

Influence of Social Media on the Fight Against Covid-19 in Nigeria

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Abstract

Social media has in recent times become part and parcel of human daily living. People easily get addicted to staying glued to their digital devices – mobile phones, laptop computers, tablet computers and many more which are all gateways to the Internet in general and social media in particular. This addiction comes with a price as it puts many users face-to-face with all forms of personalities, information and situations. COVID-19 took the world by surprise when its outbreak was reported in December 2019 following a report of a mysterious illness in Wuhan, China. Infodemiology is not new and scholars have made attempts to understand the pattern of information flow on platforms such as the Internet and social media. However, the word infodemic recently got into the mix. It was used to describe the spread of falsehood on COVID-19 and social media is recognised as the main diffusing point. This study is a discourse on the influence social media conspiracies and fake news has on the fight against Coronavirus. Through existing literature, that is library research, the study sought to identify conspiracy theories that trended during the Covid-19 pandemic whilst also exploring the implications of such conspiracies on the fight against the pandemic vis á vis its impact on Nigeria's public health. It is anchored on Uses and Gratifications and Conspiracy Theories. The paper, among other findings revealed that Coronavirus-related conspiracies trended in the middle of the outbreak and asserted that social media owing to its ubiquitous nature weighs so much power, and therefore had a mix of negative and positive impacts on the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria. It concludes that unverified reports were shared on social media to the detriment of Nigeria's public health.

Keywords: *Social media, Fake news, Infodemiology, Infodemic, Conspiracy, COVID-19*

1.0 Introduction

Coronavirus pandemic took the world by surprise and triggered a launch of different measures or techniques to fight and defeat the disease. Whereas government and members of the public expected and therefore tasked mainstream media to provide information to the public on the best health decisions to take at such critical times, social media platforms had a mix of different types of information – fake, real and bizarre, all to the detriment of public health information. Health information is critical to humans and at every stage in human history proved useful and significant. The world has witnessed an ever-changing landscape of communication, information sharing and seeking scenarios and different eras have presented unique and peculiar technological solution to the challenge. In this age and time, social media has become and is now widely acknowledged and accepted as means of communication as well as medium for seeking information due to the opportunities especially that of “hyper interactivity”. The younger generation armed with the simplest forms of tools have unhindered access to social media platforms and therefore take advantage of their multiplicity of use and ease-of-access to connect, explore and share information in previously unimagined dimensions or levels.

According to Allen [1] there has been increase in the use of platforms by adult and the younger ones alike – though young people are now using social media to communicate and to also seek information. In a research by Twenge as quoted in Allen [1] younger persons spend so much time on social media and therefore tend to seek information across such platforms. A study by Common Sense Media [2] also revealed that more teenagers make use of social media in modern times – amounting to about 81 percent – a third of which access platforms multiple times on an hourly basis. However, the adoption and use of social media by the people for numerous purposes is ever changing and diverse uses and purposes for adoption also come with latest technological innovations. In other words, as technologies emerge, people always have different use for them. In modern times, social media have not only been used as mediums for social and professional communication and connection but as tools for sharing information – including fake news and conspiracies. Therefore, needs for seeking information on platforms often come in conflict with the type of information available – a situation which increasingly makes platforms vulnerable to conspirators and purveyors of fake news who take advantage of the anonymity provided therein.

Numerous scholarships that touch on social media, fake news, conspiracies and their effect on the fight against diseases exist. However, the studies with specific reference to the influence of social media enabled conspiracies on pandemics such as Coronavirus are limited. Social media is one of the powerhouses for information in the 21st century and its use, misuse and convenience-of-use is receiving the desired attention from all corners of the world. In the wake of the outbreak, and in a glaring form, social media platforms saw a spread in misinformation and outright falsehood ranging from preventive to curative measures. Consequently, platforms such as YouTube and Facebook as a result of the direct access users have may have contributed to the propagation of false rumours and inaccurate information [3]. The spread of fake news and conspiracies on social media platforms is becoming a trend and more people have realised the impact it has on the health of people. Social media was said to have aided in the spread of 50.5 percent (which is about half) of Coronavirus-related stories [4]. Stecula and Pickup [5] revealed that evidence also show that misinformation, conspiracy theories and the spread of outright falsehood has become widespread since the introduction of social media. It is so elsewhere and in Nigeria where research has shown that social media aided the spread of conspiracies and fake news on Covid-19 [6]. The spread of such unfounded information comes at great risk to public health – and therefore, it does not amount to great surprise that some countries or governments of the world have taken steps to stop the trend.

