

Utilisation of WhatsApp for Communicating COVID-19 Messages in Akure, Ondo State

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Abstract

The study was carried out to determine the extent to which WhatsApp was used to spread information during COVID-19 lockdown. Anchored on the uses and gratifications theory, survey was adopted as methodology. Taking Akure as the area of the study, questionnaire was administered on 400 respondents purposively drawn for the study. The findings revealed that WhatsApp was to a very great extent, used to spread COVID-19 messages among Nigerians. Findings further showed that messages about coronavirus circulated on WhatsApp were effective in influencing the beliefs and opinion of WhatsApp users about the virus. It was, therefore, recommended, among others, that responsible use of social media should be given priority by WhatsApp users in Nigeria.

Keywords: COVID-19, WhatsApp, Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation

Introduction

Over the years, social media have become active technological tools in Nigeria. Access to mobile telephony, especially among the technologically well-informed youth has made dissemination of information easy with a snap of the finger. In recent times, as the coronavirus pandemic encroaches on and emasculates world activities, social media platforms have been utilised as information outlets to citizens. Drawing from the work of Zoonen & Meer (2015), the need for information increases during crises and social media, no doubt, have come to stay as sources of information during crises. This was the experience during the COVID -19 pandemic. The nature of the coronavirus pandemic and the consequent lockdown made information seekers more reliant on the social media of which WhatsApp was highly utilised. The significance of social media has gained more recognition and prominence, especially, due to the lockdown policy implemented by government to curb the spread of the virus. Thus, social media have become active tools for engagement and communication for the dissemination of plausible information as well as incredulous fake news which manifests in misinformation, disinformation and malinformation.

The explosive growth of fake news, driven by the social media, demands investigation and intervention. While fake news is not a new phenomenon, it has received much attention in recent time as a result of the popularity of social media for interaction and for the diffusion of news and ideas. Social media are the “lifeblood of fake news” because they permit anyone to share a viral fake story to people at a low cost (Klein & Wueller, 2017). The “concern about the spread of fake news focuses on both the ubiquity of social media and the easy circulation of

information that social media platforms afford due to their technical affordances” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Social media platforms encourage the dissemination of problematic news content and permit its circulation in a novel perplexing manner (Quandt, 2019) and the rapidity with which news content moves within social media causes fake news to swiftly spread unverified, making it hard to correct (Lazer *et al* 2018). Hence, the rise of fake news has become a concern the world over.

The COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation on 11 March, 2020. Since it broke out, the virus is said to have accounted for about 4, 181, 853 deaths globally out of a swooping statistics of 195, 275, 961 positive cases which sadly increases daily, but it is consoling that 177, 086, 899 recoveries have been recorded, as at July 26, 2021 (Worldometers, 2021). WhatsApp is a messaging application on mobile devices that enable users share information, both text and media (Pictures, audio and video). WhatsApp, a social media platform, being one of the commonest, most popular and most used today is being examined to determine what impact the messages sent and received through this platform had on the spread or containment of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. WhatsApp was chosen for this study in particular because of its prevalent use as the preferred messaging app to share information in Africa, Latin America and Asian countries, with over 1.6 billion active users monthly, in 180 countries (Turcilo & Obrenovic, 2020).

There have been several studies in the field of health communication, especially on COVID-19. For instance, Zoonen & Meer (2015) looked at the importance of source credibility perception in times of crisis with a focus on crisis communication in a socially mediated era; Warner-Solderholm (2020) dwelt on the spread of misinformation about Coronavirus on Facebook; Frenkel, Alba & Zhong (2020) also concentrated on the surge of misinformation about COVID-19 on Facebook and Twitter and Huynh (2020) focused on COVID-19 risk perception and socioeconomic and media attention. None of these studies made use of WhatsApp. Meanwhile, Turcilo & Obrenovic (2020) stated that WhatsApp is preferred messaging app for sharing information in Africa, Latin America and Asia with over 1.6 billion native users monthly in 180 countries. Hence, this study was conducted to determine the utilisation of social media for the communication of COVID-19 messages.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the extent to which WhatsApp was used to circulate information about Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in Nigeria.
2. Establish the kind of messages circulated about COVID-19 pandemic among WhatsApp users in Nigeria.
3. Examine the perception of WhatsApp users about the effectiveness of the messages received about COVID-19.
4. Determine the attitude of Nigerians towards COVID-19 messages they received on WhatsApp.

