

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF NCDC'S COVID-19 SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES AND ADOPTION OF NON-PHARMACEUTICAL INTERVENTIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Corona Virus popularly known as COVID-19 was not just a health concern but a phenomenon that posed great communication challenge to media professionals, public health organizations, nations and the international system as a whole. As information about the virus and how to curtail it pervades the media space, public perception of such information played a major role in the adoption of such measures meant to curtail the spread and effect of the virus. This paper relying on available literature, published research works seminar papers examines how public perception of National Center for Disease Control (NCDC)'s COVID-19 messages on social media affected the adoption of Non-Pharmaceutical Intervention by Nigerians. It is manifest in the abundant literature that the capacity of social media platforms if properly deployed to change behaviors especially as it relates to health cannot be overemphasized or undermined. It can be used to engender the adoption of the non-pharmaceutical interventions as well as other social development interventions in Nigeria through proper perception management. However, this study, is limited to select States of Kogi, Nasarawa and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) in North Central Nigeria.

Keywords: Behavioural change, Covid-19, Non-Pharmaceutical Intervention, Social Change

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus, (now known more as COVID-19) outbreak a pandemic and the spread of this disease in spite of efforts by governments, organizations and individuals to tame it, is still an ongoing global public health concern (World Health Organization, 2022). The virus was first identified in Wuhan China in December 2019, over 688 million cases and 6.87 million deaths have been reported globally as at 12 May 2023, (Worldometer, 2023). Accordingly, the outbreak of COVID-19 has brought unprecedented changes to societies touching all aspects of people's daily lives [(Khanra, Dhir, Kaur, Joseph & Joseph (2021); Talwar, Dhir, Singh, Virk & Salo (2020); Wind, Rijkeboer, Anderson & Riper (2020)].

According to Reddy & Gupta (2020), COVID-19 pandemic exposed people globally to psychological distress, fatigue, occupational burnout, fear, stigma and therefore became of extreme importance that effective communication be ensured to galvanize everyone in mitigating the disaster. Countries immediately

and aggressively too stepped up the response measures to find, isolate, test, treat and trace transmission to save people's lives from COVID-19. As expected in a situation of this magnitude, with apprehension, media and social conversations became primarily dominated by large amounts of information about COVID-19. Responding to this pandemic requires critical preparedness and rich responses which include effective communication as an essential strategy. Communication is a mode of imparting or exchanging messages by speaking, writing, or using some other medium. During a pandemic, communication is not only conveying messages to people but has a much wider approach.

Being a novel disease, the unavailability of an effective treatment and initial absence of vaccines led to non-stop transmission causing huge socio-economic and health impact, necessitating countries to institute Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions (NPIs) such as hand hygiene, compulsory use of face masks, surface and object cleaning, quarantine, isolation, lock down, travel ban and restrictions (Owhonda,

Onyekwere, Kanee, Maduka, Nwadiuto, Okafor, Chibianotu & Aigbogun, 2021). Research findings have revealed that there is a positive relationship between non-pharmaceutical interventions and decreased COVID-19 related mortality and morbidity in China, Europe and other parts of the world. There is evidence that people actively evaluated the NPIs using criteria such as perceived necessity, efficacy, acceptability, and feasibility (Kantor & Kantor, 2020). Study also revealed that the adoption of these NPIs among Nigerians were challenged by such as lack of trust in government, strains in family resources, gaps and confusions in some areas of pandemic information communication and low adherence to voluntary social isolation and NPIs for public gatherings. Nigerians did not exhibit self-perceived risk of contracting COVID-19 and so were not very concerned about the risks of the pandemic (Oyeyemi, Oladoin, Okunlola, Mosobalaje, Oyeyemi, Adebimpe, Nwuba, Anuoluwa, Tiamiyu, Ovuakporie-uvo, Adesina, Olatunji, Kone, Oluwafemi, Obajaja & Ajiboye 2020).