In order to quantify the damage social media-enabled conspiracies and fake news may have done to the coordinated fight against Coronavirus in Nigeria; there is a need to undertake a study to identified specifics with respect to the subject matter. Therefore on the basis of the foregoing, and above captured background, this study, through the sifting of previous studies and existing literature on the topic matter, delved into a discourse on influence of social media on the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to find out and pursued two basic objectives which are: 1) to identify various forms of conspiracies that trended during the Covid-19 pandemic, and 2) to ascertain the implication of such trend on public health in Nigeria and its response with respect to the Coronavirus pandemic outbreak in the country.

2.0 Clarification of Concepts/Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Social Media

Social media platforms are products of advancement in technology and may include platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn amongst others that are Internet-based and powered by the much talked about Web 2.0 which enables users to create and exchange user-generated content. Social media presents an opportunity for a group of channels to interact, share content and collaborate, and that either directly or indirectly affects the perception of the society we live in [7]. This is because as people interact across platforms, they tend to not only develop new ways of communication but also build new lines of

relationships as well vistas of establishing more diverse ways of connection regardless of physical barriers. Such connections and relationships traverse professional and personal grounds [8, 9, 10]. Therefore, social media are not just mediums for sharing information about events and happenings around the globe, but are platforms for social cohabitation – persons from diverse backgrounds and geo-political locations converge for the purpose of connecting for varied reasons and purposes.

Social media presents several benefits to our world. It brings awareness to the society in diverse ways and help makes the world smaller thereby helping in the realisation of the much talked about “global village”. Rabin [7] avers that social media is of benefit to our world in the following ways: bridges the gap between people from different parts of the world, creates awareness in society, enables digital marketing of products and services, makes provision for healthcare by offering health tips on the go, establishes useful virtual communities and so much more. Above all, social media platforms provide dynamic mediums for communication and modify the standards for information access in the 21st century world – where people can move about and access information from anywhere in the world with just a click. This possibility was thought of several years ago – on the basis of McLuhan’s global village concept, and then on the anticipation that technology will play a determining role as per how humans live and communicate.

It is significant to note that Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are not the only popular and widely used platforms as per geographical location in the world. In fact, Price [11] revealed that over a thousand of them exist as platforms dedicated to virtually all human communication needs have been created by someone somewhere in the world. Somehow, there is also an alternative to the popular ones we know in this part of the world somewhere else – either as a way of government control or just to fill a void created due to restriction of access. For example, the Russians see VKontakte as the equivalent of Facebook, while Sina Weibo is an alternative to Twitter in China [see 11]. According to a list of top 20 social media applications and sites that are popular in 2021, Price [11] added a bouquet of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Tumblr, Pinterest, Sina Weibo, Reddit, Tiktok, Ask.fm, Vkontakte, Flickr, Meetup, InterNations, XING, Nextdoor, Tinder, Foursquare, and MySpace. These platforms are used by individuals or group of individuals to communicate and share information on diverse topics which ranges from politics to health matters and other areas of importance. Social media as used in this paper typifies all platforms used to share information, conspiracies and fake news during Covid-19 outbreak in Nigeria.

2.2 COVID-19 Pandemic as a Concept

Coronavirus will be explained in components – COVID-19 and then pandemic. Coronavirus disease 2019 otherwise known as COVID-19 is a respiratory disease that is communicable and caused by a new strain that causes illness in human beings [12]. Cennimo [13] sees COVID-19 as illness brought about by a novel corona virus now known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 first identified in the middle of an outbreak in Wuhan, Hubei Province of China when people complained of respiratory illness. Cennimo [5] further identifies the following as symptoms of COVID-19: cough, fever or chills, shortness of breath, fatigue, body aches, headache, loss of taste or smell, runny nose, nausea or vomiting, diarrhea amongst others. Quoting Last, Keely [14] defined pandemic as an “epidemic occurring worldwide, or even a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people”, (para. 1). When it comes to classification, epidemic affects a smaller geographical location – for instance, a country or region while pandemic spreads across international boundaries. The World Health Organisation (WHO) is solely responsible for this classification and on March 11, 2020 declared COVID-19 a pandemic [15, 16, 17].

