

COMBATING COVID-19 FAKE NEWS AND PROMOTING POSITIVE BEHAVIOURAL PATTERNS IN SUB-URBAN SETTLEMENTS OF TARABA STATE: STAKEHOLDERS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This study examined the communication strategies that were employed to combat COVID-19 fake news and promote positive behavioural traits towards COVID-19 in rural and sub-urban settlements of Taraba State, Nigeria. This examination was done against the backdrop of the media-disadvantaged status of rural communities in Nigeria where access to modern channels of communication is extremely difficult owing to a multiplicity of factors such as lack of steady power supply, socio-economic status, and literacy levels among other factors. Using in-depth interview as the research method, the study engaged agents of the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) - an agency that was saddled with the responsibility of tackling the pandemic in Nigeria, and primary healthcare workers in the state for data on the communication approaches they utilised to sensitize the masses on the pandemic, the effectiveness of the channels used, and the limitations that inhibited the process. Findings revealed that while a combination of modern and traditional communication channels was deployed, the traditional channels proved more effective in engaging with the masses at the grassroots due to their popular appeal at that level, although with serious limitations bothering on reach and logistics. The study recommended a synergy between modern and traditional communication channels to checkmate the limitations of individual channels and properly mainstream them into the process of sensitizing people at the grassroots towards adopting appropriate health behaviours necessary for combating COVID-19 and indeed, other health emergencies.

Key words: COVID-19, fake news, COVID-19 infodemic, NCDC, COVID-19 safety protocols, Nigeria.

Introduction

COVID-19 took the world unaware and heightened the need for strategic communication of health information to the masses, especially in developing societies with vast majorities of citizens residing in rural settlements where access to modern channels of communication is extremely difficult. As Lucas, Targema, Jibril, Sambo & Istifanus (2020) noted, the world was battling a double scourge- pandemic and infodemic- at the same time. The

predominance of fake news, misinformation, and conspiracy theories on the pandemic (*see* Wonodi, Obi-Jeff, Adewumi, Keluo-Udeke, Gur-Arie, Krubiner, Jaffe, Bamiduro, Karron, & Faden, 2022) birthed an infodemic that heightened the complexity of COVID-19 and made it the most controversial pandemic in the recent history of humanity.

Soon after its outbreak, WHO (2020, p.2) declared the existence of an infodemic- "an overabundance of information, both online and offline [including] deliberate

attempts to disseminate wrong information to undermine the public health response and advance alternative agenda of groups or individuals” on COVID-19 that threatened global efforts towards taming the wave of the pandemic. Naeem & Bhatti (2020) noted that containing this infodemic was one of the major preoccupations of stakeholders in the fight against the pandemic, placing a huge burden on health experts and information professionals from the relevant agencies- global and national towards taming the wave of misinformation.

In the post-COVID dynamics, therefore, one of the major take-aways from the pandemic is the imperatives of strategic communication approaches that would not just serve information needs during pandemics or emergencies, but also drive impactful interventions and mould positive attitudinal patterns amidst concomitant infodemics typically associated with such situations. This quest becomes even more pressing given the information deficits of rural communities of the global south, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Ibiang (2020, para. 9), for instance, observed that: “the lower-income class living in rural and peri-urban areas are most at risk of fake news, and where myths are involved, they spread quickly amongst these populations.” COVID-19 particularly presents a good case study for this post-mortem assessment for a couple of reasons: apart from being the most devastating scourge in the recent health history of humanity, the pandemic had neither cure nor vaccine for the most part of its initial outbreak (Lucas *et al*, 2020; Maikomo, Targema & Obun-Andy, 2021), prompting the need to promote precautionary measures- or safety protocols/guidelines- as the most effective way of containing its spread (Reuben, Danladi, Saleh & Ejembi, 2020).

Against this backdrop, this study interrogates the extent to which relevant state agencies and experts were able to persuade citizens- especially residents of rural and sub-urban settlements- to adopt the safety guidelines/protocols put forward towards containing the pandemic. To what extent were these agencies/experts able to effectively tackle COVID-19 infodemic in rural/sub-urban settlements of Taraba State and get residents to adopt these safety guidelines towards containing the spread of the pandemic? This is the major preoccupation of the study.

