
Mass Media and Reduction of Covid-19 Vaccination Hesitancy in Nigeria: A Review of Literature

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ABSTRACT

The researchers examined the challenges faced by Nigeria in achieving herd immunity against COVID-19 disease through the use vaccination, and it was used to highlight the role mass media can play to reduce the hesitancy amongst Nigerians. The research design is qualitative in nature, and the media framing theory was also adopted as the basis of the research. In addition, the study was a position paper that incorporated the use of reviewed literature, and the researchers found out that conspiracy theories contributed greatly to COVID-19 hesitancy in Nigeria. In addition, the researcher findings showed that the mass media can help reduce or stop COVID-19 hesitancy by positively framing reports on the vaccine. The researchers also recommended that the spread of conspiracy theories about the vaccine should be stopped on the new and old media.

KEY WORDS: *COVID-19, Mass media, Vaccine hesitancy, Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, which is popularly referred to as the giant of Africa, have an estimated population of 216 million, 953 thousand, and 585 people as of August 16 2022 (Worldometer, 2022). However, WHO (2023) reports that as of 19 March 2023, only 116,606,863 vaccine doses have been administered in the country. In fact, *Premium Times* (2022) noted that less than 40% of Nigerians have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19 as at the end of 2022, even though vaccine rollout began in later part of 2020.

The World Health Organisation had earlier noted that for countries to achieve herd immunity against the COVID-19 disease, they have to vaccinate at least 70% of their population. And on this basis, the Nigerian federal government projected that the country would have vaccinated about 70% of its population by the end of 2022 (*Vanguard*, 2022; WorldStage, 2021).

Premium Times' report on the vaccination acceptance rate in Nigeria, however contradicts the projected percentage the country should have recorded at this period of time. The low numbers of vaccinated Nigerians have been attributed to the high hesitancy or refusal of Nigerians to take the vaccine because of their disbelief in the efficacy of the vaccine, lack of confidence in the government to provide good vaccines, conspiracy theories about the vaccine, as well as the fear of the vaccine side effects amongst others (Olu-Abiodun, Abiodun & Okafor, 2022).

Furthermore, Ogunbosi et al (2022) note that COVID-19 vaccine doubtfulness is a public health challenge that has attracted the attention of health organizations and stakeholders. This is because COVID-19 disease has caused the death of over three thousand people in Nigeria

and over six million people globally (NDDC, 2022; WHO, 2022), and the COVID-19 vaccine treatment is still being met with high resistance, suspicion, lack of trust, hesitancy, or rejection.

The mass media has been widely known as an agent of change over the years. In fact, the mass media is known to be an important tool that helps encourage or discourage the public about societal issues, in order to bring about positive social change globally. This is why Shan & Nusrat (2020) note that the mass media was significant in influencing behavioral change in the public during the COVID-19 pandemic and dominant in making the public to abide by the COVID-19 lockdown rules through their news contents.

The media involvement in curtailing the fear people have towards receiving the COVID-19 vaccination, and in encouraging the public to accept the vaccine treatment is thus cogent. This is because the mass media has the power to influence people's opinions, and influence their thoughts on societal issues (IPL, 2022), and the COVID-19 vaccination is an important societal issue in Nigeria as the country has found it difficult to vaccinate majority of its residents.

In support, IndianCC (2022) states that the media do not only present information to the public about global happenings, but as well form public opinion and consciousness on the reported issues or events, in order to shape the public opinion. Shan & Nusrat (2020) also added that the mass media work as outward stimuli that change its audience's behavior pattern through the conditioning of the news reports they pass out to the audience.

Therefore, this article would be used to enumerate the roles the mass media can play in influencing Nigerians to accept the COVID-19 vaccine treatment, in order to achieve herd immunity against coronavirus in the country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An overview of the coronavirus and its vaccination

Mayo Clinic (2022) notes that coronavirus disease, which is also known as SARS-CoV-2 causes respiratory illnesses that have led to the hospitalization and death of millions. Furthermore, Wiersinga et al (2020) opine that COVID-19 has caused a worldwide significant increase of human hospitalization and death as a result of pneumonia related diseases.

