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Exploring the Believability Profile of Social Media Fake News Headlines on Covid-19 in Nigeria

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Abstract

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), fake news is one of the critical upshots of the Covid-19 pandemic, convoyed with untimely and avoidable deaths. However, the response profile to this challenge is largely unknown, especially in the Nigerian context. This study investigates the impact of fake news headlines on social media on how Netizens viewed and believed the covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Data from an online survey and contents from social media users in Nigeria using the hashtag "#coronavirusNigeria" and "#covid19Nigeria" were analyzed. Results show that those who are apolitical, less educated, and use Facebook and television as primary sources of news are more likely to believe fake news and fake cures. They do that more than those who belong to a political party and are educated. This study offers the theoretical and empirical background to frame the debate about the influence of fake news on how Nigerians viewed and responded to the pandemic.

Keywords: social media, fake news, fake cure, covid-19, Nigeria.

Introduction

The Coronavirus is known for its deaths and sickness. In March 2020, the World Health

Organization (WHO) also acknowledged that the pandemic had produced misinformation 'infodemic' (Brennen et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). According to WHO, the novel Coronavirus outbreak and response to it have been accompanied by the over-abundance of information, some accurate and some not so accurate, making it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance about the virus when they need it (WHO, 2020). Nevertheless, misinformation about science and health is not new, and neither is it unique to Covid-19.

Policymakers, journalists, and scholars have reiterated WHO's concerns and emphasized that misinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic presents severe public health and public action risks (Brennen et al., 2020). Following this trend, one unease has been the effect of fake news circulating in social media. This fake news, especially about fake

cures, has inundated social media platforms with unprofessional advice, leading to an increase in cases and fatalities (Zhou et al., 2020; Folayan et al. 2018).

Prior to Covid-19, the surge and debate about fake news were starting to become a global issue. It diminishes the quality and number of accurate and trustworthy information people consume, particularly on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Although fake news is not novel, it is now problematic due to its capacity to hurt people. In recent years, social media popularity has soared, permitting instantaneous interaction and diffusion of new ideas (Apuke & Omar, 2020a; Zhou et al., 2020). With social media users' obsession with virality, fake news dissemination has become widespread in the present digital world.

Statement of the Problem

The push for Covid-19 vaccination persists throughout the globe. Concomitant with this push is misinformation and fake news about the pandemic (Lampos et al., 2020; Uwalaka et al., 2021). Some studies have examined predictors of fake news proliferation. At the

same time, a handful of studies have also contributed to the literature on fake news and social media (Apuke & Omar, 2020b). Previous studies have looked at the proliferation of fake news in general (Apuke & Omar, 2020a, 2020b; Mutsvairo & Bebawi, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2020; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). Others studied fake news during the 2016 US presidential election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Carlson, 2020), lack of trust in the mainstream media (Uwalaka et al., 2018), and fake news during Covid-19 (Lampos et al., 2020; Pennycook et al., 2020). Many of these studies utilize student samples (Lee & Ma, 2012). They do not adequately examine the fake news concept in the Nigerian context, especially the factors that necessitate the believability of fake news headlines.

This study complements these studies by investigating social media users 18 years and above in Nigeria. Nigeria was selected for this study because it is a developing country not robustly studied (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019) yet. Secondly, fake news in Nigeria thwarts medical advice, introduces false medications, incites panic, and is

used for political point-scoring (Apuke & Omar, 2020a; Olapegba et al., 2020). These are unhealthy to the health and safety of Nigerians and need to be investigated.

In a nutshell, this study investigated the impact of fake news headlines on social media and how Netizens viewed and responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. It attempted to unravel the likelihood that social media users in Nigeria could distinguish between fake news headlines from credible news and honest government guidance regarding the pandemic in Nigeria. Of particular interest was studying inferences about credible versus fake (false) news headlines.

Research Question

The following research questions are the research questions:

1. What effect do fake news and fake cures have on social media on how netizens viewed and responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria?
2. What is the level of exposure of social media users to fake news and

fake cures about Covid-19 in Nigeria?

