

Social Media Fake News, Myths and Conspiracies on COVID-19: Threat to Public Health in Nigeria

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Abstract

Fake news and conspiracies are often associated with outbreaks such as pandemics and epidemics. Nigeria reported its first confirmed coronavirus case in February of 2020 and since that time, a tsunami of information on the disease has been seen online and offline. Myths, fake news and Covid-19 related conspiracies doubled across social media spaces. The threat of such infodemic on public health can only be imagined as it is impossible to quantify the collateral damage. Decisions taken based on falsehood or conspiracies can have adverse consequences on the health of individual members of society or the entire population. With the use of library research technique, this paper discusses how myths, fake news and conspiracy theories across social media platforms pose threats to public health in Nigeria. The paper with the use of activation theory of information exposure explains the need to create effective health communication to help reduce the impact of infodemic on Nigeria's public health system even in the face of a pandemic. It therefore concludes that fake news, myths and conspiracies pose serious threats to public health as individuals could rely on them to take decisions that portends immediate and long term danger to the health of individuals and public health in general. Fake news on social media portends danger to public health as uncontrolled information can send consumers of such content into some form or panic mode, just as the chances of ignoring safety protocols may also be high on the part of those exposed to certain information on social media platforms.

Keywords: Fake news, Conspiracies, Myths, Covid-19, Public health, Infodemic

Introduction

Covid-19 took the world by surprise and since its outbreak, authorities, nations and institutions have been on-the-move in efforts to combat the virus. Coronavirus happens to be the first pandemic in a digital age – where social media is widely used and people have access to digital devices (Gaffield, 2020). According to Bilton (2020), it is the first major disease in “a polarized, plugged-in era” (para.3). The world has always seen epidemics and pandemics – from the famous Antonine plague to the Spanish flu, the Russian flu and now Covid-19, panic has always been a challenge. However, no era has seen a concentrated global panic like Covid-19 era, largely due to

the spread of myths, fake news and conspiracies amplified through modern new media tools made possible by evolving digital communication technologies. Rothschild and Fischer (2020) corroborate this position with their assertion that social media contributed immensely in the spread of panic among users.

Since the first case of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2) otherwise known as COVID-19 was discovered in Wuhan, Hubei province of China, there has been a lot of misinformation in relations to curative and preventive measures across social media platforms. The implication of infodemic on pandemics is that it has the tendency to stir panic and paranoia in the population, which can lead to rash decision concerning one's health. This is what makes infodemic – myths, fake news, outright falsehood inimical to public health.

Public health and the entire population are usually targeted with health communication to dispel any rumours and save the people from impending dangers as a result of a belief in fake news, myths of conspiracies. However, the digital age of new media and advancement in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is making such task become increasingly painstaking. According to BBC (2020a), while COVID-19 pandemic spread in Africa, so also was an outbreak of falsehood spreading across virtual platforms – and the people always get such information through social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

Once China was first declared as epicenter of COVID-19, Africans entertained fears over a rapid spread, partly because of the trade ties between the two (Onyeji, 2020). Onyeji further observe that Nigeria became the third country in Africa and 48th in the world to see a COVID-19 case. Immediately the Nigerian index case was confirmed, the population, especially users of social media platforms entered a panic mode occasioned by the spread of myths, rumours and fake news on the disease. Aiyewumi and Okeke (2020) align with the foregoing in their position that Nigerians' knowledge, collective perception and attitude towards COVID-19 was mainly driven by social media.

Available records show that the Nigerian government through Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) with partnership from INGOs did so much on health communication campaigns. Such communication was mainly disseminated through the conventional media in the country. Despite all the efforts from authorities, Nigerians seem to rely more on misleading narratives as propagated through social media platforms (Aiyewumi & Okeke, 2020).

