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Media Role and Perception of the Rural Dwellers on COVID-19: A case study of Selected communities in Edo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates how 857 rural dwellers in nine selected communities in Edo State, Nigeria received information on COVID-19 and how this affected their economic situation. The study employs the descriptive research design and was based on the Framing Theory. The study found out that rural dwellers got their COVID-19 information mainly from Social Media Radio and friends. The study also found out that COVID-19 affected the rural dwellers economically and as a consequence, they had to cut down on their expenses. The study recommends that the Government should support its citizens during a health pandemic such as COVID-19.

Keywords: 1 media, 2rural dwellers, 3 economic situation, 4 covid 19, 5 information.

Introduction

The emergence of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in November 2019 has continued to be an issue among scholars all over the world. According to the WHO (2020) and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020), COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus. 'CO' stands for corona, 'VI' for virus, and 'D' for disease. Formerly, this disease was referred to as '2019 novel coronavirus' or '2019-nCoV'. COVID-19 is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. The virus was first identified during an investigation into an outbreak in Wuhan metropolis in China. First reports from initial investigations of this outbreak in Wuhan, China indicated that most cases are associated with wildlife animals and a seafood market where the first patients had worked or visited, and the non-existence of COVID-19 transmission between humans (Wu, Hao & Lau, 2020).

However, the spread of the coronavirus occurs and many confirmed cases were identified among contacts with patients with COVID-19 and healthcare professionals and most of these cases lack direct contact with the Wuhan's animal market. Thus, transmission between human populations has been confirmed in China

and many other countries (Phan, Nguyen and Luong, 2020; Li, Guan and Wu, 2020) and has rapidly evolved into a global health pandemic as declared by World Health Organization (WHO, 2020). The number of infections has continued to increase around the world, with the USA emerging as the new COVID-19 hotspot and epic centre. As of December 2020, COVID-19 is virtually present in all countries of the world including Nigeria. Despite global efforts to develop a drug to treat COVID-19, there is still no specific antiviral treatment for COVID-19.

Both urban and rural dwellers perceive the effects of coronavirus differently (Aondover & Phillips, 2020). To some rural dwellers in Nigeria, it is not real while to a limited few it is real. Several efforts have been put in place by several agencies both government and non-governmental organisations to create awareness particularly on the spread and prevention of contracting the various. These sensitization and awareness campaigns were to sensitize the populace on the cause of COVID-19, its symptoms, consequences and prevention methods. As observed in most communities, the awareness has led to persons deciding to wear face shields/masks, maintain social distancing, hand washing and to observe other health protocols as approved by the National Council for Disease Control (NCDC) in Nigeria and the WHO.

The first confirmed case of COVID 19 in Nigeria was detected in the South Western state of Ogun on February 27th, 2020. This has spread to all the 36 states of the federation including Abuja with Lagos State serving as the epic centre of the pandemic. As of January 10th 2021, statistics from Nigeria COVID-19 Dashboard, a total of 100, 087 cases were reported with Active Cases of 20, 057 accounting for 20% while the Deaths (1, 358) and Recovery (80, 030) rates accounted for 1.4% and 80% respectively. Seven months after an early outbreak in Edo state, COVID-19 has swept across the state infecting a total of 2,690 people. Of these figures, 2,559 have been discharged while a total of 112 deaths recorded as of January 10, 2021. Several explanations have continued to emerge on the reasons for the upsurge in figures in Nigeria. In all this, the media particularly social media, radio and television are used as veritable instruments for creating the needed awareness and COVID-19 health education. Although some scholars (McQuail, 2015; Jubrin, 2019; Obasanmi, 2020) have argued that the use of social media is exclusively reserved for the educated. The Government of Nigeria adopted media institutions with other traditional means of mass mobilization to create proper awareness of COVID-19 among rural communities. These institutions particularly the television and radio stations adopted native vernacular or language as their means of communication. Like Obasanmi (2020) opined, since the Nigerian government announced the first confirmed novel coronavirus pandemic in the country on February 27th 2020, the media in Nigeria have been giving coverage on the issues using different frames to inform the people about the pandemic and influence behaviour positively.