Objectives of the study

The major objective of this study is to underscore the communication strategies adopted for promoting positive attitudinal traits towards COVID-19 among residents of Taraba State. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Ascertain the measures adopted for taming the spread of COVID-19 infodemic in Taraba State.
2. Examine the communication strategies used for COVID-19 sensitisation in Taraba state.
3. Find out the effectiveness of communication channels used in creating awareness on COVID-19 in Taraba state.

Literature Review

The imperative of a strategic communication approach towards enhancing positive health behaviour has been advanced in academic literature on health communication (Aswani, 2021; Anorue et al 2021). Nearly a year into its outbreak, COVID-19 had neither cure no vaccine (Lucas *et al*, 2020; Maikomo, Targema & Obun-Andy, 2021), making the need to persuade the masses to adopt laide-down guidelines- or safety protocols towards containing its spread one of the major preoccupations of health experts and authorities (Ibiang, 2020). When the vaccine

was eventually developed, this effort expanded to include convincing the masses to take the vaccine jabs to provide them with needed immunity towards the virus (Sadiq, Croucher, & Dutta, 2023). Aswani (2021, p. 181), for instance, investigates government's communication strategies on COVID-19 vaccination in Kenya. Findings from the study reveal a defective strategy that was "reactive and pompous (or arrogant) and/or contradictory" in nature, and hence lacked the required capacity to effectively persuade the masses into taking the vaccine in Kenya.

In Portugal, Gonçalves, Piñeiro-Naval & Toniolo (2021, p.180) advance evidence for a direct link between (non-)compliance with the authorities' recommendations on health protocols to trust in the sources of information. The study established low level of trust in "media or government authorities, both at the national and local levels" as "compared to non-governmental sources" such as "healthcare personnel, particularly prestigious personalities in the healthcare field, such as doctors, epidemiologists, or the director of the WHO." This distrust they argue, is at the heart of people's hesitation to comply with the guidelines laid down by the government to contend the spread of the COVID-19. A similar study by Sadiq, Croucher & Dutta (2023) established that lack of trust in government and conspiracy theories were largely responsible for people's hesitancy to COVID-19 vaccine intake in Nigeria.

Hyland-Wood *et al* (2021) argue that that effective communications and leadership are central to the management of pandemics, presenting an overview of health and risk communication approaches during pandemics. Their conclusion suggests that effective health communication- especially in times of information crises- goes beyond mere dissemination of information to the masses, but active engagement and

interaction with the masses- using dialogic approaches to influence positive behavioural patterns. In doing this, public trust and involvement of the masses, transparency and civic engagement, clarity and precision of communication endeavours, openness, frankness, and honesty; recognition of uncertainty, empowering the masses to take actions and proactive measures, appeal to social norms and proactive debunking of fake news, misinformation and conspiracy theories are advanced as key to ensuring positive health behaviour among the masses (Hyland-Wood *et al*, 2021). These sentiments are summarised in the IDEA Model of risk communication (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2020) which is discussed in detail in the following section.

The Nigerian situation- and indeed most of sub-Saharan Africa- is particularly unique given the gross information disadvantage of people at the grassroots occasioned by several factors such as the digital divide question, endemic poverty, gender factor and gross infrastructural deficit that affect effective information access of people at the grassroots (Maikomo, Targema & Obun-Andy, 2021). This informs the need for a communication approach that does not only incorporate international conventions, but also takes cognizance of local peculiarities to carry everyone along.

Furtherance to this notion, Lucas *et al* (2020) present a case for mainstreaming traditional communication systems into the communication strategy of COVID-19 to effectively connect to people at the grassroots. In this regard, a trado-modern communication approach becomes highly recommended. Evidence suggests that stakeholders must appraise the strengths and weaknesses of each of the available media platforms- the mainstream media, traditional communication channels and the new media platforms- and deploy them strategically

towards increasing awareness about the safety protocols and enhancing positive behavioural patterns. To be effective, the study suggests that this strategy must explore the synergy among the various methods, and as well recognise the place of primary health workers who stand in-between the rural masses and the health sector and empower them accordingly to spread the right information beyond what is communicated on the various media platforms.