Relatedly, the government set several strategies in motion to reduce the spread of coronavirus. Government engaged national health authorities in efforts to contain coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria (Akande-Sholabi & Adebisi, 2020). Agencies tasked with navigating the nation through the Covid-19 crisis include, Ministry of Health, NCDC, PTF and concerned INGOs. Regardless of the efforts of government, Akande-Sholabi and Adebisi observe that the threat of the pandemic to public health continue to be on the increase. The threat is from different angles. On one hand, there is the health

sector infrastructural decay, and on the other, there is the problem of Covid-19 related infodemic – conspiracies, fake news, myths.

Social media has provided a breeding ground and one where the circulation of false and misleading medical information on varied form of diseases thrives for a number of years with devastating impact on public health, (UICC, 2020). In the Ebola outbreak of 2014, several deaths and hospitalisations were reported in Nigeria following misleading medical information on preventive measures (see Ogoina et al., 2016; Salami et al., 2019). Being the first pandemic in a world of advanced digital technology, Covid-19 comes with overabundance of information, and also enables the spread of misinformation on an unimaginable scale – a situation which portends great danger to public response to the virus (WHO, 2020a).

Similarly, myths and misinformation surrounding Covid-19 in Nigeria negative affects the fight against the virus and poses serious public health threats. One of the dangers is that myths, hoax or misinformation all have potentials of making people ignore, disregard or reject evidence-base scientific measure to curtailing the spread of Covid-19 (Aiyewumi & Okeke, 2020). Therefore, this paper examines Social Media Fake News, Myths and Conspiracies on COVID-19 and the threat to Public Health in Nigeria. The objectives of the paper are to:

- examine how social media fake news and conspiracies pose threat to public health in Nigeria
- identify's possible threats of social media infodemic to Nigeria's Public Health

Conceptual Clarification

Social media

Several definitions are assigned to the word “social media”, and since there is no generally accepted one, attempts will be made to clarify the term. Social media can be seen as internet-based form of communication with platforms that enable users to share information, have conversations, and create web content, (University of South Florida, n.d.). Some forms of social media include wikis, social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, photo-sharing sites, instant messaging, video-sharing sites, podcast, virtual worlds, widgets and so on, (Hopkins, 2017). Popular social media platforms used in Nigeria include Facebook, WhatsApp, 2go, WeChat, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and many more.

Computer-based and internet-based technology that enables sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through the establishment of virtual communities or networks is what is referred to as social media (Dollarhide, 2020). With social media, users can get quick sharing of content in electronic format, i.e., photos, documents, videos, personal information and many more. In Nigeria, Covid-19 infodemic in multimedia formats went viral across social media platforms posing threat to public health as it directly impacts negatively on the country's health response system.

Public Health

Public health is both a science and an art, and in fact, it is far beyond this scope. According to Schmitt and Schmitt (2008), the term – public health is multidisciplinary; however, it is all about ensuring healthy living. According to the World Health Organisation (n.d.), public health is “the art and science of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the organised efforts of society” (para. 1).

Public health covers areas such as medicine, nursing, dentistry, nutrition, optometry, health education, environmental sciences, health services administration, and the behavioural sciences, with focus on a mass of the people i.e., the entire population rather than a segment or on individual (Shiel, 2008). Further, Shiel outlines three basic goals of public health as follows: first, it has to do with monitoring and assessing the health of vulnerable communities for the purpose of identifying health problems and giving them priority attention, second, it has to do with the formulation of public policies targeted at solving the identified local and national-scale problems. Finally, to establish structures that make care affordable and accessible to the entire population, and to ensure health promotion, disease prevention services, and a timely evaluation of effectiveness of the provided care. Covid-19 raised public health concerns and requires the attention being accorded it at the moment in Nigerian and beyond.

Myths, Fake News and Conspiracies

Sometimes, myths, fake news and conspiracies are not distinguishable, but we shall clarify concepts based on their usage in this study. In its ordinary form, myths can be seen as symbolic tales of old that connects the past to the present – they dwell on primordial times and bring to the present the situations of the old (Magoulick, 2015). However, as used in this study, myth is an unproved or false belief or idea that is widely held, (Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary, n.d.). Myths spreading regarding Covid-19 are numerous and ranges from preventive to curative measures, but in any case, all are adjudged threats to public health.

