Credibility of Social Media as a Source of Covid-19 Information in Nigeria: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Coronavirus just the word strikes fear into our hearts. "Novel coronavirus" is the proper term for this brand-new virus wreaking havoc on our unprepared world. But you can also call this nasty villain by its scientific name: severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, or SARS-CoV-2 for short. Becoming infected with SARS-CoV-2 can trigger a potentially deadly respiratory disease called Covid-19, an illness which presents with three main acute symptoms: fever, a deep, dry cough and a shortness of breath which can become quickly life-threatening. Other symptoms can mimic a cold or the flu. Covid-19 seems to strike the elderly and immunocompromised the hardest, along with any of us with underlying health conditions such as diabetes, heart and lung disease. But the young shouldn't take anything for granted there have been numerous deaths among people aged 20 to 50 as well as a very few among children. Covid-19 can also present with mild symptoms very similar to a typical cold or flu or no symptoms at all, which makes controlling the spread of the virus causing Covid-19 very difficult since there is no special treatment or drugs available as of now.. All viruses are like zombies they try to take over people's bodies but they aren't really alive. Outside the host's body they are dormant, surviving without living. Once touched or inhaled and brought inside, their ancient machinery springs into action, using proteins to latch onto and invade human cells (World Health Oorganization, 2020).

As of 25 April, 2020, Nigeria was reported to have 1,182 confirmed cases while 35 people were confirmed dead. With the internet, social media is one of sources of information and entertainment available the masses in the country. In a pandemic situation like the Covid-19 outbreak, social media is one of the most seek source or venue for information. However, there are thousands of people spreading information, sensationalism, rumours, fake news, misinformation, mal-information, propaganda and disinformation thereby making it crucial for the Governments and Health experts to fight the pandemic as well as the infodemic. In this study, attempts was made to find out whether social media is a credible and reliable source of information for the general public in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic using the qualitative research method. The internet and social media use pattern among the people is gradually changing slowly. The speed and manner at which information spreads on the social media is alarming and unimaginable hence, the study's findings will help in understanding whether social media is a credible and reliable source of information, that is, whether social media as an information source is diffusing genuine information to the public or misinforming the public in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. An in-depth survey was conducted on thirteen (13) active social media users who are frequently following the pandemic updates on different social media platforms using open-ended questions.

Keywords: Social media, source of information, credibility, COVID-19.

Introduction

The most severe pandemic of the 20th Century was the influenza pandemic of 1918, that was caused by H1N1 virus, which affected one-third of the world's population and resulted in 50 million deaths (Taubenberger and Morens, 2006). With no cure or vaccine against the infection, efforts to control the pandemic worldwide were very much limited to non-pharmaceutical interventions that included maintaining good personal hygiene, isolation, quarantine, avoidance of handshakes, social distancing, avoiding public gatherings, the usage of facemask and twenty minutes hand washing and disinfecting with sanitizer (Sheila, 2018). One hundred years ago, when medical therapies and countermeasures for most of the medical conditions were significantly limited and also information exchange among public to facilitate any health intervention or awareness primarily employed person-to-person interaction, mail or rarely telephone. Human coronaviruses were responsible for a considerable proportion of upper respiratory tract infections among children, first in the 1960s (Kahn and Mcintosh, 2005). It came to spotlight with the outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2003. Now, a century later to the influenza pandemic outbreak, coronavirus known as the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) with the scientific name of SARS-CoV-2 has caused the pandemic, currently threatening millions of lives worldwide and Nigeria in particular. The social media platforms came up with many different methods of diffusing information with incredible speed, reach, and penetration to the general public. Health experts and scientists are using social media to directly engage with the public, to share accurate information as well as discussing awareness and safety measures thus, emerging research and community leaders are hereby using the platform to form networks of public volunteering so as to help the vulnerable (Alejandro, 2020). With over 3 billion individuals accessing social media globally (Statista report for 2019) through the mobile phones regularly for over long period of time thereby making it very useful most especially when many of us are distance apart from one another. The social media thus became polluted with inadvertent spread of misleading, fake and false information such as misinformation in the forms of images, voice messages, text messages and videos. Every individuals online knowingly and unknowingly, spread information at an alarming rate which could be dangerous or misleading or both. Information or misinformation on social media can influence public opinions and attitudes with intense or dire consequences which can positively or negatively manipulate the perception of those who consume such information or misinformation.