This brief excursion into the literature highlights the primacy of trust in government/information sources, context-specific communication and information situations of recipient communities and appeal of information channels as critical factors towards developing an effective communication strategy that would bridge information gaps and get people adopt positive health behaviours in times of health emergencies as experienced during the outbreak of COVID-19. It is against this backdrop that this study examines the effectiveness of communication strategies that were deployed for this purpose by authorities in Taraba State.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on the IDEA (Internalisation, Distribution, Explanation and Action) Model of risk communication. Propounded by Sellnow & Sellnow in 2013, the model contends that effective and strategic communication is imperative “to motivate disparate audiences to pay attention to, comprehend, and take appropriate actions during times of crisis” or emergency situations (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2020, p. 1). The model presents itself as one of the emerging models within the domain of risk and health communication (Sellnow, Lane, Sellnow, & Littlefield, 2017, p. 553) that emphasises the need to engage in “an *interactive* process of exchange of

information and opinion among individuals, groups and institutions” towards building “*trust* through *participation* in the decision-making process” regarding their reactions to the emergency.

From the foregoing, the model could be understood as a dialogic approach to risk communication that recognises the primacy of the audience in the communication process, emphasising such ideals as *interaction* and *participation* as crucial for building trust and enhancing the effectiveness of the communication process (Selnow & Sellnow, 2020; Sellnow, Lane, Sellnow, & Littlefield, 2017). The hunt for appropriate communication models has come a long way with scholars advancing appropriate information and communication behaviours, approaches and strategies that would bridge knowledge gaps associated with risks and emergencies and get people to act in the most appropriate of ways towards contending with such situations. Wardman (2008, p.1621) underscores the imperatives of risk communication when he notes that in times of emergencies, “risk communication is undertaken simply because it is the right thing to do.” This imperative necessitates the hunt for appropriate models of doing this, with IDEA as one of the most recent on the staple that bears much hope for a productive model of risk communication. IDEA model is built on the fundamental pillars of internalisation, distribution, explanation, and action (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2020, p.1) that, collectively, explains how stakeholders initiate and implement risk communication initiatives towards greater impacts.

Internalisation according to the model “involves the key elements needed to motivate receivers to attend to and remember the message” such as compassion, timeliness, proximity, and impact. These, according to the model must be factored into the ideation of the message to ensure maximum impact.

Distribution, on the other hand, tackles those activities that must be undertaken to ensure that the message reaches the target audience. Such activities include “ensuring *consistent* messaging from *multiple sources* (as

ambiguities. Explanation also encapsulates myths busting, debunking of fake news, mis/disinformation, and conspiracy theories- as experienced in the case of COVID-19 and how these complicate situations, thereby

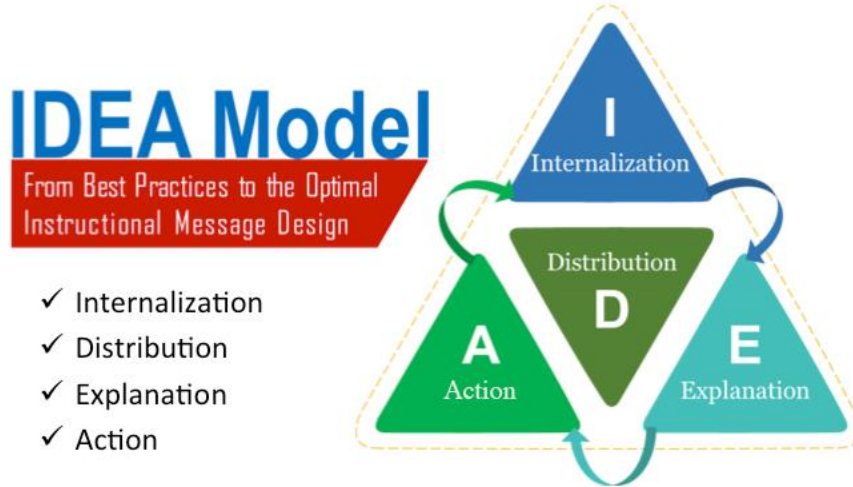


Figure 1: The IDEA Model. Source: <https://researchoutreach.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Deanna-and-Timothy-Sellnow.pdf>