However, most of them have not focused adequately on sensitizations, proper framing and media effect. It is against this background that this study seeks to look at Media Role and Perception of the Rural Dwellers on COVID-19 with a focus on nine randomly selected communities, three in each of the three senatorial districts in Edo State. These are Illelah, Ekpoma, Ekpon (Edo Central Senatorial District), Imoga, Iyamho and Afuze (Edo North Senatorial District) and Urhonigbe, Egor and Usen (Edo South Senatorial District). Their socio-economic demographics in line with the World Bank was used in selecting and classifying them as rural communities for this study in the light of media sensitization campaign and the impact of the campaign on their precautionary health behaviour. The broad objectives of this study include to find out:

- 1 The extent to which rural dwellers in selected communities are aware of COVID-19.
- 2 The source of rural dwellers' information on COVID-19.
- 3 The degree to which rural dwellers in selected communities believed the information on COVID-19 got from the media.
- 4 How the mass media have influenced rural dwellers' perception of COVID-19.

- 5 How rural dwellers' perception of COVID-19 has affected their economic situation.
- 6 The extent to which rural dwellers in selected communities managed their economic situation during COVID-19.

Literature Review

The concept of coronavirus is no doubt very novel, however, there have been some attempts by some scholars to create an understanding of it on the world. Some have looked at its effects on rural people and food systems, media roles in framing the COVID-19 message, effects on Professionals particularly those in the medical and allied fields, constraints in the management of COVID 19, adherence to COVID-19 Health Protocol amongst others.

In the working document on responding to the impact of COVID-19 on rural people and food systems, the CDC (2020), opined that the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on poor and vulnerable groups, and by implication on rural people and small-scale farmers, has been widely acknowledged and has created the critical need to keep food supply chains functioning. The full scale of the impact of COVID-19 on Low and Medium Income Countries (LMICs) is yet to become clear. However, given the scale of COVID-19, there exists a gap between the capacity and resources needed to protect poor rural people both in the short and long run. National governments and development agencies need to urgently consider this eventuality and how to respond. These can be effectively coordinated with careful targeting and efficient use of limited financial and human resources as well as coordinated support from high-income countries. Mobilizing non-state actors including local community groups, the private sector, national and international NGOs and faith-based groups is crucial in this endeavour.

The Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations (2020) recommends the urgent need to support and protect the rural poor affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation has become very imperative as the rural poor are unable to have adequate information on COVID-19 and to get relevant information that helps them navigate the effects of the pandemic. Also, if people are not well guided with the relevant information and enlightenment, the post-COVID-19 era would have devastating effects on food supplies, employment and a general fall in the living conditions of the people particularly the rural dwellers.

The increase in coronavirus infections in Nigeria in the last few months has attracted media attention and generated reports. Several types of frames, the tones of the frames, the dominant frames have been used in sending the message. Using two newspapers, Aondover and Phillips (2020) examined the Media Framing of Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria's Daily Trust and Vanguard Newspapers, found out media narratives tilted more on economic and political frames. The tones of the frames of both newspapers are more negative frames than positive and neutral on the Covid-19 pandemic. They concluded that these newspapers framed the Covid-19 pandemic more of economic, political and downplaying important frames such as health, safety and quality of life frames.

Interestingly, people rely heavily on media for information during the period of social isolation. Investigating the relationship between media exposure and anxiety and the underlying mechanisms mediated by the media vicarious traumatization effect on 1118 Chinese citizens, Cong and Yi Liu (2020) study showed that all four types of media (official media, commercial media, social media and overseas media) cause vicarious traumatization to their audience to different degrees. It was also found that the impact of media exposure on anxiety was mediated by media vicarious traumatization, there were full mediation effects for commercial media exposure and overseas media exposure, while there were indirect-

only mediation effects for official media exposure and social media exposure. Audiences staying in cities with relatively severe pandemic were more susceptible to the vicarious traumatization caused by commercial media compared to those staying in Hubei.

Furthermore, a pressing problem with modern-day online media is the spread of misinformation – this has been much talked about in political spheres but has also been a prevalent issue in healthcare regarding sentiments towards COVID-19. The spread of misinformation on COVID-19 has been no different – namely, that the virus was engineered in a laboratory as a bioterrorism agent, or that the symptoms are caused by the 5G mobile network and that it was designed to eliminate the black race (Ogbona, 2020). Also, thousands of listings on Amazon promoting fake COVID-19 cures have been reported, and the prices of some sanitisers and facemasks have increased by over 2000%, despite in many cases not being fit for purpose.

Previous studies on media coverage of health issues hardly recognize the role of time in moderating media contents. Instead, scholars most often examine how news media report health issues. In his study, Omohan (2020) recognizes the role of time by taking into account how media report differs based on when a global outbreak is confirmed in a country and when it is not. Omohan (2020) focuses on coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and examined six media (two TV stations, two newspapers and two radio stations). He did a content-analysis of 537 stories and found that there were few stories about the virus before it was confirmed in Nigeria. But as soon as Nigeria recorded a confirmed case, the number of stories tripled. He also noticed that story format and recommendation on health behaviours were also closely linked to the COVID-19 status of Nigeria. However, he did not find an association between Nigeria's COVID-19 status and policy recommendations among the media studied. Therefore, this study concludes that Nigerian media did not provide sufficient health warning messages on COVID-19 before it spreads to the country.

