



## **TACKLING SOCIAL MEDIA AND COVID-19 ISSUES IN NIGERIA: THE CASE OF FAKE NEWS AND MISCONCEPTIONS**

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### **Abstract**

The emergence of social media which are web-based communication tools for social communication have democratized communication in our world today. From education to agriculture, science and technology, governance and health sectors, emerging issues are rapidly brought to the knowledge of everyone like those living in the same town through social media sites. The Internet enabled every nation to be concerned and involved in events that happen anywhere. The emergence of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in 2019 was a huge global health challenge, and social media were agog with all manner of information about the pandemic, that fake news soon became a serious issue that led to misconceptions about COVID-19 pandemic. The threat to life of Nigerians was palpable as fake news was distracting the efforts of the government to contain the spread with massive information flow. Anchored on technological determinism and uses and gratification theories, the study adopted discourse analysis method to discuss how to tackle social media and COVID-19 issues in Nigeria: The case of fake news and misconceptions. Based on the plethora of secondary data used for the study, it was found that people are easily drawn to the social media contents because they are accessible and interactive among other attractions. It was also revealed that being sites without gatekeepers, social media are prone to fake news about the pandemic. The study recommends among others that social media users should verify any information about COVID-19 before sharing, while media literacy should be inculcated on the citizenry to avert the tendency to believe everything they found on social media.

**Keywords:** Social media, COVID-19, Pandemic, Fake news, Misconceptions.



## **Introduction**

Social media are web-based communication tools used by individuals and groups for social interaction, sharing of views, ideas, ideologies and thoughts. They are technological means of communication which have empowered the users to become consumers and producers of information at the same time. According to Lenhart, Madden, MacGill and Smith (2007) social media are avenues for social interactions- a place where people can share creations, tell stories, and interact with others. For Clark (2009), social media are multiplatform, participatory and digital technologies. They are platforms that enable the interactive web by engaging users to participate in, comment on and create content as a means of communicating with their social groups, other users, and the public (Cohen, 2011).

The emergence of social media, powered by the Internet, which has been widely described as the network of networks (Baran, 2012; Dominick, 2013) has changed how people communicate. With social media, one can perform variety of tasks – read content, upload content, create content and share content. These multiple tasks can easily be done with the social media, aided by the Internet because they are interactive in nature. This is perhaps, why Baran (2012, p. 272) avers that, “the Internet makes us all journalists, broadcasters, commentators, critics, filmmakers and advice columnist.” They enable everyone with a smart phone and a laptop with an Internet connection to accomplish variety of tasks that were previously not possible.

The use of social media platforms which include Facebook, WhatsApp, Flickr, Myspace, YouTube, LinkedIn, SnapChat, Blogs, Imeo, and Photobucket for information and news dissemination have made the flow of information from all parts of the globe faster and swifter, with no holds bar, thus making McLuhan’s (1964) postulation about electronic technology making the world a global so true. Nigeria is no exception as everyone everywhere now has the capacity to access the Internet for information on health, education, politics, agriculture and so on. The knowledge and awareness about emerging issues in the society such as the novel Coronavirus disease COVID-19 are shared by people of every nation with breath taking speed.

The news and information about COVID-19 that was first identified in 2019 at Wuhan city, Hubei province, China started spreading to all parts of the world, largely due to the new means of disseminating information across the globe where events in one part of the world becomes a concern of other regions. Incidentally, barely three months after its emergence in China, COVID-19 came into Nigeria, precisely on 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2020. The enormity of public discourse, the plethora of news and information both accurate and false that were flowing from all manner of sources soon resulted to what media watchers described as infodemic which is simply a situation of an overload of information, and the follow up were fake news, misinformation and disinformation among other issues (WHO, 2021a; Dixit, Ogundeji, & Onwujekwe, 2020; Anwar, Malik, Vaneeza & Anwar, 2020).



It is against this backdrop that the Federal Government of Nigeria got worried and came up with different campaign messages on the traditional mass media, and social media to counteract the fake news being peddled by netizens which had already created a lot of myths and misconceptions about COVID-19 in the country. This paper discussed the means of tackling social media and COVID-19 issues in Nigeria: The case of fake news and misconceptions.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The outbreak of the novel Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) which originated from China in 2019 took the world by surprise. It was declared a global emergency by the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 30, 2020 and by 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2020, it became a global pandemic (Gallegos, 2020; Ramzy, McNeil, 2020; *The New York Times*, 2020). It is the palpable fear of mass death by COVID-19 which gripped all countries of the world, including Nigeria that prompted the Federal Government to embark on media campaigns to sensitize the citizens about the new pandemic that was causing massive deaths across the globe. Many citizens of Nigeria relied on social media for daily updates, on what is new and for what to do despite the efforts of the government in combating the disease with the active collaboration of media organizations in the country.