different audiences seek information from different places) and various communication channels” (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2020, p.1) both formal and informal as in the case of disadvantaged rural and sub-urban dwellers in Taraba State. The model holds that no matter how lofty a message appears, lack of effective *distribution* limits its impact, as the target audience do not receive it as intended. This places the burden of finding the most appropriate channel of reaching out to the audience with the message on the emergency.

Explanation on its part “involves the key elements to help receivers comprehend accurate information” distributed about a risk situation. This, according to proponents of the model may involve giving the receiver regular satiation updates, and “intelligible translation of science for different audiences” from different linguistic, literary, and socio-economic stratifications. Importantly, the message must be demystified in such a way that every segment of the target audience understands it without any form of

keeping the target audience well informed of the situation and its associated circumstances.

The last element in the model is **action**, which “involves the key elements to get receivers to take appropriate action”. In the case of COVID-19, the whole gamut of the safety protocols/guidelines fall within this domain. These include regular handwashing and sanitisation, physical distancing, seeking medical attention upon suspicion or manifestation of signs/contact with victims, avoidance of crowded settings, self-isolation when tested positive, and vaccine intake etc. among a handful of other guidelines put forward by WHO which were domesticated by national and state agencies responsible for the containment of the pandemic. A conceptual model of IDEA as designed by its proponents is presented in the figure below:

Importantly, all elements in the model are crucial to the overall success of a communication endeavour and must be

treated as such for maximum impact. Sellnow & Sellnow (2020, p.1) emphasise that “mistakes in internalisation, distribution, and explanation can hamper the action stage.” Citing the COVID-19 experience in the US as an instance, the authors note that “by failing to effectively communicate the risk of contagion from asymptomatic carriers and by playing down the risk to the young and healthy, many people chose to not socially distance” which made it extremely difficult to contend the spread of the virus in the US, leading to exponential casualty figures. From the foregoing, it is evident that the model presents a suitable framework to appraise the effectiveness of the communication strategy that was adopted to combat COVID-19 infodemic in rural and sub-urban settlements of Taraba State.

Methodology

This study adopts key informants’ interviews, a purely qualitative research method that generates data from a targeted group with specific experience on a phenomenon. Population of this study included frontline health and information experts engaged in the fight against COVID-19 in Taraba State. National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) data indicates that as of January 2024, Taraba recorded a total of 1,517 lab-confirmed COVID-19 cases and 34 deaths out of 266,675 confirmed cases and 3,155 deaths recorded across the country (NCDC, 2024). Beyond these figures, however, one other factor that informed the choice of Taraba is the agrarian nature of the state that complicates the task of effectively reaching out to the rural masses with vital information to curtail the spread of the virus. Official records on the state’s website indicate that Taraba is predominantly an “agrarian” state whose “predominant population engages in farming as an occupation.” According to the records,

“about three-quarters (i.e., 75%) of the people are farmers” residing in sub-urban and rural settlements (Taraba State Government Official Website n.d.), which informs the need for a strategic communication approach to suit their information demands in times of emergencies.

Fifteen (15) personnel from the ministry of health, primary/secondary healthcare, and NCDC agents were purposively selected and interviewed across the three senatorial districts of the state on their experience while disseminating COVID-19 information and bursting myths to residents of the state. Interviews were conducted until a saturation point was reached. According to Saunders, Sim, Kingstone, Baker, Waterfield, Bartlam, Buroughs & Jinks (2017), saturation in qualitative research where new themes do not emerge again from repeated interviews, thereby making further data collection unnecessary. This research reached saturation at 15 respondents. Accordingly, data arising from the interviews are transcribed and coded into themes, which are presented and discussed below based on the research objectives.