Theoretical Issues

There are a few theories that support this current study. The Mass Media theory focus was based on the idea that mass media are corrupting influences that undermine the social order and that 'average' people are defenceless against influence by the media. A good example of Mass Society theory is the Hypodermic Needle Theory or Magic Bullet Theory. Before World War I, there was no separate field of study on Communication, but knowledge about mass communication was accumulating. An outcome of World War I propaganda efforts, the Magic Bullet or Hypodermic Needle Theory, came into existence. It propounded the view that the mass media had a powerful influence on the mass audience and could deliberately alter or control peoples' behaviour (Lazarsfeld, 1941).

The Era of Scientific Perspective Lazarsfeld (1941) explains that the Era of the Scientific Perspective to mass communication was promoted by Halloween Eve. The focus of this era was on limited effect on the audience. The Limited Effects Theory Media influence is affected by individual differences that include educational levels, religious affiliations, political affiliations, personal relationships. For example, the Two-step Slow Theory–Opinion leaders get media and translate for followers Timeframe–during and after World War II or 1945 to 1968. Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Goudet (1914) as reported in Greenslade (2015) conducted an American survey on mass campaigns. The study revealed that informal social relationships had played a part in modifying how individuals selected content from the media campaign.

The Dissonance Theory argues that when confronted by new or conflicting information, people experience a kind of mental discomfort, a dissonance. As a result, this dissonance can be reduced through selective processes. The Attitude Change Theory (Selective Processes) posits that the process by which people

expose themselves to messages that are only consistent with their existing attitudes and beliefs. It further assumes that people remember best and longest those messages that are consistent with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs.

Another theory is the Framing Theory. According to McQuail (2005), this is a philosophical postulation that provides an explanation on which news content is typically shaped and contextualized by a media outlet. The frames are cognitive structures that guide the representation of events. In framing, the media devote volume of coverage to a particular issue. The media through framing make an issue salient and direct audience attention to specific issues, ideas and individuals while downplaying what lies outside the frame (Boykoff and Laschever, 2011). In terms of frame tone, Greenslade (2015) noted that much of media coverage tilt towards the negative than the positive.

It is noticeable that media in respect of the COVID-19 hyped the consequences focusing more on the danger of the spread of the virus across countries and continents. In this context, there is a nexus between the study and the theory because the media frame stories and such stories or words depending on the content producers which portend to issues like COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study is anchored on the Framing Theory.

Methodology

This study is a descriptive survey. The population was drawn from the three senatorial districts of Edo State in Nigeria, namely: Edo Central Senatorial District (Illehi, Ekpoma, Ekpon), Edo North Senatorial District (Imoga, Iyamho and Afuze) and Edo South Senatorial District (Urhonigbe, Egor and Usen). A total of 900 of the questionnaire was given out to be filled by respondents out of which 857 respondents completed their questionnaires and the information are used in the analysis. The questionnaire contained a set of questions divided into two parts was used to extract information. Part 1 was the demographic survey while Part Two focused on the five research questions established for this study. The results from the survey instruments were analysed using the SPSS statistical tool to compute the various responses which are presented in tables, charts and frequencies.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussions

This section presents the data generated and an analysis. Results are presented in tables, charts and frequencies depending on the nature of the question being investigated.

From Table 1, 345 respondents are males while 512 are females. This implies that most of the respondents are females

Tables 1: Gender Status of Respondents

	Frequency	%
Female	345	40.26
Male	512	59.74
Total	857	100

Source: Researcher fieldwork 2021

Tables 2: Occupational Status of Respondents

Status	Frequency	%
Farmer	267	31.16
Petty Trader	378	44.11
Artisan	110	12.84
Self-employed	65	7.58
Civil Servant	37	4.32
Total	857	100

Source: Researcher fieldwork 2021

44.11% of total respondents are petty traders, 31.16% are farmers, while 12.84%, 7.58% and 4.32% representing 110, 65 and 37 respondents were Artisans, self-employed and civil servants respectively. With this, the catchment area is adequately reflected in the demographics.

Analysis of Research Questions

Research Question 1: The extent to which rural dwellers in selected communities are aware of COVID-19.

In this question, the research tried to investigate the extent to which rural dwellers in identified communities are aware of COVID-19. As shown in Table 3 below, two questions were asked.

Table 3: Are you aware of COVID-19?