Citizen journalists' overwhelming sway on many social media sites allegedly created grounds for dissemination of propaganda and outright falsehoods about the pandemic despite the efforts of the government. Thus, certain issues emerged in the quantity and quality of information and communication that people were consuming and producing on social media. It became worrisome that what people learnt from social media about COVID-19 overwhelmed the verified and verifiable facts in the government websites and the traditional media. Misconceptions and fake news became the order of the day which if left unchecked can jeopardize the well-being of the citizens. This study thus, examined social media and COVID-19 issues in Nigeria, with a view to identify what the issues are, and what needs to be done to tackle them to safeguard the health of the citizens.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study generally examined social media and COVID-19 issues in Nigeria with a view to discover how to tackle the challenge of fake news and misinformation. The following specific objectives guided the study:

1. To ascertain the nature of information about COVID-19 available to the citizens on social media;
2. To understand what motivate social media users to upload fake news and misinformation about COVID-19 on social media;
3. To know how citizens can possibly sift reality from fake news and misinformation about COVID-19 pandemic available on social media.

### **Theoretical Framework**



This study is anchored on technological determinism and uses and gratification theories. Technological determinism theory as developed by McLuhan (1964) posits that communication technologies can drive human interaction and influence social change. It explains the effects of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on users, organizations and society (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2016). In the conception of McLuhan, we are living in a world where the technology of any age determines the social structure of the society. The theory also argues that the form of the media matter more than the content (messages they disseminate). What this means is that the new media technologies determine the culture, the trend and the social force (McLuhan, 1964). How we think and act today is largely influenced by what we see, hear and read on the social media which have the potential for positive and negative effects on the society, especially now that everyone is involved and concerned with one another in the global village (Baran, 2012). Technological determinism is considered relevant to this study in view of the capacity of social media to drive and influence social communication today.

The uses and gratification theory argues that people know the need they seek to satisfy from any medium; hence they use the media form that satisfies such need. The theory as propounded by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) explains what people do with the media and not what media do to them. This theory sees media audience as active and not passive. They access the media of their choice and consume the content they like. It means therefore that the audience or users, in the case of social media, influence the effect the media content has on them, as they selectively choose, attend, perceive and retain the media content (Folarin, 1998, cited in Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2016). Uses and gratification theory is key in explaining the power available to social media users as active participants in the creation and consumption of media contents according to their respective needs, hence its relevance to this study.

### **Overview of Social Media as Source of Information**

Social media are the products of the information society which are Internet-based. With the emergence of the Internet, online dissemination of news and information to a wide range of audience became easier, cheaper and more interactive. McQuail (2005, p.40) describes the Internet as “flexible, interactive, unregulated, interconnected, ubiquitous and accessible” to individuals who can communicate on their own with one another. However, what makes this interconnected and interactive communication possible is the social media.

The social media have transformed media audience from content consumers to content producers and creators. In the views of Campbell, Martin and Fabos (2015), social media have given rise to content communities, which is an example of platforms where many can communicate with many others. Today, such content as texts, videos, photos and images can be shared from one group to another within seconds. Uploaded content can go viral within minutes of publishing such on social media platforms as millions of people could access content on the Internet through the platforms. This is why it is important that authors and producers should be wary of what they upload or share on their social media, while content



consumers are also supposed to check and recheck what they found on the social media to avoid being fed with distorted information. This concern is no doubt necessitated by the freedom and lack of control that characterized the social media sites as anyone can post virtually anything or access any content through the sites.

This gateless nature of the social media is considered as one of their banes (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012). It is quite unlike the numerous gatekeepers in the traditional media. That singular characteristics, according to Baran (2012, p.273), has made the new communication “technology a double-edged sword. Its power-for good and for bad resides in us”. What this means is that the way people use communication technology such as the social media can lead to good or bad. Thus, when people share authentic news, ideas and information, they enlighten the audience, and help them to make informed decisions. Conversely, when people use the social media to spread fake news, disinformation, misinformation and rumours; they distort reality, promote misconceptions and ultimately, use technology for the bad reason.