Data Presentation

Data arising from the interviews highlight the experiences of health and information experts on the communication measures they adopted towards contending with COVID-19 fake news at the rural settings, the impact of the strategies adopted, and the limitations that inhibit the strategies with implications on their overall impact. These are presented as follows.

Measures of Taming the Spread of COVID-19 Infodemic in Taraba State

Interview with the Agents of the NCDC in Taraba State revealed that several measures were adopted to tame the spread of COVID-

19 infodemic in the state and get resident adopt positive behaviours towards the pandemic. One of the respondents averred thus:

We encourage people to take COVID-19 vaccine to provide them with the required immunity towards the virus, we also check the quality of information given to people: is the information credible or not? Is it from a reliable source that they are getting the information concerning the virus? Then we follow public gatherings where people are gathered and encourage/educate them concerning the virus, the need for vaccination, and then we support public health campaigns too. When we campaign on COVID-19, people get to understand what the virus is all about, the vaccination and its safety [because many doubt the safety and efficacy of the vaccine], get educated about the virus and finally accept to take up the vaccination... So, I think one of the ways to avoid all this kind of misinterpretation and misconception about Corona vaccine is to educate people and possibly give them some of the side effects that they might encounter after been vaccinated [such as the slight fever that always accompanies the vaccine].

This finding reveals that NCDC agents in the state were at the vanguard of public health campaigns on COVID-19, educating the masses on the virus and eventually the vaccination as well as counteracting the misinformation and infodemic circulating within the state.

People's Attitude to COVID-19 Safety Protocols in Taraba State

Majority of the NCDC agents interviewed stated that at the onset of the pandemic, there was poor compliance from the people towards WHO/NCDC COVID-19 safety protocols in the state. However, after series of efforts were made by the NCDC agents and the media in the state to orient the people on the need for adherence to COVID-19 safety protocols, many began to comply to avert the impending danger of contracting the deadly virus. One of the respondents affirmed thus:

People have the natural tendency exhibit defiant behaviour to laid-down guidelines and if I should go to tell him don't do this, don't do that, it will sound like a story to them. Now let me deviate small; now the issue of HIV, it's also a virus, isn't it? People don't believe that HIV exist until you know we had one or two incidences that may be someone next to them that is so dear to them gets infected with the virus and then by such now they believe that wearing protection during sex and avoidance of sharing of needles and many other things could help in preventing this virus now. Now the compliance to protocols that have been advanced in respect to the COVID-19 regular washing of hands, distancing yourself in social gatherings, you know at first people felt like it is a way for the government and politicians to get money, but then as they begin to see with their eyes and watch on the TV and see how the virus

spread towards affecting people now, their response began to change for the better.

This agrees with the argument of the Hochbaum & Rosenstock's Health Belief Model (*see* Juárez-García, de Jesús García-Solís, & Téllez, 2020) which posits that people consider adhering to health messages only when there is a perceived severity. Most residents in the state were not compliant to COVID-19 protocols until fatality rate began to rise and positive cases became widespread.

Effectiveness of Communication Channels Used in Creating Awareness in Taraba State on COVID-19

Several communication channels have been utilised by the NCDC in the state to sensitise the public on COVID-19 safety protocols and the need to also take COVID-19 vaccine. Out of the various channels used for the awareness, informal means of communication stand out to be most resourceful in convincing the people. This factor is largely attributable to the agrarian nature of Taraba State. One of the NCDC agents noted that:

Our most effective communication channels in this regard are through the traditional councils where we gather people and sensitize them on the virus, and then in the church, because that is where you get people and talk to them at length. The issue we have with the use of the mass media is that they will give you limited time, and sometime when the message is taken as a public service announcement that is done freely, they may not give it much time and if they are to give it much time you may have to

pay. But the use of these traditional channels avails you more time and is also cheaper compared to the mass media.

