

Examining University Students Truthfulness and Usefulness of Covid-19 Related Information on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 is one of the most threatening pandemics in recent times. People worldwide became terrified because of the risk of contagion, the high rate of fatality, particularly among the elderly, and the effects on people's social, economic, political, and cultural lives. Despite the risk associated with the pandemic, the Nigerian populace have different attitudes regarding usefulness to their use of information and trustworthiness, especially on social media. This study examines gender differences in COVID-19 attitudes towards related information on social media among undergraduate students of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. The study employed a qualitative approach, and interviews were used to collect data. Purposive sampling technique was used in selecting respondents. The participants consist of six female students and six male students. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings showed an insignificant gender difference in Covid-19 attitudes and beliefs among students. The result further indicated that females do not value COVID-19 related information posted on social media by individuals.

Keywords: Attitude, COVID-19, Gender, Nigeria, Social Media

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, is an infectious illness that causes respiratory infections ranging from a typical cold to more serious respiratory problems (Ishola et al., 2021). The virus claimed its first victim in Nigeria on February 25, 2020, when an Italian man landed in the nation (Marshal et al., 2020); after displaying symptoms of the illness, he was taken to an isolation centre in Lagos. Afterwards, the cases increased. Nigeria has tried to control the virus's rapid spread through measures such as lockdown, border closure, and imposed face marks. Some state governors also took proactive actions by closing the border in submission to curtail the spread of the virus (Rabilu & Nasidi, 2021).

Other measures include the prohibition of mass gatherings of people at mosques and churches, sports arenas and burials while schools were closed all over the country.

The actualisation of the measures taken by Federal and state governments is accredited to the widespread of information via social media by the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) and other individuals. Every day there is a lot of information on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube and the likes on COVID-19. In Nigeria, social media has evolved into an active technical tool and a news and communication medium for the populace (Gamji et al., 2021). As the epidemic crept on and continued to weaken global activities, social media platforms have been used as a source of information for individuals.

The importance has grown due to the government's implementation of a lockdown strategy to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. As a result, it has evolved into an active instrument for engagement and communication to transmit both reliable and false information. Social media aids in disseminating information to the public, but some citizens perceive social media as an avenue of propaganda in disclosing information based on assumptions and speculations.

Against this background, this paper intends to examine gender differences in Covid-19 attitudes towards related information posted on social media platforms. The following research objectives guide the study:

- To examine university student's trustworthiness toward COVID-19 related information on social media.
- To explore university students' perceptions of the usefulness of COVID-19 related information on social media.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19)

The coronavirus is an infectious disease that first appeared in China's Wuhan city in 2019 (Zhao et al., 2020). When people encounter COVID-19, they spread the disease to others even if they don't display any symptoms (Ali & Alharbi, 2020). The coronavirus is a disease or infection that has been at the top of the world's and Nigeria's health issue chains for more than two years, affecting nearly every area of the economy. The disease affects a person's respiratory system, causing fever and, in most cases, shortness of breath. Coronavirus is a serious viral illness that primarily affects the elderly (Mohanty et al., 2020). Individuals get the disease directly or through secondary interactions with surfaces like wood, metal, or textiles.

Before the advent and manufacturing of the vaccine, the dread of the COVID-19 was associated with the risk of illness-related contamination, the fear of stigma, and the

anxiety of victim alienation or isolation. The coronavirus's dread is related to long and complex systems for dealing with the infection from the illness. Many survivors of coronavirus whose breathing muscles become immobilised were administered or placed on ventilators (Cheng et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the fear of coronavirus disease is linked to the threat of awfulness. COVID-19 is regarded as a highly feared disease. A large number of people reported shortness of breath. As of August 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) assessed the worldwide number of individuals with Corona between 12-20 million. In Nigeria, the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) reported 178,105 total samples, 162,598 confirmed coronavirus cases, 150,308 discharged cases, and 2,048 deaths. In Nigeria, the coronavirus became endemic because it has never halted the wild spread of the virus transmission.

Research conducted by Anikwe et al. (2020), Reuben et al. (2021), Iorfa et al. (2020), Habib et al. (2021) revealed that despite the awareness and threat of coronavirus, a significant number of Nigerians still do not believe the disease is real. Some Nigerians thought the virus was real, not in the country but other parts of the world. Others look at it from a political lens, believing that Nigeria only wants to join the trend to attract donations from developed countries and health-related agencies (Chukwuorji & Iorfa, 2020).