According to [16], Coronavirus is an infectious disease which is responsible for respiratory infections such as common cold and severe respiratory difficulties. The origin of COVID-19 can be traced to Hunan seafood markets, Wuhan, China where live animals such as racoon, bats, snakes, dogs, marmots

and many more are sold [18]. Shereen et al. [18] further emphasise that information available on the genetic sequence of the virus suggests that individuals who visited the market and those who did not, contracted the infection which validates the possibility of human-to-human transmission of the novel Coronavirus. This is in contrast with the earlier position. People were made to believe that it was only those who visited the seafood market and came in contact with the animals, or consumed the animals sold in the market as food that got sick of the reported infection. In the wake of its outbreak, widespread pneumonia was reported in Wuhan [18].

From the clarifications above, we can see COVID-19 pandemic as respiratory disease reported in 2019 and declared a threat to global health capable of causing severe respiratory problems in humans or even death. It is important to note here that COVID-19 and Coronavirus means the same thing. As used in this study, the two terms refer to the virus caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). Therefore, it is imperative to clarify that the two terms, that is, COVID-19 and Coronavirus are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

2.3 The Concept of Conspiracy Theory

As a concept, conspiracy theory is not so easy to explain or define because the meaning goes beyond just mere contradictions of the original explanations of existing events to include deliberate plan of action purposefully executed to provide a form of meaning to things and often targeted at a group of individuals. A definition that lends credence to the foregoing statement was the one provided by Coady [19] that conspiracies have to do with explanations opposed to the official ones provided for an event within a particular period of time. Certain pieces of information may fall within the bounds of conspiracy theory as provided by the foregoing definition while others may simply not. On this basis, Pauly (20) revealed that Watergate may not be seen as conspiracy if aligned with a particular definition but will, however, align with others. Conspiracy theory has been defined as conspiracy-laden explanations provided for an event or happening [20]. In other words, when conspiracy is featured as the main ingredient (as provided) in any explanation to an event, then such is known as conspiracy theory.

According to Seide (21) theories often come from the ideas of powerful groups in the society who take on secretive actions and often evade public scrutiny – which makes them difficult to disprove. In the explanation of what conspiracy theory entails, Seide avers that there are five major elements that explains its psychology – and the elements include the following:

- It has to do with assumptions relating to the interplay or pattern of interconnected between people and events.
- Those who are the major stakeholders otherwise referred to as conspirators take intentional actions
- It involves a group of bad actors and dishonest personalities working hand-in-hand in order to actualise a set goal or objective (and this negates the position that conspiracy can somehow emanate from a singular actor – as two or more persons must conspire to act by weaponising information)
- The conspirators intend to inflict harm to other persons who may be primary or secondary targets of the action
- The act of conspiracy is a secret one – so conspirators act in secrecy (a situation that shroud the entire process in secrecy – provide no definite base or origin and making them difficult or hard to disprove, at least, in most cases)

There are diverse categorisations of conspiracy theories – as we have political and non-political conspiracy on one hand, and that of local, global and total conspiracy on the other [22, 23], scientific and non-scientific [24]. Examples of political conspiracy are numerous, but according to Rääkkä [22], an example of non-political conspiracy is that of the death of Elvis Presley and Jim Morrison. Relatedly, in Huneman and Vorms' [24] explanation of their categorisation of conspiracies, emphasis was made that

when a conspiracy is hinged on the domain of science such as that of HIV/AIDS, then it is regarded as scientific, but when it is not – and only revolves around issues such as anti-Semitism, and the 9/11 issues among others (without any form of scientific claims), then such is considered non-scientific. Therefore, most Covid-19 related conspiracies that trended on social media can be seen as scientific because they are science-based.

According to Menczer and Hills [25] the increasing need for information in addition to its overabundance or glut has come with adverse consequences – of which lack of quality information is just an aspect. In modern times, a search of the internet and associated platforms exposes people or users to all forms of information including conspiracy theories. In other words, social media platforms can be seen as having great influence on information access in modern times. It is not so difficult to spot conspiracy theory online as there is often a pattern, agency, threat and secrecy – as factors that constitute one [26].