Other respondents note the issue of access, where most residents of rural settlements have no access to modern media channels such as television and newspapers. According to interviews, radio is the only mass medium that appeals to the rural settlers in the state, hence, the need to support it with the traditional channels that the masses easily identify with. Another significant issue raised by interviewees is the issue of trust. An interviewer emphatically notes that from experience over the years, people pay less attention to health messages in the mainstream media, and trust more information passed through some of the traditional channels such as places of worship and traditional councils. Yet, other respondents talk of the dialogic model that traditional channels of communication offer, which enables them to respond to queries and concerns of the masses. All these inform the use of traditional channels as most preferred for disseminating COVID-19 related information to residents of rural communities in Taraba State.

Residents' Response to COVID-19 Vaccination in Taraba State

Response to COVID-19 vaccination in the state followed the pattern for reactions towards the safety protocols earlier discussed, as people were reluctant at first but later agreed to take the vaccine after public sensitization by the NCDC agents in the state via conventional media and informal gathering like places of worship, village gatherings, market square among others. The public health campaign was instrumental in encouraging the people to take the vaccine after getting to know its

significance and the dangers of not taking the vaccine. An NCDC agent averred thus:

Let's say in 100% let's talk about 60% compliance, in the first place, people were rejecting it but when we're following up, routine campaigning and telling people if you did not vaccinate what will come about it either now or later, so people came and agreed, and they started taking the vaccine... In the state, 2760 persons have taken the vaccine so far after the campaign. In terms of demographics, the male gender complied more, because when we talk of the female, they say a pregnant mother should not take the vaccine, so male complied more than the female.

Beyond the issue of gender, interview respondents revealed that so many conspiracy theories greeted the vaccine which made it difficult to convince people to take it. These conspiracy theories, according to the interviews stem from religious undertones which breed serious resistance. Others associate the vaccine to birth control measures while others insinuate attempts at reducing the global population via the campaign, all of which influenced people's attitude towards its intake.

Communication Strategies used for COVID-19 Vaccine Sensitisation in Taraba State.

Respondents stated that conventional media, social media, and informal gatherings were the major channels they utilised for public awareness and sensitisation on COVID-19 vaccination. In the rural areas, town criers were also utilised to disseminate information on the major streets in the villages. Places of worship were also visited by the health workers and time was given to

the agents to address the worshippers on the need for them to take COVID-19 vaccine which in some cases, some people indicated interest at that same instance to be vaccinated. An NCDC agent stated that:

We go to traditional rulers and tell them to gather people when we tell them we're coming for mobilization or sensitization, we go to them, and we tell them about the virus, the vaccine and how effective it is. When we started from the beginning, people were against it but later they accept it we have an appreciable degree of compliance.

The foregoing indicates that traditional channels which offered one-on-one experience with the masses have proven to be more effective in convincing the masses to accept COVID-19 vaccine in Taraba State compared to the modern means of communication, although both channels were deployed in the process based on suitability, target audience, accessibility by the audience and logistic reasons. Interviewees revealed that face-to-face interactions availed the masses the opportunity to raise questions which were instantly addressed towards clearing some of the doubts and misconceptions they had towards the pandemic, thereby enhancing the sensitization process.

Limitations of Communication Channels used for COVID-19 Awareness in Taraba State

Different challenges and limitations inhibited the use of both the conventional media and informal means of information dissemination for communicating COVID-19 related information to the people. The NCDC agents said that adequate time was not given by the mass media to report on COVID-19 sensitization, and where it was

given as public service announcement, the payment was typically on a high side, thereby exerting enormous economic cost on the agency which was grappling with paucity of funds in the state. On the other hand, using informal means to reach the public was very tedious and stressful where one had to move from one place to another with public address system. The audience reach using traditional channels was highly limited, and although a communication endeavour was relatively cheaper, the cumulative cost for logistic and mobility was cumbersome. More so, public resistance and or confrontation are additional challenges. An NCDC agent added that:

The challenge is that when you send out someone for the sensitisation or when you go out by yourself, the community will be complaining- this noise you people are making we are looking for money to eat, there's no money you're only telling us about vaccine, are we eating vaccine? Government must do some other things to them but they're not doing it. They are not giving them money, they are not treating them free, but if it is something of vaccine, we are disturbing them. That's the challenge.