Fake news can be seen as “those stories that are false: the story itself is fabricated, with no verifiable facts, sources or quotes” (University of Michigan Library, 2021). “Fake news could be any information that takes the form of legitimate news but laden with false and misleading content” (Duffy, Tandoc & Ling, 2019, as cited in Inobemhe et al., 2020a). Fake news could take any form. For example, a recent viral fake news with religiously targeted false messages came with false claims that vaccine contain animal produce such as pork or beef which does not sit well with Muslims and Hindus (Carroll, 2021). This poses great threat to public health as people could believe the fake news and avoid vaccination.

Conspiracies can be seen as deliberate misinformation carefully crafted to dishonestly manipulate the people (Kramer, 2021). New media technologies contribute in no small measure to the spread of conspiracies (Inobemhe, et al., 2020b), chief of which are social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and so on, as

can be seen with regards to the proliferation of fake news, conspiracies and myths regarding Covid-19 in recent times.

Literature Review

Literatures abound on the existence of fake news, myths and conspiracy theories on Covid-19. Some other researchers have also looked at the threat posed to public health as a result of Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, especially in relations to the volume of fake news, myths and conspiracies regarding the virus. Bernard et al. (2020) note that several conspiracies have been churned out regarding Covid-19 pandemic, and that while some appear to have element of fact embedded, others are outright fabrications with intent. It is imperative to point out that not all information shared across social media platforms is done with malicious intent. Quoting Apuke and Omar (2020), Solis-Moreira (2021) observes that people shared Covid-19 related falsehood based on varied reasons such as keeping others informed, keeping themselves informed, connect with others, and then just “to pass the time” (para. 7). However, conspiracies surrounding Covid-19 were drawn from areas such as population cleansing, religious beliefs, as well as curative and preventive measures (Bernard et al., 2020).

Digital technologies enable interactivity at the best possible speed and this has impacted negatively on information management by countries. Relatedly, the advent of Covid-19 coincides with super innovations in ICT such as 4G, 5G and other capabilities. This has in no measures contributed to the spread of false rumours, myths and misconceptions which in turn spread panic. According to Kabir (2020), information sharing across platforms was a product of the uncertainty that came with the outbreak of Covid-19 in Nigeria. Further, Kabir observes that false information trended across social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and other platforms and such can best be described as “myths” shared online.

Fake news and myths surrounding coronavirus impacted negatively on public health response to the pandemic (Adegoke, 2020; Yiga et al., 2020). Adegoke further observes that the unprecedented nature of coronavirus sparked a level of anxiety which in turn provoked a search for information on symptoms, preventive, and curative measures on social media – a situation that has led to serious problems for Nigeria.

Nigerians were sharply divided along two lines of belief – those who believe in the existence of Covid-19 and those who believe the virus exist elsewhere in the world but not in Nigeria (Azuh, 2020). According to Azuh, this disbelief can be attributed to social media conspiracies. Whereas, the first group of Nigerians took recommended precautions to avoid the spread of Coronavirus, the second group simply did not care. This, on its own, pose as threat to public health of Nigerians.

The myth that Nigerians and blacks possess a form of immune system that can counter and defeat Covid-19 also poses a great risk to lives in the country (Aiyewumi & Okeke, 2020). This is most threatening to public health as members of the public can rely on such myth to flout Covid-19 preventive measures or guidelines set by the

NCDC. Available records show that a record number of black people in the United States of America have succumb to the virus which proves that the myth portends danger to lives (see Andrew, 2021 for a review).

Conspiracies and myths are inimical to any public health system. For example, the myth surrounding a possible Covid-19 vaccine is already raising fears among people as to the way out of the pandemic since there seem to be no safe curative or preventive measures. Myths such as Covid-19 is a ploy to force everyone to take vaccine for population control in Africa is viral and popular. Some others myths are: Covid-19 vaccine can affect women's fertility, scientists were in a rush to develop a vaccine so that may affect the safety and effectiveness, if one already survived coronavirus, there would be no need to take a vaccine for prevention as there is possible immune resistance to the virus (Kelen & Maragakis, 2021).

