

Owerri Residents' Perception of the Transmission of Information via Social Media during COVID-19

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Abstract

The researchers sought to examine Imo residents' perception of social media information dissemination amidst COVID-19 pandemic era. The technological determinism theory was adopted as the theoretical framework for the study. The survey research design was employed. Population of the study comprised 555,500 residents in Owerri metropolis. The Wimmer & Dominick sample size calculator was used to derive 384 as the sample size. Questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection and the multistage sampling technique was adopted. Findings revealed that at an average of 56% respondents believed that social media has played significant role in the information overload experienced during the peak of the pandemic. Not only that, but the social media information were not fact checked before dissemination and this resulted to spread of fake news and misinformation. Further findings revealed that at an average of 53% respondents confirmed that to large extent social media information and dissemination on COVID-19 influenced Imo residents' behaviour towards practicing COVID-19 guidelines such as hand washing among others. It was recommended that, the fact social media users enjoy lots of freedom, give them the opportunity to use it to spread all sorts of information which sometimes are fake. To curb this trend, fact checker should be made available on all social media handles so as to minimise the spread of misinformation.

Keywords: Coronavirus, COVID-19, Information, Dissemination, Social Media

Introduction

There is no doubt the world would have likely been in the dark without information. Information is important for any goal to be achieved as far as human is concerned. The traditional media has been one of the means of disseminating information to various people; however, recently the digital media, especially the social media has occupied a pride of place and has been frequently used to disseminate information even by the mainstream media (Nairaland, 2016). Nsude & Onwe (2017) maintain that no one can dispute the fact that the traditional media of communication is still very useful; however, there have been shift as the use of digital media for communication and information dissemination has risen tremendously in recent times.

The power of the digital media cannot be overemphasised because of what it can be achieved with. The digital media with the aid of computers and smartphones has also gained a larger share of the world population. Recent research shows that there are about 1.5 billion active users on Facebook, 400 million on Twitter, 300 million on Google Plus and 200 million on Instagram. This has made most top industries, even the traditional media to embrace the digital world in reaching their customers or audiences and getting feedbacks on their product, services

and brands. Another merit of the digital media platforms is its cost effectiveness in getting information across to people (Nairaland, 2016).

The focus of this paper is on social media. The digital media such as social media is refers to the electronic network or networks that link people and information through computers and other digital devices, allowing for person-to-person contact and information retrieval. In the words of DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman & Robinson (2001, p. 307), “the internet is a big medium that has arisen for the purpose of disseminating information; as a result, the media serves as an information hegemon in terms of deciding what information is made accessible to people and how they view issues (Savrum & Leon, 2015). Due to how accessible the social media is during the period of the Coronavirus pandemic the social media was use to disseminate information as well as misinformation among people (Barua, SajibBarua, Aktar, NajmaKabir & Li, 2016; Frenkel, Alba & Zhong, 2020). Supporting this assertion Ladan, Haruna & Madu (2020) note that basically, most information making round in current circumstance are mostly through the social media. The novel Coronavirus disease started in December 2019. Bryner (2020) records that the first case of the virus was detected in the province of Wuhan, China in December 2019. As at 10th August 2020, the Coronavirus disease has spread to most parts of the world, with 20 million people globally infected, and total of 700,000 deaths recorded globally (World Health Organisation, 2020). During this period the social media contributed to the large chunk of information people get and this in one way or the other heightened tension and anxiety (Ladan *et al* 2020). Be that as it may, as a consequence of the pandemic, social media is becoming the platform of choice for public opinions, perceptions, and attitudes towards various events or public health policies regarding COVID-19. Social media has become a pivotal communication tool for governments, organisations, and universities to disseminate crucial information to the public (Pérez-Escoda, Jiménez-Narros, Perlado-Lamo-de-Espinosa, & Pedrero-Esteban, 2020). The issue as regard the social media is its potency to be used to spread false information concerning COVID-19 with its significant negative effects on the society and on people’s decisions and behaviours (Allcott, Gentzkow & Yu, 2019). Hence, this study sought to investigate Imo State residents’ perception of social media information dissemination in COVID-19 era.

