yet to have a cure and vaccine and the fact that prevention was the major weapon available to fighting the virus. The NCDC also provided information on how people can stay safe which was the social distancing mechanism, the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers as well as a report of any suspected case of infection to the medical authorities.

Part of the communication also was to allay the fears of many that the virus was airborne or that people can be cured when they do a

particular thing that has not been proven scientifically. They also helped in debunking the notion that the hot weather in the country was enough to kill the virus. Even now, the NCDC has not changed her messages and has vowed to sustain this until the infection curve is flattened.

METHOD

This paper adopted content analysis as the design for the paper. Considering the period of the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria, it is not possible to download all texts posted shared on the internet during the period. This is because social media contents are frequently uploaded or shared based on individuals perceived interpretation of a given text. Hence the paper purposively selected 200 texts shared or distributed using different social media sites or networks such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, WhatsApp Short Message Services (SMS) etc.

‘Texts’ in this context refers to written messages, graphic illustrations, photographs, images that convey symbolic meaning to the sharers. Although a given text can be subjected to multiple meaning by different readers, the analysis is based on critical discourse analysis of the texts.

According to Van Dijk (1988) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is concerned with studying and analysing written text and spoken words to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, bias and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced and transformed within specific social, economic and political and historical contexts. It tries to illuminate ways in which the dominant forces in a society construct version of reality that favour their interest.

To effectively analyse the selected texts, a coding sheet was designed using the following coding parameters:

- **Text Channels:** This is the channel in which messages on COVID-19 were circulated.

- (a) Facebook
- (b) Twitter
- (c) WhatsApp
- (d) Blogs
- (e) Mobile Text Messages

This gave an insight into whether the social media or social networking sites played a major role in the circulation of COVID-19 information and messages.

- **Text Format:**
- **Expression of feelings for COVID-19 outbreak:** Three perspectives are identified in the paper:
 - (a) **Positive** – messages that gave hope or explicit support for the fight against COVID-19. For instance, if a message says that COVID-19 will be tackled and will soon be a thing of the past and that all is needed to arrest the pandemic was for the Federal Government to release money for hospitals and set up isolation centres.
 - (b) **Negative** – Messages that did not give any positive support to the fight against COVID-19, especially the ones that were of the opinion that the pandemic was a scam and not in Nigeria.
 - (c) **Neutral** – Messages that were equivocal or merely recounted source's opinion on COVID-19 pandemic without expressing a definite stand on it.
- **Sources of Messages:** The following sources of messages are identified
 - (a) Political/Government Sources
 - (b) Health Workers/Experts
 - (c) Local Residents/
 - (d) Survivors
 - (e) Others

- **Language/Tone:** This was analysed and grouped into three categories: Confrontational, biased, and conciliatory.
 - **Confrontational tones** took the stance that there was no pandemic in Nigeria and used negative, emotionally charged words to describe the pandemic and government's efforts such as "scam," "corruption," "Covidots," "Ordinary Malaria," etc, which tend to create the impression that the government was merely claiming that there was COVID-19 in the country while officials corruptly enriched themselves.
 - **Biased tone** portrayed one side of the COVID-19 pandemic positively, while neglecting to give information on the other side's position or portraying it negatively.
 - **Conciliatory tone** sought to encourage a "win-win" attitude in the interest of all Nigerian and encouraged a positive approach from both the citizens and the government on the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: Message Channels

Social Media Channel	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Twitter</i>	48	24.0
<i>Facebook</i>	66	33.0
<i>WhatsApp</i>	21	10.5
<i>Blogs</i>	39	19.5
<i>SMS</i>	26	13.0
Total	200	100

Table 1 indicates that out of a total of 200 messages analysed, 48 (24.0%) were from *Twitter*, messages from *Facebook* constituted

33% while social messaging site WhatsApp had 21 (10.5%) of the messages analysed. Thirty-nine (39) messages constituting 19.5% were retrieved from blogs while the remaining 26 (13.0%) messages were from texts distributed through mobile phone short messaging services (sms).

Table 2: Formats of text presentation

Social Medium	Format Variables					Total	
	Written Messages N (%)	Graphic Illustration N (%)	Photograph N (%)	Videos/ Links N (%)	Audio Messages N (%)	N	(%)
<i>Twitter</i>	29 (21.16)	6 (31.57)	6 (24.00)	7 (36.84)	0 (0.00)	48	(24.0)
<i>Facebook</i>	42 (30.65)	7 (36.84)	9 (36.00)	8 (42.10)	0 (0.00)	66	(33.0)
<i>WhatsApp</i>	17 (12.40)	1 (5.26)	3 (12.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	21	(10.5)
<i>Blogs</i>	23 (16.78)	5 (26.31)	7 (28.00)	4 (21.05)	0 (0.00)	39	(19.5)
<i>SMS</i>	26 (18.97)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	26	(13.0)
	137 (68.5)	19 (9.5)	25 (12.5)	19 (9.5)	0 (0.00)	200	(100)

Table 2 indicates that of a total of 200 messages analysed, 137 (68.5%) were written messages; 19 (9.5%) texts appeared as graphic illustrations, and photographs were 25 (12.5%). The texts also included video links 19 (9.5%).