### **Social Media: Gateway to Information for All**

The content of the various social media platforms are varied. There are many things for many users depending on what a user desires in the social media. Those who use the Internet are known as “users” (Baran, 2012). Unlike the traditional media consumers that are referred to as the audience. They are referred to as users because they can create and consume media contents. They are active and not passive users who have a multiple choice of platforms to access depending on the need they want to accomplish. According to Nwabueze (2014, p. 171), “social media have proved to be virile channels for mass enlightenment and mobilization in the contemporary society”.

Other scholars have also noted that the social media are reliable resources for news and information (McQuail, 2005; Baran, 2012; Dominick, 2013). They can also be harbingers of fake and false information. Many citizens readily attribute the source of the information they have to Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn and so on. Who is saying what on the social media, matters! A student can use social media for educational purpose; an artisan can use social media for how-to-dos. A researcher has many educational web sites to click on for an array of data on different topics. Classmates can link-up with each other through WhatsApp or LinkedIn. A news hunter can access the multiple news sites to be up to speed on events from local to national and international scenes.

The same freedom of access applies to anyone anywhere to interact with individuals or groups of like minds. This means that what you seek is what you find on the social media; hence the sites are open, free for all and devoid of any control. They have indeed democratized the communication process that no one can really put a hold on how people share information today (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012; Ezeonyejiaku, 2018).

This open access of the social media largely differentiates them from the traditional media where gatekeepers watch over the collection, processing, dissemination and storage of news



and information that gets to the audience. As such, what becomes news to the public is determined by news editors, news managers, reporters and presenters who are guided by ethical considerations of the mass media. Consequently, the social media have side stepped the powerful media gatekeepers “who can either open or close the ‘gate’ on a story or shape how it is presented” (Straubhar, LaRose & Davenport 2014, p.49). This new approach to news production and information dissemination has given rise to citizen journalism where ordinary citizens have become news reporters (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012). While the traditional media shape the agenda of the public, social media influence the conception of those who access them. Thus how the citizens perceive issues in the society is dependent on the traditional media and the social media.

### **Understanding Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic**

Coronavirus disease, also known as COVID-19, is derived from ‘CO’ standing for Corona, ‘VI’ for virus, and ‘D’ for disease, while ‘19’ is for 2019. COVID-19 is a new strain of virus which emerged in December, 2019 from Wuhan, China, which was discovered as capable of causing deadly disease to humans. Cennimo (2021) describes COVID-19 as an illness caused by a novel coronavirus which causes severe acute respiratory syndrome. The origin is traceable to animals but it evolved to become a dangerous illness causing disease to humans. According to the Director of research, Johns Hopkins Bio-containment Unit, Lauren Sauer, COVID-19 when contracted by a human, can manifest its symptoms within 2-14 days after exposure (CDC, 2019). This disease is highly contagious, as an infected person can infect another. Research has proven that COVID-19 can manifest in different ways depending on the health status of the person exposed to it.

It can present as asymptomatic, mild or severe (WHO, 2020). It is worse for people with underlying health issues, such as cancer, diabetes, hypertension; as well as old persons. The common symptoms of COVID-19 include: cough, fever or chills, muscle or body aches, sore throat, shortness of breath or difficulty in breathing, pneumonia, loss of taste and/or smell, Diarrhea, headache, malaise, runny nose, vomiting or nausea, fatigue and altered mentality. Severe cases of COVID-19 can lead to death and so far, there is no known cure for the treatment of the disease except the adoption of non-pharmaceutical approaches. The World Health Organization, WHO (2020) recommended certain protocols for preventing the spread of COVID-19. These include:

- Wearing of face mask once you are stepping out of your home;
- Social /physical distancing of at least 6 meters;
- Avoid crowded spaces;
- Regular hand washing with running water and soap;
- Use of alcohol-based hand sanitizer, where hand washing is not available;
- Coughing or sneezing into your elbows and so on (Honein, Christie, Rose, Brooks, Meaney-Delman, Cohn, Sauber-Schatz, Walker, McDonald, Liburd, Hall, Fry, Hall, Gupta, Kuhnert, Yoon, Gundlapalli, Beach, &Walke,2020; CDC, 2020b).



COVID-19 spreads in an open air, basically through exposure of respiratory droplets carrying infectious virus, while transmission can occur within 6 feet space, hence the advice to maintain social distancing and wearing of face masks in public (CDC, 2019; Morawska & Milton, 2020; and WHO, 2020). COVID-19 pandemic had a drastic effect on the public health system of the world to the extent that human race was endangered, following the millions of deaths recorded from December 2019 till date. The global burden of COVID-19 as at June 16, 2021 shows that confirmed cases of the infection is over 176million; and more than 3.8 million deaths (WHO, 2021b).