As the pandemic raged, the capacity of Social Media platforms to influence and change health-related behaviours and perceptions became the focus of most researches. Leask, Hooker and King (2020) and Nwakpu, Ezema & Ogbodo (2020) expressed strong positions that the media especially the social media can influence and change health-related behaviours and perceptions. It has the capacity to also lead a society on the path of behavioural change.

It is in the same light that Hyland-Wood, Gadner, Leask & Ecker (2021) revealed that several countries successfully reduced their COVID-19 infection rate early with the NPIs, while others became overwhelmed through reluctance. Response efficacy was also in part dependent on the speed and scale of governmental intervention and how communities received, perceived, and acted on the information provided by governments and other agencies. While there is no 'one size fits all' communications strategy to deliver information during a prolonged crisis, this paper relies on key findings in multiple social science disciplines to highlight some fundamental characteristics of effective governmental social change communication.

According to Viola, Toma, Manta & Benvenuto (2021) information systems have been radically changing in recent years and are still mutating day by day. There exist in our reality the rise of two phenomena relevant to the evolution of information: the dramatic increase in the rapidity of spreading and the incredible overload of information. Social media have changed communication practices by creating an acute need for continuous interaction. The use of social chatbots as an effective way to communicate with the public is growing (Suarez-Gonzalo, Mas, Guirero-sole 2019). This development is rather darkened by the second issue described by scholars as the plague of the present times: the rise of the phenomenon of fake news. It has raised serious concerns about the concept of quality in information and communication, which rose further in importance during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency (Lillrank, 2003).

Some scholars have insisted that the quality of information is a mediating factor of the relationship between system quality and organisational impact (Gorla, Somers, & Wong 2010), attributing a crucial role to responsive organisations. On the other hand, others argue that information alone is insufficient, stating that it is essential for citizens to have the power and incentives to act on information (Kosec and Wantchekon, 2020).

This scenario showing the need for institutional communication to be clear and immediate in terms of velocity and quality as well as result oriented has created the need to investigate the Nigerian situation especially as it regards the success of the campaigns against COVID-19 by the NCDC and its partners for people to adhere to the non-pharmaceutical interventions meant to halt the spread of the virus. Iyorza and Ojorgu (2020) revealed that despite the heavily sponsored advocacy and social mobilization campaigns by Government and Non-Governmental Organizations, as well as corporate social responsibility activities of media organisations in Nigeria alongside efforts of well spirited individuals, cases of infections by the virus witnessed an untamed rise.

In the same vein, Igyuve, Agbo, Eze and Jonah (2021) discovered that Nigerians were not observing the Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions as campaigned by the NCDC and its sister agencies. The study revealed that even law

enforcement agents got fatigued in forcing Nigerians to wear facemasks in public places and vehicles when it was still compulsory, many religious organisations, schools, social event centers operated without strict adherence to the COVID-19 prevention measures. Research by Ilesanmi and Afolabi (2020) and Iorfa, Otu, Oguntayo, Kolawole, Gandi, Dangiwa & Olapegba (2020) among others, also revealed that apart from hand washing measures, many Nigerians were not keeping to the COVID-19 prevention guides as they view messages about the pandemic with skepticism, utter disbelief and go on with their usual lifestyle in self-denial.

The world, beyond the corona virus itself is faced with a communication problem as it continually seeks better and more effective ways of galvanizing the whole of humanity towards a common cause of social development. This became the issue as humanity became frantic in attempts to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 through effective communication. However, the success of this anti COVID-19 communication by various organisations and institutions which had a major target of behavioural change i.e the adoption of the Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions (NPIs) were greeted by various kinds of perception by the public. These perceptions as seen in this study have various levels of consequence on the adoption of the NPIs.

Statement of the Problem

There have been sustained efforts by government and non-governmental agencies at engendering social development in the Nigeria society as seen in the background of this study. However, the UN FAO, (1984) as cited in Servaes (2008) insists that communication for development is a social process, designed to seek a common understanding among all the participants of a development initiative, creating a basis for concerted action.