This result shows that much of the texts analysed during the period of the study were presented in the form of written messages which were in the form of reports or stories posted on different social media sites. The implication is that since the messages were largely written in journalistic form, the level of their believability and readership may have had far reaching effects in encouraging Nigerians that we will all pull through this pandemic some day and go back to our normal lives.

Table 3: Expression of feelings on COVID-19 pandemic

Social Medium	Expression Variables						Total	
	Positive		Negative		Neutral		N	(%)
	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)		
<i>Twitter</i>	26	(18.43)	7	(29.16)	15	(60.0)	48	(24.0)
<i>Facebook</i>	39	(27.65)	13	(54.16)	14	(56.0)	66	(33.0)
<i>WhatsApp</i>	19	(13.47)	1	(4.16)	1	(4.0)	21	(10.5)
<i>Blogs</i>	31	(27.45)	3	(12.5)	5	(20.0)	39	(19.5)
<i>SMS</i>	26	(21.09)	0	(0.00)	0	(0.00)	26	(13.0)
	141	(70.5)	24	(12.0)	25	(12.5)	200	(100)

Expression of feelings was classified into three perspectives: Positive – texts that gave hope or explicit support for the fight against COVID-19. For instance, if a message says that COVID-19 will be tackled and will soon be a thing of the past and that all is needed to arrest the pandemic was for the Federal Government to release money for hospitals and set up isolation centres. Negative – texts that did not give any positive support to the fight against COVID-19, especially the ones that were of the opinion that the pandemic was a scam and not in Nigeria; Neutral – text that were equivocal or merely recounted source's opinion on COVID-19 pandemic without expressing a definite stand on it.

In Table 3, of the 200 texts analysed, 141(70.5%) were positive; 24 (12.0%) were negative. The neutral portrayal of the COVID-19 pandemic efforts was 25(12.5%) text materials.

It is evident from the Table that *Facebook* portrayed the efforts most positively and negatively than the other social media, while texts from *Twitter* were the most detached even though there were also positive texts from the social networking platform.

In sum, the texts analysed remained highly positive in support of all the efforts towards the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 4: Sources of Texts

Social Medium	Local residents	Health Workers/ Experts	Political/ Govt. Sources	Survivors	Others	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
<i>Twitter</i>	7(33.33)	4(50.00)	23 (23.0)	2 (20.0)	12(19.67)	48 (24.0)
<i>Facebook</i>	10(47.6)	4(50.00)	31 (31.0)	4 (40.0)	17(27.86)	66 (33.0)
<i>WhatsApp</i>	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	15 (15.0)	0(0.0)	6(9.83)	21 (10.5)
<i>Blogs</i>	4 (1.04)	0 (0.0)	16 (16.0)	4 (40.0)	15 (24.59)	39 (19.5)
<i>SMS</i>	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	15 (15.0)	0(0.0)	11(18.03)	26 (13.0)
	21(10.5)	8(4.0)	100(50.0)	10 (5.0)	61(30.5)	200 (100)

Sources of texts on the fight against COVID-19 pandemic were examined in this paper. Table 4 which summarises the various sources indicates that the political/government sources were the dominant source of information posted on the five social media sites studied. It accounted for 50% of sources of texts. Local residents were the sources of 21 (10.5) texts analysed as compared to 10(5.0%) of the texts which source can be attributed to survivors. Other sources constituted 61 (30.5%) which is the second most attributed source of texts on the pandemic.

Table 5: Language of texts

Newspaper	Language Variables			Total
	Confrontational	Bias	Conciliatory	
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
<i>Twitter</i>	23 (19.49)	11 (36.66)	9 (36.0)	43 (24.85)
<i>Facebook</i>	39 (33.05)	9 (30.0)	11 (44.0)	59 (34.10)
<i>WhatsApp</i>	16 (14.48)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	16 (9.24)
<i>Blogs</i>	27 (13.55)	4 (13.33)	2 (8.0)	33 (19.07)
<i>SMS</i>	13 (11.01)	6 (20.0)	3 (12.0)	22 (12.71)
	118 (68.20)	30 (15.0)	25 (12.5)	173 (100)

To run the analysis of the wording of the texts obtained from the different social media sites examined, three constructs were used: Confrontational, biased and conciliatory. Confrontational tones took the stance that there was no pandemic in Nigeria and used negative,

emotionally charged words to describe the pandemic and government's efforts such as "scam," "corruption," "Covidots," "Ordinary Malaria," etc., to describe fight against COVID-19 and cast the impression that the government was merely claiming that there was COVID-19 in the country while officials corruptly enriched themselves.