2.2 Covid-19 and Social Media

Social media is an efficient way to disseminate health information to the general population. Emerging infectious illnesses, such as COVID-19, always increase the general public's use and consumption of all kinds of media information (Apuke & Omar, 2021; Cinelli et al., 2020; Cuello-Garcia et al., 2020). As a result, social media influenced people's perceptions of disease exposure, decision-making, and risk behaviours. People create social media content, it can be subjective or erroneous, and it commonly contains misinformation and conspiracy theories (Wright, 2021). People may produce and

exchange information utilising audio, video, post, tweet, remark, and other forms of social media because it allows for personalisation and customisation.

During the COVID-19 widespread, Nigerians had access to vast information via social media as a communication tool. The first coronavirus victim was announced on Twitter, Facebook, and other websites (Obi-Ani et al., 2020). It was simple to distribute this information since many Nigerians have access to social media sites. Through these social media channels, health care agencies such as the NCDC kept the public informed about the number of COVID-19, deaths, or recovered cases in Nigeria (Ohiagu, 2021). This offered Nigerians a greater chance to be entirely prepared for COVID-19. As a result of social media impact, NCDC platforms on Twitter and Facebook are updated regularly. Researchers like Zintel et al. (2021), Apuke and Omar (2021), Reuben et al. (2021), Erubami et al. (2021), Rakhmanov and Dane (2020) examined Covid-19 attitudes amidst different gender.

2.3 Empirical Review of Related Studies

Nasir, Ahmed, Tareq and Mohamed-Slim (2020) examined wireless communication responses to COVID-19 to combat the pandemic by providing economically relevant information. It was born out of the fact that the world in 2020 saw worldwide health and financial-economic emergency because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study submits those nations worldwide are utilised computerised information technology to battle this worldwide emergency. These communication technologies unequivocally depend, somehow, on the accessibility of local communication systems. Therefore, according to different viewpoints, their paper gave a layout of remote interchanges in the COVID-19 pandemic. It showed wireless communication technology assists with combatting this pandemic by checking the spread of the infection, empowering medical services computerisation, and empowering virtual schooling and conferencing. Then, they examined the difficulties of utilising wireless communication technology, including worries

about protection, security, and deception. Subsequently, they concluded the significance of wireless communication technology in the endurance of the worldwide; for example, digitalising of businesses and investment networks business, and supporting occupations. The study recommended that the advancement of wire communication technology during the pandemic was helpful during and after the pandemic.

Anwar, Malik, Raees and Anwa (2020) studied the role of the mass media and public health communications in the COVID-19 pandemic. The study established through the literature that the spread of this virus all around the world turned into a health public concern and with lots of questions in regards to how the mass media can be of significance in curtailing the menace and challenges. It equally submitted that mass communication channels became significant health tools as a result of their ability to provide health relevant data and information about the novel COVID-19. In this study, they further broke down the role of mass communications and general health communication from December 31, 2019 to July 15, 2020, and made logical derivations. The study revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic features numerous social and economic issues among which is the role of media. The study submits that the media assumed an overall part in Coronavirus disease follow-up and updates through the live update's dashboard. Also, that the media took into consideration ideal intercessions by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO), thereby empowering a quick and far and wide reach of general health communication. The study concluded that mass communications played a basic part in this and it gave a bound together stage to all general health communication, extensive medical care training rules, and hearty social isolation training.

Umar, Gubareva and Sokolova (2021) examined the effect of the COVID-19 related media coverage upon the five significant markets. This study investigated the impact of the COVID-19 coverage by the online media upon the state of the sovereign non-industrial

nations; namely, the Federative Republic of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. The observational assessments of the study were anchored on re-performed communication form of the Nelson–Siegel model. The study adopted a discourse analysis of literature from the five nations. The coherence between the level, slant, and the shape of the sovereign yield term structures and the COVID-19 media coverage was found to shift among low and high ranges, contingent upon the periods of the pandemic. The study revealed that the mass media were effective in disseminating information on the pandemic updates. It equally submits that the various channels served as sources of information for the citizens of the various nations. Likewise, it was revealed that the mass media was considered one of the dependable factors for taking transformational and economic decisions of the government and citizens.