There have been several studies that brought light on the relationship between media campaigns and the management of the COVID-19 infections and spread in Nigeria. One of such is by Iyorza and Ojorgu (2020) which carried out a study on the change communication strategy in media campaigns and COVID-19 rising infections in Nigeria. This study looked at the connection between change communication

tactics and the rising infections in COVID-19 in Nigeria. Another is that by Igyuve, Agbo, Eze, & Jonah (2021) which focused on source credibility, audience perception and their implications on the adherence to NCDC's COVID-19 guidelines on social media. However, none of the studies have examined the public perception of NCDC's social media campaigns and compliance to the non-pharmaceutical interventions against COVID-19 in the North Central Nigeria.

None of the studies have considered the public perception of the information made available by the NCDC through its social media campaigns on non-pharmaceutical interventions against COVID-19 by people of North Central Nigeria. These have created the knowledge gap that this research seeks to fill.

Discussion

Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) according to Devex (2021) was established in the year 2011. This was Nigeria's response to the challenges of public health emergencies and in order to enhance Nigeria's preparedness for epidemics through prevention, detection and control of communicable and non-communicable diseases. Its core mandate is to detect, investigate, prevent and control diseases of national and international public health importance.

Meanwhile, Nigeria has suffered COVID-19 cases amounting to 266, 675 and 3,155 deaths as documented across 36 States and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). In the North Central region, the FCT accounts 29, 535 cases with 249 deaths, Nasarawa State 2,853 cases with 39 deaths and Kogi State 5 cases and 2 deaths as at 12 May 2023 (NCDC, 2023).

According to Abdelhafiz, Mohammed, Ibrahim, Ziady, Alorab & Ayyad (2020) the COVID-19 presents clinical symptoms that include fever, fatigue, dry cough, malaise and breathing difficulty. Since the first incidence, the disease has recorded high morbidity and mortality alongside other ailments (Roy, Tripathy, Kar, Sharma, Verma, & Kaushal 2020). The attempt to curtail the spread of the pandemic forced the world to shut down various forms of social activities. This global lockdown resulted in a recession as a consequence of the break in the global supply chain (Ephraim, Ahmed, Gozzer, Schlagenhauf, & Memish 2020).

Even before the WHO pronounced COVID-19 as a global public health challenge and pandemic Reuben, Danladi, Saleh and Ejembi (2020) reported that many Nigerians regarded the disease which was announced by the NCDC on both the mainstream and social media as a distant white man's (oyibo) disease that could not affect the black man or survive in the country's very hot climate. With complete disregard for expert advice and recommendations, some Nigerians and their governments in spite of the campaigns denied the existence of COVID-19 in their territory thereby hesitating the adoption of initial non-pharmaceutical preventive measures which many believed would have saved the country a lot while protecting the population from undue exposure to the virus. However, in spite of the NCDC (2020) confirming the index COVID-19 case in Lagos, Nigeria on February 20, 2020, other parts of the country including the north-central region moved on with their normal routines and social activities with total disregard for the initial preventive measures outlined by the disease control agency.

The public opinion within central Nigeria in spite of the vigorous campaigns by the NCDC and government/non-governmental agencies was that COVID-19 is a "big man disease" (i.e. disease of the highly influential persons). With the low level of education within this region of Nigeria, their immediate conclusion and misinformation on those vulnerable to the disease were expected.

It is also worth noting that Oleribe, Ezechi, Osita-Oleribe, Olawepo, Musa, Omoluabi, Fertleman, Salako and Taylor-Robinson (2023) that the continued increase in new cases of COVID-19, three months after the first case was reported in Nigeria made Nigerians wonder about the reliability of the government and its agencies response to the pandemic. As a result of this failure to halt the outbreak, significant numbers of the public were disillusioned and discountenanced the messages to keep to the government-issued guidelines and recommendations, with some believing that the COVID-19 pandemic is a hoax.