Biased tones were slanted towards one side and portrayed either the opinion of the government towards the fight against COVID-19 pandemic positively, while neglecting to give information on what Nigerians think about it or vice versa.

As shown in Table 5, the majority of the texts were significantly confrontational and may have contributed significantly to the bulk of mis-information on the pandemic amongst Nigerians of different classes. This is evident in 68.20% score of the use of confrontational language. Thirty (30) texts constituting 15.0% were couched in biased tone while 25 (12.5%) texts analysed within the period of the study appeared in conciliatory tones.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section discusses the findings of the paper in relation to the three research questions raised.

Research Question One: What format were texts on the fight against COVID-19 presented?

The answer to this research question can be found in Table 2 which indicates that of a total of 200 texts analysed, 137 (68.5%) were in written format; 19 (9.5%) texts were in the form of graphic illustrations while photographs constituted 25 (12.5%) of the format in which the analysed texts were presented. The texts also included video links 19 (9.5%).

This result shows that much of the texts analysed during the period of the study were presented in the form of written messages which were in the form of reports or stories posted on different social

media sites. The implication is that since the messages were largely written in journalistic form, the level of their believability and readership may have had far reaching effects in encouraging Nigerians in keeping faith with the fight against COVID-19 pandemic since its outbreak in Nigeria in February 2020.

Research Question Two: What were the feelings of Nigerians as conveyed in their texts/communication through social media concerning the fight against COVID-19 pandemic?

Table 3 which presented expressions of feelings provided answer to this research question. By classifying expression into three perspectives: Positive –texts that gave subtle or explicit support for the fight against COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, if a message says that COVID-19 will be tackled and will soon be a thing of the past and that all is needed to arrest the pandemic was for the Federal Government to release money for hospitals and set up isolation centres. Negative – texts that did not give any positive support to the fight against COVID-19, especially the ones that were of the opinion that the pandemic was a scam and not in Nigeria; Neutral – text that were equivocal or merely recounted source’s opinion on COVID-19 pandemic without expressing a definite stand on it.

It was discovered that of the 200 texts analysed, 141(70.5%) were positive; 24 (12.0%) were negative. The neutral portrayal of the fight against COVID-19 pandemic were 25(12.5%) text materials.

It is also evident from the Table that *Facebook* portrayed the efforts of government in the fight against COVID-19 most positively and negatively at the same time than the other social media platforms, while texts from *Twitter* were the most detached even though there were also positive texts from the social networking site.

In sum, the texts analysed remained highly positive in support of the fight against COVID-19 pandemic. This is not surprising because the interactive nature of the social media has made it possible for users

to express their feelings on the COVID-19 pandemic uninhibited as against the limited opportunities of the mainstream media.

A social media user while reacting to a comment on Facebook said: “The beauty of social media is that I control the information I want people to hear. I won’t let people listen to lies from government.”

Research Question Three: What sort of language was used in conveying the texts on the fight against COVID-19 posted on social media sites during the period of the study?

Table 5 provides answer to this research question. As observed, the majority of the texts were significantly in confrontational language and may have contributed significantly to the bulk of mis-information on the pandemic amongst Nigerians especially those who claimed that the pandemic cannot survive here because of our hot weather or that the pandemic is caused by radiations from 5G telecommunication activities. Thirty (30) texts constituting 15.0% were couched in biased tone while 25 (12.5%) texts analysed within the period of the study appeared in conciliatory tones.

This obviously shows that Nigerians were not willing to read a contrary information from the government nor her agency (NCDS). In fact, the study observed that many Nigerians complained bitterly about the daily SMS sent to their phones by the NCDC concerning the pandemic as they felt the messages were disturbing their peace. Some simply noted that they do not want the daily information and updates but rather palliatives that can cushion their stay at home effect.

With such confrontational texts even from notable persons actually have a serious impact on the messages concerning the pandemic as it encouraged them not to obey various policies or measures put in place by the government to contain the spread of the virus in the country, especially the social distancing policy. It is therefore not surprising that many of the texts circulated within the period of this study were couched in confrontational tone.

All these may have contributed to the perception of Nigerians towards the fight against the pandemic as many still believe that the pandemic is a hoax. Some texts examined reads:

“... outbreak is much worse than the government is admitting ...”;

“Traditional healer finds cure ...”

” Drink plenty of wine and cure the virus ...”

