

**SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE PROPAGATION OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES ON COVID- 19
PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA: AN APPRAISAL**

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Abstract

The detection and spread of COVID - 19 Pandemic brought with it the dissemination of lots of misinformation and conspiracy theories in the Social Media leading to some sorts of confusion among Users. This study examines the social media and propagation of conspiracy theories on COVID -19 pandemic in Nigeria. Quantitative Survey Research Method was used to obtain information for the study. Questionnaire containing two major sections with several key issues and a cross sectional face to face survey was conducted within the months of March - April, 2021 among youth in Delta State. A face to face structured questionnaire of 2000 pertaining social media and the propagation of conspiracy theories on COVID -19 pandemic in Nigeria was administered to males as well as females youth in five selected Local Government Areas of Delta State. The study found that social media are mostly used to propagate conspiracy theories on COVID -19 pandemic and however affirmed that social media platforms can filter out few conspiracy theories when content are censored. Generally, it was also found that people's perception of conspiracy theories varies from persons to persons in the studied area due to several social factors. Overall, COVID -19 conspiracy theories are pervasive in Nigeria and can be curtail /mitigated when media content moderation is employed. The study recommended that Social Media platforms should intensify its self censorship by adding some restrict features that check misinformation and unverified claims.

Introduction

Conspiracy theories on COVID -19 began to flood the Social Media immediately after the outbreak. The perilous respiratory syndrome, COVID – 19 was described as an anorectic virus which has caused the death of millions of people and others infected worldwide. However, conspiracy theories try to explain significant events and circumstances as the malevolent act of secret and powerful groups (Douglas *et al.*, 2017; Douglas *et al.*, 2019). The propagation of conspiracy theories on COVID – 19 pandemic have lacked needed scientific proof on the virus but kept spreading unchecked through the social media and occupying the news contents. This however is not unconnected with the gatelessness of the social Media. Thus, COVID -19 pandemic and the conspiracy theories and misinformation kept spreading at alarming rate. A lot of information and misinformation preceded COVID- 19 pandemic especially during the dreaded Ebola Virus. At this period of the COVID – 19 pandemic, information is constantly changing (Vaugh & Tinker, 2009). Health information is competing with claims which are amplified across social media (Zarocostas, 2020). More so, several theories and beliefs about COVID -19 outbreak revealed vast spectrum of falsity and calumny information

as regards beliefs pertaining COVID -19 outbreaks. Majority of these COVID -19 misinformation has focus on false claims, conspiracy theories, unchecked rumours, false prevention methods and dubious cures (Liu et al., 2020). According to Imhoff & Lamberty (2020), conspiracy beliefs about COVID -19 have direct implication for human behaviour as misinformation causes confusion and spreads fear, which may obstruct the response to the pandemic (Depoux *et al.*, 2020). As COVID -19 viruses circulate all over the world, many conspiracy theorists claim that COVID -19 was planned to kill and reduce world population. Many social media Users became gullible and were coaxed to adopt information and beliefs that are conflicting and unproven scientifically.

Statement of Problem

The outbreak of COVID -19 Pandemic came with the propagation of conspiracy theories all over the world and proliferation of un – verified information through social media platforms such as twitter and facebook (Frenkel *et al.*, 2020). These beliefs, rumours, mis – information, and calumny have changed human thought, behaviour and perception because of man's egoism and constraints of knowledge. Consequently, the increasing rate of conspiracy theories' claims, beliefs and uncertainty around COVID -19 which make people prone to doubt the prevention and treatment protocols necessitated this research.

Objective of the Study

This study examined the social media and propagation of conspiracy theories on COVID -19 pandemic. However the specific objectives are:

1. To identify the Conspiracy theories on the Social Media
2. To ascertain the extent the Social Media propagate Conspiracy theories
3. To find out how Conspiracy theories influence people's perception of COVID -19 pandemic
4. To determine how effective the Social media propagate the Conspiracy theories on COVID - 19 pandemic

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions in line with the objectives:

1. What are the conspiracy theories on the social media.
2. To What extents do the social media propagate conspiracy theories?
3. How do the conspiracy theories influence people's perception of COVID -19 pandemic?
4. How effective do the social media propagate the conspiracy theories on COVID -19 pandemic?

