



The Hype of Coronavirus Pandemic in Southeast Nigeria: Some Thoughts

¹Mathias Chukwudi Isiani, ²Ngozika Anthonia Obi-Ani & ³Paul Obi-Ani

^{1,2,3}*Department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka*

¹ORCID: 0000-0003-2202-6634, ²ORCID:0000-0003-0219-7460, ³ORCID:0000-0002-7019-0917

Corresponding Author: Ngozika Anthonia Obi-Ani, **E-mail:** ngozika.obi-ani@unn.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

The escalation of the Coronavirus to other countries around the world prompted WHO to declare the virus on January 30, 2020 a public health emergency (WHO, 2020). In lieu of its quick spread and high mortality rate, the WHO termed the virus a pandemic. However, in Nigeria, efforts to contain and sensitize the populace about this pandemic were put in place, media platforms were copiously engaged by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), sensitizing the masses on the preventive measures against the coronavirus. Despite their efforts, some social media users inundated the people with fake news, ‘end-time’ religious teachings, rumors and misinformation about 5G ultra-waves. The dominant questions are: what roles did the different social media platforms play in information dissemination on Covid-19 in Southeast Nigeria? What were peoples’ reactions to these messages? How do the people view messages from government viz-a-viz their religious leaders or other sources? Why do individuals deem it necessary to ‘forward’ such messages to relatives, friends and different social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook? In answering these questions, this qualitative study explores social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, blogs, online newspapers and YouTube where the contestations about the pandemic are most pronounced. This study through its finding using statistical frequencies, demonstrates that before the detection of the first victim of Covid-19 in Nigeria, the region was already agog with social media (mis)information about the pandemic causing panic among the populace followed by the frenzy need to ‘forward’ such messages to those in their contacts. In lieu of this, this study examines these contestations and contradictions about Covid-19 in Southeast Nigeria.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19, Nigeria, Social Media, News, Southeast

INTRODUCTION

The Industrial Revolution since the late 18th century thumped the world into a global village through its advancement in technology. These revolutions came with new technologies, new means of livelihood, new systems of government as well as several new means of communication. Prior to the early 2000s in Nigeria, Ogbuka (2020) observed that communication was restricted to only post offices for letters dissemination. This mode of communication usually took up to three months to reach its destination within the country (Isiani, 2020). By 1980s, Nigeria began to make use of NITEL (Nigerian Telecommunication Limited), a sole telephone service provider which could only accommodate a limited number of people per day (Ogbuka, 2020). Some lamented that the “NITEL queue” could last for up to three days (Nworah, 2020) before they could communicate with their relations. Aside this, only the rich could afford the landline telephones at home. This was the situation of the country before the inauguration of President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999. Following his inauguration, he commissioned the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC) to re-organize and make issuances to companies who would provide telecommunication services to Nigerians. Within this period, successful companies such as MTN Nigeria, Globacom and Econet were granted licenses in 2001 and had begun to attract other companies in Nigeria. Recently, there are numerous telephone service providers in Nigeria, at a cheap rate for calls and browsing for ease in communication.

Consequent upon technological and communication innovations through the use of ultra-waves as a means of connecting to the wider world; Americas and other European nations introduced more sophisticated means of communication with the introduction of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, 2go, Badoo, LinkedIn, Telegram, YouTube, Chrome, WhatsApp and lots more in order to broaden human interactions. These applications in phones and laptops have assisted mankind in knowledge transfer (Quraishi, Ali, Bajwa & Bibi, 2020). In lieu of this, the system within which such transfer of knowledge, information and exchange of ideas occur through the use of these applications in phones and laptops and is known as “social media.”

Hence, social media is defined as “web-based communication tools that enable people to interact with each other by both sharing and consuming information” (Nations, 2018). It also means websites which allow profile creation and visibility of relationship between users (Boyd & Ellison, 2008); web-based applications which provide functionality for sharing, relationship,

group conversation and profiles (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Another definition of social media refers to “internet-based application built on Web 2.0, while Web 2.0 refers to a concept as well as a platform for harnessing collective intelligence” (Hunag & Benyoucef, 2013). Ricciardelli et al (2020) opined that the concept of social media thinks about “people’s privacy, confidentiality and professional boundaries.” Social media becomes public when it carries information beyond an individual’s consumption. It is the fastest and easiest means of communication. To Martins (2020), “the rate of information got from social media is far better than that of television stations news of limited hours.” Social media as a means of communication therefore has assisted the world in understanding incessant challenges such as wars, conflicts among other socio-economic problems daily confronting man.

It is through the social media that, Li Wenliang – a Chinese Ophthalmologist- before his death on February 7, 2020 posted of the presence of coronavirus. His message was not very welcomed by the Chinese government. However, following the outbreak of Coronavirus pandemic in Wuhan, China in the late 2019, the entire world received ample information on the causes, consequences and implications of the virus. Education and sensitization on the different ways through which the virus could be curtailed were relayed while the World Health Organization declared the disease as a pandemic on March 11, 2020. As Nigeria detected her first victim, the various social media outlets became rife with information on the virus. Ezezim (2020) narrated that:

Social media has educated people on the necessary things to do and eat in order to prevent the spread of the virus. It has also assisted the government in disseminating information of what is happening around us during this period (p. 23).