The above authors also noted there were opinions in Nigeria that while most of these global policies were adopted and implemented without proper review of their effectiveness and implications to the sociocultural climate of the

nation; for instance, physical distancing measures may save many lives in high-income countries, but are less effective in poor countries like Nigeria with younger populations who are less susceptible to COVID-19. That people living in poverty consider their economic survival as more important than contracting COVID-19, because they lack the resources and social protections to isolate themselves and sacrifice economic opportunities.

As the number of COVID-19 cases gradually rose among the Nigerian population, mainly of metropolitan areas including Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) situated in North Central Nigeria alongside its both States of Nasarawa and Kogi where most workers of the FCT reside, the people suffered unfound uncertainties and palpable fear amidst misinformation regarding COVID-19. These characterized the state of the inhabitants of the region.

According to Igyuve, Agbo, Eze & Jonah (2021), various governments world over, Nigeria inclusive were tasked to mobilise through advocacy and any other means, its populace to adhere to these measures. Iyorza and Ojorgu (2020) reported that in Nigeria, media advocacy by officials of government institutions and medical or health personnel were seen every day and on almost every electronic media. A Presidential Task Force (PTF) set up by the Federal Government was tasked to get all facts about the Covid-19, inform and apprise Nigerians, if possible, on daily basis. This was with the purpose of bringing the disease and its spread under control. The PTF also undertook social mobilization and advocacy to state governments and members of the public on how to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

In line with the task before it, the Presidential Task Force on Covid-19, the Ministry of Health and agencies under its supervision with the leadership of the NCDC designed the Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) strategy document. The RCCE (2020) described its aims to include enabling real time information, exchange of opinions and advice between frontline health providers, community outreach workers and community members. It is to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, serve as the road map for developing and implementing an integrated risk communication system during

public health emergencies in a comprehensive manner with multi stakeholder involvement.

Consequently, the NCDC launched a national communication campaign with the theme “Take Responsibility”, designed to motivate the audience to comply with a set of priority behaviours and interventions for ending transmission of COVID-19 in Nigeria. The purpose of the campaign is a call to all Nigerians at all levels to take responsibility to prevent and control the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria (RCCE, 2020).

However, in spite of these documented approaches, Nigeria and indeed the world found itself at a crossroad as it sought the best way to respond to the novel Corona Virus-19 and how best to mobilise the world population against that which was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020).

Nations and international organizations as revealed by Iyorza and Ojorgu (2020) had without relenting, become the vanguard of campaigns against the spread of diseases. The Strait Times (2020) also reported that on the 5th of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) disclosed its plans to promote a new social media campaign labelled "Be Ready for COVID-19", with the objectives of creating awareness, encouraging people to be safe, live smart and informed in the outbreak of the disease.

The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) as part of its communication strategy, infused the use of five social media platforms popular with Nigerians: Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Instagram and YouTube (Varrella, 2021) to distribute information to the populace on the non-pharmaceutical interventions. According to the United Nations Children and Education Trust Fund [UNICEF] (2020), the NCDC used these platforms to among other things promote adherence to the non-pharmaceutical interventions as well as to provide Nigerians with timely and accurate information to reduce their risk of infection.

A study like Ukwueze, Okafor & Ekwugha (2021) established that the coronavirus pandemic will go into history as the first global health crisis in the social media era. The disease was brought into the notice of the authorities in late December into the early days of January 2020, and, following investigations, was declared

as an emergency in the third week of January 2020 by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Insisting that the use and spread of information on the virus in various media platforms may have redefined scholarly expectations by the media, Ukwueze, Okafor & Ekwugha (2021) said the situation potentially placed the social media in a place of preeminence with such powers of more regular updates on the information about the pandemic. The social media assumed the position of greater influence than the conventional media relying on its ability to allow users discuss among themselves and on social media messages containing information on COVID-19.

However, as the world was in pensive mood and pharmaceutical interventions were still farfetched various governments took actions as recommended by WHO known as Non-pharmaceutical Interventions, (NPIs) aimed at reducing contact rates in the population.