2.4 The Review

In today's world, social media platforms happened to be some of the most utilised channels of information dissemination on virtually every kind of event globally. Eveland and Scheufele [27] aver that social media pride itself as a platform that provide immediate and instantaneous communication to a large proportion of people. Since the outbreak of Covid-19 in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan in China, several countries, health organisations, individuals and non-governmental organisations have deployed varied means of communication to create awareness and mitigate the spread of the virus. For example, due to the national lockdown imposed on countries as a result of the surge in the transmission of Covid-19, there has been an unprecedented utilisation of social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram etc.), to educate people on the virus and the mode of its transmission [28].

On a general note, social media platforms provided the means to share information on Coronavirus pandemic as people sought to know about preventive and curative measures aftermath of its declaration as a pandemic by the WHO. In a study, for instance, Ajayi and Fatukasi [29] found out that the use of WhatsApp to create awareness about Covid-19 was very effective among Nigerians in Akure, Ondo State. The study further revealed that, to a very large extent, Covid-19 messages shared on WhatsApp influenced the beliefs and opinion of the people about the virus. Hence, WhatsApp users were able to comply with the non-pharmaceutical guidelines given by health professionals to mitigate the spread of the disease.

In another related study, Onwukwe, Onyebuchi, Chikwe and Ihekwoaba [30] sought to discover the perception of the public on the transmission of Covid-19 information via the social media. The findings of their study corroborated the discovery of Ajayi and Fatukasi [29] which establish the fact that information on Covid-19 disseminated on social media played a significant role in educating the public about the virus. However, the study equally found that due to lack of fact checking and filtering of information before they were shared by social media users, a number of respondents participated in the dissemination of fake information on Covid-19.

However, it is noteworthy that fake news and conspiracy theories have found fertile grounds for breeding on social media platforms [31]. Inobemhe, Ugber and Udeh [32] lend credence to the foregoing with the assertion that social media provides a platform for fake news to thrive owing to its unregulated nature and citizens seem to take advantage of this to spread fake information. This became very worrisome during the outbreak of deadly viruses such as the Covid-19 with so much impact on the world across various areas of measurement – economy, health, trade and so on. Inobemhe et al. [32] revealed that people can be misled into imbibing certain health behaviours that may be injurious to their health. Little wonder then, that several conspiracy theories were manufactured and sold to the public with respect to the Covid-19 virus – and whatever injurious act that may be taken by individuals by virtue of their exposure to conspiracies

spread across platforms can be blamed on originators (the conspirators) and the technologies that enabled such spread which happen to social media.

Evidences also abound that social media was used to share fake news and conspiracy theories on the Coronavirus pandemic. Just as much as the platforms provided means or medium for the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories during the period, the Covid-19 outbreak increased or intensified the spread of conspiracies [33]. Such spread of conspiracy theories about the pandemic, to a reasonably high extent, pose a public health risk as they have been found to trigger suspicion with respect to scientific recommendations and measures [34]. In other words, people may rely on conspiracies to ignore warnings with strong scientific footings – thereby exposing themselves to the danger of the virus at a greater risk to the general well-being of members of the public otherwise referred to as public health.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

This study rests upon Uses and Gratifications theory. The theory was initially introduced by Elihu Katz in the early 1970s to explain how people select specific media and make use of same to their benefits [35, 36]. Uses and gratifications theory also attempts to explain the impact of media message on people. It extends to also examine the functions of a medium, with focus on the assumption that motivation of an audience is a crucial factor [35]. Further, the theory elucidates that the motivation of an individual to connect with others determines his choice of a particular media, and that this also affects the usage and interpretation of the content obtained from the selected media [38]. In other words, people choose a specific media type or form on the basis of their wanting to connect with other users, and by extension, this factor also impacts on the way they interpret the messages and content therefrom.

Uses and gratification theory was initially developed to explain how people select and use traditional media, but has in recent times extended to understanding the use of Internet and even social media [39]. Researchers such as Apuke and Omar [37] in a study to understand fake news sharing amongst social media users with reference to COVID-19 found that people can gain gratifications from using social media which can also lead them to share fake news. Similarly, Dunne, Lawlor and Rowley [40] conducted a study on the use of social networking sites amongst young people with focus on U & G and found out that people use SNS for relationship conservation, information seeking, and peer approval. Gratifications such as status-seeking and information seeking were the findings of a study by Thompson, Wang and Daya [39]. Uses and gratifications theory is the theoretical framework for this study as it helps to understand why people choose social media as platform to seek information and the gratifications derive therefrom. It also helps justify why social media weighs so much influence and therefore becomes a source of concern with regards to the fight against COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Conspiracy theory is another theoretical underpinning for this study. A conspiracy can be seen as explanation that attributed the causes of an event to a plot or conspiracy and could either be evidence-based or speculative [41, 42, 43, 44]. Sometimes, people hide under the cover of conspiracy to advance a plot or motive, or execute a plan especially in political domain. However, conspiracies thrive in other areas including health-related matters and it is considered a dangerous one for public health. Conspiracy might seem entertaining but really dangerous and may sometimes start as fun but can quickly snowball into a bad or sad moment [45], and once the impacts are activated, so many other things may accompany. For example, in Nigeria, violent protests or mob action may follow conspiracies that touch on ethno-religious sentiments as seen in Maitasine riots and several others.

