

MEDIA DEPENDENCY AND INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR OF UYO RESIDENTS DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *This study examined media dependency and information-seeking behaviour of Uyo residents during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The study adopted the survey research method with questionnaire as an instrument for gathering data. The population of the study comprised of Akwa Ibom State residents based on the 2018 National Population Commission (NPC) projected census figure of 2006 taken at 3.4% yearly growth rate which gave the figure as 4,828,267. The researcher adopted the multi-stage sampling technique to select respondents for the study. A sample size of 500 was chosen using Comprey and Lee's sample guide. Out of 500 copies of the questionnaire distributed to respondents, 480 were returned and found useful for the study. The study found out that during health emergency situation like the covid-19 pandemic which was occasioned by anxiety, tension, fear and uncertainty, residents depended more on the media to obtain information that can help reduce tension and fear. The study recommends that the mass media should be objective, fair, honest and devoid of bias during health emergencies like covid-19 pandemic since a lot of media audience rely on them for health updates.*

KEYWORDS: media, dependency, information-seeking behaviour, covid-19, pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus, otherwise known as COVID-19 has generated so much anxiety and tension globally. COVID-19 has altered the information-seeking behaviour of audiences in this 21st century. The Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria is part of the global scourge of coronavirus disease 2019 caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS Covid-19). Coronavirus was first discovered in Wuhan, China in December, 2019. Initially, coronavirus was tagged an epidemic by

the World Health Organization (WHO) but because of its global spread and deadly nature, WHO upgraded the virus to a pandemic in 2020. More than 200,000 COVID_19 cases have been confirmed on the African continent, with over 5,600 deaths. Globally as at July, 26, coronavirus cases was 16,432,110, with 10,056,554 recovery and 652,437 deaths (www.worldometers.info). On January 30, the WHO declared the coronavirus outbreak a Global Public Health Emergency (www.worldometers.info).

The first confirmed case of the coronavirus in Nigeria was in February, 27 2020, an Italian citizen in Lagos state who tested positive for the virus. The second case was reported in March, 9, 2020 in Ewekoro, Ogun state through contact tracing of a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian citizen. The first case of coronavirus in Akwa Ibom state was in April, 2020, with another case reported on May, 2020, where a Government House Press Corps reportedly tested positive to the dreaded Covid-19 disease (<http://allafrica.com>). According to Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) the total number of confirmed cases in Nigeria as at 25th July 2020 stands at 40,532, with 17,374 persons said to have recovered and 858 persons confirmed dead. According to NCDC the total number of confirmed cases in Akwa Ibom state as at 25th July, 2020 stands at 208, with 121 persons said to have recovered and 7 persons confirmed dead. (wikipedia.com).

The daily global updates on coronavirus pandemic information is trending immensely, broadcast on radio stations, scrolled on television screens and the social media. Moreso, with the liberalization of the telecommunication sector in Nigeria, which result in over 139 million active mobile phone users and an installed capacity of over 180 million lines (Monye, 2015), the media dependency level of Nigerians during Covid-19 Pandemic increased tremendously. The media have an essential role to play in communicating health promotion. According to Asogba (2019) citing Quattrin, Filliputt and Brusafferro (2015) public health programmes may benefit from the use of mass media to promote positive health behaviours.

Interestingly, when Melvin DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach (1976) postulated the Media System Dependency theory, little did they know about the emergence of the social media. The Media System Dependency theory major assumption is that in times of crisis or uncertainty, people will depend on the media to obtain information in order to reduce uncertainty and anxiety. Moreso, during health emergency situations, like the coronavirus pandemic, the more people rely on having their health needs met by media use, the more important will be the role that the media will play in the life of such people which will lead to more media influence on such people. This study therefore, investigates media dependency and information-seeking behaviour of Uyo residents during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

1. Determine the extent to which Uyo residents depended on the media for information during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria.
2. Identify the most preferred media for information during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria.
3. Determine Uyo residents perception of the role of each media in information dissemination during the covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interestingly, so many scholars have carried out empirical studies on the Media System Dependency theory. Scholars such as Tsfati and Capella (2003), Tsfati and Peri (2006) studied the relationship between media dependency and media trust. Research have showed that gaining insight into users information seeking behaviour is important to provide better services to the audience (Nkomo, Ocholla and Jacobs, 2010 p. 138).