Oberiri and Bahiyah (2021) examined television news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria from February 2020 to July 2020. The attention was on African Independent Television (AIT), a private TV, and Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), a government TV. The study's objectives were on the frequency of the coverage of the COVID-19, NTA and AIT, the degree of prominence of the coverage of COVID-19 by, the prevailing health news sources of COVID-19, the tones applied by the TV stations in the coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria and the news and visual casings utilised by the tested TV stations when covering COVID-19 in Nigeria. This study is based on three theories: agenda setting, framing, and propaganda model. This study adopted a mixed method to understand TV coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria. The researchers interviewed (30) respondents to collect data in respect to understanding their view on the media coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The study revealed that the TV stations gave significant and adequate attention to the COVID-19 related issues. Notwithstanding, the private media was discovered to have paid more level of prominence to the reporting and coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. By implication, this shows that the private media gave more

COVID-19 related stories in their programming as well as which also appeared as the first headline in many cases. Furthermore, they had more stories that were aired 61 seconds and above. The findings of the study equally revealed that the government-owned media cite more of government authorities in their reports, while the private media duelled more on the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC).

This research is different from the studies reviewed because it focuses on gender differences in terms of Coronavirus believability and usefulness of COVID-19 related information on social media. Most of the studies used survey in their studies, this study come up with different approach by using interview method.

2.4 Theoretical Approach

The study is based on the theory of uses and gratifications. Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch proposed the theory in 1974 (Katz et al., 1973). The theory describes why and how individuals utilise the media and the needs that they desire to be satisfied by it. According to McQuail (2010), people use the media for various reasons, including perceived satisfaction, conditions, and desires. The uses and gratification theory focuses on why people consume media. Madan and Kapoor (2021) posit that the uses and gratification theory, for example, is a way of looking at why and how people actively seek out and utilise certain media to meet their requirements. According to the uses and gratification theory, individuals pick media that meets their needs, allowing them to achieve gratifications such as knowledge development, amusement and relaxation, social connection, and reward or compensation. According to Ruggiero (2000), the motives behind an individual's media choices and the enjoyment that this choice provides are known as uses and gratifications. The theory is suitable for this work as it will showcase the gratification that different gender drive in using social media information.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative method, and interview was used as an instrument for gathering data. An In-depth interview enabled the collection of detailed data from respondents. The study population consisted of six participants. The participants were purposively sampled for the interview because they are active social media users. According to McGehee (2012), and Peterson (2019) interview is an open-ended, discovery-oriented method to obtain detailed information about a topic from the respondent. Since the qualitative approach is almost always interpretative, inductive thematic analysis was employed to examine the data (Clarke & Braun, 2014). Cohen et al. (2007) proposed four generic analysis steps for analysing interviews: creating natural units of meaning, classifying, categorising, and ordering these units, building narratives to explain interview material, and interpreting the interview. Thus, the data generated for this

study were inductively coded and followed Cohen et al. (2007) suggestions. Only related information given by respondents was coded and analysed.

4.0 FINDINGS

The interview was conducted with 12 university students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria for analysis, the 12 interview participants were coded as MP1, MP2, MP3, MP4, MP5, MP6, and FP1, FP2, FP3, FP4, FP5, FP6 for male and female students, respectively. The analysis was set out to achieve two objectives. First, to examine gender differences in terms of belief toward COVID-19 among selected university students in Nigeria; and second, to explore university students' perceptions of the usefulness of COVID-19 related information on social media based on gender. Findings regarding gender differences in belief toward COVID-19 are represented in Table 1 and Table 2 as follows.