Conceptual Clarification and Review of Relevant Literature

The concept of fake news is not new in the media landscape nor is it a creation of the 21st century. It evolved with the appearance of the first newspapers, initially serving to entertain and/or

perhaps help sell more copies, with no evil intentions, more so that the readers were made aware, by the journalists and editors, that the information presented was not true (Turcilo & Obrenovic, 2020). To Allcott & Gentzkow (2017, p. 4), fake news means “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers.” They maintain that fake news has several “close cousins” which are: “1) unintentional reporting mistakes; 2) rumors that do not originate from a particular news article; 3) conspiracy theories (these are, by definition, difficult to verify as true or false, and they are typically originated by people who believe them to be true); 4) satire that is unlikely to be misconstrued as factual; 5) false statements by politicians; and 6) reports that are slanted or misleading but not outright false” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 5).

Tandoc, Zheng & Richard (2018) also made similar classification by giving six forms of news, namely: news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda. To them, “fake news hides under a veneer of legitimacy as it takes on some form of credibility by trying to appear like real news.” Klein & Wueller (2017, p. 6) define fake news as the “... publication of intentionally or knowingly false statements of fact.” Gu, Kropotov & Yarochkin (2017) see fake news as the promotion and propagation of news articles on the social media in such a way that they appear to be spread by other users, as opposed to being paid for. This, to them, it is because the stories being distributed are designed to influence or manipulate users’ opinions on a certain topic towards certain objectives.

Describing fake news, Ethical Journalism Network (2020, p. 13) says it is “information deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts.” Malovic (2007), cited in Turcilo & Obrenovic (2020) concluded that if it is fake, it cannot be news, as news must be truthful, claiming that fake news is an oxymoron. Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) summed that the term “fake news” encompasses misinformation, disinformation and malinformation.

Misinformation is defined in several ways. Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) see it as information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm. It is seen as incorrect information, the probable outcome of an accident. Jack (2017) says misinformation is usually used to imply that there is no deliberate intent to mislead. To her, it is an information reported in error and can spread when journalists misinterpret or fail to independently verify the claims of their sources. This exactly seems to be the case with WhatsApp users who share information without first verifying the information. Some of such messages or information were circulated on WhatsApp, about Coronavirus. Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) further noted that false information which is being shared unconsciously (not knowing that the information is either correct or not) and without any purpose to harm anyone is called misinformation.

Disinformation is false information consciously shared to cause intentional harm. To Breton (2000, p. 62), cited in Turcilo & Obrenovic (2020), disinformation is the “act of misleading with the help of false information.” He added that it is just like propaganda supported by individuals, organisations and even governments, all for the realisation of their interests. This goes to say that disinformation is not only false, but deliberately created to cause harm to an individual, group or people. Wardle (2019) lending his voice, explains that disinformation is caused by three intentions which are: to make money, to have political influence; either local or foreign, or to cause trouble for the sake of it. In the opinion of Wardle (2019), there are cases when an originally created message laden with disinformation is shared with no intention to harm. To him, when disinformation is shared in such context, it turns to misinformation, though

the person sharing is not aware. This, mostly, is the case with information that people, especially social media users, receive and share during emergencies as it was with WhatsApp users during the COVID-19 pandemic, a global health emergency. They basically only thought to help to spread the messages.

Malinformation is information based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). They also maintain that malinformation occur when information meant to remain private is moved into the public sphere. To them, malinformation involves hate speech and harassment. This is in consonance with the submission of Asanov (2019) who describes malinformation as intent to harm with mix of some leaks, some harassment and some hate speech. In attempt to connect the relationship among the three concepts, misinformation, disinformation and malinformation, Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) drew on the dimensions of harm and falseness and described them as parts of a whole, "Information Disorder."