From the above, we can assume that myths surrounding Covid-19 are as dangerous as the virus itself. One thing is that myths and conspiracies put public health in danger if there is no adequate health communication from government and scientists alike. With such attacks on vaccination, there might be no hope if promoters of such conspiracies get a buy-in of a vast percentage of the population. This is because immunisation still remains a very important measure for public health intervention as it can have great positive impact on prevention and eradication of diseases (Greenwood, as cited in Schiavo, 2020).

Again, misinformation and disinformation circulating online are in unquantifiable volumes or proportions overshadowing accurate information. What makes fake news and conspiracies so visible across online platforms is the rush and search for information concerning Covid-19 pandemic. The more people search for keywords, the more users generate contents to match such searches and this has brought about an increase in misinformation and disinformation. According to Pazzanese (2020), accurate health guidelines are being eroded as a result of the sheer proportion of misinformation and disinformation across online platforms. In other words, the amount of falsehood available on online platforms is overshadowing official recommendations on Covid-19, and this comes with heavy price for public health. Such online platforms include social media and similar virtual environments.

Social Media as a Conduit of Fake News, Myths And Conspiracies on Covid-19

As earlier observed, digital communication platforms enable the spread of myths, conspiracy theories and fake news. Social media being one of the digital era innovations offers modern communication platforms where information spread like wild fire with just the use of "share" option across platforms. Social media platforms are, no doubt, ubiquitous. This is largely due to the possibilities provided by digital technologies. Since they are largely web-based, internet-enabled and mobile-enabled

applications, social media can be carried anywhere and everywhere provided the user has access to the devices and the Internet which powers interactivity of the platforms.

As a matter of fact, social media platforms are ubiquitous (Cowan et al., 2020), and there seem to be very few things with that wields so much influence on people as social media do (FYA Media Group, 2020). It is such influence it has on people that has turned platforms to tools for several vices including propaganda, spread of myths, fake news and conspiracies. This does not remove the reality that social media can also be used for good if properly channeled.

Social media, beside hosting a large number of users, also host groups with varied agenda. Sometimes social media groups are set up to propagate political ideologies while some others are for educational purposes, yet some others are used for religious activities. However, some existing social media groups seem to be focus on spreading myths, fake news, propaganda. The various groups and individuals churn out unprecedented amount of information on per-minute basis – some baseless and unverified. Quoting Viswanath and Kee, Pazzanese (2020) notes that the public user of social media is no longer a mere consumer of inaccuracies and falsehood but now a creator and channel used to distribute them, and that all that is made possible due to the popularity and ubiquity of the various social media platforms.

A major explanation to the spread of fake news on social media is that put forward by Quattrociochi (2016), that unlike traditional media with editors that can filter and exclude unverified reports, social media is without such. An individual can simply say what he wants and within minutes he gets it online, and like wildfire, a share of the information posted can reach thousands and millions of people. This is a cogent explanation to how Covid-19 fake news spread across social media platforms. Since no one really moderate individual pages, users can generate and share content as they want.

Covid-19 Fake News Spreading among Nigerian Social Media Users

Several Covid-19 fake news spread in the early days of the outbreak and there has been escalation in the dissemination of such across various social media platforms since the first case was recorded in China Hubei province, and subsequently the rest of the world including Nigeria. In a modern world where information sharing is seamless, and social media platforms enables easy tools for various application to communicate with one another, it is difficult to separate fake news, from myths and then conspiracies, because the tools provided with minimal editing can change form at every stage in the incubation process. But attempt shall be made to differentiate the three as shown in the clarification of concepts above. Though we may not exhaust the list of fake news shared so far on Covid-19, the prominent ones will be reviewed thematically.