Statement of the Problem

No one can doubt the usefulness and power of the social media, especially in contemporary time. The easy accessibility of the social media has made it popular among other means of information dissemination. When the world was shocked with the news of Coronavirus right from Wuhan in China the social media contributed immensely in the spread of information and even in the heat of the COVID-19 the social media was relied upon as the quickest way to spread information as it concerned COVID-19, in the process to cater for the information needs of the people the social media owing to its nature of easy access seem to be used by many to spread information and sometimes misinformation by people without verifying and in such cases unnecessary tension among the people are likely created. To this end, this study sought to investigate how Owerri residents perceived social media information dissemination in COVID-19 pandemic era.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Find out the level of Owerri residents’ exposure to social media information on COVID-19 during the pandemic era.

2. Examine the perception of Owerri residents on social media information and dissemination on COVID-19 during the pandemic era.
3. Determine the extent social media information and dissemination on COVID-19 influence residents' behaviour towards practicing COVID-19 guidelines.

Social Media and COVID-19 information and Dissemination

Social media have been increasingly used as means for information dissemination in recent times. The media gives the opportunity to communicate, share and interpret information of any sort. This is why it is seen as the platform that comprises several actors, all engaged in the communication process. It involves new strands of media involving interactive participation (Manning, 2014). Boyd & Ellison (2008) describe social media as the computer-mediated platform designed to create online interaction among others. Kraschnewski & Dangers (2013) aver that social media platform has enabled the opportunity for a large global networks base that makes it very simple to disseminate information and mobilise large number of users of the social media to facilitate greater progress in an effort to attain higher public health goal.

According to Hamzat & Otulugbu (2020), social media have some essential characteristics one of the most glaring features is the seeming freedom that is associated with it to the extent that users go ahead to spread information even before the government make an official announcement. Social media as media of communication provide enormous information point to Nigerians during the pandemic. Coronavirus was first made public via various social media outlets, including Twitter, Facebook and various websites. It was simple to distribute this information since a large number of Nigerians have access to these platforms. Following that, health care agencies such as the NCDC used social media to inform the public about the number of cases that were positive, fatal, or recovered in Nigeria (Obi-Ani, Anikwenze & Isiani, 2020; Adebowale, 2020).

Empirical Review

Tsao, Chen, Tisseverasinghe, Yang, Li & Butt (2021) carried out a study on social media and COVID-19 and it was revealed that from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media has rapidly become a crucial communication tool for information generation, dissemination, and consumption. Also for COVID-19, social media can have a crucial role in disseminating health information and tackling infodemics and misinformation. Mirbabaie, Bunker, Stieglitz, Marx & Ehnis (2020) conducted a study on social media in times of crisis and findings emphasised the importance of information-rich actors in communication networks and the leverage of their influence in crises such as coronavirus disease 2019 to reduce social media distrust and facilitate sense-making.

Barua *et al* (2020) did a study on the effects of misinformation on COVID-19 and the result of the study showed that misinformation as the stimulus undermines the COVID-19 individual responses. Also, the credibility evaluation of information as resilience strategy has strong positive influences on the COVID-19 individual responses, hence, first of all, the respective authority should encourage the social media users to evaluate the credibility of information before they take any decision on a matter related to health issue based on the information they received through social media. Ladan *et al* (2020) conducted a study on

pandemic and social media news in Nigeria and it was revealed that the dependence on social media as information source has left the country managing and circulation fake news.