Noar, (2006) notes that the mass media have long been used as a tool for promoting public health such that they are significantly used to exposé high population of large populace to messages through routine uses of existing media such as television, radio and newspapers. According to Akarika, (2019) the mass media plays a fundamental role in educating people about diseases and ailments, outbreaks, prevention, control and treatment. Jakob (2010) in his study found out that there is significant positive relationship between media dependency and media trust. According to him, this is influenced by the negative relationship between the use of alternative sources and dependency.

Media audience behave in different ways in terms of their dependency on a certain media. Thus, their attitudes and dependency towards information obtained from certain media vary. According to Tsfati and Cohen (2013) cited in Egielewa (2020) media trust always involve two sides, namely the trustor which is the side that places trust in something or somebody and the trustee, which is the side being trusted. Both the trustor and the trustee intermit in certain situations in which the trustor may stand to gain but is also at a greater risk of losing.

Additionally, researches have further emphasized that media dependency arises from audience trust which is tied to the media content. James, Akarika and Kierian (2017:27) succinctly explains:

“We live in an enthralling world and even more enthralling society. From the moment we wake up until the moment we go back to our beds, we avail ourselves of numerous media programmes. At the end of the day, you avail yourself of the latest news from your television and crave for your favourite music over the radio and even log on to be connected to the rest of the world through the World Wide Web. Our society is becoming more and more capable of being constantly informed, entertained, and connected to the other individuals at the click of a button. Life without the media is simply unthinkable”.

To buttress this point, Kierian, Akarika and Ukpe (2017) note that the advent of the mass media, for example, television, magazines, newspapers, the internet and other social networks such as facebook as well as means of communication has become part of human life in the contemporary world. Similarly, Ernest, Level and Culbertson (cited in Nkomo et al 2010) observe that electronic

access has drastically influenced information seeking behaviour. The web has compelled a shift in the way people seek information. Clearly, evidence points to shifts in information seeking behaviours due to rise of internet channels (Nkomo et al. 2010).

Sridhar (cited in Nkomo et al. 2010; 147) points out that three sets of factors affect users use of information. They include psychological factors, effectiveness of available services and characteristics of the user and his environment. Nkomo et al. (2010) cited in Akpan and Epepe (2017) in their study found that when searching for information, most respondents preferred a media that is a hybrid of electronic and print media. According to them, the use of electronic media alone was considered transient, while its incorporation of multimedia and currency were advantageous.

Interestingly, news media organizations have also bought into the social media trend as Emmett (cited in Stassen, 2010:117) notes, “The update of social media in news organizations is growing today and journalists are ‘romancing new communities’ by blogging and posting updates and stories on twitter, Youtube and Facebook”. Other uses of the social media as outlined by O’Keeffe, Clark and Pearson (2013) cited in Akarika and Ekanem (2018) include accessing health information and enhancing learning opportunities. From the foregoing, this study therefore seeks to fill some gaps in order to contribute to a more accurate understanding of the relationship between media dependency and information-seeking behaviour of residents of Uyo metropolis during the covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study made use of two theories namely: Media System Dependency Theory (MSD) and the Information Society Paradigm (ISP). The Media System Dependency Theory (MSD) was enunciated by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur in 1976. The theory explains that the length of time which people use for a particular medium, underscores the importance attached to that medium; and that the needs of an individual can be met through the use of a medium, which can result in a dependency. The theory also emphasizes that in times of emergencies or crises, individuals tend to depend more on the media to reduce their anxiety or even confirm their fears. This theory is relevant to the present study in that during this covid-19 pandemic media audience depend solely on the mass media for health information in order to allay their fears.

This study is also anchored on the Information Society Paradigm (ISP). According to McQuail (2005:105) ‘information society’ points to a greater flow of information arising from electronic networks and computerization. The information society paradigm describes a greater dependence on, and trust in Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) so that users can lead a normal life (Stassen 2010 p.123). While the paradigm does not advocate a replacement of old information channels, it introduces elements of interconnectedness, interactivity and personalization, which were lacking in traditional media (Fourie, as cited in Stassen 2010 p.123; Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006 p.6).

The information society paradigm is relevant to this study as it provides a framework to explore the relationship between media dependency and information-seeking behaviour of Uyo residents in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the survey research design. According to Babbie (1990) cited in Akarika, Ukpe and Ikon (2019:58) survey is probably the best method available to the social scientist interested in collecting original data for describing a population too large to observe directly. The population of the study comprised of Akwa Ibom State residents based on the 2018 National Population Commission (NPC) projected census figure of 2006 taken at 3.4% yearly growth rate which gave the figure as 4,828,267. The researcher adopted the multi-stage sampling technology to select respondents for the study. Uyo metropolis was divided into six clusters, Abak road, Ikot Ekpene road, Nwaniba road, Oron road, Aka road and Wellington Bassey Way.

