

INFLUENCE OF OPINION LEADERS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF COVID-19 INFORMATION IN TARABA STATE

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of various opinion leaders, namely traditional, religious, and political, in the dissemination of accurate information regarding COVID-19 in Taraba State. The study sought to gauge the level of their participation, their efficacy, as well as the obstacles they encountered while managing COVID-19 information. Two step flow theory was used as the theoretical framework, and survey research design was adopted. The population of Taraba state residence according to National population commission and Bureau of statistic (2022) was projected at 3,609,800. Four hundred (400) respondents was determined using Taro Yamene formula to administered copies of questionnaire. The quantitative data were evaluated descriptively using statistical methods, particularly frequencies and simple percentages. Results revealed that opinion leaders contributed in the management of COVID-19 information in Taraba State and also played an active role in promoting awareness, mobilisation, and sensitization among their followers. Results further demonstrated that opinion leaders confronted many problems ranging from the complicated nature of COVID-19 to cultural and religious belief systems, among others. The study concluded that there is a need for coordinated efforts among health workers, traditional and religious leaders, and government officials, among other stakeholders, in the management of COVID-19 information in Taraba State. It is also recommended that the government use traditional and religious leaders in spreading COVID-19 preventive information. The study suggests that both traditional and religious leaders should be trained in the management of COVID-19 information, and the government and health organisations should prioritise the traditional and religious leaders in COVID-19 information management in Taraba State.

Keywords: Opinion, leaders, information, management, Covid 19.

Introduction

COVID-19 (coronavirus), originated in Wuhan, China in 2019. Its rapid spread to other regions of the globe resulted in a devastating mortality rate of approximately 5,705,320 globally, according to (W.H.O 2020). The World Health Organization on 11th of March, 2020 classified COVID-19 as a pandemic due to its widespread impact. Despite ongoing efforts to combat the virus, it continues to pose a serious threat to global health. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact worldwide since its

emergence in 2020. According to reports from the Nigerian Tribune in 2020, the initial case of Coronavirus in Nigeria was detected on February 27th 2020. A positive test was confirmed for an Italian national in Lagos. The second instance of the virus was recorded on March 9th, 2020 in Ekekoro, Ogun State, with a Nigerian citizen receiving a diagnosis. Subsequently, the virus expanded to all the states in Nigeria, damaging practically all sectors of our economy, according to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (2020). It is worthy to highlight that there are different stakeholders

in information management during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the NCDC, the mass media, the Ministry of Health, WHO, and most crucially, the opinion leaders (traditional leaders, religious leaders, and political leaders). These opinion leaders provided platforms where COVID-19 material is addressed in churches, communities, and mosques, among several other places.

It is an established fact that some religious leaders who are considered opinion leaders in the country debunked the existence of the virus, while others prophesied to their willing congregation that COVID-19 could not affect them since they were carrying anointing in addition to being covered by the special blood of Jesus. In May 2020, LoveWorld Television, run by Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, was banned from airing in British airspace by the British broadcast regulator, the Office of Communications (OFCOM). The reason behind this decision was Pastor Oyakhilome's promotion of a conspiracy theory linking the COVID-19 pandemic with the development and launch of 5G networks. Given the circumstances at the time, OFCOM deemed this action necessary.

Similarly, a revelation has emerged that Governor Yahaya Bello of Kogi State, in March 2020, openly remarked something to the effect that the commotion over COVID-19 was all hype since the virus was nothing more than the ordinary cold! According to *The Thisday Newspaper* as cited by Kente (2020), around 5000 Nigerians had already been exposed to the virus at the time Governor Bello made his assertions. On the contrary, a report has shown that Governor Sanwo-Olu of Lagos State is doing his best to curb the spread of COVID-19 in Lagos and is possibly one of the most proactive governors in the country with regard to establishing an

effective treatment regime for COVID-19 in his state (Ibrahim, 2020).

Prior studies (e.g., Shadrach, 2019; Kolowale, 2016; Echetama, 2017; Ekoh, 2021) demonstrated that opinion leaders are important in shaping the views and behaviours of their followers, especially as it relates to the adoption or rejection of ideas, including health issues. However, as COVID-19 is a novel condition, research has yet to thoroughly establish the extent to which opinion leaders influence their followers over information pertaining to the disease. It is against this backdrop that this study is intended to evaluate the role of opinion leaders in the management of COVID-19 information in Taraba State.

