

SOCIAL MEDIA AND HEALTH INFORMATION: A STUDY OF FACEBOOK USE DURING THE 2020 COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN DELTA STATE

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Abstract

Facebook, one of the major resources of social media have become an information hub in the present times; with over 1 billion subscribers who own a profile on the platforms. In the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak in early 2020, numerous reports from Facebook algorithm shows that it served as the information hub about the pandemic. Thus, this paper examines the use of Facebook for health information during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic in Delta State. The study was hinged on the Health Belief Model

and adopted survey research design. The samples of the study consist of 400 residents of Delta State selected using multistage sampling approach. Questionnaires were the instruments used for data collection and data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics. The study found that a significant proportion of residents of Delta State accessed Facebook for various types of information. The study also found that the majority of Delta State residents frequently accessed Facebook for updates on Covid-19, showcasing their heavy dependence on the platform during the pandemic. It was further found that a large proportion of residents in Delta State actively utilized Facebook to a high extent for Covid-19-related health information. Based on these findings, the study recommended among others that federal government, state governments and other private health organizations should sensitize the public on the dangers of accessing, believing and using health related information on social media platforms that has not undergone any scrutiny or check from a credible medical personnel.

Keywords: Social Media, Covid-19, Facebook, Health, Information, Delta State.

Introduction

Facebook, one of the major resources of social media have become an information hub in the present times; with over 1 billion subscribers who own a profile on the platforms. Liikkanen et al., (2024) posit that Facebook is one of the most popular social media, and due to its interactive features, provides a breeding ground for all sorts of information seeking and production, health information inclusive.

The end of 2019 to the beginning of 2020 witnessed a palpable fear due to the outbreak of SARS COVID-19 in Wuhan China, with the spread of the pandemic cutting across all the countries of the world. This outbreak had a very significant effect on all spheres of human existence with all the activities across different parts of the world coming to a halt (Onwuka, 2021). This no doubt led to the loss of socio-economic capital across the affected continents.

One of the countries that witnessed a sudden spread and rise of carriers of the Covid-19 virus was Nigeria, a country of over 200 Million people sitting in the western part of Africa (Okoroiwu et al., 2021). Data emerging from Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (2020) shows that Nigeria recorded their first case of Covid-19 on the 27th of February, 2020 through an Italian citizen that arrived at the country through the Murtala Muhammed

Airport, Lagos. Subsequent data on the disease outbreak in the country pointed to the fact that the pandemic in the country continued unabated despite the various efforts of individuals, governments and organized private sectors with 46,803 tested, 8,344 confirmed cases and 249 deaths in 3 months (27 February to 27 May 2020) of the pandemic in Nigeria, prompting plans to introduce measures to manage the pandemic.

With the number of outbreak and carriers within and outside Nigeria on the increase, the pandemic continued to generate a whole lot of conversation both in the mainstream and social media spaces such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, Whatsapp, Telegram and other platforms (Alla, 2021; Taba, 2023). Despite the volume of news it continued to generate on social media, Facebook became the hub of Covid-19 related news, as evidenced from Internet World Stats (2020) points to it as the social media with the most Covid-19 related algorithm among other social media platforms. Etta (2022) concurs that Facebook remained the most used social media for seeking and producing information throughout the period of the Covid-19, as users found the social media very flexible for information production and consumption about the pandemic.

However, the use of Facebook for information generation and consumption during the pandemic

outbreak has been attributed to the distinct characteristics of Facebook which sets it apart from other social media; and such feature are the participatory nature of Facebook- that allows multi comments and replies on one post; its nature allows all comers to generate posts about the pandemic, and as well for good number of people to get involved in consumption and replies. In the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak in early 2020, numerous reports from Facebook algorithm shows that it served as the information hub about the pandemic (Internet World Stats, 2020). It provided an avenue for users to bare their mind on the causes of the virus, cure, possible preventive measures and pace of the spread. Stocking et al., (2020) found through Facebook algorithm that over 74% of Facebook users posted and discussed Covid-19 related issues in the first month of the outbreak across the globe. However, Ovenseri-Ogbomo et al., (2020) explained that some of the Facebook information related to Covid-19 are those that questioned the origin of the virus, touted cures and treatments, disparaged the production of vaccines as a plot to monitor or kill people, blamed 5G technology for the outbreak and created a flood of misinformation that the WHO Secretary-General described the situation as an “infodemic. Other of such related information are those that Facebook users posted about causes of the outbreak with claims that the disease is a result of laboratory work that went wrong while individuals posted personally

generated information and recommendations on orthodox and unorthodox cures.