Another informant has the same idea as above, as the mass media such as television, internet and radio have helped a lot to educate the masses of this pandemic. It has helped the people to know the right precautions that would prevent the virus. Since the outbreak of this virus, social media has been a veritable source of information (Nancy, 2020). Also, the use of Zoom has proven worthwhile in connecting to wider audience on the causes of the virus and its preventive measures. Contrarily, Aroh (2020) observed that:

Social media is undeniable the best medium for disseminating information. WhatsApp amongst other social media platforms seems to be the fastest means of transferring messages to the grassroots. Sadly, social media has not been used in the best way especially following the

outbreak of COVID-19 that is depriving the world of its peace and rest... the media has injected fear and panic in the lives of the populace and has made the virus look like a death sentence... social media broadcast from pastors and non-experts have worsened the information about the virus (p. 34).

Still on the same line of view, Kanu (2020) shared her own positions on the challenges of social media wherein she evinced that:

Social media is unarguably the fastest and easiest means of communication today. It has helped provide real time information on the COVID-19 pandemic. But social media platforms have spread false information creating anxiety and panic in the country... Fake news everywhere on social media on the causes and consequences of the virus. In Nigeria, through social media, we were informed that coronavirus will not survive in the country because of her hot weather conditions... Now the country is challenged with over 600 positive patients because of the fake news (p. 20).

Ali & Kurasawa (2019) further documented in his article that:

We are facing an unprecedented crisis of public understanding. Western Digital Corporation and social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and Reddit) and their Chinese equivalents (WeChat, Weibo, Tencent and Toutiao) are at the heart of this crisis. These platforms act as facilitators and multipliers of COVID-19 related misinformation (p. 31).

From the arguments and observations above, it is obvious that social media is an object of information for communicating with a wider audience. Whether genuine or fake news, the use of social media has affected communities, and this makes society a discursive one (Edelman, 2018; Morner & Olauson, 2017; Ricciardelli, 2020). Against this backdrop, the main thrust of this research is to present evidences on the negative and positive consequences/effects of social media on the recent coronavirus pandemic in South-east Nigeria. However, due to the pandemic and consequent distancing guidelines, the research will rely on respondents through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and telephone conversations to gather information from wider audience from the different parts of Southeast Nigeria. Other collection includes oral interviews, published and unpublished books, articles and conferences proceedings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

However, the advancement of social media has become one of the issues on human relations. Some scholars have argued that social media helps in the sharing of public or private messages. As such, the essence of social media is to network the globe within a defined territory (Nations, 2018; Ricciardelli, 2020). However, the crux of installing social platforms on personal devices in recent times has trampled its ethical code. Thus, the rapid propagation of social media has shaped our discursive constructions of society including modes of interpersonal and professional communication as well as norms therein (Edelman, 2018; Morner & Olausson, 2017; Orben & Dunbar, 2017; Wanger, 2015). Owing to this unprecedented growth in digital communication, social work educators are presently taking up concerns on how best to facilitate the awareness and training of social work students on the ethical implications of social media usage (Duncan-Daston, Hunter-Sloan & Fullmer, 2013; Hitchcock & Battista, 2013; Judd & Johnson, 2012; Kimball & Kim, 2013; Mukherjee & Clark, 2012; Trimberger, 2012; Voshel & Wesala, 2015). This is mostly because a lack of ethics on social media has created fears, panic, deaths and societal dislocation. Majority of the public have underplayed the role of scientists, biomedical experts, government authority in addressing issues with accountable information (Kurasawa, 2018; Ali & Kurasawa, 2020; Godfrey, 2020; Anyaogu, 2020; Bouygues, 2020). It is in this lieu that Obi-Ani, Anikwenze and Isiani (2020) observed that the use of social media should be regulated especially in a developing country like Nigeria. They further avow that COVID-19 pandemic affected lives in Nigeria because of the back-up religious messages on the virus from Facebook and WhatsApp. With recourse to this, the authors argue that in order to mitigate the spread of fake news and curb social mistrust, the government should detain defaulters and encourage agencies to educate the public on the social and economic implications of misinformation through the media. Evidently, the only lacuna from the above literatures are that the various scholarly studies reviewed focus solely on the challenges and contributions of social media without an in-depth research on any specific country, region or community. It is this obvious gap in literature that this present study sets out to present evidences on the information culled from social media in Southeast Nigeria. This research is not trying to prove the scientific drugs or its contesting the virus vaccine, but its thrust is to observe how the people of Southeast Nigeria reacted to the spread of COVID-19 virus through copious messages received from social media.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