The internet has become the greatest source of health information worldwide due to heavy use of mobile devices and easy and low-cost connectivity with the internet across the world just as research into the proliferation of false news is emerging in the age of COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these studies have attempted to establish the connection between social media and misinformation in this era of the pandemic (Hou, Du, Jiang, Zhou & Lin, 2020; Huynh, 2020). This supports a growing view that false content concerning COVID-19 has become more pronounced on social media (Frenkel *et al* 2020).

With overabundance of information in the digital age, it becomes difficult for people to identify truthful and trustworthy sources from false or misleading ones (Werner, 2020). This tends to make the concerned authorities and experts to lose their legitimacy among the public (Rich & Zaragoza, 2016). That is why misleading posts seem to be thriving more than accurate and relevant public health information about certain diseases.

Theoretical Framework

The study is premised on the uses and gratifications theory introduced in 1974 by Elihu Katz when he came up with the idea that people make use of the media to their benefits. This theory, according to Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma (2017), "seeks to explain what function a particular kind of media content serves in a particular circumstance." It attempts to realise the rationale behind peoples' use of certain media. Thus, the theory explains how and why people deliberately select specific media and how they make use of such media to please their desires (Halpern, Valenzuela Katz & Miranda, 2019). The theory does not only attempt to understand what the media do to people, but extend to examine the functions provided by a medium, putting into consideration that the motivations of an audience are a crucial factor. The theory offers the foundation for the motivation of an individual to connect with others which consequently affect the selection of a particular media as well as the usage and interpretation of the content obtained from such media (Rubin, Chen, & Conroy, 2015). The theory is relevant to this study because it lays emphasis on what motivate people use the media. Thus, Akure residents use WhatsApp to get information on COVID-19 messages.

Methodology

The researchers employed survey research method. Since the opinion of many people was needed, survey method comes handy to help get accurate data. The population of the study

comprised the total population of Akure metropolis which is estimated at 701, 289 (Nigerian Informer, 2021). Akure was chosen for the study being the capital of Ondo State. It was impractical to study the entire population; hence, a representative sample size of 400 was drawn for the study after applying the Taro Yamane’s statistical formula. The stratified sampling technique was used to divide Akure metropolis into eight (8) axes. Purposive sampling technique was then employed to select 50 respondents from each of the axes, based on their knowledge and use of WhatsApp for information sharing. Out of the 400 copies of questionnaire distributed, only 385 were returned and found useful. Therefore, the analysis of data was based on the copies returned and found useful.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Extent to which WhatsApp was used to spread COVID-19 Messages

Response	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Very great	290	75%
Great	95	22%
Undecided	11	3%
Low	-	-
Very low	-	-
Total	385	100%

The question in table 1 was designed to determine the extent to which WhatsApp was used to spread COVID-19 messages in Akure. The data show that WhatsApp was greatly used to spread COVID-19 messages during COVID-19 lockdown.

Table2: Kinds of Messages circulated about COVID-19 on WhatsApp

Response	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Misleading information about nature of virus	78	21%
Correct information about nature of virus	102	25%
I can’t really say	30	8%
Conspiracy theories laden stories	83	22%
Helpful information on preventive measures	92	24%
Total	385	100%

Table 2 above shows the response to the question probing the kind of messages circulated on WhatsApp about COVID-19. The data indicate that messages circulated on WhatsApp about COVID-19 were a mix of correct and misleading information about the nature of the virus as well as stories about COVID-19 laden with conspiracy theories and helpful information about preventive measures against the virus.

Table3: Effectiveness of WhatsApp Messages on COVID-19 in influencing Respondents’ Beliefs and Opinion about the Virus

Response	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Highly effective	159	41%
Effective	120	31%
Undecided	40	10%
Less effective	52	14%

Ineffective	4	4%
Total	385	100%

The data in table 3 above emanated from the question which sought to determine the effectiveness of the WhatsApp messages received by respondents in influencing their beliefs and opinion about the Coronavirus. Majority of the respondents (WhatsApp users) were of the view that the WhatsApp messages were effective in influencing their beliefs and opinions about the virus. This, therefore, implies that WhatsApp messages about COVID-19 received were effective in influencing their beliefs and opinion about the virus.