Statement of the Problem

Fake health news on Facebook constitutes a potential threat to the socio-economic structures of the society, and if not properly managed, will continue to cause more damage to human life. The era of Covid-19 witnessed plethora of health claims and misinformation regarding outbreak, treatment, management, vaccination, what the vaccines could potentially do to people who take them. More so, the Covid-19 related information about the Covid-19 vaccination hoax includes claims about the safety, efficacy, ingredients, side effects and purpose.

What is more is that these Covid-19 claims thrives more on social media platforms like Facebook because social media health information is amplified by social media algorithms that prioritize content likely to receive a high amount of engagement, and the conversational nature of social media that creates room for shares, reply and other forms of feedback. Given the penetrative nature of Facebook health information and that of Covid-19, Nigerians are in danger if they believe such unverified claims? What is their behaviour towards these unverified health information on social media such as Facebook? This study therefore interrogates Facebook use during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic in Delta State, Nigeria.\

Study Objectives

To find out the proportion of Delta State residents who accessed information on Facebook during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic.

To ascertain the behaviour of Delta State residents to Covid-19 related information on Facebook.

To find out the extent Delta State residents used Covid-19 related information on Facebook.

Literature Review

Social Media Defined

Social media has been defined as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Shankar & Sparks, 2023). According to Kuss and Griffiths (2011), social media or social networking sites are those sites which, on a basic technological level, combine social networking, a list of contacts and a profile to function for users gratification; they are distinct from other applications in the way they support people's presentation of themselves, externalization of data, new ways of community formation, and bottom-up activities. From other perspectives, social media has been defined as the collection of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration, and they

are websites and applications dedicated to forums, micro blogging, social networking, social bookmarking, social curation (Wise & Shorter, 2014). For Marati and Sanjeeva (2023), social media are primarily Internet-based tools for sharing and discussing information among human beings. It is also a category of sites that is based on user participation and user-generated content. In the same perspective, therefore, it is pertinent to note that social media by their natures have the capabilities of educating, entertaining and informing the audience.

Covid-19 within the Nigeria Context: An Overview

According to World Health Organization (2020), Corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is defined as illness caused by a novel Corona virus now called severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV), which was first identified amid an outbreak of respiratory illness cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. The disease was initially reported to the WHO on December 31, 2019. On January 30, 2020, the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global health emergency. On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, its first such designation since declaring H1N1 influenza a pandemic in 2009 (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020).

In Nigeria, Oleribe et al., (2020) noted that the pandemic in the country continued unabated despite the various efforts of individuals, governments and organized private sectors with 46,803 tested, 8,344 confirmed cases and 249 deaths in 3 months (27 February to 27 May 2020) of the pandemic in Nigeria, prompting plans to introduce additional measures. Thus, in order to curtail spread of disease, the Nigerian President established the Presidential Taskforce on COVID-19 to manage the outbreak of disease across the country. The PTF was mandated to work with the Federal Ministry of Health (FMOH) and the Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC) in the implementation of the various initiatives and strategies on COVID-19 containment (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020). While FMOH and NCDC were responsible for the implementation of strategies to track the epidemic, to develop management guidelines and to engage and train field workers, the PTF was responsible for local and international relationships, mobilization and management of resources, together with weekly briefings of the President and the Nigerian Federal Government. State and local governments also established similar COVID-19 structures that were all answerable to the local and State governments of the Nigerian Federation (Federal Ministry of Health, 2021).

Despite these efforts from the government, on the 15th of March 2021, 238 new confirmed cases and 3 deaths

were recorded in Nigeria and till date, 160895 cases have been confirmed, 145752 cases have been discharged and 2016 deaths have been recorded in 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (Adeoye, 2021). Yet, there have been concerted efforts from the ministry of Health and Nigeria Centre for Disease Control to manage and vaccinate the vulnerable people till there is no more any case of Covid-19 in the country.

Empirical Studies

Omar and Casero-Ripollés (2023), in a study on the role of news post consumption on Facebook during COVID-19 in the U.S., Spain, and Egypt, found that heavy exposure to Facebook news cultivated fear and terror perceptions and shaped preferences for tightened security at the expense of civil liberties. Cascini et al. (2022), in a systematic review of social media and attitudes towards COVID-19 vaccination, found that studies mainly reported a negative relationship between reliance on social media and vaccine intentions, highlighting its role in vaccine hesitancy. Ijioma and Nze (2022), in a study on social media use and COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in Owerri Metropolis, found that social media facilitated the spread of misinformation, leading to a high level of vaccine hesitancy among the respondents. Ahmed and Msughter (2022), in a study on fake news about COVID-19 among social media users in Kano State,