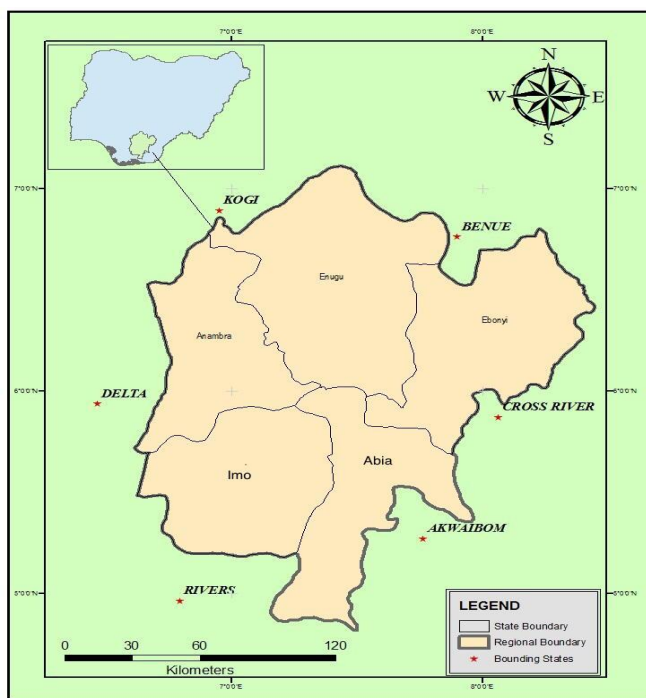
1. The research questions raised in this study examines how the south-eastern Nigerian received the news of recent coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria through social media.
2. It also investigates the reactions of the inhabitants and the outcomes of the pandemic in the region.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, DESIGNS AND DATA COLLECTION

The research interrogates the use social media in sharing messages of COVID-19 in South-eastern Nigeria. The research chooses Southeast of Nigeria, a Christian dominated area and one of the major centres for commercial hub in Nigeria to draw a conclusion that social media was and still is the most essential tool used in disseminating information to the inhabitants living in this region. Descriptive, ethnographic and field survey research design through purposive sampling technique is adopted in this study. The designs are suitable in collection of data from a large population. According to Turkman (1999) research survey simply means the measurement of a person's knowledge, belief, values, feelings and preference of a particular subject matter. This goes in line with Agbegbedia citing Ilogu (2013) that descriptive survey method is used to collect data in such a way that a researcher describes systematically the characteristic features about a given population which are certain variables in relation to the population. Sampling on the other is described to be an avenue where people decide, set or observe behaviours and experiences (Christainsen & Bertram, 2014). It is also used to ascertain division of greater population in context where an investigation of the whole population is not attainable. For the strength of this study, the sample was collected from the five states that made up Southeast Nigeria which include Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia and Ebonyi. 100 questionnaires were distributed to participants for the purpose of determining the effect of social media information on COVID-19 in Southeast Nigeria. This assisted the researchers to understand the views, attitudes, and nuances of the inhabitants on the subject matter.

The study adopted a qualitative historical method of enquiry. This method is adopted to collect and analyse non-numerical data through presentation of opinions, views, comments on social media in Southeast Nigeria. The qualitative data was collected for this research were gathered through the use of primary and secondary sources of data. The primary sources was collected through Key Interviews Informants (KII) especially adult male and female (literate and non-literate), telephone conversions and social media responses. The researchers strictly adhered

to the WHO and NCDC preventive regulations for spreading COVID-19 of wearing their nose masks, use of alcohol-based hand-sanitizers and maintaining 2 meters physical distancing. The secondary sources such as journal articles, newspapers, published books, unpublished projects report and internet messages were used to validate the data collected from interviews and questionnaires. The work involved visiting homes and telephone conversion in order to have the general feelings of the respondents on the subject matter. This participation also enabled the respondents through the survey design to freely participate in the discussion without any attempt of fear, molestation or discrimination. The respondents were allowed to withdraw their opinions or names at any time of their choice. Nevertheless, data obtained from this research were collated, sorted, edited, analysed, and tabulated using content and descriptive techniques with the aid of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) tool.



Map of Nigeria showing the South-Eastern Region (Onyemechalu, 2020)

Coronavirus in Nigeria

The first confirmed case of the coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria was on February 27, 2020 when an Italian citizen tested positive for the virus after his arrival through the Murtala Mohammed International Airport, Lagos (Ruth & Latif, 2020). Subsequently, on 9th March 2020 a second case of coronavirus was reported of a Nigeria citizen in Ogun state. As at 11:30pm on 24th April 2020 the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) confirmed 1095 cases: 208 discharged and 32 deaths (Twitter @NCDCgov, 2020), though it has increased exponentially

since then. These confirmed cases were received with random thoughts among Nigerians. Following the early reports on social media, some Nigerians chose to doubt the existence of the virus in the country while others averred that the virus was the only way God could punish sinful mankind (Philip, 2020). Nevertheless, even in the face of these speculations, a handful of Nigerians have taken preventive measures from the World Health Organization and other medical experts with regard to the control of the virus.