Social media and the pandemics

Social media describes the online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives. Social media can take many different forms, including text, images, audio, and video. These sites typically use technologies such as blogs, message boards, podcasts, wikis, and blogs to allow users to interact. The term 'social media' to refer to internet services where the online content is generated by the users of the service. Also, social media rely on Web-based technologies to turn discrete, usually rather short, user contributions such as status updates or comments into an activity stream. Social media is the term often used to refer to new forms of media that involve interactive participation. In today's modern society, the generation, diffusion and manipulation of information are activities that pervade many aspects of our cultural, economic and social life (Bruno et al., 2008).The social media is considered as a tool to seek health information (Mohammed, et al., 2019). The coronavirus outbreak has not been the first pandemic witnessed in the age of social media. At least three other pandemics have occurred in the last decade such as H1N1 virus (swine flu in 2009), Ebola virus (Ebola in 2014) and Zika virus (Zika virus disease in 2015), with all the outbreaks having had prominence, wide documentation and considerable influence on the social media. The non-governmental organisations (NGOs), usually non-profit and mostly

addressing social issues, were not essentially equipped, with regard to technology, to communicate risk information online, about ten years ago. People looked upon social media for directives, but mostly ended up hearing the loudest voices of unreliable and /or unofficial sources. People have lied to one another for as long as verbal communication came into existence, and exciting falsehoods spread faster like a wildfire than the truths. Accurate, reliable and credible dissemination of right/correct information about the virus causing the pandemic could help in controlling its spread and all other associated anxieties among the populace (Megha et al., 2017). Although, the social media still find it difficult in dealing with misinformation, identifying and isolating them but with tremendous efforts, the social media progressed and matured in terms of their functionality.

Directing people to trusted sources
Social media allow local issues acquire global awareness through online activisms and campaigns. In the current scenario of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak, social media platforms are crucially been used for disseminating information worldwide. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization (WHO), a large number of healthcare organizations and journals are regularly posting and updating awareness and guidance across a host of online platforms (WHO, 2020). Social media, as an online information tools offer global platforms for dissemination of information, content and opinion, and also promote social interactions among and between individuals, groups and organisations (Botha and Mills, 2012; and Wang et al., 2015). For instance, facebook is engaging its newsfeed function to direct users to the websites of WHO and local health authorities while google has highlighted leading medical journals and other useful sites related to the outbreak. Social media sites like twitter are particular in pointing or directing individuals who seek for coronavirus-related information to reliable sources. Healthcare organizations, physicians, and social media influencers similarly direct online users to trusted sources. The world health organization (WHO) utilizes platforms like facebook, twitter, instagram and tiktok to provide the public with accurate and timely information as to educatethe users as regarding the importance and usefulness of proper hand washing and social distancing and also in the process dispelling/eliminating misinformation and disinformation among the public.This method is assumed to increase the probability of millions of people viewing the same messages consistently while accessing different platforms even if they forgo accessing trusted information sites.

Objective of the study
The objective of the study is to ascertain the credibility of social media as a source of Covid-19 information in Nigeria.

Literature review
Social media and verifiable information sources
Initially, social media companies did not hold any accountability over the content published on their platforms, but over the years, they designed a set of automated and human-driven processes to edit, promote or filter published contents, as these platforms have become one of the primary sources of information for a large number of users (NiamYaraghi, 2019). Also, large volume of contents posted on social media can make it impossible/difficult to meet the level of editorial expectations required as compared to that of traditional media. The world health organization and various other public health organizations have readily taken to social media, as a platform to proliferate or disseminate information relating to the pandemic or outbreak to the public so as to curb or control panic or distress which may be created by the misinformation or disinformation that is being circulated within and between the social media

users. Social media websites are trying to responsibly fight misinformation and disinformation thereby actively curtailing fear mongering. Tools to effectively prevent spreading of false news or fake news have been engaged by the tech giants who are extremely skilled in censorship. In order to dispel harmful misconceptions, developers of various social media are using fact-checking platforms. Social media platforms such as twitter, instagram and facebook are also agile in ensuring amplification of right and trustable information sources as well as offering priorities to contents from reliable accounts while scrutinizing and fact checking is done for non-professional claims.