TABLE I
Male students' attitudes toward Covid-19

SN	Themes	Exemplary Quotes	Source
1	Covid-19 exists in Nigeria, but its cases are exaggerated	...we believe that there is coronavirus in Nigeria	MP2
		I believe the disease is very real as shown by many media organisations	MP3
		It exist quite sure in Nigeria but to some very little extent	MP1
		...the government, the NCDC, and others are exaggerating the thing	MP1
		I don't believe it exist in Nigeria like that...	MP4
		Nigeria is just copying other countries, with the way theirs also rises	MP5
2	Covid-19 is transmitted through close contact with patients	Yes, according to what experts are saying, Covid-19 can be transmitted through close contact	MP1
		Yes, covid-19 can be transferred from one person to another when you come closer to each other...	MP2
		... it can be transmitted through contact with infected people so yes	MP4
		I believe that	
		...covid-19 can be transmissible through touch, sneezing, and the rest. So yes, I believe	MP6
		...you can get it if you are close to someone who has the disease	MP6
3	Covid-19 cannot be spread in warm weather or through mosquitos	I cannot agree [that it is spread in warm weather or through mosquitos]	MP1
		I don't believe that. It is not true	MP2
		I don't believe that Covid-19 can be transmitted in only warm weather [or through] mosquitoses...	MP3
		... I have not heard anything official from health organisations so I don't believe it	MP4
		I haven't heard of any information about contacting covid-19 in warm weather [or] through mosquitoses, so I don't believe	MP5

		... because the virus is more active in cold weather rather than during warm weather	MP6
		... Isn't mosquitoes meant for malaria only, I don't think that's true	MP6
4	Face-masking is not the complete preventive measure	[using facemasks] is not the only preventative measure	MP1
		...using a nose mask can prevent the virus because nose masks help in curtailing the air, we exchange...	MP2
		Using a facemask is one of the many precautions we have...	MP3
		... it is one step towards the prevention of the virus	MP4
		... it's among the first way of preventing contacting covid-19, but it isn't enough	MP5
		... it's not enough but just a preventive measure	MP6
5	Hand-washing, face-masking, and social distancing can help to prevent Covid-19 infections	...you need to be washing your hand and follow the guidelines given by specialists.	MP1
		...there is this nose mask prevention, specified by the expert, that we should do social distancing	MP2
		...we have to stay 6 feet away from each other	MP3

As shown in Table 1, five different themes developed from the interview responses. First, COVID-19 exists in Nigeria, but its cases are exaggerated. Second, Covid-19 is transmitted through close contact with patients. Third, COVID-19 cannot be spread in warm weather or through mosquitos. Fourth,

face-masking is not the full preventive measure. Fifth, hand-washing, face-masking, and social distancing can help to prevent COVID-19 infections. Emerging themes from female students' responses are presented in the following table.

TABLE 2
Female students' attitudes toward Covid-19

SN	Themes	Exemplary Quotes	Source
1	Covid-19 exists in Nigeria, but its cases are exaggerated	I feel like there is Covid-19, but it is...exaggerated... ...They exaggerate a lot Covid-19 is real. My family and I were affected Covid-19 is real, and it exists in Nigeria I believe that there is covid-19 in Nigeria	FP1 FP3 FP4 FP5 FP6
2	Covid-19 can be transmitted through close contact with patients	I think close contact can spread the virus ...it can be transmitted through that. I and my sisters got it from a delivery guy ... it can be transmitted through [close] contact there is a tendency [to be infected through close contact]	FP3 FP4 FP5 FP6
3	Covid-19 cannot be transmitted through close contact with patients	I don't believe so because we have been staying in choked places and jumping buses every day Yes, that is very true...it could be transmitted through a handshake and [close] contact If one person had, we would have all had by now	FP1 FP2 FP1
4	Covid-19 cannot be spread in warm weather or through mosquitos	Mosquitoes don't even spread HIV, so how will they spread Covid-19? It is a lie I don't think this is entirely true. Covid-19 cannot be transmitted through mosquitoes [or in warm] weather I don't think so. It's not true ...it cannot be spread through any of those [warm weather and mosquitos] I don't believe it can be spread through [warm weather and mosquitos]	FP1 FP2 FP4 FP5 FP6

5	Covid-19 can be spread in warm weather It is not wise to use a face mask alone	... I don't know, but I feel like the warm weather will apply it... I don't think mosquitoes can spread it...	FP3
		I don't think it is wise to use a face mask	FP1
		Face-masking] has its own effects like irritating your face	FP1
		It is not enough to prevent you from being infected	FP2
		Maybe it can prevent it on a 50 percent scale but not totally	FP4
		Using a face mask cannot protect you from it totally...	FP5
6	Social distancing can help prevent Covid-19 infections	Yes, to an extent, but not entirely	FP6
		I will rather social distancing than using a face mask	FP1
		Sanitiser is best, I think and distancing too	FP4