Literature Review

COVID -19 pandemic and the dissemination of conspiracy theories spread like wild fire all over the globe and most of the information conveyed lack scientific claims. Kouzy *et al.*, (2020) stated that the spread of conspiracy theory gave rise to several un –verified claims. Other researchers such as Allington *et al.*, (2020) affirmed that people who have conspiracy beliefs tend to get their fact from social media. More so, misleading posts are often more popular than posts with accurate information like the case on the fact book which contains the information about Zika virus in 2016(Sharma, Jaday & Ferdinard, 2017). Rumours radiate like wild fire in social media (e.g the 5G technology which was assumed to be the cause of COVID -19 pandemic, mosquito bite transfuse virus, intake of Chloroquine cures COVID -19 disease (Bruno Kessler Foundation, 2020), Alcohol intake can cure COVID -19 (Trew, 2020) and this has resulted to the deaths of hundreds of Iranians dying from toxins. Also, notable claims, fake news, mis- information and conspiracy theories on COVID -19 pandemic circulate widely across the globe and are regarded as **Infodemic** (Mejova & Kalimer, 2020). In addition, conspiracy theories try to explain event or practices of actors secretly abusing their power to accomplish their own goals (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Vscinski & Parent, 2014).

Social media Narratives on Some Conspiracy theories about COVID 19 pandemic in Nigeria.

COVID -19 witnessed abundance of falsehood and calumny information across social media some of which are highlighted below:

(i) Radiation of the 5G networks

The 5G conspiracy theory was linked as a cause of COVID -19. Notable claims revealed that 5G network is electromagnetic waves that destroy the cells in the body. Social media (twitter and face book) were used to disseminate information across border and that is the cause of death globally. Furthermore, some school of thought averred that the 5G conspiracy was posted only by isolated groups and few individual users with accounts being set up for the sole purpose of spreading the theory (Ahmed *et al.*, 2020). Other proponents of the theory claimed that COVID -19 is fake and a plan to dispose the 5G network towers as carrier of the virus. Other social media users claimed that phone technology uses 5G radio waves to form radiation. However, emergence of COVID - 19 pandemic opposition of the 5G had already been established worldwide resenting the long debunked myths (Grimes, & Bishop, 2017). Buffering these claims does mean that COVID -19 spread by radiation through electromagnetic spectrum and no longer by droplets from human to human as affirmed by the World Health Organization or can the 5G radiation ionize or induce virus?

(ii) Conspiracy theories on micro-chips

Fake news and conspiracy theories about micro –chips in vaccines for COVID -19 pandemic are spinning on social media stopping people from being vaccinated. Thus, fake news revealed that Bill Gates Microsoft founder planned to use vaccines to inject micro –chips into people in order to aid the government monitor the activities and access peoples’ calls and locations. Hence, Bill and Melinda Gates foundation efforts to eliminate polio and malaria across Africa was alleged by the conspiracy theorists that the foundation planned to wipe out Africa population (Nathaniel, 2020). Also, another proponent alleged that Bill Gate bribed the National Assembly with \$10 million to pass a bill making the vaccination compulsory for all Nigerians (Kiven & Melined, 2020). Furthermore, Burnard & Richards (2020) braced the claims that the tracking chip will be inserted into people bodies without their knowledge and consent. According to Michael (2020) and Koester (2017) that the chip is nano - tattoo like and will be inserted into people during the vaccination. This argument favoured Michael and Ip (2008) that the microchip implant have been in existence far back 2008 and were regarded as straight forward procedures similar to the installation of pacemakers in humans and other medical innovations for prosthesis. However, many reports have been propagated on social media claiming that COVID -19 vaccines contained microchip and Bill Gate foundation has proposed a new way of inserting dye on the skin through patches, not syringe vaccinated as kind of medical record. So how will the micro-chip be injected into people’s body as claimed?. How will the microchip vaccine alter or change our DNA?

(iii) Conspiracy theories that COVID -19 was made in a Laboratory

The conspiracy theories on where COVID -19 diseases started circulating in the social media and the theorist postulated that it started from China’s Wuhan institute of Virology. This theory stressed that COVID -19 had occurred due to nature and not engineered. And if COVID -19 was engineered, evidence would have shown the real genetic code in COVID -19 DNA. Also, there is no scientific consensus that COVID -19 as claimed had escaped accidentally from Wuhan Institute of Virology. And there are no proves that COVID -19 emanated from other corona viruses under investigation by the institute. This theory has dangerous implications, biased and should be discarded.

(iv) Conspiracy theories on Hydroxychloroquine as an effective treatment

Despite the evidence that hydroxychloroquine is a malaria drug and cannot cure COVID -19 disease, several studies have shown that hydroxychloroquine does not prevent or protect COVID -19 patient and the National Institute of Health stated that it has no benefits for COVID -19 while other scientific experts warned against the use because of the risk of heart disease . But former United States President, Donald Trump continues to promote the use of hydroxychloroquine in social media as effective cure for COVID - 19 disease.