3. What factors lead Nigerians to believe fake news headlines about the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria?

Significance of the Study

This study bridges the gap in digital media and health communication literature in four ways. First, it helps test the believability of fake news headlines with empirical data in health-related communication. This was previously tested in political communication (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) and has not been adapted into health communication. This investigation helped to uncover the deleterious aspects of fake news besides issues of virality. It has also helped to explicate the rationale and means by which new media technologies are used to spread fake news.

Second, much existing literature looked at sharing fake or reporting exposure to fake news. Respondents were tasked with analyzing and answering questions that tested the accuracy of their recalling abilities. This step lessened the incidents of false

recall, thereby increasing the reliability and validity of the study. Third, the study utilized an innovative research design to study the research problem. The research adopted a mixed-methods approach. A well-crafted online survey instrument and social networking analytic technique to evaluate content from social media users in Nigeria regarding the Covid-19 pandemic helped to have a composite view of the situation. Fourth, this study's findings will benefit communication scholars and government authorities interested in the tactics that can be adapted to communicate with Nigerians during a global health crisis strategically.

The Fake News Concept

The fake news concept and history evolve as it becomes more widespread and sophisticated. Researchers have historically used fake news to define generic mistruths such as news parody, propaganda, and even misleading advertisements (Tandoc et al., 2018). This usually involves purposefully concocting and inventing news articles, commentaries, and even editorials. Fake news also includes articles from satirical websites that could

be misinterpreted or misunderstood as truth, mainly when considered in isolation on Nairaland (Uwalaka, 2015), Facebook or Twitter feeds. Recent studies use the phrase to describe a specific phenomenon: misleading and bogus information deliberately presented and marketed to appear as news to deceive its target audience (Tandoc et al., 2020).

According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), fake news is news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers. Lazer et al. (2018) described fake news as fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not organizational process or intent. Inherent in these definitions are the targets and persistence of fake news and the specific format used.

This means that fake news comes in different formats and is sometimes a type of misinformation that mirrors the look and feel of news (Derakhshan & Wardle, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2020). Disinformation has also been defined as “intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals”

(Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 124). They, however, suggested caution in adopting the term 'fake news' as it tends to frame the problem as isolated incidents of falsehood and confusion (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

In this study, fake news, disinformation, and misinformation emerged interchangeably. Not because there are no technical differences but because they all function and impact their targets similarly.

Recently, studies have begun to evaluate the effects of fake news and disinformation. Some have claimed that fake news is socially and democratically problematic. This claim emerged because it produces inadequately informed people who continue to misinform due to the impacts of echo chambers (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Although many studies have focussed on the effects of fake news on political participation, especially after the 2016 US presidential election (Carlson, 2020), it has been reported that fake news spreading on mobile social networking applications such as WhatsApp has been linked to cases of mob killings in countries such as India (Frayer,

2018; Kumar, 2020). All these intensify the concern that fake news will catastrophically undermine public trust in real news outlets if not controlled in the long run. Researchers fear that it will have a deleterious impact on global governance and health (Lazer et al., 2018).

In their study, Apuke and Omar (2020a) conceived fake news as untrue information, including myths, rumors, conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and deceptive or erroneous content intentionally or unintentionally disseminated on social media platforms. This study adopted this definition of fake news as it encapsulates fake news in Nigeria and avenues through which fake news can cause harm in Nigeria. The unintentional sharing of fake news is crucial. Many reshare false Covid-19 content on social media to render some help while ultimately harming the recipients (Apuke & Omar, 2020a; Wang et al., 2019).

The argument exists that social media users share misinformation related to earlier pandemics such as the Ebola virus to offer helpful explanations and warn other users (Apuke & Omar, 2020b). The ease of sharing information through digital networks helps people to

update family members and friends on critical matters that potentially affect their lives. The more people share these stories and 'news' content, the more likely they share fake news, sometimes without realizing what they have done. This takes an even more salient role when the 'news' concerns a rampant global pandemic ravaging the world. Here, a single spread of fake health news could endanger the safety of many people (Adesina et al., 2019; Igbinoba et al., 2020). Therefore, it was pertinent that the study evaluated the rate at which people consume fake news or could recognize and discard a fake news story.