Statement of the problem

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a historic global disruption, with devastating consequences that have resulted in the loss of over 60 million lives worldwide (WHO 2023). In addition to the tragic loss of life, the pandemic has had a significant negative impact on the global economy, with a collective drop in gross domestic product (GDP) of 3.4% in 2020. To put it into perspective, the world's GDP reached a staggering \$84.9 trillion USD in 2020, resulting in a loss of approximately \$2.9 trillion USD due to the pandemic (Statista.com, 2023). Moreover, the pandemic has also led to psychological and mental health challenges for individuals due to the lockdowns, which forced the closure of various recreational facilities and places of worship, among others.

During the peak of the pandemic, many stakeholders worked tirelessly to manage the crisis, particularly the opinion leaders in information management, amid the multitude of conspiracy theories, misinformation, and disinformation that

surrounded the crisis. As such, it is essential to examine how influential these stakeholders were in managing information during the crisis. Numerous studies (e.g Shadrach, 2019, Myer, 2020, Kolawole 2019 e.t.c) worldwide have demonstrated that opinion leaders can significantly influence the opinions and attitudes of their followers towards the acceptance or rejection of information. However, despite the involvement of opinion leaders in disseminating information about the virus, there is still insufficient understanding of their influence in the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria. This study aims to fill this crucial gap.

Research questions

- i. What is the extent of opinion leaders' participation in the management of Covid 19 information in Taraba state?
- ii. What are the roles of opinion leaders in the management of Covid 19 information in Taraba state?
- iii. What is the effectiveness of the opinion leaders in the management of Covid 19 information in Taraba state?
- iv. What are the challenges encountered by the opinion leaders in the management of Covid19 information in Taraba state

Literature Review

Opinion leaders and the management of Covid-19 information, According to (Yahaya, 2019) revealed that opinion leaders are individuals who wield more influence within their social circles and are sought out for advice and information in their respective areas of expertise. Opinion leaders and the management of Covid-19 information is a concept that shows how opinion leaders analyse and evaluate Covid-19 information in order to disseminate accurate information to the opinion followers. Basically, Management of covid-19 information is an approach that entails how Covid-19 information is harness and disseminated accurately without the bias of an opinion

leaders. According to Zakaria and Nagata (2008) posit that information management involves the study of the flow of information from the sources down to the final consumer of media material. In the light of the above, opinion leaders manage the flow of covid-19 information as it flows from various sources to opinion leaders who analyse and disseminate the information to their respective opinion followers.

Review of Concepts

Covid-19

Corona virus commonly refers to COVID-19, is an extremely transmissible disease that can result in respiratory infections ranging from mild colds to severe respiratory problems. Its origins can be traced back to China, in Wuhan town at the end of 2019 and since then, it has spread to almost every corner of the globe. Regrettably, this virus has resulted in a significant number of fatalities worldwide, with approximately 5,705,320 deaths reported (according to WHO 2022). On March 11th, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic due to its far-reaching impact across the planet. Despite efforts to contain it, the virus continues to wreak havoc globally and remains a serious threat to public health.

Opinion Leaders

The idea of opinion leaders was first introduced in 1944 by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet through their "The People's Choice" research (Yahaya, 2019). Opinion leaders are individuals who wield more influence within their social circles and are sought out for advice and information in their respective areas of expertise (Ekoh, 2019). These people are considered leaders because they shape others' perspectives on new ideas. According to Summers (as cited in Yan,

2013), opinion leadership is a process in which certain individuals hold substantial sway over others' behavior regarding a particular topic. Asiamah (2020) defines opinion leaders as persons who have a greater degree of influence because they take the lead in shaping others' ideas.

Information Management

Information management, according to Zakaria and Nagata (2008), involves the study of the flow of information from the sources down to the final consumer of the media material. It is an established strategy for assuring a structured and successful information management life cycle in media-related operations. The principle of information management is to make sure to ask the correct questions at the right time regarding the essentials of managing information created internally. To do this, it breaks down the "life cycle" of information flow into phases and highlights the most critical challenges that determine how information must be managed during each step. The information management life cycle typically involves information generation or creation, processing and organisation, storage and retrieval, and use.

Generating information is often the initial stage in information management, which takes thinking and planning so that the manager can create and modify information as quickly and easily as feasible. The information generated should meet the goal of the organisation, capture current, accurate, and reliable information, and be in the most appropriate format. To ensure an effective management of information in the media, various aspects must be taken into account because these elements will influence the sort of information created, its purpose, substance, and use.