Fake news 1: Origin of coronavirus – The first kinds of misinformation on Covid-19 had to do with the origin of the virus. Though there seem to be no mystery surrounding the origin as reports available reveal that the seafood market, Wuhan, Hubei province of China recorded the first confirmed case of Covid-19, a lot of fake

news attributed the origin to scientific process of creating diseases in a lab somewhere in China. Report remains unverified.

Fake news 2: Preventive measures – After speculations on the origin of Covid-19 was spread online, then came those surrounding preventive measures. One of the common ones is that alcohol can increase immunity (Solis-Moreira, 2021), and then prevent one from contracting the virus. The danger of this very information is that it can lead to excessive consumption of alcohol capable of damaging one's health.

Home remedies such as the old “steam therapy” was also recommended by “online Covid-19 experts” who churned out preventive measures when infections peaked in 2020. Some even recommended adding onion, orange or lemon to the steam to make it more effective. A fact-check by Reuters (2020) also debunked this false claim. Relatedly, sun exposure was also suggested as preventive measure. These recommended measures negate those of health experts and institutions tasked with the mandate to fight Covid-19. Institutions such as CDC in the US and NCDC in Nigeria. Recommendations by these institutions are, social distancing, movement restriction while research efforts are underway to find a cure.

Fake News 3: Curative measures – Right from the first week Covid-19 was declared a pandemic by the WHO, rumour mills swung into action with fake news on cures. Several were later flagged on social media and taken down. One of such is that chloroquine is a potent cure for coronavirus. This piece of information went viral and even got the support of the 45th president of the United States of America – Donald Trump. The news also received support from Dr Stella Immanuel who with a team of doctors appeared on a viral video proposing the use of chloroquine even when the CDC had not officially approved it for treatment. Similarly, information on cure of Covid-19 circulated across social media platform is that a saline solution – salt and warm water or vinegar is a remedy (Kabir, 2020). The information circulated mostly on Facebook and was distributed across other platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter and so on. A simple fact-check on WHO Twitter Q & A responses quickly disapprove of such fake news and debunked it in its entirety as untrue since there is no scientific proof of its potency or efficacy.

Fake news 4: Spread of Covid-19 – A false claim on how the disease got out of control in Nigeria was a major false information that got shared on social media. False reports spread across social media and even some traditional media that the taxi driver whose vehicle was used as means of mobility by the man with the index confirmed Covid-19 case – that is the Italian, escaped from quarantine and thereafter mix with the population. Attributing the spread to the driver was false and the authorities have debunked it as well, (see BBC, 2020b). The mode of spread of the virus is another source of fake news that went viral. A viral post on how parcels from China carry pathogens that can spread coronavirus was another one that got the attention of many. A fact-check also debunked the fabricated piece of information on the basis that it is not scientifically

possible since most of the products travel through long distances in space and time (Glez, 2020).

Another false information on mode of transmission that went viral is that coronavirus can be spread through mosquito bites. For now, there exist no scientific proof that respiratory viruses get spread via insects (Glez, 2020). Further, Glez observes that so far, what is true is that scientist have strongly advised that people should practice social distancing as droplets of nasal secretion or saliva from an infected person is still the known easiest way to spread Covid-19 at the moment.

Fake news 5: Vaccines – the news surrounding a vaccine trial on African soil is totally false, a fact-check by BBC (2020a) reveals. The information is that Africans are being explored as guinea pigs for a possible Covid-19 vaccine. The irony of the entire fabrication is that at the time it went viral, vaccine development efforts were in their early stages and there is no way a test would have been conducted at that time. This fake news is dangerous because it can eventually dissuade Africans from taking the vaccine when it is finally produced owing to the possibility that they may be targeted.

Covid-19 Myths Shared Across Social Media Platforms

Just like fake news, several myths have also been propagated via social media platforms. According to the BBC (2020a) a tonne of myths surrounding Covid-19 circulated across the African continent. Such myths surrounding shaving, vaccines, climate, cures have also been put forward by users of new media technologies chief of which is social media.