Fake News and Covid-19

Research is progressing on the proliferation of fake news and disinformation in this age of Covid-19. Some of these emerging studies investigate the relationship between digital networks and fake news related to the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, it has been discovered that the more people use social media to receive Covid-19 related information, the more they perceive and behave in a risky manner regarding the virus (Hou et al., 2020). Another finding

suggests that citizens of Vietnam accepted as credible, fake news information about Covid-19 than they believed the official information announced by the government (Huynh, 2020).

Lamos et al. (2020) found that the furry of invented information on Covid-19 caused many to think they could get healing from such substances as salty water, drinking of bleach, and eating oregano. Studies have noted that some 'experts' in Nigeria offer a false cure for Nigeria's virus. These 'cures' include sitting in the sun and the generalization that the virus cannot harm Africans (Apuke & Omar, 2020a; Lamos et al., 2020).

These studies evaluated factors that lead to the sharing of fake news. However, they did not offer any meaningful explanation about situations and context that lead to the increased likelihood of believing fake news.

An explanation is also missing on factors that help users distinguish credible news sources from fake news. A higher number of studies have focussed on media reports (Zhou et al., 2020), tackling the virus (Lamos et al., 2020), and the spread of fake news on social

media (Apuke & Omar, 2020a; Hou et al., 2020). This study evaluated the effect of social media on the believability of Covid-19 fake news headlines. It attempted to understand the factors that help social media users in Nigeria to ascertain the difference between fake news headlines from actual news headlines regarding the pandemic in Nigeria.

Fake News in African Context

The majority of the studies investigating the effects of modern 'fake news' cases have concentrated in the Global North. A handful of case studies have begun to consider 'fake news' in the Global South. However, studying fake news in the Global South is crucial considering the potential impact of fake news in society. Fake news has been described as an emerging global problem that threatens journalism and society.

It has been argued that social media platforms such as Twitter are used to disseminate political misinformation and have given rise to spurious news sites online that imitate more established satirical critiques of the media in South Africa (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). In Kenya

and South Africa, studies have shown that misinformation via popular mobile applications such as WhatsApp has instigated violence by circulating racist, misogynous, xenophobic messages (Chenzi, 2020; Jacobs & Wasserman, 2018; Muendo, 2017). Unlike other climes, the contentions over truth and trust in social media platforms in Africa are complex. This complication has been studied in detail by researchers. They argue that these complications manifest due to a “long-standing use of satire, gossip, and jokes to provide political criticism and commentary when mainstream media are captured by the state or elites” (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019, p. 110).

The consequences of fake news are sometimes far-reaching. Besides the divergence of views on misinformation, there is a comprehensive agreement on the potential repercussions of increased fake news. These potential consequences include the erosion of trust in journalism, contraction of deadly virus such as Covid-19 virus, and complications caused by citizens' inability to receive reliable political communication to make educated

choices (Amodu et al., 2019; Apuke & Omar, 2020a, 2020b; Wasserman, 2020; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). Fake news impedes medical advice from government agencies and medical professionals, introducing false medications for Covid-19, inciting panic, and being used for political point-scoring in Nigeria (Apuke & Omar, 2020a; Olapegba et al., 2020). Findings show that Nigerians exposed to fake news reported greater negative perception about the Covid-19 vaccine as new media technologies were used to spread misinformation (Inobemhe et al., 2020; Talabi et al., 2021).

A similar study found that high information literacy competence students had a lower prevalence of Covid-19 pandemic-related fake news (Igbinovia et al., 2020).