World over, concerns have been raised as to the dangers associated with conspiracies regarding Coronavirus. A study by Duffy and Allington [46] revealed that people believe the following conspiracies on COVID-19: 1) that Coronavirus was a creation of a laboratory, 2) that government deliberately hides the number of COVID-19 related deaths, 3) that authorities exaggerate number of deaths from Coronavirus,

4) that COVID-19 is somewhat linked to 5G network radiation, 5) that no hard evidence really exists on whether COVID-19 is real. Duffy and Allington [46] further found that while some people got their information from mainstream media such as TV, Radio, newspapers and magazine, most young people relied on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp and others for information. Reliance on social media is becoming a trend amongst young people who refer to themselves as digital citizens or netizens. In its conclusion, the study noted that the danger of this trend with regard to Coronavirus especially in the UK is that people are likely to believe such social media sources and disobey or break lockdown rules, the study revealed [46].

Conspiracies spread like wildfire and are often conveyed through the use of highly emotional language [47], and it is done just to grab and sustain the attention of people targeted. In other words, conspiracies contain emotional appeal targeted at an audience towards the actualisation of a set target, goal or objective. Conspiracy theory is a basis upon which this study is built because it helps understand how social media users can be influenced by deliberate plot to undermine efforts launched by the Nigerian government to fight Coronavirus pandemic.

4.0 Methodology

The method used to elicit data for this study is basically the library method, where most of the information sources were drawn from previous studies and literature. The researchers did not do any barefoot measurement and no gathering of information from any given population sample. Thus, the study solely relied on secondary sources of information to arrive at the conclusions made. The implication here is that, this study was born out of consultations of both empirical and theoretical studies carried out by scholars in this field. Data and conclusions reached were derived from extensive consultation of textbooks, journals, periodicals, magazines, newspapers and a host of other online materials. Therefore, this discourse to a large extent is built on the work done by others as existing materials are consulted.

5.0 Discussion

Coronavirus changed the ways people live their lives as restrictions on international flights, local gatherings were some of the strategies taken by countries to stop the spread pending the development and production of a vaccine. The world has not remained the same since the outbreak in Wuhan and subsequent spread to different territories of the world leading to the designation of COVID-19 as pandemic. In addition, information seeking and search on the virus soon became a minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour and day-by-day activity and in the modern era, digital media and social media come handy. Social media platforms have also been identified as hotspots when it comes to seeking information on Coronavirus [46]. In this regard, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so on had and still have considerable influence on the fight against COVID-19. In some cases, the impact is overwhelmingly negative.

Social media has been identified as one that became the center piece of conversations on COVID-19 and this gave rise to all forms of manipulative or twisted information. All manners of fake news thrive on various platforms. Cinelli et al. [3] conducted a study to understand the diffusion of information on COVID-19 across social media platforms – Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Reddit and Gab. The study found that interaction paradigm or specific interaction patterns or functions provided by specific platform is the driving force behind the spread of information. Such information may include verified and unverified content. This also enables the spread of fake news on COVID-19 across the various platforms. Therefore, it suffices to say that social media platforms aided the spread of rumours, fake news or hoaxes concerning COVID-19. In Nigeria, rumours that suggest that the disease was caused by 5G technology, that a mixture of garlic and warm water are therapeutic measures permeated social media space at the time. Quoting Omosoye, World Health Organisation [48] captured that rumours such as Coronavirus is a ruse and that

government concocted it to divert public funds circulated on WhatsApp platforms and is perhaps the most difficult to debunk. It is instructive to note that such information is difficult to debunk because people are easily swayed by anti-government rumours.