(v) Conspiracy theories on COVID -19 death rates are inflated.

This theory stressed that COVID -19 death rates are blown up and no need for COVID -19 health precautions. Also, COVID -19 death certificate and figure are manipulated by National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC).

Impact of Social media and the propagation of conspiracy theories in Nigeria.

As COVID -19 pandemic death rates continue to surge rapidly, social media and conspiracy theories spread all over the globe without excluding Nigeria. Apart from millions of death and sickness associated with COVID -19 pandemic, people's style of living has changed. Fear, curiosity, and trepidation have taken the lead. According to Adeboyejo (2020) medical personnel expresses fear of the contagion which results in turning patients away from hospitals. Also, it is a believed theory that every medical issue in Nigeria is associated to COVID -19 diseases. Thus, economic danger, threat of violence, disrupted social lives, death, no health facilities, hunger and the conspiracy theories claims, belief and misinformation was recorded in Nigeria as a negative aspect of COVID -19 pandemic. Hence, beliefs and claims that hunger and economic hardship not COVID -19 virus will kill people but starvation and fear, because many Nigerians survived on small and medium industries (Idris, 2020). Several claims and assertions on COVID -19 diseases that people with malaria symptoms are grouped as COVID -19 patients in order to add to the COVID -19 Index number were propagated. Is malaria synonymous with COVID -19? (Ben Television, 2020) . More so, others alleged that the Nigeria Center for Disease Control has ordered medical officials to direct patient with serious case to their hospital as a COVID -19 patient and this goes with palliatives. In addition, some alleged that medical personnel will inject and kill elderly people and sign a fake death certificate, collect a substantial amount for every adult death as a reward.

Furthermore, Channels Television (2020) alleged that people published themselves as COVID -19 patients to collect money while some show phone text claiming that they were asked to publicized themselves to be given money. Generally, several dimensions of conspiracy theories on COVID -19 through the social media has contributed to the irreversible pains in the ill fated Nigerian society.

Methodology: The study examine the social media and the propagation of conspiracy theories on COVID -19 pandemic in Nigeria. Quantitative techniques were used to obtain information. Questionnaire Instrument containing two major sections with several key issues were adopted in this study.

Research Design: A cross sectional face to face survey was conducted within the months of March - April, 2021 among youth in Delta State, Nigeria.

Validity of Instrument: The instrument was validated to find out the accuracy of the instrument through a pilot study.

Population of study: All internet Users living in the twenty five Local Government Areas of three Senatorial Districts, Delta State formed the focus of this study. The internet users comprises male and female aged 20 – 59 years which constitute the 5,475,140 among which male is 2,754,993 and female 2,720,147 (National population Commission, 2006).

Sample Size and Sampling techniques : The sample size for this study was purposively put at 2000 on the recommendation of Comrey & Lee (1992) that sample size of between 500 and above is excellent for a large population. Out of the twenty five (25) Local Government Areas, five were randomly selected as shown in Table 1 below. A quota sample of 400 (four hundred) youth were allocated to each of five selected L.G.As. Convenience sampling was used for instrument administration to the respondents (Youth). The choice of Youth was informed by their high social media engagements.

Instrument

A face to face structured questionnaire of 2000 pertaining social media and the propagation of conspiracy theories on COVID -19 pandemic in Nigeria was administered to male as well as female youth in five selected Local Government Areas of Delta State. The questionnaire constitutes several constructs which include (i) the socio –demographic characteristics such as age, sex, location, educational level, employment and religion (ii) Awareness of conspiracy theories on COVID -19 in Nigeria (iii) Proliferation of conspiracy theories about COVID -19 on social media (iv) The influence of conspiracy theories on people's perception (v) The effectiveness of social media platforms in propagating the conspiracy theories on COVID-19.

Data collection

The questionnaire was distributed to the Youth in the five selected Local Government Areas in the three Senatorial Districts of Delta State with research assistants who are conversant with the research areas and they were trained on the relevance of the study and the approach to use in administering the instrument.

Data presentation and Analysis

Statistical analysis was done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 2.0. The contiguous variables were presented in form of mean, standard deviation, social demographics with factors associated with awareness of conspiracy theories on COVID – 19 in Nigeria. Other segments of the investigations include the promotion of conspiracy theories about COVID -19 on the social media, the influence of conspiracy theories on people perception and the effectiveness of social media platforms in propagating the conspiracy theories on COVID – 19 were analyzed. Categorical variables were analyzed using frequencies and percentages.