Methods

This mixed-method research report consists of responses from 254 online social media users in Nigeria and tweets from Twitter users regarding Covid-19 in Nigeria. Between February 1 and April 30, 2020, an online survey of 254 adults aged 18 and over who are social media users was conducted using the Survey

Monkey platform. The survey investigates the impact of fake news and fake cures on social media on how Netizens viewed and responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

The survey consisted of four sections. First, consent to participate and an assurance to provide thorough answers was obtained, which is believed to improve data quality. Those who disapproved were excluded from the survey. Second, the researcher asked a series of demographic questions, including education, gender, age, and marital status.

Third, the researcher asked about Covid-19 news consumption, including time spent reading, watching, or listening to Covid-19 news in general, particularly on social media, and the most important source of news and information about Covid-19. Fourth, the researcher showed each respondent 15 news headlines about Covid-19. The researcher adopted and adapted Allcott and Gentzkow's (2017) characterizations of headlines to suit this study. Respondents answered two questions: 'do you recall seeing this reported or discussed during the pandemic?'

and 'would your best guess have been that this statement was true?' on each headline.

Out of the 15 headlines that were used to test the respondents' ability to differentiate fake news headlines and factual news headlines about the Coronavirus, nine were fake news headlines. The researcher made up three of the nine news headlines that were adjudged as fake news and were not published online. These are called placebos. They are made up of items in surveys to test false recall (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). They helped the researcher test whether the respondents could differentiate between made-up situations or questions from real situations.

This helps the validity and reliability of the instrument and the study. In this study, the dependent variable is the believability of factual (accurate) news headlines about the pandemic. The dependent variable takes the value 1 if the respondent correctly identifies whether a headline is true or false. It is 0.5 if the respondent is 'not sure' and 0 if the respondent incorrectly

identifies whether the headline is true or false.

Tweets from the hashtags '#coronavirusNigeria' and '#covid19Nigeria' to ascertain the themes of the tweets about the pandemic in Nigeria. Researchers are attracted to social media platforms because they can harvest thousands of content using freely and publicly available and easily configurable tools (Marwick & Boyd, 2014; Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018). A large amount of information gathered from social media platforms has given rise to the use of tools to analyze 'big data' (Marwick & Boyd, 2014).

Researchers are growingly using techniques such as social networking analysis (Bosch, 2017; Literat & Markus, 2019) to make sense of big data. Hashtags have been challenged as a sampling item in big data analytics (Rafail, 2018). However, they are still commonly used, particularly in Twitter and Facebook (Bosch, 2017; Jensen et al., 2020; Uwalaka, 2020; Uwalaka et al., 2020).

This study analyzed 10,408 tweets and retweets from Twitter users in Nigeria using the hashtags '#coronavirusNigeria' and '#covid19Nigeria'. The researcher

used these two hashtags as a means of extracting representative tweets. These tweets and retweets were scraped using Netlytic between 1st February and 30th August 2020. These tweets and retweets were collected using Netlytic and were subsequently imported first to an excel and then transferred into an NVivo 12 Pro for analysis. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software that helps the researcher develop themes and other relevant trends and graphs in qualitative data. Using graphs, images, symbols are becoming popular in qualitative analysis (2016). The researcher preferred this software because the aim was to develop common themes from the tweets and retweets.

Results

The average age of respondents was 36 years old. Male about 56% male and 44% female. Most respondents (69%) are gainfully employed either as civil servants or privately employed. In comparison, 87% of them have either a bachelor's degree or a master's degree. On average, respondents spent 117 minutes daily reading, watching, and listening to news about the Coronavirus. Of these 117

minutes, 66 minutes were spent reading, watching, or listening to news about the virus on social media.

Some 78% of the respondents got their news from social media. This figure positioned social media as the most used media for news consumption among the respondents. Only 27% of respondents reported getting their news from newspapers. Furthermore, 45% of respondents reported having seen Covid-19 cure in the media, and 54% of those are on social media and mobile social networking applications. When asked about their most important news source about Covid-19, respondents reported that social media (31%) was their much trusted source of news about Covid-19. According to Table 1 below, social media is followed by Cable TV (23%), National TV (19%), radio (13%), websites and applications (12%), and newspapers (2%). These figures show that respondents trust international cable television more than any local news outlet besides social media.