The disease, since it was primarily discovered in Wuhan town of China in the late 2019, frightened the world, and overwhelmed the global health systems (Amzat et al, 2020), even after it was declared a pandemic by the WHO. This is because there was no definite cure or vaccine treatment for the disease till the late 2020s, when the first vaccine was accepted for emergency use in the United States of America. Prior to the time COVID-19 vaccines were developed, countries across the globe enacted non-pharmaceutical intervention (NPSs) policies in order to slow down the widespread of the disease globally, and the interventions included national lockdowns, social distancing, use of hand sanitizers and face masks, movement restriction, and the practice of self isolations amongst others (Elimat et al, 2021). However, the non-pharmaceutical interventions did little to curtail the spread of the disease amongst the public because the virus kept spreading at a very high speed to the point that countries with the best health care systems could not manage the disease spread.

FDA's approval of the first coronavirus vaccine for emergency use in August 2021 hence became a major global health achievement that was appreciated by many because the disease had caused the death of millions of people globally, weakened several countries' health care systems, and the hospitalization of several millions that were showing symptoms like fever, tiredness, shortness of breath, chest pain, organ failure, and severe lung conditions as a result of the disease (FDA, 2021; Mayo Clinic, 2022). The vaccination treatment has since its approval been effective in protecting humans against severe illness caused by COVID-19, and in reducing human risk of getting infected with the disease (MU, 2022). It has also been useful in contributing to community protection and immunity.

González-Padilla (2020) describes the coronavirus vaccine as a medication given to society members in structure of injection to achieve body protection that combats COVID-19 disease. The vaccine treatment also protects humans against contracting coronavirus, or becoming extremely sick or dead as a result of the disease. Furthermore, COVID-19 vaccination prevents persons from transferring the virus (SARS COVID) to others in society, thereby stopping the spread, regeneration or duplication of the virus in the society. In the same vein, COVID-19 vaccination heightens humans' immunity and makes it more resistant to coronavirus disease by stopping the human body from getting re-infecting by the virus.

Popularly used COVID-19 vaccines include the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine, Pfizer-Biontech vaccine, the Moderna vaccine, and Astrazeneca vaccine, and these vaccines which are provided across the globe for free may be administered to everyone, in spite of their race, tribe, or color. The use of the COVID-19 vaccines has also been encouraged by the WHO, government of countries, and other global health stakeholders because of its effectiveness in protecting humans against the disease. Ekhareafo (2020) supports this by noting that all vaccine treatments go through extensive safety tests and evaluations before being approved for use in any country.

Media reportage of COVID-19 vaccination

The mass media has always been one of the major sources of health information to the public during the outbreak of new diseases in the society, and this is due to the fact that the mass media is tasked with the role of providing timely information about societal happenings to their audience (Torwel & Rodney, 2010). Ahmed & Bates (2013) also notes that humans' perceptions of health issues are formed by their own personal experiences or impressions, as well as the media reportage of the health issues. This fact suggests that mass media health report have an overpowering influence on the response of humans to health issues and their health behaviors over time.

In addition, public health related matters like disease outbreaks, pandemics, change in health policies, or breakthroughs in the health sector are usually given prominence by the mass media in their news reports because of their importance. The mass media also shape the way the public interpret these health issues through the use of health frames that play important roles in getting their heterogeneous audience to respond to health issues (Leask et al, 2010).

Since coronavirus was first discovered, the mass media have been reporting issues surrounding the virus to the world audience, and when the development of its vaccine also started, the media gave it importance in their news till it was approved for usage. The mass media (old and new media) has since then continually gave out information about COVID-19

and its vaccination to the public, and Penta & Baban (2018) opine that the mass media reportage of vaccination have become vital to its acceptance or rejection. This is because suboptimal vaccination rate and low vaccination acceptance drive have become a major problem in countries like Nigeria today, despite the enhancements made towards easy access to the vaccines.