Spread across social media platforms like wild-fire is the myth that Nigerians are immune to Coronavirus. Aiyewumi and Okeke [49] attributes the claim to the false belief that blacks have an adaptive protective immune to COVID-19 or SARS-COV-2. Aiyewumi and Okeke [49] further clarify that Nigerians are not immune to Coronavirus and that events in recent times show that misinformation pertaining to the origin of viruses coupled with conspiracies thrives, and especially on social media platforms. Such information when shared tend to garner likes and re-share on social media platforms – a situation that has led to several debunking statements from the government authority tasked with providing scientifically-footed information on the virus. In other words, such unfounded and non-scientific insinuations have been debunked by agencies of government whose task is to provide for such.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter equally affected the fight against COVID-19 considerably in that conspiracy theorists advanced their conspiracies therein and therefrom. One of such conspiracies has to do with the origin of COVID-19 and the motive behind it. Coronavirus is a brainchild of a laboratory in China created for population control is one of such conspiracies without evidence. A conspiracy that the virus was manufactured to reduce the population of senior European citizens is another one that got shared and re-shared on social media platforms. For Nigeria, conspiracy theorists floated the idea that the virus is specially designed for the elite. In fact, it is expected that it will eliminate politicians in the country, and that it was also a means to an end which is the development of a vaccine for social control [50].

The word “audio” means something a little different from the English meaning when examined as it is contextualised in Nigeria. Words such as “audio money” which means imaginary financial wealth are used almost every time by Nigerians for finances that seem unbelievable or perceived as ruse. During the COVID-19 outbreak, Nigerians coined the word “audio COVID” which means that Coronavirus exist only in the imagination of the political class and it is for a specific purpose – which is to defraud the unsuspecting public. With Coronavirus confirmed cases reaching a reasonably high number in the sub-Saharan African country, it suffices to note that available official records do not agree or corroborate the “audio” added to the word by many Nigerian social media users. According to Nigeria Center for Disease Control [51], there was even a second wave of infections in the country as 356 new cases were reported on 21st December, 2020 with 6 deaths. At the time of the announcement, total number of confirmed cases in Nigeria stood at 78, 790 with 1,227 deaths within same period.

To better understand the way social media fake news and conspiracies affected the fight against diseases especially pandemics, and recently Coronavirus, a newly introduced word can be looked up. “Infodemic” has gained usage prominence in recent studies on viruses, [see 49, 52, 53] for review. The World Health Organisation (WHO) Director General – Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus first used the word in February of 2020. In his definition of the word, Ghebreyesus explained that it has to do with the rapid global spread of both accurate and inaccurate information about Coronavirus disease through social media platforms. The former president of the United States of America, Donald Trump received backlash when messages surfaced on social media platforms where he suggested that ingesting disinfectants was curative measure while taking hydroxyl chloroquine was also a preventive one against COVID-19 – the claim has since been debunked by scientists across the spectrum [54]. In like manner, officials working with government and scientists were found to be responsible for the dissemination of outright falsehood that triggered panic on social media platforms [52, 53]. On a similar note, Dr. Stella Immanuel also lend credence to the use of hydroxyl chloroquine as preventive and curative measure for COVID-19 [55], a statement that has since been flagged as misinformation and taken off several social media platforms such

as Facebook, Twitter amongst other [50]. These illustrate the danger social media portends to coordinated efforts to fight Coronavirus.

In Nigeria, Coronavirus-related fake news trended and are still trending across social media platforms. Alcohol was suggested as one of the preventive and curative measures against COVID-19 on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. Nigerian social media space also saw stories of alleged contaminated facemask donated by Chinese billionaire Jack Ma as well as those from the Chinese government. Consequently, messages were shared and reshared on WhatsApp pages warning Nigerians of the need to be wary of contaminated facemasks donated by various countries especially China with the intent to reduce population. In addition, the conspiracy that Chinese businesses in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa were being attacked as a result of available information which traced the origin of Coronavirus to Wuhan, China, was also shared across various social media platforms. Fact-check by [56] revealed that such viral information lack evidence and therefore could be adjudged false or fake.