Hamzat & Otulugbu (2020) carried out a study on social media use and the challenges of information dissemination in times of emergencies and the study found that varying social media were being used to disseminate information about COVID-19. It was reported that library and information scientists are playing significant role in enlighten masses on the danger of COVID-19. Bridgman, Merkley, Loewen, Owen, Ruths, Teichmann & Zhilin (2020) carried out a study on causes and consequences of COVID-19 misperception and finding revealed that exposure to social media is associated with misperceptions regarding basic facts about COVID-19. These misperceptions are in turn associated with lower compliance with social distancing measures.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Technological determinism theory. This theory was propounded by Thorstein Veblen (1857), but the theory was developed by Marshal McLuhan in 1964. The theory holds that technology in any given society defines its nature; the idea is that technology has the ability to drive human interaction and create social change (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2017). More technology has a role to play in the way people behave especially toward information from one technological period to another. The basic premise of the theory is that the media are extensions of the human body. The theory further assumes that the media not only alter their environments, but the very messages they convey. The media bring new perceptual habits while their technologies create new environments. The theory states that technology, especially the media, decisively shape how individuals thinks, feel and act how societies organise themselves and operate (Technological Determinism, 2015).

Nsude (2013) notes that explains that the recent development in information communication and technologies that gave rise to social media have immensely enhanced the area of human communication, making everyone information creator and sender and then removing the barrier of just being a mere receiver of an information. The development that happened in the world of ICTs has given everyone the opportunity to participate in gathering and disseminating of COVID-19 information. The freedom people enjoy in the use of Social media which is a product of ICT makes it possible for all kinds of information to be disseminated regardless if it is accurate or not.

Methodology

The survey research design was adopted using the tool of questionnaire to gather data for the study. According to National Bureau of Statistics (2017), Owerri Metropolis has a population of 555,500. Using the Wimmer & Dominick online sample size calculator 384 sample size was arrived at. Copies of questionnaire were distributed to residents of Owerri Metropolis in Imo State using the multistage sampling technique. In the first stage, Owerri which is in cluster is already divided into three namely, Owerri North, Owerri West and Owerri Municipal. In the second stage, two communities from each local government area were purposively selected because there is a high rate of literate people there and high percentage use of smart phones to access social media; they are, Orji, Uratta, Umuguma, Ihiagwa, Umuoyima and Umuororonoj respectively. In stage three, having six communities the researchers distributed the questionnaire proportionately to the communities selected; that is $384/6 = 64$. In stage four, the 64 respondents were purposively selected in the communities based on their knowledge level on COVID-19 and

their usage of social media. Therefore, the researcher gave 64 copies of the questionnaire to respondents in these communities.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section deals with data presentation and analysis. Data were analysed based on the research questions. Questionnaire which served as instrument for data collection was distributed to respondents in the selected communities. Out the 384 copies of questionnaire distributed 367 (96%) was valid for analysis meanwhile 17 (4%) was invalid. Therefore, analysis was done with 367.

Table 1: Responses on whether they have Smart Phone with Social Media Apps

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	367	100%
No	0	0
Can't say	0	0
Total	367	100

Analysis of data from the above table 1 showed that 100% of the respondents have smart phone with social media apps. This means that all the respondents who participated in the study have smart phone with social media apps in it.

Table 2: Level of Exposure to Social Media Information on COVID-19 during the Pandemic Era

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	190	52%
Moderate	37	10%
Low	35	9%
Can't say	105	29%
Total	367	100

Analysis of data from the above table 2 revealed that 52% of the respondents are of the view that their level of exposure to social media information on COVID-19 during the pandemic era was high. This implies that majority of the respondents were highly exposed to information on COVID-19 pandemic through the social media.

Table 3: Responses on Social Media contributing to Information Overload during the COVID-19 Pandemic Era

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	208	57%
No	47	13%
Not sure	112	30
Total	367	100

Analysis of data indicated that 57% of respondents believed that social media contributed to information overload during the COVID-19 pandemic era. This means that majority of the respondents perceived that the social media contributed immensely in information overload on the people during the pandemic period.

Table 4: Social Media Messages on COVID-19 Pandemic were Fact-checked before Dissemination

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	200	55%
No	67	18%
Not sure	100	27%
Total	367	100

The implication of the data in the table is that most of the information on COVID-19 disseminated within this period were not fact-checked before dissemination.