Historically, the coronavirus was first witnessed in Wuhan, China towards the end of 2019 when it was alleged to have killed over ten thousand within its first fifty days (Shereen, et al, 2020). The International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) named the virus as SARS-CoV-2 and the disease as COVID-19 (Shereen, et al. 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) further declared the virus as a pandemic: a decision informed by the number of cases resulting from the virus in different countries. According to the World Health Organization, the virus from China grew from human communication with market seafoods such as bats, frogs, snakes, birds, marmots and rabbits (Shereen, et al. 2020). They registered that humans affected with this seafood disease could spread it through close contacts such as coughing, handshakes, sneezing, respiratory droplets or aerosols (Shereen, et al 2020). They also posited that it could also be transferred through touching metals or hard surfaces that had been touched by those infected. Notwithstanding the numerous medical experts around the world, the virus has continued to kill millions of people across the globe. According to the World Health Organization, the virus has not received any perfect vaccine. The panacea suggested from the World Health Organization in curbing the spread of COVID-19 include maintaining 2 meters of social distance, use of nose masks, touching of face avoidance, use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers, wearing of hand gloves and staying indoors. The measures have been applied strictly in all countries to checkmate human contact of the virus as a possible means of curtailing its spread. More so, the Nigerian government following the directives from the World Health Organization and the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control has issued months of lockdown policies; banning of public gatherings in churches or mosques as well as inter-state travels with the use of commercial vehicles and flight. To help with the awareness of these measures, social media outlets have proved to be the fastest and easiest way of communicating with a wider audience especially in areas where there is limited power supply for television and radio broadcast. Furthermore, through social media, non-governmental organizations have created

comic videos, cartoons and art works on the effects of the virus. An attempt to watch these videos helps in sending messages across to both literate and illiterate Nigerians.

COVID-19 and Social Interactions: The South-Eastern Platforms

Nigeria is made up of over 250 ethnic groups comprising different languages. Amongst these ethnic groups are three major groups namely – Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. The South-Eastern part of Nigeria is constituted predominantly of an Igbo speaking group whom are principally Christians. It would be assumed that about 70% of this group are literate following the widespread of education through the impact of the colonial missionaries and explorers as well as by virtue of its early contact with Europeans. In line with the 2012 UNESCO ranking of literacy rates in Nigeria, these States in Southeast were ranked thus: Imo is 53.2%, Enugu 66.5%, Ebonyi 53.0% while Anambra and Abia have 75.1% and 72.5% respectively (UNESCO, 2012). Ejizu (1986) opined that “the unsettling encounter of the Igbo and the Europeans especially from the nineteenth century onwards gradually unleashed the dynamic forces and tide of change that have over time crystallized dislocation, disorganization and transformation of the traditional Igbo society and culture”. In discourse, the Igbo culture has been jeopardized by colonialism and by globalization. Arguments among writers (Ilogu, 1974; Ejizu, 1986; Nwaezeigwe, 2013) revolve around the assertion that Igbo values are going into extinction; thus, the possibility of the Igbo culture fading away by the end of the century. These arguments go in line with the current entertainment practices in the society which have fostered language and cultural expositions of Europeans as regards the Igbo culture. However, it is evident that this acculturation is linked to the long contact of Igbo communities who were viewed by Europeans colonial missionaries as ‘fetish’, ‘barbaric’ and ‘heathen.’ For them, the Igbo culture had to be changed if it would catch up with current capitalist innovations and technological ingenuity. Resultantly, adopting new technologies or innovations allegedly became a characteristic feature of the Igbo people. Following the news of the pandemic by the World Health Organization and subsequent reactions from Nigerians; the South-Eastern part of the country has relied mostly on the use of social platforms to attract the government on the development of the region. With the assistance of the NCDC Twitter handle and messages from government owned Facebook and WhatsApp handles, the Igbos of Southeast Nigeria have been able to understand the effects of the virus. In preventing the spread of the virus, NCDC through its official Twitter handle page - @NCDCgov – fastened the education of the populace in order to curtail the rumors from other social media platforms on the causes, cure and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In curbing

widespread rumors on the cure for COVID-19, the Nigeria Health Watch tweeted on 30 March 2020 that:

There is NO scientific evidence that cooking neem leaf, pawpaw leaf, ginger, garlic, lime and organs is an effective treatment for #coronavirus. Please do NOT share such messages. #Take Responsibility by sharing ONLY verified messages from @NCDCgov, @Fmohnigeria, @WHO.

The NCDC further tweeted on 31 March 2020:

What is COVID-19?

#COVID19 is a respiratory illness that spreads through contact with an infected person or contaminated surface. Most patients will have only mild symptoms. Severe illness is mostly experienced in elders and those with chronic conditions.

#Take Responsibility.

Furthermore, on 31 March 2020, the NCDC Retweeted:

Beware of unverified messages on social media!

These DO NOT protect against #COVID19

- Consuming hot lemon, palm oil, ginger or garlic
- Gargling with salt water
- Drinking or spraying dettol on your body

#Take Responsibility

#Wash Your Hands

#Stay At Home

It becomes imperative to note at this juncture that all the five State governors of Southeast imposed a lockdown following the confirmation of two positive cases in Enugu State. The region has henceforth become misguided by lots of comments and messages from different sources on social media. Some inhabitants through social media have challenged the existence of the virus in Nigeria let alone in the region. Through comments and posts on Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram, the region jettisoned the directives of the World Health Organization and the Nigeria Center for Disease Control against the widespread of fake news. An unskilled laborer in Nsukka communicated on his mistrust that:

The government of Nigeria is deceiving us with this virus... I need to see the names of those affected with this virus. Moreover, my pastor told me that the essence of this lockdown is the President's agenda to Islamize the country

as he earlier wanted. There is nothing like Uncle Coro(coronavirus) (Agbo, 2020).