Table 1: Most important sources of news about Covid-19

Media Platforms	f	%
<i>Social Media</i>	79	31
<i>Cable TV</i>	58	23
<i>TV national</i>	48	19
<i>Radio</i>	33	13
<i>Apps</i>	31	12
<i>Newspapers</i>	5	2
Total	254	100

In Figure 2 below, the left bars present the average number of respondents who recall seeing the headline in each category. The bars on the right represent the average number of respondents who recall seeing and believing the headlines.

From the data, 120 respondents recalled seeing the accurate headlines, and 94 out of the 120 reported seeing and believing the accurate headlines. Surprisingly, about 80 respondents reported seeing fake headlines, and 42 of the 80 respondents recalled seeing and believing the fake headlines. Forty-seven respondents recalled seeing the placebo headlines, while 33 out of the 47 reported seeing and believing the placebo

headlines. These results are significant as more respondents reported to have seen fake news headlines than credible news

headlines. Even more noteworthy is that 42 respondents believed that those fake news headlines were credible and honest news stories.

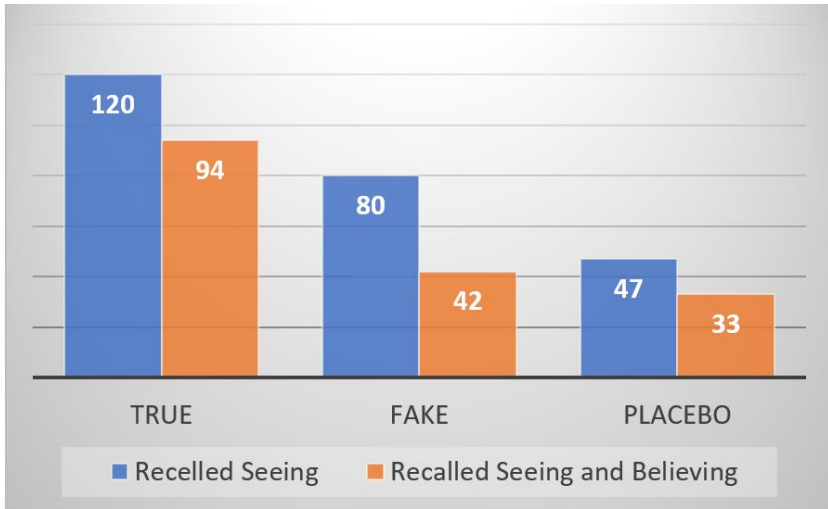


Figure 1. Respondents that Recalled Seeing and Believing News Headlines

A multiple regression analysis helped predict the belief of credible news headlines on the interaction among those who recalled seeing fake news headlines (fake news), credible headlines (accurate headlines), and placebo headlines. Preliminary analyses were conducted using the SPSS to ensure no violation of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity assumptions.

The data adequately satisfied these assumptions.

After entering all the required variables into the SPSS for analysis, five variables made a statistically significant contribution to the model. These five variables are recalled seeing accurate news, recalled seeing placebo news, recalled seeing and believing fake news, recalled seeing and believing placebo

news, and social media as the important news source.

The variance, in total, explained by the model was [37.1%, $F_{10, 248} = 14.1$, $p < .001$]. This outcome means that these variables explained 37.1 percent of the variance in seeing and believing credible (true) news headlines. Of these variables, five (recalled seeing true news, recalled seeing placebo news, recalled seeing and believing fake news, recalled seeing and believing placebo news, and social media as the most important source of news) made significant unique contributions to the model. From these five variables, recalled seeing credible (true) news headlines made the largest significant contribution (beta = .595). Next is followed by social media as the most important news source (beta = -.421), then recalled seeing and believing placebo news headlines (beta = .245). Next is recalled seeing and

believing fake news headlines (beta = -.223) and finally, recalled seeing placebo news headlines (beta = -.145).