Table 5: Responses on whether the Information Respondents got from the Social Media made them observe the COVID-19 Guidelines

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	217	59%
No	101	28%
Can't say	49	13%
Total	367	100

Analysis of data revealed that 59% of respondents confirmed that the information they got from the social media made them observe the COVID-19 guidelines like washing of hands and so on. This implies that social media information on COVID-19 contributed in making people observe the COVID-19 guidelines.

Table 6: Extent to which Social Media Information and Dissemination on COVID-19 influence Residents' Behaviour towards practicing COVID-19 Guidelines

Option	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Large extent	170	46%
Moderate	123	33%
Low extent	66	18%
Can't say	8	2%
Total	367	100

Analysis of data indicated that 46% of respondents confirmed that social media information and dissemination on COVID-19 influence residents' behaviour towards practicing COVID-19 guidelines to a large extent. This means that to a large, extent social media influence residents behaviour as regards the practice of observing COVID-19 guidelines.

Discussion of Findings

Analysis of data revealed that at an average of 76% the level of Owerri residents' exposure to social media information COVID-19 during the pandemic era is high this could be as a result of the fact most people who participated in the study had a smart phone with social media apps that enable sharing of information pertaining COVID-19. This finding is in consonance with that of Tsao *et al* (2021) which study revealed that from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic social media has rapidly become a crucial communication tool for information generation, dissemination, and consumption among people. This is not far from the assertion of Hamzat & Otulugbu (2020) that social media is always relied upon in times of crisis and emergencies in

order to disseminate information. From the theoretical perspective, social media have shaped the way information flow in the society and this is the assumption of the technological determinism theory of which this study was anchored on.

Analysis of finding further revealed that at an average of 56% respondents believed that social media has played significant role in the information overload experienced during the peak of the pandemic. Not only that, the social media information were not fact-checked before dissemination and this resulted to spread of fake news and misinformation. This finding is supported by the findings of Ladan *et al* (2020) they asserted in their finding that during the pandemic the dependence on social media news in Nigeria as information source left the country managing and circulation fake news. Barua *et al* (2020) in their study asserted that misinformation as the stimulus undermines the COVID-19 individual responses and that respective authorities should encourage the social media users to evaluate the credibility of information before they take any decision on a matter related to health issue based on the information they received through social media

The data analysed revealed that at an average of 53% respondents confirmed that to large extent social media information and dissemination on COVID-19 influenced their behaviour towards practicing COVID-19 guidelines such as hand washing among others. This finding is in tandem with that of Hamzat & Otulugbu (2020) who revealed that information dissemination in times of emergencies such as COVID-19 pandemic are usually done through various social media platforms to enlighten masses on the danger of COVID-19. However, Bridgman *et al* (2020) in their study did note that exposure to social media is associated with misperceptions regarding basic facts about COVID-19 and that these misperceptions are in turn associated with lower compliance with social distancing measures.

Conclusion Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is quite obvious that social media was greatly used to a large extent to disseminate information about COVID-19 during the pandemic this could be as a result of the level of exposure. The information was regarded as overload and was not fact checked. However, to a large extent the disseminated information significantly influenced respondents in observing the COVID-19 guidelines. In line with the findings, it is therefore safe to conclude that social media played a crucial role in making people observe COVID-19 guidelines regardless of how they perceived the information therein. Based on the findings the researchers recommended that:

1. The fact that 76% of respondents are exposed to social media is a welcome development. This means that social media could be a strong avenue to leverage on by constituted authorities on health issues to sensitised the public on the best way to keep safe amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and other related health concerns.
2. Given the fact that social media users enjoy lots of freedom, hence they use it to spread all sorts of information which sometimes are authentic or fake. To curb this trend, fact checker should be made available on all social media handles so as to minimise the spread of misinformation.
3. Having known that information and dissemination on social media influence the practice of observing COVID-19 guidelines, the campaigns on safe practices on COVID-19 guidelines should be sustained on the social media where everyone has access, so as to help curtail the spread of the deadly virus.

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