Socio-demographic characteristics of Respondents

Four hundred Youth respondents were selected from the five Local Government Areas of three Senatorial Districts in Delta State (Table 1).

Table 1: Selected Local Government Areas for this study

S/N	Location /LGA	Senatorial Districts	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	Ethiope East	Delta Central	400	20
2.	Uvwie		400	20
3.	Aniocha south	Delta North	400	20
4.	Oshimili South		400	20
5.	Isoko South	Delta South	400	20
	Total		2000	100

Table 2: Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Variable	Percentage (%)	mean
Sample size	400	
Sex		
Female	900 (45)	
Male	1100 (55)	
Age		39
20 – 29	450 (22.5)	
30 – 39	550 (27.5)	
40 – 49	650 (32.5)	
50 – 59	350 (17.5)	
Educational level		
University Degree	1000(50)	
Colleges (NCE)	700 (35)	
Secondary school and below	300 (15)	
Religion		
Christian	950 (47.5)	
Muslim	730 (36.5)	
Pagan/traditional worshippers	320(16)	

Location	Delta Central	965 (40.25)
	Delta North	725 (36.25)
	Delta South	310 (15.5)
Employment Status	Employed	900 (35)
	Unemployed	1300 (65)

Table 3: Awareness of conspiracy theories on social media (section B)

S/N	Description	SA	A	UN	D	SD	Mean	Std.
1.	Conspiracy theories on COVID -19 are propagated on social media platforms	880	520	100	300	200	3.71	1.39
2.	Most people are influenced in endorsing conspiracy theories than others.	1000	400	220	190	190	4.18	1.10
3.	Conspiracy theories are completely false.	1100	500	100	100	200	4.27	1.12
4.	Where these conspiracy theories perpetuate there is geographical variance?	540	300	120	480	560	2.80	1.44
5.	There is evidence that COVID -19 death rate are manipulated.	380	480	100	340	700	2.94	1.40
6.	There is evidence that claimed COVID -19 is from laboratory.	260	40	260	560	880	3.77	1.45
7.	There is evidence that conspiracy theory on vaccine will change human DNA	380	480	100	300	740	2.95	1.40
8.	Conspiracy theories are true facts and they don't lack scientific consensus and claims.	150	40	50	640	1120	4.27	1.13
9.	Conspiracy theories on COVID -19 affect people perception	880	560	40	260	260	3.77	1.45
10.	COVID -19 is linked to the 5G radiation	220	620	80	300	780	3.72	1.39
Aggregate mean							3.64	1.33

Criterion mean – 3.00

SA – Strongly Agree, A – Agree, SD – Strong Disagree, D – Disagree, UN – Undecided

The result (Table3) shows an aggregate mean of 3.64 which is greater than the criterion mean of 3.00 . it can be deduced that conspiracy theories are propagated on social media platforms. Also, implies that Internet Users are aware of these conspiracy theories.

Table 4: Promotion of conspiracy theories on social media (section C)

S/N	Description	SA	D	UN	D	SD	Mean	Std.
1	Conspiracy theories began to appear on social media after the emergence of COVID -19	880	420	320	200	180	2.95	1.34
2	Social media are carrier of conspiracy theories and beliefs	1000	880	40	100	180	4.14	1.22
3	Social media amplify mis –information that undermine the global response to control the pandemic	680	570	350	260	140	2.51	1.49
4	Exposure to COVID -19 media messages on videos promotes conspiracy belief	800	400	140	340	320	2.50	1.56
5	It is better to consume and distribute conspiracy theories on social media	520	700	400	100	280	2.45	1.34
6	Fake news posted on social media heighten conspiracy theories.	840	560	630	180	60	2.38	1.30
7	Twitter and face book are majorly the social media used for the spread of COVID -19	220	300	80	620	780	3.71	1.30
Aggregate Mean							2.94	1.36

The result in Table 4 revealed an aggregate mean of 2.94 and is lower than criterion mean of 3.00. This indicates that the magnitude of content moderation and the social media platforms can filter out few conspiracy theories. This also means that the Internet user should employ ways to navigate and curtail the high influx of conspiracy theories in the social media.