The next big problem before global powers was how to mobilize the world in this course of action through communication as perceptions and sentiments took center stage of conversation in the media and within communities. Jingcheng, Erin, Victoria. & Gerald (2021) interrogated and analysed some social media sentiment trends towards COVID-19 Non-Pharmaceutical Intervention messages, widely recognized as a crucial area of sustenance by different countries.

Explaining further, Naby-Grover, Cheung, & Thatcher (2020) and Malecki, Keating, & Safdar (2021) said that some of the perceptions and sentiments were grossly spread and experienced explosive growth on social media. This was fueled by the global social distancing directives and lockdowns as experts and the general public have the tools in their hands (social media) unlike the conventional media to quickly spread information to a large number of individuals. However, instead of glossing over the negativity and the growing controversies rapidly escalating on the Social Media platforms, some authorities, health professionals and individuals (Nigeria inclusive) took advantage of the same media platforms to share some kinds of details which were often debated. These debates on social media platforms became the nurseries for varied perceptions of the anti-COVID-19

campaigns and the information promoting the Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions contained in the messages communicated on social media to Nigerians by the NCDC.

According to WHO (2020) and Chatwin, Butler, Jones, James, Choucri, & McCarthy (2020), while social media serves as a spontaneous means of spreading information by authorities and as an asset to developing effective risk communication strategies and responses, these information are subject to amplifications, and arguments on social media. Therefore, Ukwueze, Okafor & Ekwugha (2021) described the perception sharing by social media of the unfolding concerns on the COVID-19 pandemic as some vital issues raised on the platforms and further amplified therein, suggesting that these Social Media platforms constituted threats to global public health as the virus itself, contributing towards undermining the desired global response to NPIs, they can be properly used by authorities like the NCDC to propagate among same users public health safety measures as the NPIs, with positive appeal leading to proper understanding, acceptance of its usefulness, adoption of these preventive measures and a complete attitudinal change as expected in all social change campaigns.

Although social media platforms could be harnessed to provide the public health response by communicating NPIs properly, Depoux, Martin, Karafillakis, Preet, Wilder-Smith & Larson (2020) noted that health officials and individuals often times deploy these platforms to only educate the public as well as their fellow healthcare providers and may not actually be communicating in persuasive terms. It could be inferred that Social Media is an obvious tool for this engagement and can allow experts and individuals to openly and visibly debate topics, related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the non-pharmaceutical interventions but could also have a toll on the perception of the communication process and a clog to the understanding, acceptance and the adoption of promoted public health measures.

Also, Viola et al (2021) espoused that information systems have been radically changing in recent years and that the Social Media have changed communication practices by creating an acute need for continuous interaction. The use of social chatbots as an effective way to

communicate with the public is growing (Suarez-Gonzalo, 2019) and present the most potent platform to manage perceptions, understanding and adoption of behavioral change messages.

Emphasising the capacity of the Social Media in influencing attitudes, behaviours and perceptions, Kosec & Wantchekon (2020) argued that information dissemination alone is insufficient, but that it is essential for citizens to have the power and incentives to act on information. This could not have been more a relevant issue than as in times of global emergency like the COVID pandemic where governmental responsiveness is paramount, the need to galvanise the people in behavioral and social change efforts. This emphasises the need for institutional communication to be clear and immediate in terms of velocity and quality.

The WHO (2020) believes that public health is one of the most critical fields to intervene with massive communication campaigns in order to inform citizens about risk and prevention strategies. Indeed, one of the most alarming concerns argued by scholars as attested to by Sina News Chinese State Agency (2020), amid the framework of the COVID -19 emergency, has not only been the risk of misinformation and fake news but the ability to engage positively the communities involved. These positive engagements have the potential to engender among the targeted public, better perception of the messages leading to greater understanding, acceptance, adoption of promoted actions and a total behavioural change.