Review of Empirical Studies

Multiple studies have been conducted to examine the influence of opinion leaders on society. Ekoh, Ejimkarao George, and Eugene Agbawodikeizueizu (2021) in their work: 'Better to die of sickness than die of hunger': the experience of Igwes (traditional rulers) in the fight against the COVID-19 outbreak in south-east Nigeria. The study found that the traditional rulers employed strategies, including the utilization of town criers, to raise awareness among rural populations about the COVID-19 virus in Enugu. The study additionally uncovered that traditional leaders used significant power over their constituents, particularly within the pandemic, to enforce community-wide lockdown measures.

Echetama, Ani, and Onoh (2017) conducted a study titled "Assessing the Roles of Local Leaders in Agricultural Information Dissemination in the Owerri Agricultural Zone of Imo State, Nigeria," which showed that local leaders had a role in endorsing extension development projects. These findings indicate that local community leaders play a crucial role as influential figures, particularly in disseminating information about agriculture. In his 2018 study titled "Diffusion network, opinion leaders, and flow of ideas," Udemezue examined the spread of an innovation inside a social system using information from secondary sources. The study demonstrated that opinion leaders play a crucial role in transmitting mass media content to their followers. Additionally, the study indicated that opinion leaders wield significant power and are more likely to be trusted by individuals within a social system.

Kolawole (2016), examined the "Analysis of the Influence of Opinion Leaders on Voting Decisions of Rural Voters: Evidence from Ayetoro, Ogun State,

Nigeria," findings found out that a lot of the opinion leaders had particularly negative roles during the prior election, thereby reducing the legitimacy of the elections in the community that was investigated. Similarly, Ojomo, Olusegun, Amos (2019) assessed the Influence of opinion leaders on voting decision of Urban and rural electorates in south west, Nigeria gubernatorial election. Findings indicates that the extent of opinion leadership influenced voting decision in both rural and urban was low though the findings further reveals that appeal to ethnic and religious sentiments was a strategy opinion leaders used in the areas. Their findings were relatively inconsistent with the current study.

Akpor and Uyeri (2019) conducted a study on the "Influence of Opinion Leaders in the Spread of Information for Rural Development: A Case Study of Okada Town in Edo State, Nigeria." The study reiterated the concept that an opinion leader is crucial in any given institution or community. It determines the magnitude of a concepts, event, enterprise, or invention. It is a critical part of the process of policy building or strategy creation.

Odoemelam (2016) studied rural women's access to information and knowledge resources in Abia State. Results indicated that rural women obtain knowledge through several sources; one significant source is opinion leaders, who predominantly give information about intercropping and mixed-cropping practices.

Furthermore, Mustapha, Umar, Makinta (2022) investigated the role of opinion leaders in the diffusion of agricultural innovation among arable crop farmers in Donga LGA of Taraba of Taraba state. Their study reveals that opinion leaders are moderately used in the diffusion of innovation and also not effective in diffusion of innovation. However, their findings contradict the findings of previous studies.

Study by Talal and Barbara. (2017) examined the importance of opinion leaders in Agricultural extension their findings shows that opinion leaders are considered early adopters of agricultural innovation and they play an active role in influencing others to accept an innovation or a change. Their findings are consistent with the outcome of the current study.

Cowen Dziva (2020) examined the Potential and Challenges for Traditional Leadership in Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic in Rural Communities of Zimbabwe. Their findings indicate that traditional leaders are bedeviled with so many challenges, some of which include poor understanding of the COVID-19 epidemic. The study further states that another important setback or challenge hurting traditional leaders in combatting COVID-19 in Zinbabwe is a strong religious and cultural belief system among the people; as such, the traditional leaders are constraint in fulfilling their tasks. Similarly, Ibrahim, (2020). Investigates the Challenges of fighting COVID-19 pandemic the Nigerian case. Findings shows that religious belief and the intricate nature of the virus are among several additional setbacks impacting religious leaders in the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria.

Theoretical framework

The two-step flow theory was devised by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet in 1944 (Shadrach, 2020). The theory is one of the first ideas of mass communication, which acknowledged that various components interfere to affect the influence of messages on audience responses. Lazarsfeld et al. remark, "Ideas typically flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from these to the less active parts of the people." Gutlin (1995) adds that the heart of this theory is that media messages reach

individuals not so much directly as through the selective, political, and complicating interpolation of opinion leaders. Similarly, Baran and Davis (2003), as cited by Shadrach (2020), suggest that media messages first reach opinion leaders, who in turn transmit the message to their companions, who look up to them for expertise.