Table 5: Influence of conspiracy theories on people perception of COVID -19 (section D)

S/N	Description	SA	D	UN	D	SD	Mean	Std.
1	People of low status may endorse conspiracy theories.	1000	600	80	180	100	4.13	1.21
2	Conspiracy theories on COVID -19 mis – information have increased the uncertainty and challenges in people’s life	680	570	240	260	350	2.52	1.50
3	Social media platforms have both negative and positive effects on the public.	840	400	320	340	100	2.50	1.56
4	COVID -19 conspiracy theories increases the perception of fear, danger and insecurity in human.	760	560	100	220	360	2.45	1.34
5	Conspiracy theories on COVID -19 pandemic have affected the system of education.	840	560	70	620	180	2.31	1.29
6	Information on media platforms are mostly correct.	260	320	120	560	820	3.54	1.42
7	Conflicting articles on social media can make someone feel confused and in secured.	510	670	420	310	90	2.60	1.50
8	Mis-information from the Government officers inflates conspiracy theories.	900	540	100	200	260	3.76	1.44
Aggregate Mean							2.98	1.40

Criterion Mean 3.0

The result in Table 5 established an aggregate mean of 2,98 which is lower than the criterion mean of 3.00. This indicates that the influence of conspiracy theories is believed to vary or differ from persons to persons because conspiracy theories are sensitive to social factors.

Table 6: The effectiveness of social media platforms in propagating conspiracy theories on COVID - 19 (section E)

S/N	Description	SA	D	UN	D	SD	Mean	Std.
1	Social media helps individual to stay connected during the COVID -19 pandemic.	900	720	160	100	120	4.18	1.10
2	Social media provides effective channel for two way communication during COVID -19 pandemic and the propagation of conspiracy theories.	1000	640	160	50	150	4.27	1.13
3	Social media are used for communication of information on COVID -19 disease control and prevention..	560	480	540	120	300	2.81	1.44
4	Social media contributes to the spread of conspiracy theories on COVID -19 pandemic,	740	480	300	100	380	2.99	1.40
5	Social media serves as source of prompt information during COVID -19 rather than traditional media.	880	560	260	260	40	3.77	1.30
Aggregate Mean							3.59	1.30

The results in Table 6 indicate an aggregate mean of 3.59. This shows that social media platforms are effective carriers of conspiracy theories.

Discussion of findings

The socio – demographic variables of the respondents (Table1) shows that the five Local Government Areas of three Senatorial districts in Delta State. Four hundred respondents were evenly distributed in the study area, making a total of two thousand respondents. The males are highly populated (55%) and female (45 %). This implies that the Internet users are mainly male respondents. This study also employed four categories of age group 20 -29 years (22.5 %), 30 -39 years (27.5 %), 40 -49 years (32,5 %) and 50 -59 years of age group (17.5%). This designate that majority of the Internet Users are between 40 -49 years (32,5 %). The study also revealed that majority of the respondents have attained university degrees (50 %), while colleges (30 %), secondary school and below (15 %). The study also points out that employed (35 %) and unemployed respondents (65 %), Christians (47.5 %), Muslim (36.5%),and traditional worshippers (16 %). In terms of location, the study identify location which comprises Delta Central (48 .25%), Delta North (36.25 %) and Delta South (15.5 %).

The sections B of the study also aim to examine the awareness of conspiracy theories on social media. The result shows an aggregate mean of 3.64 and confirms that conspiracy theories are propagated on social media platforms.

Research question 2: to what extents do the social media propagates conspiracy theories. It indicates an aggregate mean of 2.94 which is lower than the criterion mean of 3.00 and confirms that moderation of content do mitigate the high flow of conspiracy theories is needed.

Research question 3: How do the conspiracy theories influenced people perception on COVID – 19 pandemic shows an aggregate mean of 2.98 and indicates that the influence of conspiracy theories differs from persons to persons.

Research question 4: How effective does the social media platforms propagates conspiracy theories on COVID -19 pandemic. It shows an aggregate mean of 3.64 which is greater than the criterion mean of 3.00 points out that social media platforms are carriers of conspiracy theories.

Conclusions

This study revealed that social media are used to propagate conspiracy theories on COVID -19 pandemic. Also, affirmed that social media platforms can filter out few conspiracy theories when content are censored. Generally, influence of conspiracy theories on people perception varies from persons to persons because of several social factors. Overall, COVID -19 conspiracy theories are pervasive in Nigeria and can be curtail /mitigated when media content moderation is employed.

Recommendations

The study recommends a more intensive self moderation by different Social Media Platforms by devising some Restrict features to block unverified categorical messages as well as intensify media education of the audience through the use of Health Communication experts.

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