Myth number one that got the researcher's attention is that of shaving. According to BBC (2020a) the report quoting CDC on the need to shave beard to be safe from contracting Covid-19, was first shared by *Punch* – a leading print medium in Nigeria. The BBC debunked the myth and provided clarifications on the context within which the America Center for Disease Control made the recommendation – that it was made sometimes in 2017 on the need to wear mask properly. The post advised people wearing face mask to shave in order for them to be effective against air borne diseases. It is important to note that the recommendation was made 2 years before covid-19 outbreak, and when juxtaposed with the context within which *Punch* newspaper used it, then it will be clear the traditional media was caught in the web of promoting myth since it was used out of context.

Myths were also promoted by way of false advertising on protection from Covid-19 (Glez, 2020). The myth that washing hands with children's urine contains some powers that can prevent coronavirus was shared on social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. In addition, sesame oil application on the body, eating of garlic and lime, and heavy consumption of cannabis were also recommended online.

The myth that Nigerians are somewhat immune to coronavirus is another one that received amplification through social media platforms with dire consequences on public health. According to Aiyewumi and Okeke (2020) “the story behind the myth of

Nigerian immunity to COVID-19 stems from the mistaken belief that blacks possess an innate or adaptive protective immune response to SARS-COV-2” (p.1). The myth holds no scientifically proven evidence in any form and pose serious threat to public health because people can rely on it to disregard NCDC recommendation on social distancing.

At a point when the world was still fighting to reduce the spread of Covid-19 came a viral myth that there is youthful immunity to the virus. Though the disease seems to be prevalent among the elderly, simple explanation could be their fragile state of health. It has also been established that once a person is in a fragile state, the body may not be able to develop immunity against infection (Glez, 2020). In addition, people with underlying ailments are also vulnerable, and are at increased risk of getting seriously ill from Covid-19 complications, (CDC, 2021; WHO, 2020). However, it must be clearly stated that Covid-19 can affect anyone regardless of any form of immunity.

The myth with regards to antibiotic being a cure to Covid-19 is another viral one. However, a scientific based fact-check shows that antibiotics are not effective against viruses (Onyeji, 2020). Antibiotics can be used to prevent or treat some mild bacterial infections (NHS, 2020; Seladi-Schulman, 2020), but not a virus such as Covid-19 that is not caused by bacteria (WHO 2020b, 2020). Therefore, the myth surrounding this area of curative measures is just posing as threat to public health.

One of the most dangerous myth surrounding Covid-19 is that healthy people do not need to practice social distancing. The truth is that there are those that are asymptomatic and yet carriers of the virus, and they appear to constitute the most threat to public health worldwide. In other words, someone can be healthy and still be infected without showing any symptoms, such persons can spread the virus to loved ones and the circle will keep widening.

Covid-19 Viral Conspiracies

Conspiracies that got shared overtime as Covid-19 spread are also numerous, but let us consider a few of such. One of the most viral of all the conspiracies is that of Covid-19 as a bioweapon. Conspiracy theorists ensured the biological weapon origin of coronavirus goes viral – that it was a creation of man in a laboratory to achieve a particular goal or intent. The conspiracy was that China engineered the virus in order to dominate the world economy and prosper or profit therefrom. A similar one was that Bill and Melinda Gates may be behind it or better still the United States Government may be the sole originator of the virus in the first place (Glez, 2020). Such conspiracies do not agree with reality checks, especially with the turn of events in recent times.

The 5G conspiracy is another one that got the attention of many. The rationality behind this conspiracy is that the first case was reported in Wuhan just when 5G network was launched in the city – linking the outbreak to electromagnetic field emitted by high speed wireless communication such as 5G offers (Glez, 2020). The conspiracy also linked the Diamond Princess Cruise infections to 5G on the premise that passengers were making use of technology at the time of the outbreak. In Nigeria, the debate on

whether the government should allow or legislate against 5G was intense, with Nigerians kicking against the launch. Consequently, government was asked to investigate claims of possible side effects of the technology before allowing its deployment, and if possible, in phases.