Based on the foregoing, in the two-step flow of communication, opinion leaders have more influence on people’s opinions, actions, and behaviors than the media. Opinion leaders are seen as having more impact than the media for a number of reasons. Opinion leaders are considered trustworthy and non-purposeful. People do not believe they are being deceived into believing a specific way about something by someone they know.

Despite inherent weaknesses in the theory as observed by scholars (Christiwelter 2017, Shadrach 2019) the two-step flow of communication theory has been able to remain relevant throughout the years. The theory has provided some understanding of how information and ideas are distributed through both mass media and networks of

Presentation of Data

interpersonal communication. Therefore, the theory serves as a suitable basis for understanding the influence of opinion leaders in the management of Covid-19 information in Taraba state

Research Methodology

The survey design was employed as the research methodology in this study. The study encompasses the entire population of Taraba State. The data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2022) revealed that the estimated population of residents in Taraba State is 3,609,800. Subsequently, a sample size of 400 respondents was estimated using the Taro Yamene formula for calculating sample size. Systematic random sampling was adopted; the essence is to give all members of the population frame equal opportunity to participate in the study. Out of the 400 copies of questionnaires that were administered, all were retrieved with the help of a research assistant and found useable for this study. The data were analyse using descriptive statistical methods, primarily frequency counts and simple percentages.

Table 1. Demographic respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	215	53.75%
Female	185	46.25%
Total:	400	100%
Age distribution of respondents		
20-30	89	22.25%
31-40	161	40.25%
41-50	130	32.5%
51 -70	20	5%
Total:	400	100%
Marital Distribution of respondents		
Single	140	35%
Married	204	51%
Widow/er	40	10%

Divorced	16	4%
Total:	400	100%
Religious distribution of respondent		
Christianity	201	50.25%
Muslim	182	45.5%
Others	17	4.25%
Total	400	100%

Source: Survey 2023

Based on the data presented in Table 1, the study consisted of 400 participants. Of these, 215 were male, accounting for 53.75% of the total, while 185 were female, accounting for 46.25% of the total. This suggests that there were more male participants than females. In terms of age distribution, the participants were categorised as follows: 89 respondents, or 22.25% of the total, were aged between 20 and 30 years; 161 respondents, or 40.25% of the total, were aged between 31 and 40 years; 130 respondents, or 32.5% of the total, were aged between 41 and 50 years; and 20 respondents, or 5% of the total, were aged 51 to 70. Therefore, the majority of the

participants fell within the age range of 31 to 40 years.

According to the survey, over half of the respondents were married, comprising 51% of the total number. This suggests that any impact on them would have an impact on their family members as well. In terms of religious affiliation, nearly half of the respondents identified as Christians, while Muslims accounted for 45.5%. The remaining 4.25% of respondents belonged to other religions.

Table 2: Extent of opinion leaders’ participation in the management of Covid-19 information in Taraba state

Opinion leaders	Very High Extent	High Extent	Moderate Extent	Low extent
Religious leaders	51.75%	27.5%	15.75%	5%
Traditional leaders	42%	28%	21.25%	8.75%
Political leaders	10%	22%	28%	40%

Source: Survey, 2023.

The question in Table 2 was designed to determine the extent of opinion leader’s participation in the management of Covid-19 information. Out of the 400 respondents,

51.75% and 42% are of the opinion that both religious and traditional leaders participated in COVID-19 information management in Taraba state.

Table 3: Which of the following opinion leaders plays a vital role in the management of Covid-19 information in Taraba state

Item	Frequency	percentage (%)
Religious leaders	205	51.25%
Traditional leaders	157	39.25%
Political leaders	38	9.5%
Total:	400	100%

Perceived roles of opinion leaders in the management of Covid-19 information in Taraba state

Covid-19 sensitisation and mobilisation	99	24.75%
Serves as sources of information	138	34.5%
Provision of Covid-19 protective equipment	46	11.5%
Persuade people to adhere to Covid-19 protocols	41	10.25%
Use of local language to educate people about covid-19	76	19%
Total:	400	100%

Source: Survey, 2023.