Social media and information

Social media can basically empower a community from structural, psychological and resource empowerment process and help achieve group participation, shared identification and collective control in the community (Carmen, et al., 2015). In today's scenario, social media should be responsibly utilized to disseminate constant, consistent and reliable information to bring about clarity and awareness thereby eliminating confusion, fear and panic among the people. As a best and fastest way to share news, social media takes Covid-19 news from individual states, nation and parts of the world to everyone who can gain access to it. The facebook preventive health tool provides individuals with vetted guidelines about preventive health recommendations and then directs users to geo-targeted locations where these services are available (Merchant, 2020). Factual news information relating to precautions to be adopted, suspected Covid-19 symptoms, duration, step-by-step procedure to get oneself tested with contact information and other courses of action is the need of the hour. Users also could be enabled the option to share the tool and schedule testing with their network. Following Facebook, all social media companies could educate users with step-by-step instructions on spotting misinformation. Social media platforms have been urged to initiate awareness against Covid-19, as well as against the related misinformation or disinformation.

Influencing outbreak outcomes

Social media platforms act both as facilitators and multipliers of COVID-19 related information. During the times of outbreaks and crises, a number of questions arise seeking immediate clear and consistent answers and responses. The Government or the officials cannot always as a matter of urgency respond with accurate and timely information due to various reasons most especially when the welfare and interest of the general public is paramount. Sometimes, evidence needed to support the statements and arguments as well as the standards that concerned with how and why people are socially responsible for what they say are always ignored or not taking seriously. With overabundance of information in the digital age, it becomes difficult for people to identify truthful and trustworthy information sources from false or misleading ones (Wemer, 2020) as a result of which the concerned authorities and experts tend to lose their legitimacy among the public. People continue to rely on discredited misinformation when asked to draw inferences and make judgments about the news story (Rich and Zaragoza, 2016).The instant and borderless manners information spread on the social media makes it to loose its credibility due to lack of time or inadequate time to asses and analyse the information before been communicated or diffused among the general public. Individual differences in reactions to crises depend partly in the variations in social support available to the individual in crisis (Porritt, 2004). The effect of social media information during such crisis is very imminent while misinformation or disinformation during such outbreak is more pronounced or evergreen. Emerging pandemics necessitated unique health communication and education plans for public health agencies to satisfy the information needs of the general public most especially relating to possible risks and dangers while eliminating such risk resulted in exaggeration and dramatization (Strekalova, 2016). Social media as well as the general public

have to be socially responsible and ensure that only truthful, reliable and timely information from reliable sources are published or made available to the general public as it can influence the public perceptions and attitude towards a positive outcome from such outbreaks.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study because qualitative methods are especially useful in discovering the in-depth meaning people give to events which they experience (Merriam, 1998). Specifically, the method was used to understand how the participants or respondents make meaning out of the study, in other words, the study tried to assess whether social media is a reliable source of information for Covid-19 pandemic. The innovations on social media has paved ways for user-generated information leading to early-level warnings, awareness and precautions equally disseminated with misinformation and disinformation during the pandemics/outbreaks. All social media companies should work closely together to help promote authentic information contents from reliable sources so as to generate awareness and at the same time removing fake news or misinformation and disinformation that might create panic or fear among the general public.