Nigeria, found that 65.6% of respondents were aware of fake news, with inflated numbers being a major topic. They also found that social media significantly contributed to the spread of fake news, leading to non-adherence to safety measures. Tegegne, Berhanu, and Yilma (2022), in a study on social media use for COVID-19 information among health professionals in Northwest Ethiopia, found that 54% of participants had good social media usage, with factors such as Wi-Fi access, computer training, and perceived usefulness significantly influencing their usage. Guanah, Nwammuo, and Agbadu (2021), in a study on public perception of social media usage in COVID-19 prevention and control in Awka, Nigeria, found that 56.03% of residents considered social media highly effective in disseminating COVID-19 information, primarily through platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. Uwalaka, Nwala, and Amadi (2021), in a study on social media, fake news, and fake COVID-19 cures in Nigeria, found that social media was the primary source of pandemic news but that exposure to fake news headlines had a dangerous and potentially harmful impact on public perceptions and behaviours.

Theoretical Framework

This study was hinged on the Health Belief Model (HBM). The Health Belief Model (HBM) was developed in the 1950's by social psychologists Hochbaum,

Rosenstock and others, who were working in the U.S. Public Health Service to explain the failure of people participating in programs to prevent and detect disease (University of Pennsylvania, 2019). In relation to the present study, HBM view Facebook users as people who would adopt using Covid-19 related information on Facebook based on their belief that such practice would fetch specific health benefits to them. In other words, if they perceive use of such Covid-19 related information on Facebook as a helpful health action, then they are likely to adopt them. Such perception is constitutive of the following: perceived susceptibility – the extent an individual perceives themselves as facing the likelihood of an adverse health effect; perceived severity – an individual's belief concerning the effects a given disease or condition would have their state of affairs; perceived benefits of taking action – the extent an individual believes that taking action i.e. use of Covid-19 related information on Facebook will help in dealing with the perceived health risk; perceived barriers to taking action – the extent an individual sees hurdles in adopting Covid-19 related information on Facebook; cues to action – the extent an individual is spurred to action either by internal or external cues; and self-efficacy – the extent an individual is confident in their ability to take action i.e. Covid-19 related information on Facebook. Thus, this theory provides the framework for this study.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Delta State, South-South Nigeria. The study adopted survey research design (quantitative method of research) which involves the collection of numerical data from the respondents. The population of this study comprises the residents of Delta State in South-South Region of Nigeria spreading across the 25 local government areas of the state. The population comprised of politicians, government workers, private employees, artisans, traders, religious leaders, leaders of traditional institutions, and students, among others. A sample size of the study were 400 calculated using Taro Yamane (1967) simplified formula in calculating the sample size. The study adopted multi-stage sampling approach which includes cluster sampling, simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques. Questionnaire was the instrument used for data collection and descriptive statistics is employed to analyze the data.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Research Objectives 1: To find out the proportion of Delta State residents who accessed information on Facebook during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Respondents access to Facebook

variable	frequency	percentage
yes	500	83%
no	100	17%
total	600	100%

Source: Field Work 2024

Data in table 1 showed that 83% of respondents agreed that they have access to information while the remaining 17% of the respondents does not access their Facebook account for information seeking. The implication of this data is that almost 90% of Facebook owners access their Facebook accounts for the purpose of seeking different information.

Table 2: Respondents access to Facebook for health related information during Covid-19

variable	requeryency	ercentage
es	80	7.7%
o	0	2.3%
otal	60	00%

Source: Field Work 2024

Data presented in table 2 showed that 77.7% of the respondents agreed that they consulted Facebook for health related information while the remaining 22.3% of the respondents agreed that they did not consult Facebook for health related information. The implication of this data is that a very significant portion of respondents that rely on Facebook for information also relied on it for health related information during the Covid-19 outbreak in the country.

Table 3: Respondents frequency in accessing Facebook for Covid-19 related information

variable	frequency	percentage
always	70	75.1%
sometimes	10	10.6%
rarely	5	5.3%
total	60	100%

Source: Field Work 2024

Data in table 3 shows that 75.1% of the respondents agreed that they always access Facebook social media for health information about Covid-19 during the outbreak, another 10.6% of the respondents said that they sometimes access Facebook while the remaining 5.3% of the respondents agreed that they rarely access Facebook for Covid-19 health related information during the pandemic. The implication of this data is that majority of the respondents relied heavily on Covid-19 related health information during the pandemic.

Research Objective 2: To ascertain the behavior of Delta State residents to Covid-19 related information on Facebook.