As depicted in Table 2, unlike male students' responses, mixed themes regarding how COVID-19 is transmitted and spread emerged from female students' responses. While the dominant view of the female participants suggests that COVID-19 can be transmitted through close contact with patients (FP3, FP4, FP5, FP6), others believe that COVID-19 cannot be transmitted through close contact with patients (FP1, FP2). Also, the dominant view of the female participants

signifies that COVID-19 cannot be spread in warm weather or through mosquitos (FP1, FP2, FP4, FP5, FP6); FP3 believes that Covid-19 can be spread in warm weather. In contrast, the rest of the themes are similar to those that emerged from male students' responses. Regarding the second objective of this study, students' perceptions of the usefulness of Covid-19 related information on social media are shown in Table 3 and Table 4 as follows.

TABLE 3
Male students' perceptions of the usefulness of Covid-19 related information

SN	Themes	Exemplary Quotes	Source
1	Social media provides valuable information on Covid-19	... We can give it a very good value	MP1
		I value it [social media] very important because it is through social media we get to know the rules and regulation	MP2
		...I value the social media information on corona	MP4
		... so I will give kudos to social media and of value their information	MP5
		... we only got to know about the virus through social media. So I place value on the information to some extent	MP6
2	Fake news affects the believability of Covid-19 information on social media	...people disregard social media information...	MP1
		because of the issue of fake news	
		...they tend to hype the number of cases we have here in Nigeria	MP2
		... social media is choke-full of people who easily share unverified information	MP3
		...I only believe them when it comes from official bodies	MP4
		I can't really say I accept information [on] social media because of what we call fake news	MP5
		when I want to get verifiable information, I go on Twitter especially through the direct source of the information	MP6

Note: MP = Male Participants

As presented in Table 3, two themes emerged from male students' responses to the usefulness of COVID-19 related information on social media. First, social media provides valuable information on COVID-19. Second,

fake news affects the believability of COVID-19 details on social media. Emerging themes from female students' responses regarding this point are depicted in the following table.

TABLE 3
Female students' perceptions of the usefulness of Covid-19 related information

SN	Themes	Exemplary Quotes	Source
1	Social media provides valuable information on Covid-19	...social media played a vital role in making people aware of [Covid-19]	FP2
		Yes, it's a very valuable platform because they let us to know...	FP4
		It made a lot of people aware of its existence	FP5
		I value it very much. Social media made it easy to access covid-19 information	FP6
2	Social media does not provide valuable Covid-19 related information	I do not value the information at all because social media exaggerates things	FP1
		... if you are getting your information from social media, sorry for you	FP1
		I don't really value social media information	FP3
3	Covid-19 related information on social media is not reliable	...the only one I feel is accurate is [information obtained from NCDC]	FP1
		...some people go back there to gain attention, deceive people and give fake information	FP4
		... you have to verify...because many people can just post anything	FP2
		[it is reliable only] when it comes from verified pages like NCDC	FP3
		Well, social media messages can be misleading	FP6

Note: FP = Female Participants

As depicted in Table 4, unlike male students' responses, mixed themes regarding the value of COVID-19 related information on social media emerged from female students' responses. While the dominant view of female participants revealed that social media provides valuable information on COVID-19 (FP2, FP4, FP5, FP6), others opined that social media does not offer valuable Covid-19 related information (FP1, FP3). Nevertheless, female participants believe that COVID-19 related information posted on social media is unreliable, similar to male students' responses.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study examines the gender differences in COVID-19 attitudes and perception toward related information on social media among students. The findings have established that there is not much gender difference in belief and usefulness between males and females. The majority of the female respondents believed that social media does not provide valuable COVID-19 related information, and most of the information is unreliable; male respondents have a similar view. Some

respondents believe that social media provides useful information, but fake news affects the believability of COVID-19 information on social media. The study recommends an urgent need for apparatuses to prevent the spread of fake information. The epidemic impacts the whole world, a large audience seeks knowledge on the subject. The opposing agent jeopardises their safety by disseminating fake information and misinformation for political and economic gain.

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