On a Focus Group Discussion via a Facebook video call on March 30, 2020, a uniformed commentary from members was observed. They averred that:

Coronavirus is not in Nigeria. Even if it happens to be in Nigeria, it is not anywhere close to the Igbo society. We are the children of Abraham... However, we have been bathing with holy water and holy oil as directed from our pastor through Facebook since we are being locked from going to Church.

Another interviewee commented that:

On Facebook, I was informed to always boil and drink lime, garlic and lemon. I have been taking it for a month now as it would help free me and my family from Coronavirus.

The above comment was shared on different social media platforms and has been adopted in different families as observed during the research. Many of the informants, when asked why they deem it necessary to forward same messages to friends and relations, they said that they want to save themselves and their families. The region in its literate percentage has totally rejected the philosophy of the World Health Organization and Nigeria Center for Disease Control on the preventive measures for COVID-19. To these citizens, the government of the country is a scam (Akubue, 2020). This could be attributable to years of misgovernance and corruption in the country.

In addition to the above fake news on social media is the link of the virus with the recent 5G ultra-waves; a supposed Chinese development. The South-Eastern region received this technological advancement with mistrust and misinformation from social media. Over 80% of its inhabitants linked this development to the spread of the Anti-Christ mission in the world, according to the biblical record in the Book of Revelation. The Book of Revelation is a misery documentation of the last days as God had shown John, one of the Apostles of Jesus Christ (Philip, 2020). For people dwelling in this region, one of the fulfilments of the end time is the 5G ultra-waves which would be spearheaded by an agent of the devil known as the Anti-Christ (Ebere, 2020). Social media through this created fear and panic among the populace on the penetration of 5G ultra-waves in Nigeria as some threatened to burn masts which were to be installed by Chinese engineers. One of the forwarded WhatsApp messages, commenting on the 5G and COVID-19 link had the title, "Shocking: Coronavirus is a Scam: 5G Network is the Main

Problem Created by Proponents of the New World Order (Anti-Christ)". The above assertion was purportedly revealed by a former Executive of Vodafone Telecommunications Company, Newbury England with name withheld from the post. The following was culled from the message:

What we are seeing are not symptoms of a virus. What we are not aware of is what is causing these symptoms. This has nothing to do with biological warfare or any other kind of stuff you might be hearing about on the internet. These are lies spread to distract us from the truth. What you see is the bodies of people reacting to what is known as radio spectrum radiation or radio frequency radiations.... What is happening now is that there is a deliberate strategy to install 5G Network which is the 5th generation internet radio spectrum frequencies that enable mobile phones, smart phones and all devices to function at much faster processing ability... The 5G frequency is 10 times faster than the 4G. Unfortunately, when the 5G comes into connection with the human body, it causes cell poisoning...So what you are seeing happening to people in most parts of the world is not any coronavirus per se, but cell poisoning caused by 5G frequency, manifesting with fluids, chemicals and viruses that the body is trying to dispose of because it is harmful to it.

As such, the post declined the concept of Coronavirus as a contagious disease as it further reads that:

The true fact is that this coronavirus is not contagious. What they are doing is spreading it to people via the tests and supply of contaminated face masks etc... It is certain that hundreds of millions of people will die as a result of the 5G implementation and the coronavirus vaccines. This is in fulfilment of the Book of Revelation 6:8 which prophesied that this pandemic will wipe out one fourth of the population of the earth ... The vaccines used as a measure to curb the virus contains toxins that will enable the frequency of 5G to be more effective in causing more deaths.

To further buttress this message on WhatsApp, Akubue, E (personal communication, 2020) argues that the aim of Chinese doctors coming to Nigeria is to inject toxins into Nigerians as lamented by Pastor Chris, the leader of Christ Embassy whose message of 5G ultra-waves as a vaccine to kill the world created fear, panic and anxiety among the populace. Some of the elderly

persons in the region opted not to take any vaccine “even if it [was] not harmful to the flesh” (Ogbuka, 2020).

Another attempt on social media misinformation on Coronavirus issues is as it regards the Biblical Anti-Christ. As earlier noted, Southeast Nigerians are predominantly Christians who had in some cases traced their origin to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. As Christians, they believed that after “death comes judgement from God which thereafter comes the ruling of the Anti-Christ whom must have penetrated the world before the second coming of Christ” (Philip, 2020). According to Biblical doctrines, for one to be accepted into the kingdom of Christ after the judgment, one must ensure that their ways on earth mirror the exemplary life of Jesus Christ in the Bible. With recourse to this, the Bible in every home is not to be undermined and a yardstick for children’s upbringing and social behavior. Achebe (2012) averred thus that:

The Bible played an important role in my education. My parents often read passages out loud to us during prayer time and encouraged us, when we were all able, to read and memorize several passages. Sunday school continued this tradition of Christian evangelical education, this time with several other children from the village (p. 12).