Table 4: Distribution of respondents on how necessary they consider Covid-19 related information on Facebook

variable	frequency	percentage
very necessary	30	6.1%
necessary	01	8.05%
barely necessary	9	9.1%
not necessary	0	6.6%
total	60	100%

Source: Field Work 2024

Data presented in table 4 shows that 36.1% of the respondents found such information very necessary, another 28.05% of the respondents found it necessary, another 19.1% of the respondent found such information barely necessary, while the remaining 16.6% found such information not necessary. The implication of the data is that the respondents find information on Facebook about Covid-19 outbreak necessary.

Table 5: Distribution of respondents on how willing they are to use Covid-19 related information from Facebook

variable	frequency	percentage
very willing	10	19.4%
willing	36	36%
barely willing	30.5	30.5%
not willing	13.8	13.8%
total	60	100%

Source: Field Work 2024

Table 5 shows that 19.4% of the respondents are very willing to use Covid-19 health related information on Facebook, another 36% of the respondents were willing to use the information, another 30.5% were barely willing to while the remaining 13.8% of the respondents were not willing to use the Facebook information. Data from this indicates that a slight majority of the

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
gh	Hi	2	8
	Mo	4	2
derate	0		6.7%
w	Lo	-	-

respondents were willing to use the Facebook health information on Covid-19.

Research Objectives 3: To find out the extent Delta State residents used Covid-19 related information on Facebook.

Table 6: Extent of respondent use of Covid-19 related information

	To	3	1
tal	60	00%	

Source: Field Work 2024

Data in table 6 showed that 83.3% of the respondent highly used the information while the remaining 26.7% of them moderately used such information. From this, it is pertinently observed that a very high percentage of the respondents highly used Covid-19 related information from Facebook.

Discussion of Findings

The study found that a significant proportion of residents of Delta State accessed Facebook for various types of information. This shows the importance of Facebook as an information-seeking platform. The study also found that many respondents relied on Facebook specifically for health-related information during the Covid-19 outbreak, demonstrating the platform's relevance in addressing public health concerns. This finding supports the finding of Uwalaka, Nwala, and Amadi (2021) who found that social media was the primary source of pandemic news. The findings of the current study also indicated that the majority of Delta State residents frequently accessed Facebook for updates on Covid-19, showcasing their heavy dependence on the platform during the pandemic.

Additionally, most residents of Delta State considered the Covid-19-related information on Facebook to be necessary, reflecting the perceived value of the platform's content in meeting their informational needs. While a slight majority of residents expressed willingness to use the health information obtained from Facebook, a considerable number were cautious or indifferent. This finding supports the finding of Ahmed and Msughter (2022) who found that social media significantly contributed to the spread of fake news, leading to non-adherence to safety measures by users. Finally, the study revealed that a large proportion of respondents actively utilized Facebook to a high extent for Covid-19-related health information; underscoring its practical significance in their decision-making and health practices during the pandemic. This finding supports the finding of Guanah, Nwammuo, and Agbadu (2021) who found that a lot of people considered social media highly effective in disseminating COVID-19 information.

Conclusion

The infiltration of news media and social media has no doubt changed the dynamics of life and has continued to shape means of sourcing information, peoples attitude to information and as well as their believability of such information due to the distinct nature of social media for information consumption. As regards to the study in perspective, it is pertinent to underscore that the

democratic nature of social media which made it an all comer affair, has reduced the credibility of social media information and have played a very serious role in the outcome of respondents use, attitude and believability of information on Facebook as it relates to Covid-19 health information.

Based on the foregoing, the study concludes that while social media as an information source has come to stay giving globalization and system adaptation to news media devices and attendant information, such information is still found to be a product of some conspiracy theories which if not well managed, could cause more health damage as two major pandemic in the country such as the Ebola Virus and Covid-19 abundantly show. Thus, there is no gainsaying that social media as a source of information is still suspect and lacks the required credibility for people to believe claims made about health issues on them without subjecting the information to credible check as that is the only means to avert the society from more health dangers.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that

Federal Government, State Government and other private health organizations should sensitize the public on the dangers of accessing, believing and using health

related information on social media platforms that has not undergone any scrutiny or check from a credible medical personnel. This is because there is an imminent need for a change towards the use of health related information from social media to avert the looming danger associated with it in the present social media dominated era.

Government and or stakeholders should make policies that have social media application developers play a part in curbing the spread of fake health information by flagging down unverified health information whenever such suspected fake information is posted on social media as a way of calling the attention of the audience to its credibility, and have them fact check the information before use.

Government makes and enforces laws for individuals that are caught in the act of posting unverified health information on social media as means of discouraging posting of health information that endangers the life of the citizens and as a means of curbing the gale of use of health related information on Facebook and other social media platforms ravaging the country.

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