5.1 Highlights of Some Conspiracies on COVID-19 Shared Across Social Media

Specific situations across social media platforms where conspiracies on COVID-19 got amplified abound. In order to provide a quick understanding, we present below, highlights of such conspiracies shared on social media:

- 1) 5G launch is somehow related to COVID-19 as radiation from the technology may even lead to more deaths
- 2) Coronavirus is made in China. That COVID-19 originated in Wuhan Seafood market contentious. However, the contentious issue is that the disease was created in a Chinese lab for population control but got out of hand when it was not properly managed.
- 3) The government of Nigeria reported the index case for selfish reasons and that the motive is to get donors to raise funds for the country. Funds many social media users believe will end up in the private accounts of powerful individuals in the country.
- 4) Mere malaria could be reported by the Nigeria Center for Disease Control as COVID-19. This particular conspiracy gained so much popularity as some of the symptoms of malaria fever are similar to those of COVID-19. It therefore, becomes a good ground to build on such assumptions and sometimes seem convincing enough. However, this again is not evidence-based.
- 5) Coronavirus was brought in by politicians and it is strictly meant for elite as it does not really affect the poor people.
- 6) Bill Gates is investing in the search for a cure just to advance the anti-Christ ideology and that there will be an implant to mark out those who belong to them and anyone who refuses to take the vaccine will be quarantined or isolated.

5.2 Social Media Fake News: Implications and Lessons from Nigerians

Mixed reactions trailed the announcement of Nigeria Coronavirus index case in February 2020. Nigerian government through the Ministry of Health confirmed the case and explained it was of an Italian citizen who returned from Milan after the European country was hit by COVID-19 [46]. The government position clearly indicates that Coronavirus actually existed in the country; however, many Nigerians disagreed with the government position as they found it difficult to believe its existence. Several factors are seen to have played out in the disbelief. On one hand, there is the impression that government was not really prepared for the outbreak [53], on the other, that it concocted, established and confirmed the notion just for political or personal gains by a privilege few – individuals who belong to the political class [45].

Social media platforms complicated matters as people found them as avenues to propagate and churn out falsehood and conspiracies by ways of comments and posts suggesting that government was out

to defraud the international community by posting figures that do not exist [see 54]. Consequently, several Nigerians believed the conspiracies and fake news propagated through social media. It is imperative to note that this led to bottled-up anger which was unleashed on the public during the EndSARS protest – a movement to fight police brutality in Nigeria that turned violent. Beside the conspiracies, the discovery of some of the palliatives in the homes of politicians also made matters worse for government [55]. Evidence could be seen in the manner with which “hoodlums” destroyed public buildings and looted warehouses where food items donated by Coalition against COVID-19 (CACOVID) were stored. This validates the assertion by Dunne et al. [40] that conspiracy theory is dangerous though it may sometimes camouflage as a form of entertainment. In other words, it may sometimes sound funny but could easily degenerate into something unimaginable.

Subsequently, Voice of America [56] carried out an exercise to fact-check Coronavirus claims by Nigerians and other Africans and thereafter came up with a report to debunk the misrepresentation and affirm that Nigeria truly accounts for at least 5% of COVID-19 deaths in Africa. However, this did not stop some Nigerians from believing the information they sought and got from social media platforms. Recall that social media platforms can be accessed by mass of the people due to their ubiquitous and interactive nature. With a mobile phone, one person can have access to all available social media platforms. This supports the postulations of U & G theory that people tend to focus on a particular media form due to the gratification derives therefrom. In this case, it is information seeking and ease-of-use.

The Nigerian government in March 2020 inaugurated the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19 and mandated the team to help monitor developments around the world, and to serve as advisory body to the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) on possible ways to fight the disease in the country. Ajimotokan [57] observes that FG also tasked the body to coordinate inter-agencies response to fight Covid-19 and prevent the situation from degenerating or growing out of control. The PTF was established to coordinate activities in conjunction with the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC). Both organs took the lead and made several efforts to ensure the spread is contained and the impact of the pandemic on the economy and public health is minimised.

Since the disease was declared a pandemic in February and Nigeria recorded its first case, the world economy appeared to be struggling and third world countries are worst hit. Nigeria appeared to have gone through tough times as economic activities were grounded following the lockdown policy introduced to stop the spread [58]. Kazeem [58] further stresses that the economy contracted by 6.1% in the second quarter of 2020 setting a record of the steepest in 10 years. Despite the economic problems, the Nigerian government made progress on other fronts with respect to the fight against COVID-19. Social media fake news represents one of such fronts. The government made efforts as it deployed strategies which seem to have worked in certain ways. While the NCDC responded by setting up a crisis communication team, PTF also made a move by setting up a communication team to tackle misinformation. The two government agencies were also active across social media platforms as they have verified Twitter handles and Facebook accounts dedicated to informing the public on the direction and focus of government in relations to the fight against the disease. NCDC verified Facebook page is “Nigerian Center for Disease Control while its Twitter handle is “@NCDCgov”. The PTF verified Twitter handle is “@DigiCommsNG. These platforms were also deployed to debunk rumours, fake news and other forms of false information across platforms.