Cited in Glez (2020) is another conspiracy that big pharmaceutical companies could be fueling a spread of the virus by hiding simple Covid-19 treatment. The assumption is that they hope to profit from a vaccine sale in the future. This theory though calculated at tarnishing the image of giant pharmaceuticals, may be the reason people will ignore vaccines as they are already convinced of the existence of a secret plot to make money off governments through vaccine sales.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on activation theory of information exposure. Developed in 1980 by Lewis Donohew and Philip Palmgreen, activation theory of information exposure provides explanation to differences between people in attention seeking and sustained exposure to messages. The theory holds that individuals seek information or messages that fulfil their emotional and cognitive needs, and that it is the level of message effectiveness that determines the receiver's continued willingness to receive more (Beltran, 2020). In other words, individual's desire to continue exposure to messages is activated by the effectiveness level of the very message being received.

According to Beltran (2020) the main or key concepts of activation theory of information exposure are exposure, stimulation and activation. When a message is targeted at a population, and eventually gets delivered, the people get exposed to the message just as much as the message is exposed to them. Beltran further explains that the delivered message is expected to stimulate the target population's optimal levels i.e., attendance to the delivered message. So, if the message sits with their cognitive needs, the audience will continue to pay attention, but if otherwise, there is the tendency to seek more or alternative information that will stimulate sensation. In the same vein, infodemic poses real public health threat, just as certain conspiracies even go as far as denying the existence of Covid-19 (Gruzd & Mai, 2020), and this has been a major challenge for medical professionals to offer meaningful advice – certain reports even indicate that some patients while dying still deny the existence of COVID-19, and nurses rely on politics to refuse to take the vaccine (Argentino, 2020).

Further, people are exposed to Covid-19 messages on social media platforms. As they seek more information, they get more that seem to contain higher-sensation stimuli. Once this is achieved, the need to go higher keeps widening. Individuals always have tendencies to seek exciting sensations and are ever ready and willing to even go the extra mile by taking risks to get the desired experiences (Zuckerman, as cited in Beltran, 2020). The recommendation for effective health communicators is that messages must be designed to meet sensation seeking needs of the public – it should neither take up the form of high sensation nor low, but should be moderate (see

Stephenson & Southwell, 2006). That way, audience will go for authentic information once it has quality sensation value, and that will help save public health from infodemic of any sort. The reason this is important is because if it falls short of the outlined quality, people will continue to seek information elsewhere and in modern times, social media comes handy due to their ubiquitous nature and ease-of-use.

Method

The study explores library research technique by carefully consulting articles, books and online sources to arrive at data used for this paper. Relying on sourced materials, this paper discusses how myths, fake news and conspiracies surrounding coronavirus raised serious health concerns for Nigerians.

How Social Media Fake News and Conspiracies Pose Threat to Public Health in Nigeria

Studies abound on how social media fake news, myths, and conspiracies pose as threat to public health globally and in Nigeria. Fake news could make disease outbreak worse (Kelland, 2020), stretching the resolve of health workers and authorities to stop spread and eventually find a lasting cure. Citing a research effort co-led by Paul Hunters – a scientist at East Anglia University together with his colleagues, Kelland reveals that a reduction in circulation of harmful advice may have positive impact on a disease, thereby reducing its severity. Similarly, the referenced research also finds that if a population is unable to share harmful advice on a particular disease or an outbreak, same impact also applies. In a Covid-19 era, where people share harmful advice on curative and preventive measures, this study reveals that inability to share such on social media platforms could reduce the spread and infections.