Results from Table 1 below show that respondents who reportedly recalled seeing credible Covid-19 news headlines are more likely to believe credible news headlines about Covid-19. Also, those who pointed out that the placebo news headlines were fake are more likely to believe credible news headlines relating to the Covid-19. Conversely, those who reported social media as their most important source of news, those who reportedly believed the placebo news headlines, and those who believed fake news headlines were less likely to believe credible news headlines regarding Covid-19. This is shown in the result through the negative beta signs of these variables. Table 2 expatiates.

Table 2. Factors that predict correct beliefs about Covid-19 news headlines

Variables	B	SE b	Beta	T	Sig	R ²	Adjusted R ²
						.371	.345
Constant	2.090	.147		14.259	.009**		

Education	-.028	.027	-.049	-1.042	.298
Gender	.060	.020	.135	3.011	.092
Age	.002	.016	.006	.136	.892
Recalled seeing True	.065	.025	.595	2.618	.000*
Recalled seeing Placebo	.163	.039	.245	4.178	.000*
Recalled seeing Fake	-.003	.026	-.013	-.005	.121
Seeing and believing Placebo	-.023	.032	-.149	-.723	.008**
Seeing and believing Fake	-.053	.047	-.223	-1.122	.000*
Most important news source SM	.039	.029	-.421	1.353	.000*

Note: regression * $p < .001$, ** $p < .05$.

The total number of tweets and retweets analyzed was 10,408. Of the 10,408 tweets and retweets analyzed, 30 percent (3,122) tweets and retweets provided information about the pandemic to Twitter users in Nigeria. This information ranged from safety counsel regarding the dangers of Covid-19 to statistics regarding the fatalities from Covid-

19. Using the information provision theme, Twitter users in Nigeria tweeted and retweeted information relating to the pandemic, which helped Nigerians fight the pandemic. For example, A Twitter user in Nigeria tweeted, 'follow the relevant handle to get real info regarding Covid-19.'

Another Twitter user encouraged her followers to utilize practical scientific steps and not just faith-based steps alone. She tweeted, 'yes, pray! Pray very hard! But also, take precautions.' The user was responding to those preaching faith-based cures and measures to fight the virus. Using the information provision theme, she acknowledged their right to exercise their faith-based approach. However, she suggested that they also take practical scientific precautions. One of the users was more succinct and 'brutal' in her information provision tweet. She tweeted, 'I will not be visiting anyone, and please do not visit me for now. Stay home, stay safe. In this tweet, the user supplied information about the lockdown and the need for Nigerians to follow the lockdown rules and directives. She explicitly encouraged her friends and fans not to visit her as she would not be visiting them. She concluded her tweet by encouraging her fans and friends to stay home and stay safe.

About 22 percent (2,290) of the tweets pushed disinformation regarding the pandemic. Many of the tweets were directed at Twitter users in Nigeria to undercut those in authorities such as the NCDC or

WHO. These tweets denied the existence of the virus, underplayed its seriousness, and introduced fake cures. For example, a Nigerian Twitter user tweeted, 'Abba Kyari did not die of Coronavirus.' Another user tweeted, 'this clearly shows that Abba Kyari did not die of Covid-19. It was a cover-up to hide his real ailment'. The user continued, 'the fact that he could not travel out of the country to seek medical treatment was what led to his death. These users asserted that Kyari did not die of the Coronavirus but from other related illnesses that they failed to name. While the second user's point about the dilapidated state of Nigeria's hospitals is legitimate, he still engaged in disinformation when he wrongly stated that he did not die of Covid-19.