As the global healthcare agencies are battling to contain the disease, a second wave came up in November, 2020, leaving the global community more challenged. Reports show that the 2nd phase is even more deadly with new variants of manifestations and symptoms. Hence, healthcare experts' advice that vaccination, improved compliance with the guidelines for prevention and increased advocacy for the adoption can reduce the surge (Oghifo, 2021; Ilesanmi, Afolabi & Olabumuyi, 2021).

### **COVID -19 Pandemic in Nigeria**

Coronavirus disease came into Nigeria on 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2020. The index case was an Italian citizen working in Nigeria, who returned from Milan, Italy to Lagos on 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2020. From that index case, his contacts and other people who were exposed to the disease became the source of the infection for more Nigerians. However, the Federal Government of Nigeria through its Centre for Disease Control, NCDC, has been working assiduously with the presidential Task Force on COVID, PTF COVID-19, to provide a multi-sectorial response to the COVID-19 pandemic which is reportedly spreading to all the states in the country with attendant daily death tolls and negative impacts on the national economy (NCDC, 2021).

The daily updates on COVID-19 are communicated on the traditional media as well as online via the NCDC web sites, and Facebook page. From 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2020 to 21<sup>st</sup> June, 2021, Nigeria recorded 167,292 confirmed cases; 163,797 recoveries and 2,118 deaths (NCDC, 2021). In response to the containment of the disease, Nigeria has established more than 70 public health laboratories across the country while each State of the federation has one public health laboratory for testing of the virus. Those who tested positive to the virus were quarantined in designated hospitals where they are managed while vaccines have been imported, though the possibility to vaccinate everyone is still not in sight, hence citizens are enjoined by NCDC to continue to adhere to the non-pharmaceutical measures to be safe (NCDC, 2021).

Nigeria was categorized as one of the 13 high-risk African countries and given the weak healthcare system of the country; Marbot (2020) classified Nigeria among the vulnerable nations in Africa with regards to the spread and burden of COVID-19 pandemic. However, from the onset of the index case in Nigeria, the nation like other countries of the world is experiencing a new way of life tagged- the new normal. This implies new social norms which



impacted heavily on the economy of the country and actually on many systems including education, sports, religion, public service and health.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic Issues in Nigeria**

In health emergencies and pandemic anywhere, people yearn for information and seek for protection. Care is always taken to ensure proper management of the information system to minimize feeding the public with wrong and inaccurate information that may lead to misconceptions and issues that could impact negatively on the society. In the cases of HIV/AIDS, Ebola virus disease, and Monkey pox for instance, Nigeria witnessed massive exchange of information, misinformation, fake news and poor information management which resulted to more deaths than the diseases caused (Ugwoke, 2014; Ezegwu, Ezeonyejiaku & Asodike 2018; Onyeonoro, Ekpemiro, Abali & Nwokeukwu, 2015).

In the present case of COVID-19 pandemic era, the use of social media for information dissemination was proliferated by their nature which include affordability, ease of use or user friendly, open access to all segments of the society especially those that would have been silenced, multiplicity of channels, interactivity among other characteristics (McQuail, 2005; Baran 2012; Okunna & Omenugha 2012; Dominick, 2013). The lack of control or legislation against Internet users who access the net for various reasons through the ubiquitous social media can be regarded as one of its greatest strengths and banes as well.

The potential for everyone to be a mass communicator and the active participation of social media users, no doubt, posed great danger for the society. Since anyone with Internet access and a smart phone can use the social media, they have gradually become breeding grounds for fake news and false information which could be harmful to the citizens. Fake news and false information in public health is a grave danger.

Although there are a number of monitors who censor some aspects of the Internet such as scanners who scan comments for content that may be offensive or libelous; there are also others whose job is to screen videos to mark scenes that are perceived as inappropriate, as well as pictures, images or texts that violate copyright laws; these seeming gatekeepers can be seen as insignificant compared to how seriously content are checked and verified in the traditional media.

Evidently, Facebook and Twitter have occasionally removed unpleasant or offensive content in their sites, but innumerable false information and offensive content are still uploaded on the Internet through the social media in the hands of everyone. It is for this reason that Dominick (2013, p.16) notes that “rumours, conspiracy theories, vitriol, and truly tasteless content abound on the Internet. There are no editors to sort out the credible from the lies or to distinguish merit from the trash”.