Qualitative method is effective in studying a small number of subjects, in this case, 13 participants who are active users of social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc., are the study samples. This because it is a broad approaches encompassing many research methods, involved systematic collection, organization and interpretation of textual information. Also, it is an inductive approach to generating novel insights into phenomena that are difficult to quantify and can be used to generate comprehensive description of processes, mechanisms, or settings, characterize participant perspectives and experiences and to identify their core of experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2003), the Covid-19 outbreak and to generate patterns and identify relationships of meaning that can build new knowledge (Moustakes, 1994). All the participants or respondents involved in the study are literate, active users of various social media platforms with the habit of frequently checking for updates and actively participating in contributing to the society during the current Covid-19 outbreak. The qualitative research methods employed in the course of the study include purposive sampling interview schedule using open-ended questions as well as systematic and concurrent data collection procedures to analyse the participants or respondents view on whether social media is a reliable source for coronavirus-related information in this current situation.

Perception of COVID-19 information on social media

Nigerian government doctors said that it is obvious and natural for a population to panic in the time of a crisis such as the deadly Covid-19 and the degree of panic significantly correlates either positively or negatively with the level of awareness of the people being informed. In such situation, our minds primarily focus on the negative or worst situation and in which case the information received might influences our reaction to such information and relatively to the outcome of the crisis. Governments, public health agencies, and media collect huge amounts of data all of which was not always share for the general public consumption. As an ethic, they jointly work in the best interest of the public though scientific research and conclusions required some certain amount of data while little or smaller part of such data are required for decisions to be made and executed although, during a crisis different types of data are considered valuable provided such data are truthful and reliable. Comparatively, further some elements of misinformation, fake news and disinformation were been spread on the social media as regards coronavirus being a bioweapon used by China to wage war against America. With such news being circulated again and again over the social media, the social media at that particular point in time may have become a dangerous information source to the general public by creating havocs and panics especially during a pandemic situation such as the coronavirus

outbreak.

A private doctor when asked about the information relating to coronavirus and related issues on social media said that it was unfortunate that we are in this current situation it was disheartening to see people sharing unwanted content related to the Covid-19 pandemic on the social media. People are glued to their mobile phones and television during this lockdown and with the social media, any random person or persons is or are able to create any content or contents and share it for everyone around the world to see despite the facts that the governments are reiterating the use of government websites, official pages and apps for verified updates, people still end up with false news and wrong information, particularly and primarily because media literacy is something lacking among the people and the population as a whole. People are more attentive and attracted to emotionally charged contents and end up sharing same irrespective of their credibility and reliability.They either share exaggeratedly simply to establish themselves as a well informed person among their peers and followers or to inform and safeguard their dear and near ones to take preventive measures. Images from movies with dead bodies lying around were interpreted and related to Covid-19 and people ended up sharing such on the social media most especially the Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram without verifying the rationale and truth behind those images.

Social media offers an online space which could be efficiently accessed to share credible information to improve outcomes in the current critical situation. Though many platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp have taken steps to direct their users to trusted sources for the of prevention and elimination of fake news and misinformation to be more efficient and effective. With countless videos and blogs on awareness, preventive measures, the do's and dont's during the pandemic, the social media enable some sort of control over the media contents to ensure truthful and reliable information so as to eliminate the dominating fake news and misinformation at the peak of the hour. Social media opened doors for citizen journalism and this is altering the news business. Traditional and broadcast media are finding ways to compete with social media content providers. No wonder, healthcare organisations can communicate instantly and directly with the public through social media which bypasses the gatekeeping of traditional media. Social media are constantly evolving with filters on content that can be best used to positively influence the public perceptions and attitudes in a situations like the Covid-19 outbreak.

Social media are a very useful tool for communication, especially when people are isolated or far away from one another. Conversations on coronavirus in a society could help us walk out of the situation collectively with a positive outcome. But with thousands of social media users spreading rumours, sharing false information, selling sensationalism, misinformation and disinformation, which spread far and near through sharing hence poses as a threat to the society. In relation to information pertaining to Covid-19 as regards the social media users point of view, fake news, misinformation and sensationalism that can misguide and mislead the people are spreading faster and farther online. Social media are can be seen a right source for information and updates on Covid-19 pandemic as the information found there are mostly guiding though there might be some aorta of fake news and misinformation which might have been generated by some people without media literacy. People depend on social media for immediate updates which at times might involve some grains of misinformation which actually doesn't make social media an unreliable information source though it's the people's responsibility to logically and analyse the situation before making decisions based on information shared on the social media.