Some 18 percent (1,873) raised the alarm about the hypocrisy of those in leadership. These alarms came on to point out that those in power were flouting their Coronavirus lockdown and social distancing directives. A user did not like the double standards playing out in Lagos and tweeted, 'whoever is enforcing the lockdown in Lagos State must be thinking with the sole of their feet. This tweet was in connection to what the user saw as

incompetence mixed with double standards. The haphazard and chaotic manner the Lagos State Government went about its lockdowns were the issues here. In one of the tweets calling out the hypocrisy of leaders in Nigeria, one of the users replied, “let’s stop making excuses for them abeg. They need to step up. This is when the country needs them”. This user appears to be irritated. She urged her followers to call out the leaders and stop allowing their incompetence and hypocrisy.

Ten percent (1,041) of tweets were fact checks and tweets debunking either a misleading tweet or outright disinformation, while 20 percent (2,082) of the tweets were for other topics. Such topics include lamentations about hunger due to lockdowns, lack of transportations, mishandling of essential services, corruption, lack of palliative measures, and so forth. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) attempted a fact check to debunk conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns regarding the Coronavirus in Nigeria. The fact-checking and verification theme was frequent as Twitter users and media organizations, especially national newspapers in Nigeria,

ensured that they fact-checked any tweet they found to be inaccurate.

Discussion

This research sought to examine the impact of social media and the believability profile of Covid-19 fake news in Nigeria. Findings uncover overwhelmingly that social media is generally the most used type for news consumption. It is the most important source of news about the Covid-19 pandemic. The print media emerged as the least trusted source of news about the disease, even though newspaper headlines turned out to be the most credible. The growing Nigerians’ distrust of the mainstream media has been well documented. They include ownership structure, the acquiescence of journalists in Nigeria to government propaganda, and the elitist posture of the Nigerian press people (Hari, 2014; Uwalaka et al., 2018; Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018).

Respondents of this study were exposed extensively to fake news headlines. More respondents saw fake news headlines than they did credible news headlines. For example, while 120 respondents reported having seen credible news headlines, 80 reported being exposed to fake news and placebo

headlines. It is worth pointing out that believing in those false headlines has a deleterious consequence in a health pandemic. Similar to this work, some studies assert that information sharing predicts the sharing of fake news on Covid-19 and that fake news dissemination is exacerbated by the availability of social media and the phenomenon of virality (Apuke & Omar, 2020a; Tandoc et al., 2020). This study indicates that fake news about the Covid-19 pandemic disorients the people as it causes them not to trust official guidelines. The impact of about half of respondents of the study seeing and believing fake news headlines could lead them to reject adhering to the safety procedures put in place by the Nigerian government. A recent study has shown that fake news shared on social media regarding the pandemic has led to death and even serious injury to some people (Zhou et al., 2020). This study demonstrates that anyone recalling and believing fake news and placebo headlines decreases the likelihood that such a person will believe credible news headlines. At the same time, the reverse is the case for those who recalled seeing and believing credible news headlines. This result

estimates that the more a respondent uses social media as his or her primary source of news, the more the person will be exposed to fake news headlines. After being exposed to fake news headlines for an extended period, the person will then start believing fake news headlines. The more people believe fake news headlines, the less they trust mainstream media and credible headlines.

Conclusions

This study implies that the ease of use and distrust of traditional media lead users to expose themselves to and believe in fake news. While this contributes to knowledge, especially regarding Nigeria, the researcher recognizes limitations. These include the less likelihood of a universal generalization of the results. Nonetheless, the result may be generalizable to nations similar to Nigeria. Due to the pandemic, an online survey is the only way to conduct this research because of the lockdown instituted by the Federal Government of Nigeria. The extensive use of social media as the trusted news source is the most significant predictor of fake news believability. This upshot weakens the ability of the user to believe and trust credible or

accurate news. Extensive exposure to fake news boosts the chance of believing in fake news while lowering the believability of accurate and credible news.

Recommendations

This study recommends that,

1. Journalists in Nigeria ensure that they report news credibly and objectively to regain the people's trust.
2. Nigerians try to verify the news headlines and stories they read online to work with the most credible information, especially during a health pandemic like the Coronavirus.
3. The Nigerian government engages Nigerians online and use social media platforms as communicative space and media touchpoints to reach her citizenry.

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