Furthermore, the pride of every community, home, village or town in Southeast Nigeria is hinged on having a Christian priest (Isiani, 2020). The parents of the ordained priest automatically bear the name “*mama ukochukwu and papa ukochukwu*”¹ as they enjoy a form of reverence and respect among the people till they die. With the outflow of the Coronavirus pandemic, social media messages amplified the populace’s anxiety by linking the virus with the coming of Anti-Christ as well with the Beast of the Earth in fulfilment of the prophesy of John in the Book of Revelation 13: 16-18. One of the social media messages that went viral was titled “Coronavirus and Anti-Christ.” The following was culled from this message:

The coronavirus vaccines will come with a tracking device called a Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) Chip. It is a microchip that will be inserted in the body at the same time with the vaccines ... this chip is the Mark of the Beast which shall be implanted on the right hand or forehead ... The Bible says that the mark, name and number of the Beast which is 666, is the number of a man. The person after whom this virus is named after is known as Saint Corona, who is considered by the Roman Catholic Church as patron Saint of plagues (p. 1).

¹ Mama Ukochukwu and Papa Ukochukwu are Igbo words which literally means “Priest Mother and Priest Father.”

It went further to capture Bill Gate as the “Anti-Christ”, which the Bible says will come in form of a man. It read:

Bill Gates has resigned from his position as Chairman of Microsoft and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He is now vigorously pushing the Coronavirus vaccines agenda. He has developed technology in that direction ... Please take note that the Book of Revelations 13:16-18 identifies the Anti-Christ as the man that will spearhead the implanting of the Mark of the Beast (RFID Chip) on human beings. Bill gates is the Chief Proponent of implanting the chip in human beings. So, is Bill Gates the long awaited Anti-Christ?

In line with the above, another message forwarded on WhatsApp on April 10, 2020 read:

If viruses are man-made, as scientific research shows, where did SARS and Corona viruses come from? This is Bill Gates, an agent of the devil, trying to fulfil the plan of the evil one on Earth through the spread of 5G and toxins vaccines.

Some Nigerian religious leaders have also assisted through social media platforms in spreading fear and panic. One of the proponents of 5G ultra-waves as a biological weapon from China to destroy the entire world is the leader of Love World Assembly (aka Christ Embassy), Pastor Chris Oyakhilmoe. The pastor in his message on YouTube accused the government led by President Buhari of locking Nigerian citizens at home in order to install 5G network (YouTube, April 7, 2020). The pastor was later reported in a Nigerian Newspaper thus:

I am a science and technology enthusiast; I will be in the right position to look at the health risk of the 5G installations in the major cities in Nigeria... No matter how enthusiastic I am about the 5G technology, I'm going to think of health implications and put my concern for the health risks involved.

His audience in Southeast Nigeria began to spread his broadcast in all social media outlets in the region where they lamented that people should withdraw from the preventive measures of the Nigerian medical experts as their problem is to fight against planned 5G installations in any part of the country.

Another female pastor, Lady Apostle Helen Ukpabio also shared her messages on Facebook on the pandemic titled “The Plague and Coronavirus.” Following her teaching she accused the federal government of locking down churches that should be a meeting of prayers

for healing the land from the pandemic disease. She furthered noted that “the cause of the pandemic in the world is because of the atrocities humanity have committed ... and it will not end until the world begs God for forgiveness.”

Still on the path of interrogation, some of these forwarded messages from Social Media platforms have been received with mixed feelings among the populace in Southeast Nigeria. Majority of the citizenry have “died” silently from fear, worry, anxiety, high blood pressure and panic from these broadcasts. The Nigerian government through its agencies have made efforts in curbing the spread of fake news on coronavirus among citizens, yet these social media platforms in the region are awash with received hundreds of thousands of such forwarded messages. Nevertheless, the essence of this present study is to call on the government of Nigeria to strictly examine the versions of news on coronavirus from social media before it births a detrimental consequence that the country might be unable to ameliorate.

RESULTS: PRESENTATIONS OF DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA FINDINGS

The research was carried out in order to examine what influenced the populace in South-eastern Nigeria in understanding the negative and positive effects of covid-19. From the research, the study finds out that majority of the population living in South-eastern Nigeria relied on social media information from friends and relatives with little or no attention to the government and medical experts’ preventative measures. Questionnaires distributed were collated and tested for the validation of the finding in the research. The result of this findings is organized in a tabular form to show the frequencies derived from the 100 questionnaires shared in different online platforms and personal contact with the respondents.

Table 1.1. *Descriptive Statistics of the Mean and Standard Deviation of the respondents*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Social Media	1.10	1.092	100
Citizens	1.79	1.107	100
Government	1.18	1.205	100
COVID-19	1.20	.728	100

From the table above it is observed that the social media information in South-eastern Nigeria obtained the mean of 1.10 and standard deviation of 1.092. Citizens responses to covid-

19 messages in South-eastern Nigeria obtained the mean of 1.79 and standard deviation of 1.107. Government and medical experts' instructions on the use of social media and COVID-19 preventive measures in South-eastern Nigeria also obtained the mean of 1.18 and standard deviation of 1.205. Nevertheless, the 100 respondents which responded on the effects of coronavirus hype in South-eastern Nigeria obtained the mean of 1.20 and standard deviation of .728. To note, from the foregoing analysis, a result is accepted when it is more than 0.5 and rejected when it is less than 0.5. The descriptive statistics is used to correlate the frequencies on the social media information on COVID-19 in Southeast Nigeria. Its significance will be shown below.