“The disease is punishment for sin ...”.

“Millions have been infected and thousands of people are dead in the streets of China ..”;

“Foundation predicts this outbreak that it will kill 65 million people ...”

There was even a video circulating in the social media where the Ag. Chairman of the EFCC, Ibrahim Magu had said that “Corruption is the biggest tragedy to humankind... corruption is worse than all the diseases now running about. And I strongly believe, that even the coronavirus is caused by corruption”. The implication of this is that rather than focusing more on the disease, priority should be given to the political and economic dimension, which could be distractive to the efforts being made by the government.

Rumours, falsehood and misinformation have been the side effects of viral outbreaks for as long as humans have been plagued by them since social media networks have now amplified irresponsible information sharing. The new media is so powerful that a tweet or post with dubious information can spread to all corners of the globe within minutes.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The media, especially the social media remains highly positive in support of the fight against COVID-19 pandemic. This is not surprising because the interactive nature of the social media has made it possible for users to express their feelings on the COVID-19

pandemic uninhibited as against the limited opportunities of the mainstream media.

Confrontational texts even from notable persons actually have a serious impact on the messages concerning the pandemic as it encouraged them not to obey various policies or measures put in place by the government to contain the spread of the virus in the country, especially the social distancing policy.

The NCDC have been able to provide adequate and sufficient information on how people can stay safe during this period which is observing the social distancing, wearing of face masks, the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers as well as a reporting of any suspected case of infections to the medical authorities.

Rumours, falsehood and misinformation have been the side effects of viral outbreaks for as long as humans have been plagued by them since social media networks have now amplified irresponsible information. The new media is so powerful that a tweet or post with dubious information can spread to all corners of the globe within minutes.

Religion was another major issue observed in this study as it was discovered that the belief systems of many Nigerians were activated as against all the medical information and advice emanating from the NCDC. The study found that a lot of religious faithful's chose to see the pandemic from the prism of their religious leaders whom they most of the time listen to or believe before they can accept anything around them as normal or abnormal.

CONCLUSION

In this age of information explosion, it is difficult to undermine the powers of communication especially messages distributed through the social media in information dissemination and its capacity to unite and dethrone government through mass mobilization. However, "the use of social media tools – text messaging, e-mail, photo-sharing,

social network, and the like – does not have a single preordained outcome.

There have been various efforts to communicate in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. The various state governments as well as the federal government through the Nigeria Centre for disease Control (NCDC) have been in the fore to tackle this pandemic, not just medically, but with communication as adequate information contributes to the safety of Nigerians during this pandemic. However, it is still disturbing that these efforts are challenged by various issues, chief of which is misinformation. Facebook, Twitter and Google have put a spirited campaign to stop the spreading of fake news and misinformation on COVID-19 since they have a global reach and are often used by individuals to spread fake news and misleading information without control.

Due to the wrong information still being put out in the social media both by ordinary citizens and influential personalities, efforts are on between the various health agencies and the WHO to tame this tide. For instance, Facebook indicated that they would remove content flagged by leading global health organization and local authorities that violate content policy such as fake news and misinformation, which also had the potential to physically harm individuals.

Locally, governments are warning people about spreading fake news and misinformation, and in some countries such as Kenya, bloggers have been arrested and detained for the same. Disaster Management Act (2002) in South African allows the government to arrest people who share fake news and misinformation. In a recent address by President Ramaphosa on COVID-19, he requested South Africans to “...stop spreading fake and unverified news (since it was likely to) create further apprehension and alarm”. This is a good way to go and it is being recommended that Nigeria tows this path.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are put forward:

1. The interactive nature of the social media should be harnessed by the relevant government agencies with a view to dissuading or disabusing their minds concerning the erroneous information that they may have consumed from different social media platforms concerning the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. The national COVID-19 Task force, should engage media influencers (notable persons) with a view to boosting the impact of the communication on the pandemic on Nigerians as well as to encourage them to obey the various policies or measures put in place to contain the spread of the virus in the country, especially the social distancing policy.
3. The NCDC should not relent in her duties of providing adequate and sufficient information on how people can stay safe during this period which is observing social distancing, wearing of face masks, the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers as well as a reporting of any suspected case of infections to the medical authorities.
4. The new media is so powerful that a tweet or post with dubious information can spread to all corners of the globe within minutes. Therefore, the NDCD and the government must tackle the issue of rumours, falsehood and misinformation headlong as they have proven to have major side effects on humans more than the virus.
5. The government must also continue to engage religious leaders as the study has observed that the belief systems of many Nigerians were activated as against all the medical information and advice emanating from the NCDC. This engagement will enable religious leaders to take the messages of the NCDC to their followers with a view to keeping everyone safe.

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EDITORIAL POLICY

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