Option	Frequency	%
Yes	781	91.13
No	76	8.87
Total	857	100

Source: Researcher fieldwork 2021

Respondents representing 91.13% said they are aware of COVID-19 while 76 respondents representing 8.87% said No. This infers that most of the respondents are aware of the COVID-19 Pandemic. In terms of the extent of awareness for the 781 who claim to be aware of COVID-19, Table 4 reveals that 62.61% of respondents who claim to be aware of it only have very little knowledge whereas, 6 respondents representing 0.77% have a very large knowledge of COVID-19. The implication of this is that although some persons may have heard of the pandemic the level of knowledge was very low and this might also affect their level of compliance to the NCDC regulations.

Table 4: Extent of awareness of COVID-19

Options	Frequency	%
Very Large Extent	6	0.77
Large Extent	31	3.97
I do not know	92	11.78
Little Extent	163	20.87
Very Little Extent	489	62.61
Total	781	100

Source: Researcher fieldwork 2021

Research Question 2: The source of rural dwellers' information on COVID-19.

As shown in Table 5, 100% said they had the information through one media or the other. A further probe into the type of media source as shown in Table 6 revealed that rural dwellers got most of their COVID-19 information from Online/Social Media (23.68%), Radio (21.79%) and friends (17.09%). The least sources were Newspapers (7.03%) and Television (7.73%). The implication of this is that most rural dwellers have access to social media and Radio from which they can gather information.

Table 5: COVID-19 information gotten through the media

Options	Frequency	%
Yes	729	96.3
No	28	3.7
Total	757	100

Source: Researcher fieldwork 2021

Table 6: Sources of COViD 19 Information

Options	Frequency	%
Newspaper	211	7.03
Radio	654	21.79
Television	232	7.73
Online / Social Media	711	23.68
Billboards / Flyers	180	6.00
Friends	513	17.09
Association Meetings	359	11.96
Others	42	1.40
Total	3002	100

Source: Researcher fieldwork 2021

Research Question 3: The degree to which rural dwellers in selected communities believed the information on COVID-19 got from the media.

43.33% of the respondents believed the information on COVID-19 to a large extent while 21.80% said to a little extent. Also, 14.53% of the respondents were indifferent. The import of this is that despite the awareness of COVID-19, some persons still have some reservations about the reality and existence of the disease.

Table 7: Extent respondents believed the information on COVID-19

Options	Frequency	%
Very Large Extent	117	15.46
Large Extent	328	43.33
I do not know	110	14.53
Little Extent	165	21.80
Very Little Extent	37	4.89
Total	757	100

Source: Researcher fieldwork 2021

Research Question 4: How the mass media have influenced rural dwellers' perception of COVID-19.

In response to this, the respondents opined that the Mass media have helped them to broaden their knowledge about happenings in the world. When provided further information about how best to live healthy lives, mass media helped respondents in planning their lives economically and socially in the wake of the pandemic. Interestingly, some respondents said the conflicting information about the trueness of the information got them confused as some media sources claimed that the disease was just the normal flu and that it was not real.

Table 8: How has the mass media sharpened their perception of COVID-19

Status	Frequency	%
Broaden their knowledge about happenings in the world	231	24.68
Provided further information about how best to live healthy lives	361	38.57
Helped in planning their lives economically and socially in the wake of the Pandemic.	125	13.35
Conflicting information about the trueness of the information got them confused as some media sources claimed that the illness was just the normal flu and that it was not real	219	23.40
Total	936	100

Source: Researcher fieldwork 2021

Research Question 5: How rural dwellers' perception of COVID-19 has affected their economic situation.

All the respondents said that COVID-19 has affected their economic situation. Also, all the respondents said that COVID-19 affected them negatively. This response can be likened to the views expressed by Olaniyi (2019) that when there is a drop in economic activities arising from pandemics, draughts or other natural disasters, those that are negatively affected are daily income earners and petty businesses. The respondents for this survey fall within this category. Also, all the respondents said that to a very large extent that was affected negatively by COVID-19 economically.

Research Question 6: The extent to which rural dwellers in selected communities managed their economic situation during COVID-19.

Based on the views expressed in response to research question 5, two questions were asked. Firstly, the researchers tried to establish how the rural dwellers in selected communities managed their economic situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the respondents said they resorted to buying goods (particularly food items) on credit, others said they had to borrow funds for their upkeep, others said they had to cut down on their feeding expenses particularly while others simply said they struggled to get other means of earning income which according to them was not sustainable. Table 9 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of their responses. This is in line with Obasanmi and Nedozie (2020) study where they concluded that when the economy is biting hard on people particularly low-income earners, they are left with the options of either borrowing or to cutting down on their daily consumption patterns.