Table 1.2. *Correlations of the respondents*

		Social Media	Citizens	Government	COVID-19
Social Media	Pearson Correlation	1	.286**	-.212	-.153
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.010	.059	.031
	N	100	100	100	100
Citizens	Pearson Correlation	.286**	1	.074	-.173
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.010		.215	.025
	N	100	100	100	100
Government	Pearson Correlation	-.212	.074	1	.057
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.059	.515		.043
	N	100	100	100	100
COVID-19	Pearson Correlation	-.153	-.173	.057	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.031	.025	.043	
	N	100	100	100	100

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From the table three independent variables (social media, citizens, government) and one dependent variable (COVID-19) was tested in order to get the significant relationship between the messages on coronavirus and its responses in South-eastern Nigeria. The above table will be discussed in the findings below.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings from the research was based on the collated questionnaires from the respondents. The researchers used the questionnaires to validate the study. Thus, whenever the

table value is less than the calculated value in statistical analysis, the tested hypotheses is to be rejected but when it is greater the hypotheses is to be accepted.

The first hypotheses that was tested states that ‘social media do not significantly influence the spread of fake news and rumours of COVID-19 in South-eastern Nigeria’ was rejected because the results show that the significant level was .031 which is less than .05 (.031 < .05). This shows that social media news from WhatsApp, 2go, Facebook etc significantly influence the spread of false messages in South-eastern Nigeria. The social media platforms rarely discuss on the preventative measures for the virus. This shows that the spread of coronavirus virus in South-eastern Nigeria is as a result of several false fake messages and rumours received from the internet.

The second hypotheses tested states that ‘citizens do not significantly influence the spread of misinformation to the public’ was rejected because the result shows that the significant level was .025 which is greater than .05 (.025 > .05). This shows that the citizens living in South-eastern Nigeria orchestrated the widespread of misinformation in the region through the use of social media. From the research, it was found out that the region has no law regulating the messages through social media. Information on social media are not checkmated in the region or in the country at large thereby allowing the citizens to assume that the news on COVID-19 from these platforms are right.

The third hypotheses tested states that ‘government and medical experts’ responses do not significantly influence the spread of COVID-19 social media fake messages in South-eastern Nigeria’ was rejected because the result shows that the significant level was .043 which is greater than .05 (.043 > .05). This shows that despite the causes and preventive measures of coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria, the populace in South-eastern Nigeria disregarded the information for the messages from their loved ones through social media.

CONCLUSION

The transition from the Stone Age to Modern times has led to numerous technological innovations that has fostered a peaceful and “unharmful” co-existence of mankind. One of the targets of the Industrial Revolution that started in Europe and America in the late 18th century was to ease the human load of working in farms and plantations through machines. With the assistance of technocrats, there were massive transformation of human environment thus leading to the stoppage of human slave trading between African middlemen and European merchants

cum explorers. These technologies gave rise to the transformation of a manual means of sending and receiving messages to a sophisticated method with the use of smart phones and personal computers. These messages from these devices could be sent and received through installed applications such as Facebook, 2go, WhatsApp, Instagram, Badoo, Twitter and Zoom. Communicating through any of this application was widely termed the use of social media. With this means, one communicates with loved ones without queuing up for hours as was with the case in Nigeria in the 1970s through the mid-1990s. In lieu of this, social media can be said to be a wizard communication (Ugwu, 2020).

Through these social media platforms, the global North and global South could exchange the knowledge of technologies, health services and infrastructural advancement. The global South could through the use of social media outlets such as YouTube and Facebook learnt how to cook continental dishes and vice versa. These platforms also comprised a means of tutelage as it was the easiest and fastest way of transferring cultures, norms and values from one nation to another. More so, it is also a vital tool for disseminating important information such as the outbreaks of conflicts, wars and pandemics. It is on this basis that after the outbreak of the recent coronavirus pandemic in Wuhan, China, the entire globe received 90 per cent of information through social media platforms. These messages also got to the illiterate masses through cartoons and comic videos displaying the causes, consequences and preventive measures against the spread of the virus. With the assistance of the World Health Organization and the Nigeria Center for Disease Control, Nigerians adequately received messages of using alcohol-based hand sanitizers, covering of nose with nose masks, covering of mouth when sneezing or coughing, as well as maintaining a distance of 2 meters between individuals. The NCDC tweet on March 31, 2020 reads thus:

The virus that causes #COVID19 is not airborne. Based on studies, droplets that spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes land on nearby surfaces. Maintain a social distance of 2 meters always and if you are ill, wear a face mask to avoid infecting others #Take Responsibility.