In Nigeria, the new media have been particularly used to widely spread myths and false information about the coronavirus vaccine treatment, and mediums like YouTube and other social media platforms have been used to create fear in the minds of people about COVID-19 vaccination, and discouraged them from accepting the COVID-19 vaccine treatment.

Although studies have shown that People who took the vaccine reported fever, lethargy, chills, joint discomfort, fever, soreness of the muscle, confusion, enlarged lymph nodes or arm swelling as adverse effects of the COVID-19 vaccination (Ekharefo, 2020). Several false negative effects of the vaccine treatment are being spread on the social media daily, with little or no media message to correct the false information, and this is bad because ordinary individuals find plausible ideas and images about the benefit or danger of a health issue from the media message they receive about it (Wonkwang & Myoungsoon, 2019).

Vanguard (2022) notes that only about 19% of Nigerians have been fully vaccinated against the coronavirus disease at the end of 2022, a number that is really low when compared to the percentage of vaccinated people in developed countries. For example, SORTIRAPARIS (2020) notes that Malta, Qatar, Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan have vaccinated over 90% of their citizens, while countries like Canada, Spain, United Kingdom, Brazil, Japan, France, and Denmark have vaccinated over 80% of their citizens. The United States of America, Cyprus, Saudi Arabia, Sweden and some other countries have also vaccinated about 70% of their citizen, but a lot of developing countries have not reached this mark in their vaccination exercise due to the high hesitancy of their citizens to accept the vaccine treatment.

Wonkwang & Myoungsoon (2019) note that the media conveys 'health issues' to the public by using frames that project health related issues in communicative contexts, and enable them to see the importance of the health issue and the perceived appropriateness of its gain or threat. This depicts that media messages on COVID-19 vaccination might have contributed to the high refusal of people to take the vaccine.

COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy and its causes in Nigeria

Several factors have been linked to coronavirus vaccine refusal, apathy, and hesitancy in Nigeria, and one of the major ones include infodemic, which must have been triggered by doubts of people about the safety of the vaccine, fear of experiencing side effects of the vaccine, the spread of misconceptions about vaccine effectiveness, and lack of trust in vaccine developers, and the healthcare system.

Vaccine hesitancy is a global issue that has been recorded in countries like The US, Canada, France, and the United Kingdom over the years (Wright, 2011). Disease like Polio, tetanus, measles, hepatitis, Flu' vaccines have all been met with some sort of hesitancy or rejection after their developments , and this confirms that COVID-19 vaccine is not the first disease vaccine to be rejected or met with hesitancy.

Nwaoboli & Asemah (2021) note that the rapid speed in vaccines' development weakened the confidence of people in the vaccine, and stimulate vaccine complacency. Nwaboli et al

(2021) also added COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy in Africa countries is connected to the fake news being spread on old and new media that those living in African are immune to coronavirus because to the continent's climatic factors, and therefore do not need to get vaccinated.

Historically, vaccination hesitancy or rejection has been a notable problem in Nigeria, principally in the northern part. This is because many Nigerians have always had lack of trust in the potency of vaccines that could protect them against diseases. For example, the 2003/2004 rejection of polio vaccine in Northern Nigeria by some persons caused the quintupling of polio cases in the country, as well as polio outbreaks in three continents.

Furthermore, vaccine hesitancy amongst Nigerians have been said to have thrived because Nigeria is a multi ethnic/religion country, that host people with various religious and cultural beliefs that guild their health behaviours. This fact explains why many have refused the COVID-19 vaccine because their religious or cultural beliefs oppose the acceptance of the vaccine despite its numerous advantages (Nwaboli et al, 2021).