Table 9: Ways rural dwellers in selected communities managed their economic situation during COVID-19.

Management strategy	Frequency	%
Buying goods on credit	431	21.63
Borrow funds for their upkeep	239	11.99
Cut down on their expenses particularly feeding	564	28.30
Struggle to get other means of earning income which is sustainable	443	22.23
Appeal to friends and relatives	218	10.94
Wait for government, NGOs and other philanthropies for assistance	98	4.92
Total	1993	100

Source: Researcher fieldwork 2021

Secondly, the researchers investigated the extent to which respondents were able to cope with their economic situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 10 shows that 33.16% said they could not cope while 18.63% said they could not cope at all. 27.87% said they did not know how they coped implying that they relied on their faith for survival. In all, 20.34% said they were able to cope. Most probably they deplored other means of survival as highlighted in Table 9. The results show that even though they deplored several ways to survive, it was not still easy for most of them.

Table 10: Extent in which they were able to cope with your economic situation during the COVID-19?

Options	Frequency	%
I coped very well	0	0.00
I was able to cope	154	20.34
I do not know	211	27.87
I could not cope	251	33.16
I could not cope at all	141	18.63
Total	757	100

Source: Researcher fieldwork 2021

Conclusion

From this study, the media to a very large extent have a major role in shaping the perception of people on issues most of the respondents claimed that they got the awareness of COVID-19 through different media platforms, particularly social media, radio and friends and that their perception was based on the information gathered. Some of them revealed that the information was quite educating while others said they got more confused which made them doubt the existence of the pandemic. What this implies is that the content of information delivered to people should be such that it does not in any way dilute the quality of the message being conveyed. Also, COVID-19 affected the rural dwellers economically and many a large percentage to cut down on their expenses.

Recommendations

This study recommends that:

1. More efforts should be made to create more awareness about the COVID-19 pandemic due to the high level of doubts about its existence.
2. The media should play its role by disseminating quality content during a health pandemic.
3. Managers of information should ensure that information reaching the public are not conflicting.
4. The government should also implement better strategies or ways of addressing the hardships faced by people during health pandemics.

5. The government should be proactive enough in addressing some of the economic challenges faced by citizens during health pandemics.
6. The populace should adhere strictly to the COVID-19 health protocols.

Questionnaire: Media Role and Perception of the Rural Dwellers on COVID-19: A case study of Selected communities in Edo State, Nigeria.

Kindly assist in answering the following questions. This anonymous survey will take less than 10 minutes to complete. Please tick (X) in the spaces provided as it reflects your choice unless otherwise stated.

Thanks

Section A.

1. Your gender: Male [] Female []
2. Your town of residence (Please Write)
3. Your occupation: Farmer [] Trader Artisans [] Self-employed []
Civil Servant [] Others (Please specify)

Research Questions 1: The knowledge of COViD 19 amongst rural dwellers in identified communities.

4. Are you aware of COVID-19? Yes [] No []
5. If yes, to what extent are you aware of COVID-19? Very Large Extent []
Large Extent [] I do not know [] Little Extent [] Very Little Extent []

Research Questions 2: The source of information on COVID-19.

6. Did you hear about COVID-19 through the media? Yes [] No []
7. If yes, which of the media did you get the information on COVID-19?
Newspaper [] Radio [] TV [] Online [] Bill Boards / Flyers []
Friends [] Association meetings [] Others (Please specify)?

Research Questions 3: The degree to which rural dwellers in identified communities believed the information on COVID-19 got from the media.

8. To what extent do you believe the information on COVID-19 got from the media?
Very Large Extent [] Large Extent [] I dont know [] Little Extent []
Very Little Extent []

Research Questions 4: How has the mass media has sharpened their perception of COVID-19

9. Please state how has the mass media has sharpened their perception of COVID-19?
.....

Research Questions 5: The extent to which COVID-19 affected the economic situation of rural dwellers in identified communities.

10. Has COViD 19 affected your economic situation? Yes [] No []
11. If yes, how did it affect you? Positively [] Negatively []
12. To what extent did COVID-19 affect you economically? Very Large Extent []
Large Extent [] I dont know [] Little Extent [] Very Little Extent []

Research Questions 6: The extent to which rural dwellers in identified communities managed their economic situation during COVID-19.

13. To what extent were you able to cope with your economic situation during the COVID-19?

I coped very well []	I was able to cope []	I do not know []
I could not cope []	I could not cope at all []	

14. How did you manage your economic situation during COVID-19.

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