Social media beside being a source of information, has also been a base from whence panic relating to Covid-19 draw its strength (Obi-Ani et al., 2020). Effective health communication does not have a place for panic and fear – it constructively reveals the threats posed by a disease while stating the symptoms, preventive or curative measures. However, in a digital era such as we are now, information buffers have been removed as a result of unhindered access to social media. Everyone and anyone who seek information can gain access without having to rely on the media. It is that simple. It is unfortunate for people, especially in these difficult times, because information is right at everyone's fingertip unfiltered – task or role hitherto or previously performed by the traditional media.

However, people have the freedom to choose what media to get news – social or traditional. Little wonder then, that most Nigerians chose to believe what trended online disregarding recommendations, advice, and constant communication by the NCDC through traditional media and mediated platforms. A scenario that was largely attributed to the information they were exposed to across social media platforms. It is easier to believe alternative facts than the real facts in modern times. In a world where

information spreads with the speed of light, it is possible to be exposed to any kind of information, and that could put public health in serious jeopardy.

Possible threats of Social Media Infodemic to Nigeria's Public Health

As observed in separate sections above, social media fake news, conspiracies and myths pose serious threat to public health in Nigeria. In reality, one cannot exhaustively discuss the negative impact of social media infodemic – tsunami of information – fake news, myths and conspiracy theories on public health in Nigeria in a single discourse, especially in the Covid-19 pandemic era and beyond.

The first and major threat of infodemic on public health in Nigeria is that people can rely on them and ignore warnings and recommendations from constituted authorities. As observed during the national lockdown policy introduced by the Federal Government of Nigeria, many persons were seen flouting the order even without masks, and going about their normal day-to-day businesses as if nothing was happening. This is at great risk to others because it can lead to a spread of the virus. Therefore, the general well-being of Nigerians may be jeopardised vide the action of a few. No wonder, NCDC reported a second wave of infections in the last quarter of 2020. One does not need any special lecture to understand that it could well be a result of flouting the order to stay at home, and other precautionary measures put in place based on the national lockdown policy (see Obiezu, 2020; Premium Times, 2021).

On the long run, Covid-19 infodemic can increase the distrust between the people and their leaders. Though long before the outbreak, there appears to be problems with distrust resulting from broken promises by the political elites, the relationship may appear further strained post-Covid-19 era. Several reasons can be adduced to this – first, insincerity and lack of transparency in the handling of grants and donations by private sector and international bodies, second, the rumour mill-fueled hostilities towards constituted authorities, and lastly, fabricated infodemic purposely disseminated to cause chaos in the health sector. However, this does not mean there is no corruption in the Nigeria health sector, it is just to draw attention to the possibility that sometimes, the rumoured corruption when there is none can cause distractions to health workers whose daily activity is fighting to push back viruses – Covide-19 being one. Though corruption is endemic in the West Africa health sector (Onwujekwe et al., 2019), and Nigeria being not left out, the infodemic regarding corruption especially at this time, also pose a threat to public health in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Though the researcher attempted a separate discussion of terms such as fake news, conspiracy, and myths in this work, the terms are often used interchangeably depending on the context. Sometimes, it is impossible to separate the three as one could come in the form and style of another. For example, conspiracy theory can start as a rumour and then later take the form of fake news and vice versa. A myth on the other

hand can begin as a rumour and then later gets established and held as a belief. However, the aim of this paper was to discuss the threat posed by these three – myths, fake news and conspiracies on public health with regards to Covid-19. The paper established that, indeed, fake news, myths and conspiracies pose serious threat to the health of Nigerians as persons can rely on them to take decisions that may turn out to be immediately harmful or devastating on the long run. Since information sharing on social media is, to a large extent, uncontrolled at the moment, it is possible for a user to come across information and immediately enter panic mode – a situation that portends danger to people suffering from certain medical diseases such as hypertension and many more.

The implication of this therefore is, regardless of who is responsible or behind any piece of information, there is the need to always relax, think and fact-check before embarking on an action as a result of viral information. By doing this, one can be rest assured of not taking unscientific measures at fighting a virus – which could most times turn out to be inimical to one's health and by extension public health of the people, for as more and more persons gets infected by a contagion so are public health issues or concerns further magnified.

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