In a crisis situation, information becomes a powerful survival tool as people will stop at nothing to be informed or share information especially in a pandemic such as the COVID-19 era, so as to understand what causes it, how it spreads, management, prevention and possible



remedies. Since the good of the citizenry is the responsibility of the leadership, the various government agencies and stakeholders in the health sector including the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, the Presidential Task force on COVID-19, the National Orientation Agency, the National and State media organisations were consistently sharing information to sensitize the citizenry and create ample awareness of the risks of COVID-19 pandemic in the country and worldwide. Other groups such as faith based organizations, non-governmental organizations and other development partners at various levels have also partnered government in the dissemination of health information and education regarding COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. This awareness are created in form of news updates, public service announcements (PSAs), news commentaries, and features in English, pidgin and other Nigerian local languages, educating Nigerians from all walks of life. A campaign by NCDC tagged: **‘Take Responsibility’** is on the social media for all to take charge of their health in the pandemic.

Despite these cost intensive efforts to bridge the information gap, many citizens still shared certain information that are outright falsehood, unverified and fake news for reasons only the authors can explain. Meanwhile, other measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, such as the eventual lockdown to minimize community transmission in many States that lasted for weeks; inter-state restrictions of movements; the eventual lifting of the lockdown replaced with a curfew from 8pm to 6am in many States; civil servants at both state and federal levels from level 12 down were mandated to work from home, except those on essential services, such as healthcare providers, media workers, and security personnel with transporters of essential goods like food and drugs and so on were some drastic measures taken by government to safeguard the life of the citizenry.

Sadly, a number of citizens misinterpreted and misconstrued the government’s efforts at every step, due largely to the preponderance of fake news that inundated the social media by all manner of authors and news mongers. As authentic information are disseminated to influence the attitude and behaviour of people, fake news rocks the efforts and leads to misconceptions about COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, while many believe, a number of others disbelieve the existence of COVID-19 in Nigeria.

### **Fake News and Misconceptions about COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria**

The issue of fake news in Nigeria, and other parts of the world is increasingly becoming a perennial problem. It got to an all-time high in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, especially with the ubiquitous social media as means of public communication in the country. Nigeria was waging a double-barreled war against the pandemic and the gamut of fake news following it. Consequently, Nigeria’s Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed in a statement to the House of Representatives Committee on Information, National Orientation Agency, NOA, Ethics and Value to address the menace of fakes news in the country on 27<sup>th</sup> October, 2020 laments that “the biggest challenge facing the country was the issue of fake news and misinformation,”(Salem, 2020). He went further to explain that the government



identified this problem since 2017 and decided to launch a national campaign against fake news in July, 2018.

Also on April 1, 2020, the Information Minister notes: “We are also tracking and refuting fake news and misinformation like the one that the federal government will pay #30,000 to all Nigerians with verified BVN, as well as a report on some false remedies and cures” to COVID-19. Again, on May 17, 2021, Chief Mohammed, while receiving the officials of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, NIPR on a courtesy call stated: “It will amaze you that recently we unveiled almost 476 online publication sites that are dedicated to daily engaging in churning out fake news to fight the government”. He warned that fake news is not only debilitating to the government but on every Nigerian” (*The Guardian*, 2021). What is fake news and what debilitating effects does it have on the citizens?

Fake news comprises all news that is not based on facts. It may be fabricated to mislead the public or to influence them negatively. Fake news is fictitious, a lie and a distortion which should not be taken seriously (Amadi and Ekeanyanwu, 2019). Fake news includes any article or video containing untrue information disguised as a credible news source in the market place of information exchange. Indeed, fake news or false information is any content that tends to deceive or mislead the target audience. It is misinformation and disinformation because the aim is not to enlighten but to mislead and deceive the people.

The need to disseminate facts and figures especially in a health communication and education cannot be overemphasized. Accurate news, verified and verifiable information about health risks especially that of COVID-19 pandemic is essential to give a clear sense of direction to the citizens which can help contain the spread of the disease. This explains the concerted efforts of the state and federal governments of Nigeria in the COVID-19 era, but the spread of fake news through the social media tend to obstruct and obliterate the efforts of the government as many were deceived by the fake news they got from their social network contacts, especially through Facebook and WhatsApp.

Those who believe the messages disseminated by government in traditional media, social media and other group communications tried to abide by the government directives to adhere to WHO’s COVID-19 protocols. The media are credited with the power to create awareness and change the attitude and behaviour of the audience (Uwom & Oloyede, 2014; Owuamalam, Nnaemeka & Ezeonyejiaku, 2019). On the other hand, those who relied on the social media for information and swallowed the distorted stories and myths being shared were chiefly the ones who disseminated all manner of misconceptions about COVID-19 in Nigeria.