The question in table 3 indicated that out of 400 respondents, 51.25% were of the opinion that religious leaders play a vital role in the management of Covid-19 information in Taraba state.

Furthermore, the question in table 3 also indicated that out of 400 respondents, 34.5% which represents 138 respondents were of the opinion that Opinion leaders serve as sources of information in the management of Covid-19 information in Taraba state.

Table 4: How effective are the following Opinion leaders in the management of Covid-19 information in Taraba state?

Item	Highly effective	Effective	Not effective
Traditional leaders	84%	6%	10%
Religious leaders	87%	5%	8%
Political Leaders	20%	18%	62%

Source: Survey 2023.

The question in table 4 indicated that out of 400 respondents, 87% and 84% of the total respondents are of the opinion that both

Religious and Traditional leaders were very effective in the management of Covid-19 information Taraba state.

Table 5: Perceived Challenges Opinion leaders faced in the management of Covid-19 information in Taraba state

Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Technical nature of Covid-19 information	260	65%
Low level of education among the leaders	85	21.25%
Lack of access to Covid-19 information from Authorities	39	9.75%
Traditional beliefs system & conspiracy theories	228	57%
Misinformation and Propaganda	60	15%
Language Barrier	25	6.25%
Lack of effective partnership with Covid-19 officials	25	6.25%

Source: Survey, 2023.

The question in table 5 revealed that out of 400 respondents, 260 which represent 65% of the total respondents were of the opinion that technical nature of covid-19 information are among the challenges opinion leaders faced in the management of Covid-19 information in Taraba state.

Discussion of Findings

The findings indicated that opinion leaders in Taraba State were actively participated in the management of COVID-19 information. This supports the results of previous studies (e.g Ekoh et al 2021), which showed that Opinion leaders participated and influenced people to act as stipulated by Covid-19 guidelines in order to curb the spread of the virus. Similarly, (Talal et al 2017), showed that opinion leaders are key players in shaping thought, influencing a cause of an action in any given society and their roles cannot be overemphasised.

Secondly, the study further revealed that Opinion leaders play an important role in the management of Covid-19 information in Taraba state. This findings is consistent with the previous studies (Echetame et al 2017, Odoemelum 2016, Talal et al 2017, and Akpor et al 2019) which showed that opinion leaders plays an important role in shaping people thought and influencing them to accept an innovation or a change. This is because they are considered to be genuine and reliable sources of information, given their proximity to the people and the respect they command. Thirdly, the study found that opinion leaders in Taraba state are effective in the management of Covid-19 information. This study is consistent with the previous studies (Ekoh 2021) which showed that opinion leaders are effective in shaping people thought thereby influenced them to act according to the laid down procedures. On the contrary, another study by (Mustapha et al 2022) which negate the findings of previous studies they revealed that opinion

leaders are not effective in the diffusion of innovation.

Lastly, the study found that opinion leaders were faced with challenges such as technical nature of Covid-19 among several other challenges. This study is consistent with the previous studies (Cowen Dzina 2020) which showed that traditional leaders are bedeviled with so many challenges, some of which include poor understanding of the COVID-19 epidemic. Similarly, (Ibrahim, 2020). Further revealed that religious belief and the intricate nature of the virus are among several additional setbacks opinion leaders faced in the management of COVID-19 information in Nigeria.

This finding is consistent with the tent of two step flow theory, which is the framework for the current study. The theory argues that media messages first reach opinion leaders, who in turn transmit the message to their opinion followers, who look up to them for expertise. Therefore, the outcome of this study corroborates the two step flow theory.

Conclusion

To effectively reach the people with COVID-19 information in Nigeria, the government should prioritise partnership with opinion leaders, including traditional and religious leaders, because the study established that they hold enormous control over the communities they serve. These leaders are frequently considered as trusted individuals and have the power to influence behaviour and views, making them essential allies in the government's efforts to adopt policies and projects that benefit rural communities. By using their existing relationships and reputation, traditional and religious leaders can assist bridge the gap between the government and public, ultimately leading to more successful and meaningful programmes.

Recommendations

The study recommends:

1. It is essential for health workers, traditional and religious leaders, government officials, and other stakeholders to collaborate.
2. The government should employ traditional and religious leaders to reach their followers. Such leaders can effectively break through belief systems and overcome illiteracy barriers, making the information more appealing.
3. Government agencies and health workers involved in COVID-19 management should simplify the content of their campaign messages as well as use local languages, pictures, and illustrations for easy understanding.

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