The two government agencies are known to have used and are still using mediums such as Short Messaging System (SMS), WhatsApp amongst others, especially when the need arises. When infection rates peaked in the country, NCDC sent weekly, and in some cases, daily SMS to members of the public admonishing all not to ignore symptoms, stating that a sudden loss of taste or smell, cough or fever are signs that one needs to get tested. Other preventive measures which include, avoiding crowded spaces, wearing of face masks and regular hand washing exercises also formed part of the contents of the messages

circulated by the government agency. It is noteworthy that the agency, at regular intervals still sends periodic messages on COVID-19 till date.

As earlier observed, the claim that Nigerians and the entire black race are immune to COVID-19 lacks scientific evidence, and is therefore considered as baseless assumption. Fact-check has also revealed information on preventive and curative measures such as drinking boiled water or hot tea are false. In line with this, [50] avers that though fake news is a global problem, it is overwhelmingly so for Nigeria as news shared on social media platforms, which often times turn out to be fake, quickly get published on websites of legitimate news organisations. The implication of such information that suggest curative measures is that it puts public health in jeopardy as people can take decisions that may be harmful to their health. A similar case played out in 2014 during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa where WhatsApp messages circulated admonishing people to bath and drink a so-called remedy of a mixture of salt and warm water [59]. Complications abound as cases of extreme reactions were reported in some parts of Nigeria, with two deaths [60]. This aligns with the assertion on conspiracy theory that it may sometimes come as fun but can also lead to negative consequences.

Common lessons that can be drawn from the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria is that no matter how difficult a move may seem; it is worth taking when public health is at risk. Authorities in the country seem to have won the war against misinformation as they deployed strategies aimed at debunking falsehood and providing accurate information to the public. The Nigerian government through the NCDC and Ministry of Health solicited the services of a Nigerian actress Funke Akindele Bello to promote hygiene and sanitation [61]. The agencies took the step to ensure Nigerians kept and maintained a clean environment which, according to experts, is one of the many measures that can be adopted in the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria and the world over.

6.0 Conclusion

Unsubstantiated reports on health matters are dangerous to humans in unimaginable proportions. When persons come in contact with information which they are unable to process properly in order to make informed decisions, chances are that wrong choices become inevitable. This paper has discussed the influence social media has on the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria and found that it is largely negative. Fake news, conspiracies, outright falsehood and many more got amplified through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp. The paper, therefore, concludes that fake news and conspiracies on Coronavirus sought and got through social media platforms posed great threat to public health of Nigerians.

The paper also concludes that several conspiracies with respect to the pandemic got shared across platforms. Specifically, the paper identified 6 major conspiracy theories that trended within the period with far-reaching negative consequences on the Nigerian society as public health could be jeopardised as a result of such unfounded health information (not backed by science). Curative and preventive measures without scientific base could be harmful to the population – and being that social media provided some sort of channel for quick and easy dissemination of information on the virus, it made the situation even worse or difficult.

On the basis of the findings of the paper and the points as marshaled out in the form of discourse above, the following recommendations may prove useful:

1. It is important that users of social media and other digital platforms realise how powerful they are especially with sharing content and therefore must be circumspect so as not to allow or promote careless spread of falsehood among people. This is even more important with respect to sensitive information such as health tips on any form of disease or pandemic.
2. Social media technology companies must carefully introduce measures to ensure that unsubstantiated information-laden contents that relate to health are not allowed to go viral or

shared. This can be done by introducing special features that ask for verification before such sensitive contents are allowed to circulate in such a manner as can be considered as “viral”.

3. Finally, government and concerned stakeholders must devise means or put mechanisms in place to debunk falsehood and conspiracies in order to ensure people do not take wrong decisions on the basis of information available to them at a time. This can be done by ensuring the establishment of efficient and effective units that monitor and counter all forms of conspiracies targeted at the population whether during an outbreak or other times.

7.0 References

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