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Ajala (2022) examined the framing of coronavirus vaccination reports in The Guardian newspaper, and the study was aimed at finding out the most prevailing frame and source used by The Guardian (Nigeria) in the reportage COVID-19 vaccination. The researcher adopted content analysis as the research design, and used of 10 news frames for the analysis. The researcher found out that 7% of the analysed news elicited fear of accepting the COVID-19 vaccine in the minds of people, and that only 5% of the news reports corrected the misconceptions of Nigerians about the vaccine treatment after analyzing 220 COVID-19 vaccination reports on the newspaper.

Ajibulu (2022) examined the content analytical study of COVID-19 vaccination reports on the Facebook and YouTube social media platforms, in order to ascertain the framing and slant of the reports. Content analysis was the study's research design, and the framing and agenda setting theories ere reviewd. The researcher found out that there were many reports slanted to discourage the acceptance of the vaccine treatment on YouTube, even though Facebook majorly slanted its reports to favour the vaccine treatment. Furthermore, the researcher found out that Facebook majorly used safety or efficacy of vaccine, while YouTube used human interest frame to report COVID-19 vaccination.

These research studies, as well as many other researches carried out on the reportage of COVID-19 Vaccination in Nigeria showed that the Nigerian mass media have not done enough yet to reduce the high refusal of Nigerians to accept the vaccine through their news reports.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Framing Theory

The framing theory elucidates how the mass media influence the perception and attitudes of the public through its news contents (Borah, 2016). In addition, Comminos (2013) opines that the theory explains the mode by which the mass media depict its messages to the public

through the uses of frames that influence the decisions that public make about how to assimilate the media information.

Furthermore, framing theory simply show how the media make use of news frame to structure opinions and determine what individuals of a society think to be essential and irrelevant, as well as what to see as unimportant. Thus, if the mass media portray the COVID-19 vaccine as good and important for every Nigerians, Nigerians would also see the vaccine as essential to their health. This is why media framing of issues is as important as the issue itself, because media contents shape the opinions of those exposed to it.

Khaldrova (2016) notes that framing theory describes the differences between audience' positive and negative attitude or reaction to events, as a result of how media messages of the events are framed. Crawford & Olsen (2017) supported this by noting that exposure of audience to media contents influence changes in their perspectives of the news being discussed.

Framing theory is thus essential in this article because it attest to the fact that the mass media framing of COVID-19 vaccine and its treatment would always influence Nigerians' decision to accept or reject the vaccine treatment.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The researcher reviewed several literatures on COVID-19 and found out that the mass media can contribute to ending COVID-19 hesitancy in Nigeria in several ways. This is because mass media is the mirror that keeps society members informed of the events happening around them, and enhance the public to draw interpretations from the information reported by them.

Firstly, the researcher discovered that the media can help stop COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy by putting an end to the spread of COVID-19 vaccine conspiracy theories in the society. In addition, the researcher discovered that the mass media can help stop COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy by making more use of the misinformation frame in reporting the vaccine treatment, in order to correct all the false news that have been circulated about the vaccine amongst Nigerians.

Furthermore, the researcher discovered that the mass media can help put an end to COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy by slanting its news reports on the vaccine treatment to favour it and incite its public acceptance amongst Nigerians. The mass media can also give more prominence to information relating to the safety and efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine, so as to encourage the acceptance of the vaccine treatment amongst Nigerians.

Finally, the researcher found out that the mass media can help stop COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy amongst Nigerians by ensuring that they validate all their news on the vaccine treatment, and by making sure that only correct information of the COVID-19 vaccination are reported to the public.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the researcher, the researcher concludes that COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy can be reduced and stopped in Nigeria if the mass media corrects the fake news about the vaccine treatment, validating information about the vaccine treatment before reporting to the public, and by focusing on the safety and efficacy of the vaccine.

The researcher also makes the following recommendations

1. The mass media should see the reduction of the COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in Nigeria as part of its social responsibility.
2. Nigerians should help in reducing COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy by stopping the spread of fake news or false information about the vaccine treatment.
3. Nigerian government should also make provision of adequate vaccines to Nigerians.

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