Through the social media, whole world are able to know all they need to know about the deadly virus and its effects which has led to an alarming rate thereby resulting in panic globally and

Nigeria in particular. With the coronavirus having taken thousands of lives on one side, it has also been successful in spreading a sense of threat, panic and anxiety widely. Everyone is looking out for possible solutions in such a situation. Unlike the traditional mass media, social media offers a two-way communication process where people can comment and react to an information. Social media offers a window that not only shapes our reactions but also our collective responses to the coronavirus outbreak both positively and negatively. With the Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown in place some states as well as curfew in other states, social media users, who were barely active previously are now facilitating important conversations about the virus. Moreover, the social media information at our fingertips can be referred to as a double-edged sword which can influence real-time smart decisions as well as create an anxious environment with uncertain outcomes.

Discussion and conclusion

The Covid-19 crisis is still ahead of and everywhere around us and we are taking the situation for granted without realising the actuality. Both, government and corporate organizations use social media more often than traditional media in responding to a crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic (Sora and Brooke, 2012). Although the three tiers of government in the country are directing the general public towards reliable and credible sources for verified information and updates on the pandemic, social media has transformed the way people communicate around the world, instantly and borderless. In the new media age of inter-connectedness, information about the outburst of Covid-19, a pandemic caused by coronavirus, has been spreading at a faster rate among millions of people in Nigeria and globally. Information diffused through the social media is widely spread due to networking among and between the general public on the social media platforms, because such information can be created, generated, diffused and spread easily (Srijan and Neil, 2018). There are millions of information being circulated on various social media platforms on how the government having been taken series of number of measures to curb the pandemic in the best possible ways they can, although, social media information might contain some misinformation, it is very difficult to identify if the true motive behind such misinformation are whether or not to misguide the people on a large scale information diffused on the social media has resulted in people trusting such information and actually implementing the same in their real lives because of their reliance on social media as a reliable source. In the era of post-truth, social media could still be the best venues to disseminate information if the people on social network are transmitting news from credible sources. Social media has led to ground breaking phenomenon called realtime citizen journalism (Alfred, 2010) and at the same time it has led to increased visibility and effect of true, reliable and credible information (Marcelo, Barbara, and Carlos, 2010). As earlier mentioned, social media information are marred by some elements of fake news which sometimes spread much faster than actual news but the people are to be blamed for this and not the devices or media (Soroush, Deb-Roy and Sinan, 2018). With regards to the coronavirus outbreak, some social media information are more of user-generated or user-edited contents which majorly contribute to misinformation than factual information and these misinformation spreads much faster than these platforms could possibly contain or control which may misguiding the general public who are unaware of the actual situation but though some contents are explaining the actual situation. Criticisms could be constructive only when it ends on a positive note so the social media should primarily work towards global welfare with their business perspectives aside by making sure that truthful and correct information and data from reliable sources are shared and spread to create the needed awareness for a positive outcome among the public. Furthermore, sometimes people are able to identify the truth from the falsehoods on the social media being the most common, quick and easily accessed form of information source (Safieddine, Dordevic and Pourghomi, 2017), people are relying more and

more on social media for information, the credibility of which is assumed to great despite the elements of misinformation it may contain. An important issue for today's information consumers is that information on social media platforms relatively involved professional gatekeeping to monitor the contents and evaluate its credibility (Ruohan and AyoungSuh, 2015). In a country where Wikipedia, an online encyclopaedia where anyone can edit the content, is still the most referred site and trusted source of information on an unimaginably wide range of topics, checking reliable sources for updates has become very crucial, especially in today's Covid-19 scenario. A socially responsible citizens and the generality of the public should refrain from disseminating inaccurate information rather they should learn to verify and validate information and check the credibility of extensive information because the rate and speed at which information spreads on the social media are unimaginable.

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