This public confrontation stands to be a serious challenge and confounding factor towards effective sensitization in many places. However, respondents revealed that some of the people later gave heed to the awareness after hearing the message and adopted the right attitudinal pattern.

Discussion of Findings

Findings from this study provide useful insights to the communication approaches of reaching out to residents of rural settlements

in times of health emergencies such as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings show that stakeholders adopted public education and sensitization as a strategy towards taming the wave of infodemic that characterised the pandemic. This was a domestication of global efforts coordinated at the global level by WHO (*see* WHO, 2020). At the national level, however, the NCDC was saddled with this responsibility which it discharged in collaboration with primary healthcare workers to distil the information to the grassroots (Ihekweazu & Oranezi, 2023). While NCDC took on this herculean task head-on, a pressing challenge that confronted it was reaching out effectively to residents of media-disadvantaged communities in the country's vast agrarian settlements.

At this point, trado-modern channels of communication recommended by scholars (*see* Wilson & Itek, 2017; Nwodu & Nwanmuo, 2017) become handy tools, first, because of their popularity and accessibility among rural settings, and second, because of their flexibility, dialogic nature, and cost effectiveness. Deployment of trado-modern channels of communication to reach out to rural and sub-urban dwellers resonates with *distribution*, one of the key elements of the IDEA Model which emphasises finding the most suitable channel of information dissemination to reach every segment of the target population as earlier discussed in this study. This, however, was hampered by the inherent deficits of these channels of communication such as limited reach, mobility, and logistic challenges. Notwithstanding this, findings show that these channels served as valuable tools in the hands of health experts towards driving positive actions about the virus such as adoption of the safety protocols and vaccine intake (Ehondor & Unakalamba, 2021), thus validating the assumptions of the IDEA Model.

Another finding that emerged from the study is the influence of cultural/religious barriers on people's attitudinal traits to the safety protocols and vaccine. This calls for cultural reorientation of people to dissuade them from staying inclined to cultural believes and embracing modern medical conventions, a practice is emphasised at the *internalisation* phase of the IDEA Model. Taking cognisance of this factor will help in designing appropriate messages that will knock-off socio-cultural barriers and effectively persuade the masses into adopting positive behaviours towards mitigating the risks of the pandemic.

Finally, distrust in government and its policies contributed significantly to people's hesitancy to adopt the safety protocols put forward to contain the virus. This corroborates findings of previous studies (*see* Sadiq, Croucher & Dutta, 2023; Wonodi *et al*, 2022; and Gonçalves, Piñeiro-Naval, & Toniolo, 2021) that established a positive correlation between people's lack of trust in government, conspiracy theories and COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy. Against this backdrop, government must endeavour to build trust in citizens to enhance acceptance of campaigns and sensitizations, not just on health matters but in every other facet of life, as distrust is a strong factor responsible for resistance to public advocacies and behaviour change campaigns. COVID-19 experience clearly highlights this reality, as the current study and indeed, previous studies indicate.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Combating COVID-19 fake news in Nigeria and getting citizens adopt the right attitudinal patterns especially in media-disadvantaged sub-urban and rural settlements required a strategic communication approach and media

combo that suits the information channels of the masses. This study reveals that to accomplish this task, Nigerian health agencies adopted a combination of modern mass media and traditional communication channels to reach out to the masses in media-disadvantaged communities.

This, however, met with serious limitations bothering on limited coverage of these channels and logistic challenges. To optimise this practice in further health information emergencies, there is need to properly mainstream the traditional channels of communication into the communication strategy of relevant government and non-governmental agencies. Since the masses easily identify with these channels for a multiplicity of reasons, this mainstreaming will help to improve on their limitations, and boost their impact for optimal results.

This study strongly recommends a synergy between the modern mass media and the traditional channels of communication so that collectively, the limitations of individual channels can be minimised. Beyond this, however, the authors recommend that to build people's confidence in government intervention programmes, it is expedient that government and its agents at all levels are prudent and transparent enough to enable people trust them and their intentions. This will go a long way in building peoples trust and confidence in government campaigns and advocacies towards optimal results.

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