However, irrespective of the important roles of social media platforms in preventing the widespread of the virus, they have also become a means of sharing misinformation about the disease especially among Southeast Nigerians who predominantly are the Igbo speaking group with a strong Christianity inclination. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), noted that urgent measures must now be taken to address

the “coronavirus infodemic.” In recounting the measures of the infodemic, the director lamented on the panic arising from “public confusion about who and what information sources to trust thus generating fear and panic due to unverified rumors and exaggerated claims.” This no doubt promotes xenophobic and racist forms of digital vigilantism and scapegoating (Ali & Kurasawa, 2020). With the series of messages from WhatsApp and Facebook on the pandemic, majority have lived in fear, anxiety and panic regarding the derogatory messages from different sources as the same “false” messages that led to deaths in Southeast Nigeria on drinking salt as a treatment for Ebola virus has been replicated (Aliyu, 2014; Neporent, 2014). Additionally, Facebook and WhatsApp messages are currently spreading the news of Rev. Mbaka’s prophesy of bathing with a human hair from Bible which the revered reverend disputed in various media outlets. Other preventive messages culled from different social media platforms include the drinking of hot garlic, lemon and lime. At the wake of Donald Trump’s tweet on the use of Chloroquine as a helpful drug for curing coronavirus at its early stage which was further proven by scholars and medical experts (Siemieniuk, et al, 2020) on the use of Hydrochloroquine as a helpful drug for reducing the symptoms of COVID-19 between its first ten days was misinterpreted in Nigeria. In Nigeria especially in Southeast, the social media platforms misinterpreted the information to the general public on Chloroquine as the permanent drug for COVID-19. This misinterpretation lead to a majority of Nigerian citizens taking an overdose of Chloroquine in order not to be infected with the virus. The drug itself went high in price and scarce in markets and pharmaceutical shops as majority of the citizens were buying it in bulk for themselves and loved ones. This was a similar scenario in the region during the Ebola virus outbreak as the social media disseminated the use of salt to bath and drinking salty water as a cure for Ebola virus. It is sad that majority of the people in the region died in their thousands as a result of drinking salty water (Obi-Ani, Anikwenze and Isiani, 2020). Arising from the tweet of Chloroquine as an anti-malarial drug for treating coronavirus, a WhatsApp message complemented it saying:

Interesting read.

COVID-19 AND MALARIA. RESEARCH BY DR. BAYO

The infection rate (especially the critically ill) and number of deaths due to Covid-19 that are emanating from Sub-Saharan Africa are rather low, so I got curious that some factors must be at play.

With the recent report that some antimalarial drugs might be helpful in treating Covid-19, I now saw a correlation:

Sub-Saharan Africa is a heavily endemic area for malaria, hence antimalarial medications are like a staple diet for us. I pored over some data on the internet mainly from two sites; Malaria: Our World in Data (a world map with all the malaria endemic countries shown) and Coronavirus Update (this is an hourly update of number of infections, number of critical cases and number of deaths for almost all the countries in the world). I found out that the low figures are common to all malaria endemic countries in the world.

India, the number one malaria nation in Asia with a population of over a billion and a fairly large and prosperous middle class that travels the world, has only 8 deaths as of today.

Papua New Guinea, another malaria endemic country in the South Pacific, has only one death.

Afghanistan, another malaria endemic country in Asia, has only one death.

And neighbouring Pakistan has only 7 deaths.

Africa an endemic country for Malaria all together has less than 150 deaths

There are no critical cases in all these countries.

The figures coming out of European countries and America are in hundreds and thousands and these are countries with far better medical care than Sub-Saharan Africa and most Asian countries. Some are arguing that our figures are low because of poor testing, but there are no exponential increases in the number of critically ill persons and deaths.

This survey is very limited but the pattern is glaring that malaria endemic areas of the world are not that affected by Covid-19, and I have strong a feeling that quite a large number of people in these areas if not all have been treated for Malaria severally and therefore have developed resistance to the Covid-19 virus. Thus, they are getting infected but their immune systems are healing them.

I'm not even sure the only death in Nigeria can be counted for Covid-19 because this was a 67-year-old man with multiple myeloma (a form of cancer) and diabetes and was undergoing chemotherapy. In conclusion, if you have ever been treated severally for Malaria, you stand a 100% chance of overcoming any Corona virus. Go and get Chloroquine drug and save yourself and family from COVID-19. Take it twice in a day. **Copied

In lieu of the above assertion, a post-truth society is one in which subjective opinions and unverified claims rival valid scientific and biomedical facts in their public influence; therefore, the need for evidences to support reasoned arguments becomes downplayed, while at the same

time, social norms concerning how and why people should be held accountable for what they say is weakened. Southeast Nigeria is challenged with a gross misconduct of spreading fake news, rumors and false preventive measures for the virus. Pastors and some individuals have also tweeted and posted that the recent pandemic is as a result of the fifth-generation grade of technology (5G ultra-waves) which they claim have human effects through the injection of vaccines. Through social media, proponents of this argument have threatened the government on the installation of the 5G network in any part of the country. Others have also linked the pandemic to the end of the world and to the rise of the Anti-Christ as documented in the Holy Book of Revelations.

With regard to the above challenges this study recommends that the government of the region should place sanctions on individuals, religious leaders, government and non-governmental personnel that misinform the citizens through erroneous posts on any social media platform. This is because the 21st century social media ought to be presented to the citizenry as a channel for appropriate information. More so, government agencies should create an official WhatsApp account having observed that it is one of the easiest and fastest channels of reaching a wider audience because of its interactive nature and cheap cost. Religious leaders should also be advised to use social media platforms as medium for counselling the masses on the consequences of the pandemic. They should also be advised to desist from using these platforms as a means to ‘sentence citizens to death’ through false teachings. Without these measures, efforts to contain COVID-19 will be hindered by “spread of panic and confusion, and driving division, when solidarity and collaboration are key to saving lives and ending the health crisis (Ali & Kurasawa, 2020).

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