Since social media sites are almost free for all who can afford data to access the various platforms; gullible users consume messages they accessed from different sources without checking the facts or the authenticity of the sources or even interrogating the facts of the content. This can lead to dangerous effects that could mar the health security of the citizenry.



Confusion, panic, distress, fear, shock, outrage and general misconception about the issue of COVID-19 became the lot of many.

Again, fake news manifests in different dimensions. It can be shared as misinformation, disinformation and disinhibition. Fake news is dangerous and should not be shared in any platform whether inter personal, mass media or social media. Misinformation is wrong, false and inaccurate information which is shared to the public unknowingly (SciLine, 2021). The intent is not to deceive but mistakenly or inadvertently shared. Disinformation on the other hand is deliberately sharing false information with the intent to deceive, harm and mislead the audience (Bucham, 2020; SciLine, 2021). Disinformation is like propaganda which is aimed at influencing the mind of the people to believe a content that is not actually true. When people share information they have not verified as true or fail to balance a report in a bid to be the first to share online regardless of who gets hurt; it causes much tension to the polity and could breach the security of the society. This is why Adler, Rodman & Pre (2015) caution social media users to be careful and considerate with what they post online. Disinhibition effect in information management in the cyberspace which is aided by the anonymity and invisibility factors inherent in online interactions (Suler, 2016) also occurs in a reckless sharing of information, which is the tendency to share information without considering their consequences to the audience. Many get hurt with false information.

Fake news is fabricated information or content that is untrue (Molina, Sundar, Le & Lee, 2019); they are not verified or verifiable. The effects of misinformation, disinformation and disinhibition can put lives to risk and can negatively influence political, economic and social well-being (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018), hence before anyone should share any news from any source, such news should be verified, fact checked and cross-checked before consuming, spreading or sharing to others. Any news or information that is not factual is categorized as fake. People fabricate stories for many reasons: to mislead or misguide the people as in the case of politicians who try to use all manner of propaganda techniques to influence the mind of the citizenry to consolidate their hold and win followers to their party. Some politicians in a bid to play political stunts sometimes create certain half-truths just to stir up some kind of emotions in the mind of the populace. They may succeed in inciting the public or bring down the reputation of their opponent or negatively influence the opinion of the citizens towards a policy or program of their opponents.

The social media provide the platform for content producers to do many things for many reasons including sharing personal or professional content, share words and images with other users in different platforms (Straubhar, LaRose & Davenport 2014; Adler, Rodman & Pre, 2015; Ezeonyejiaku, 2018). For instance, citizen journalists desiring to attract followers on the social media want to be the first to share a story breaking from anywhere. Checking, or verifying the fact may delay the breaking of the news, hence they upload it as quickly as possible. They thus, publish regardless of ethical considerations and the effect it will have on the society. There are online authors whose interest is to make money from their blogs.



Bloggers are quick to upload content on the social media to increase traffic to their sites because the more they are followed, the more advertising profits they amass.

There are also authors whose interest is to satirize issues in the society. They either want to correct societal ills or create public awareness to such ills. Thus, by twisting the facts, people are drawn to read them. Due to the technological ease to upload, copy, paste and share content on the social media, other users continue to share, forward and repost such fake content and the falsehood continue to spread until it goes viral.

Who is saying what in the traditional and social media therefore counts if fake news can be halted. The news sources in the traditional media are known and can be held liable to any false information, but social media sources may be anonymous and invisible (Suler, 2001). Wardle (2021) identifies seven shades of misinformation and disinformation as follows:

- False context even when content is accurate;
- Imposter content which impersonates sources;
- False connection where visuals, captions and headlines do not tally with content;
- Manipulated content where accurate facts and figures have been deliberately manipulated;
- Satirical content with the intent to fool someone;
- Fabricated content with the intent to harm, mislead, misguide or deceive;
- Misleading content created to misguide people over an issue.