Table 4: Responses on the COVID-19 Messages influencing the Respondents

Response	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	147	38
Agree	133	35
Undecided	36	9
Disagree	54	14
Strongly disagree	15	4
Total	385	100%

The data in table 4 show that majority of the respondents (73%) agreed that their attitudes or response to COVID-19 were influenced by messages circulated on WhatsApp about the virus. The implication of this is that COVID-19 messages circulated on WhatsApp influenced the attitude or response of Nigerians towards the virus.

Table 5: Responses receiving and sharing Messages about COVID-19 which were later discovered to be False or Misleading

Response	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	125	33%
Agree	221	57%
Undecided	-	-
Disagree	22	6%
Strongly disagree	17	4%
Total	385	100%

Table 5 above shows the data that emanated from the question which sought to know whether WhatsApp users received and shared messages about COVID-19 which they later discovered to be false or misleading. Majority of the respondents, according to the data, received and shared messages about COVID-19 which they later found to be false or misleading.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that WhatsApp was, to a great extent, used to spread messages about COVID-19 in Akure, Ondo State. This is based on the fact that majority (75%) responded in that direction. This confirms the submission of Turcilo & Obrenovic (2020) who rated WhatsApp as the most preferred messaging app for sharing information in Africa, Latin America

and many Asian countries with over 1.6 billion active users monthly across 180 countries, Nigeria inclusive. Findings also showed that messages circulated on WhatsApp about COVID-19 were of different types as they were a mix of misleading and correct messages. The data in table 2 showed that 21% of the respondents said the messages were misleading about the nature of the virus, while 25% said the messages were correct about the nature of the virus just as 22% said the messages were conspiracy theories laden stories and 24% said the messages were helpful in understanding the preventive measures of the virus. This outcome is really noteworthy as only 8% of the respondents could not say categorically the type of messages they received on WhatsApp about COVID-19 during the pandemic.

The effectiveness of WhatsApp messages on COVID-19 in influencing users' beliefs and opinions was established by the findings of this study as shown in table 3. From the table, out of 385 respondents, 159 (41%) believed the messages were highly effective, 120 (31%) said the messages were effective. This figure 279 (72%) is far more than the 66 (18%) who answered in the opposite and the 40 (10%) who were undecided. Findings further showed that the attitude and response of WhatsApp users about the COVID-19 were influenced by the messages they received on the virus. This is evident in table 4 where 147 (30%) of the respondents strongly agreed and 133 (35%) agreed to this as against the 69 (18%) who disagreed and 36 (9%) who were undecided. This shows that WhatsApp messages about COVID-19 influenced the beliefs and opinion of WhatsApp users in Nigeria towards the virus. The data also showed in table 5 that WhatsApp users received and shared messages about COVID-19 which they later discovered to be false or misleading. A total of 346 (90%) of the respondents did this to a great or a very great extent. This is in consonance with the observation of Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) who noted that false information is most times shared unconsciously and unknowingly by social media (WhatsApp) users who think to help to spread such messages.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It was discovered through the findings that WhatsApp was to a great extent used in spreading COVID-19 information in Nigeria. It was also discovered through the findings that WhatsApp messages on COVID-19 were a mix of correct and helpful as well as messages that are misleading and laden with conspiracy theories. It can be concluded that the messages received by WhatsApp users were effective in influencing their beliefs and opinion about the virus just as their attitude and response towards COVID-19 were, to a great extent, influenced by the COVID-19 WhatsApp messages they received. Based on the findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are hereby put forward:

1. Responsible use of the social media should be encouraged among WhatsApp users in Nigeria, since they have proven to be veritable sources of information during emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Handlers of government information should be prompt in communicating and separating propaganda from truth, during emergencies, by giving accurate information to citizens on issues of importance as the COVID-19 pandemic. This would reduce the spread of false or misleading information by unauthorised sources.
3. Users of the social media (WhatsApp) should always endeavour to confirm or double check the fact of information they access before sharing with other users or making use of such information.

4. Since WhatsApp can be used effectively to spread messages, information handlers should engage it in the course of their duty for its relative popularity and affordability among social media users.

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