Reporting the experience in Italy, Rosa, Marolla & Benvenuto (2020) said that the country being one of the most exposed countries to health risks, during the first month of the pandemic crisis, needed to prepare a highly responsive and effective strategy in terms of patient treatment and mitigation of spread. While home and hospital treatment depended on the structural capacity of the health care system to react to the stress caused by the massive number of cases occurring, prevention strategy focused on the need to get citizens acquainted with the risks of contracting the virus through the media. This was achieved through persuasive communication that took cognisance of tactics of perception management.

According to Rosa, Marolla & Benvenuto (2020) the developments in Italy forced all the institutions involved in crisis management into serious communication difficulties, from the local

healthcare units to the intergovernmental bodies. The World Health Organization dictated the line of intervention in light of the urgent situation. Risk communication became an important part of the strategy, aimed at creating consensus and public acknowledgement about the situation as a whole. Risk communication, operated through the months by governmental bodies, acquired more and more room in the media outlets. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte used to appear on the screens several times per week, symbolising an attempt from politics to re-establish a point of contact with the population. This approach might have been the magic pill that galvanised proper perception and joint community actions in mitigating COVID-19 among the Italians.

From the view of an inclusive public sphere, Waisbord (2016) and Bennet & Pfetsch (2017) agreed that the proliferation of social and digital media, which has increased the dispersion and cacophony of public voices and the fragmentation are relevant dimensions which can lead to a desired radical behavioural change.

Conclusion

In a time like this, the WHO (2020) insisted that the opportunity to resume relations with people is fundamental to contain the negative effects of the pandemic. On the other hand, failure to properly communicate leads to a loss of trust and reputation, economic impacts, and in the worst case loss of lives. One of the most important and effective interventions in public health response to any event is to proactively communicate what is known, what is unknown, and what is being done to get more information, with the objectives of saving lives and minimising adverse consequences. The WHO provided a strategy based on Risk Communication and Communication Engagement (RCCE), which helps in contrasting the effects of “infodemics” (an excessive amount of information about a problem that makes it difficult to identify a solution), building trust in the response, and increasing the probability that health advice will be followed (WHO, 2020).

Part of the measures taken by various countries worldwide and international organisations towards fighting the COVID-19 outbreak according to Gao, Zhang, Wu & Wang (2020) include the promotion of transparency and unrestricted public access to disease data. These

positively affected the perception of the whole communication process and the information therein contained leading to greater understanding, acceptance and adoption of the NPIs in most cases.

Arguing in same direction, Comfort, Kapucu, Ko, Menoni & Siciliano (2020) said that collective cognition, amplified by timely, valid communication and supported by sound planning, trained personnel, appropriate technology, and bold leadership, enables coordinated action needed to bring a large-scale global crisis under control. This collective cognition is a function of proper perception by the public of the issues being messaged.

Emphasising the point further, Smith (2006) & WHO (2020) agreed that there exists a gap between the people's perception of risk and that of experts and authorities. Risk perception may be affected by the media via availability (more information gives a stronger effect) but the effects are lessened by impersonal impact: general risk perception is more easily changed than personal risk perception (Wahlberg and Sjoberg, 2000) advising public health agencies to consider adapting risk communication strategies to account for a dynamic news environment and the media's agenda which eventually marry or reduce the perception gaps (Kott and Limaye, 2016).

Adding the dimension of social marketing, Reddy & Gupta (2020) said the concept is used worldwide in promoting breastfeeding, personal hygiene, immunization, tobacco control and others. In India social marketing was used by multiple multinational companies and brands to spread messages for handwashing, social distancing and restricted movement during COVID-19. It describes effective communication as being proactive, polite, imaginative, innovative, creative, constructive, professional, progressive, energetic, enabling, transparent and technology friendly.

This study concludes, as manifest in the abundant literature that the capacity of social media platforms if properly deployed to change behaviours especially as it relates to health cannot be overemphasized or undermined. It can be used to influence opinions, engender the adoption of the non-pharmaceutical interventions as well as other social development interventions in Nigeria through proper perception management.

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