In all this, it is obvious that citizen journalists have the capacity to freely share fake news. This means that it is what people say or hear on the streets that they upload and share on the social media hence we find a preponderance of fake news on the social media where everyone is immersed in a web of multiple flows of oral communication (Santos, 2021). This tendency to spread false information about COVID-19 can also be attributed to lack of media literacy among citizens because some of the stories are forwarded from one group to another. The fake news continues to spread with no one knowing the exact source. The effect is vulnerability of the populace towards the ‘infodemic’ that ultimately emerged (Dixit, Ogundeji & Onwujekwe, 2020). ‘Infodemic’, which is an overload of information especially on COVID-19 pandemic, also throws up information disorder giving rise to myths and misconceptions about the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Myths and Misconceptions about COVID-19 Pandemic on Social Media**

Some social media users misinform the people in their various platforms with the kind of information they share about COVID-19 pandemic. The plethora of information about the COVID-19 pandemic found in the social media rapidly resulted to all manner of misconceptions about what COVID-19 is, how to prevent it or how to treat it. Lule (2005) avers that myths are false beliefs or untrue stories about values, ideologies and social ethos. They are forms of social constructions used to explain phenomena in the oral culture. Since the stories are handed down from generation to generation, their authorship is unknown (Kramar, 2016). The rise of myths, which Morales (2013) describes as the guidance and



information through a psychological identification process in order to make sense of reality, became a worrisome trend in the COVID-19 era.

The myths tend to create a single and simple view of the disease which resulted to misconceptions about COVID-19 and a distortion about its reality. Rather than propagating the reality of COVID-19, myths about it held sway. Myths attempt to influence the thought pattern of the receiver (Gioia and Kumar, 1991). Social media became sources of dangerous myths about COVID-19, despite the efforts of the critical stakeholders to spread true and factual information in multiple channels using mixed media.

As a result of what social media users share online, some people erroneously believe that certain concoction can prevent COVID-19. Such concoctions include ginger-lemon-garlic-tumeric drinks, which though have some health benefits, but there is no scientific evidence to prove their efficacy in the prevention of COVID-19. Others say homemade remedies such as boiling the leaves of ‘dogonyaro’, mango, orange, sour sop, paw-paw and elephant grass can cure COVID-19. Some believe it is acute malaria. They shared this false or fake information about COVID-19 to anyone in their contact and other users keep sharing until the stories get to all parts of the country.

Another misconception about COVID-19 shared by some Nigerians is that COVID-19 is a white man’s disease which cannot thrive in the hot and sunny regions of Africa. Propagators of this misconception believe that the Nigerian weather, in particular, cannot allow COVID-19 symptoms to manifest. Some also shared the misinformation that certain medications such as malaria drugs like Chloroquine can cure COVID-19; hence the drugs became a high demand. Other groups carried the myth that the donations and aids from Europe were contaminated with COVID-19 virus to depopulate Africa. Also, the directive for a total lockdown was misconstrued by some Nigerians as a means for the government to install 5G network in order to centrally control the world.

There are still others who perceived COVID-19 as the disease of the rich which cannot affect the poor and ordinary citizens who are used to hardship or that the disease resistance rate of the poor citizens cannot allow COVID-19 to incubate, hence only the rich alone can suffer the disease. The sad reality is that these myths and misconceptions were being spread from social media and word of mouth. Many could not confirm their sources of information, other than the social media and many shared those stories without questioning their authenticity or their sources.

### **Consequences of Fake News and Misconceptions about COVID-19 Pandemic on Social Media**

The consequences of the myths, fake news and misinformation about COVID-19 pandemic on social media are numerous. Misconception about COVID-19 is the first effect because people tend to act on the information available to them. When citizens are not properly



informed about an issue of public importance, especially regarding their health, they would be acting in ignorance which may jeopardize their health. It is as a result of the fake news and misinformation created in the crisis communication of COVID-19 pandemic among social media users that tend to result to a misrepresentation and a widespread misconception about the reality of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Also, fake news and misinformation being peddled on the social media actually impaired the efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria. Those who were fed on the fake news were among those who are skeptical about the existence of the disease and believe that COVID-19 is not real, hence hardly adhere to the advice by the government to maintain the WHO's non-pharmaceutical protocols on COVID-19 prevention. However, those who adhered to the information shared by government and other development partners about COVID-19 were those that tried to follow the government directives to avoid contracting or spreading the disease.

### **Tackling Fake News and Misconceptions about COVID-19 Pandemic on Social Media in Nigeria**

The danger of sharing fake news about COVID-19 pandemic through the social media in Nigeria is seen as a huge concern by the Federal Government of Nigeria and other media monitors in the country. According to the Nigeria's Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, "the rising spate of fake news and misinformation, in spite of repeated caution by government is distracting the fight against Coronavirus (COVID-19)" (*The Guardian*, 2020). Fake news is not only a threat to the nation's democratic growth but a threat to the wellbeing of the citizenry. It is also a threat to the national peace since peace of the mind is a significant component of overall health.

No nation can grow optimally in an atmosphere inundated with fake news and misinformation. It is for this reason that information campaigns, which is the application of public relations and advertising techniques to convince people to adopt pro-social behaviours (Straubhar, LaRose & Davenport, 2014) are needed to properly inform the citizens. This can be achieved by creating awareness about specific issues in the society such as COVID-19 pandemic, its implications and what needs to be done to curtail the spread. Information campaigns or public service announcement (PSAs) are generally not paid for but they are aired on radio and television stations to change the behavior or attitude of the populace, raise their awareness or consciousness towards an issue of public concern (Straubhar, LaRose & Davenport 2014; Ezeonyejiaku, 2020). As these campaign messages are aired, people get exposed to them, get informed and subsequently become aware about the COVID-19 pandemic.

To change the behaviour or attitude of Nigerians towards the myths and misconceptions that emerged from fake news propagated on the social media by Nigerians, integrated marketing communication strategy can also be applied. This involves a combination of media mix including interpersonal approach, the mass media and the social media to recommend the



acceptable health behaviour. Integrated marketing communication approach in this regard involves the use of above-the-line and below-the-line advertising communication approaches by critical stakeholders in Nigeria to combat the fake news being spread through the social media. Using posters, bill boards, radio and television public service announcements from different public spirited groups, discussion programmes, news broadcasts, drama, discussion, documentaries, phone-in programmes as well as newspapers, magazines, articles and opinion pages focusing on the reality of COVID-19 pandemic can go a long way in counteracting the effects of the misconceptions created by the fake news already consumed by the populace from social media. The health communication field has recorded tremendous success in the use of social marketing communication strategy to communicate health issues and influenced the behaviour or health beliefs of citizens.

Moreso, advocacy visits and Internet advertising can help in bringing the truth of COVID-19 known to the populace. For those who have concluded that COVID-19 is not real, experience sharing by those who were confirmed positive but survived after treatment can also go a long way in changing their attitude about the deadly disease, especially with the number of deaths recorded in the country due to the disease. This approach will go a long way in sensitizing the populace that COVID-19 is real and it kills.

The government and other concerned groups can also crack down on fake news through the social media network providers such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, etc. Users can be asked to report false or suspicious articles and producers of such content can be banned from accessing the site. For the users or content consumers, it is advisable to check and recheck the accuracy of any story as key to tackling fake news. It is essential to verify the source of any suspicious content, double check the date or use the keywords of the article to verify the sources, facts and figures of the content. Credibility can as well be ascertained through such facts checkers as [politifacts.com](http://politifacts.com), [factcheck.org](http://factcheck.org) or [slopes.com](http://slopes.com).

Developing media literacy can also help to tackle the menace of fake news on social media. The cacophony of content about COVID-19 on the social media can be sorted out through media literacy which Wood (2006, p.320) refers to as “the ability to understand the influence of mass media and to access, analyze, evaluate, and respond actively to mass media in informed, critical ways”. By being media literate, the media audience and social media users need to critically analyze and evaluate the information they source from the media. Interrogate why a story is trending, whose interest the story serves, whose voices are loud and whose are muted, what is the source of the statistics and other facts disseminated, and how current is the content?

To halt fake news on the social media, knowing who is writing and the motive helps to ascertain the objectivity of the content. How convincing are the evidences provided to support the claims? When users genuinely become active in consuming social media content, the reign of fake news will be over. By interrogating what we see, hear or view, we would be seen as media literates.



The government and development partners on their parts can tackle fake news on the social media by consistently sharing the truth, the facts and figures about COVID-19 pandemic using the numerous languages spoken in Nigeria and reaching to all segments of the society in which ever medium they prefer, including the social media.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The health of the citizenry is paramount to national development and economic stability. Based on the idea that health is wealth, no amount of effort expended to maintain health or prevent diseases can be said to be too much, as pandemics such as COVID-19 can deplete the population and dislodge national economy if care is not taken. This is why the misconceptions and false information from fake news being peddled in the social media needs to be halted by all means possible. The ubiquitous social media content should be consumed with caution while journalists saddled with the task of sourcing, processing and disseminating news and information should be on top of their game to prevent citizen journalists from holding sway with fake news dissemination.

The study recommends as follows:

1. Social media users should always verify the content they share or consume;
2. Government and non-governmental organizations should not relent in communicating health information in crisis situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic using all available media;
3. Citizens should rely more on the mainstream media organizations for information about critical issues such as health emergencies and pandemics as reliance on social media with their unregulated nature can mislead or misguide them;
4. Media literacy is advocated for the media audiences to understand that some content of the media are not true.

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