The sample size for the study was determined using Comprey and Lee's (1992) guideline for research cited in Akarika (2019) which states that 50 = very poor; 100 = poor; 200 = fair; 300 = good; 500 = very good; 1,000 = excellent. Based on this, the researcher selected 500 respondents as the sample size which according to Comprey and Lee is very good. Out of 500 copies of the questionnaire distributed to respondents, 480 was found useful for the study. The data gathered from respondents were presented and analyzed using simple percentage and tables.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Sex of Respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage %
Male	300	63
Female	180	37
Total	480	100

Table 1 shows that majority of respondents 300 representing 63% were male.

Table 2: Educational Qualifications of Respondents

Qualifications	Frequency	Percentage %
SSCE/its equivalent	200	42
HND/B.A/BSC/its equivalent	205	43
MA/MSc/its equivalent	50	10
PhD	25	5
Total	480	100

Table 2 shows that majority of respondents 405 (200, 205) representing 85% (42%, 43%) of respondents were SSCE/its equivalent and HND/BA/BSC/its equivalent. This implies that the respondents were literate.

Table 3: Frequency of Exposure to Media Information on Coronavirus

Option	Frequency	Percentage %
Occasionally	50	10
Very occasionally	30	8
Often	150	30
Very often	250	52
Total	480	100

Table 3 shows that majority of respondents 400 (140, 250) representing 82% (30%, 52%) often and very often exposed themselves to media information on coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria. This means that respondents frequency of exposure to media information on coronavirus pandemic was very regular.

Table 4: Extent of Media Dependency by the Respondents during Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria.

Option	Frequency	Percentage %
A very great extent	250	52
A great extent	150	30
Undecided or neutral	-	-
A little extent	50	10
A very little extent	30	8
Total	480	100

Table 4 shows that majority of respondents 400 (250, 150) representing 82% (52% 30%) depended on the media to a very great extent and great extent respectively. This means that majority of respondents depended on the media for information during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Table 5: Media mostly depended on by Respondents during Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria.

Option	Frequency	Percentage %
Television	100	21
Radio	90	20
Newspapers/magazines	50	10
Social media	150	31
Mobile phone	30	6
Online media	50	10
Bill boards/posters	10	2
Total	480	100

Data gathered and presented in table 5 shows that majority of respondents 340 (100,90,150) representing 72% (21%, 20% 31%) depended on television, radio and the social media respectively for information during covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. This implies that the bulk of respondents depended on television, radio and the social media for information.

Table 6: Social Media Platforms mostly depended on by the Respondents to obtain Information on Coronavirus Pandemic in Nigeria.

Option	Frequency	Percentage %
Facebook	200	42
Google +	100	21
Blogs	40	8
WhatsApp	60	13
Twitter	80	16
Total	480	100

Table 6 shows that majority of respondents 300 (200, 100) representing 63% (42%, 21%) mostly depended on Facebook and Google for information on coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria. This implies that Facebook and Google + were social media platforms mostly depended on by residents.

Table 7: Respondents Perception of the role of the Media during the covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria.

Option	Frequency	Percentage %
Very satisfactory	200	52
Satisfactory	100	21
Undecided/neutral	-	-
Unsatisfactory	80	17
Very unsatisfactory	50	10
Total	480	100

Data gathered and presented in table 7 captures respondents perception of the role of the media during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Majority of respondents 350 (250,100) representing 73% (52% 21%) perceived the role of the media to be very satisfactory and satisfactory respectively. This implies that residents were satisfied with the role the media played during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Data gathered and presented in table 1 shows that majority of respondents 300 representing 63% were male, while table 2 shows that majority of respondents 400 (200,200) representing 85% (42%, 43%) were SSCE, HND, BA, BSC and its equivalents respectively. This implies that the respondents were literate enough to understand the topic of discourse.

On the extent to which Uyo residents depended on the media for information during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria, table 3 shows the frequency of exposure to media information on coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria. Majority of respondents 400 (150, 250) representing 82% (30%, 52%) were exposed to media information on coronavirus. This means that respondents frequency of exposure to media information on coronavirus pandemic was very regular. The findings of this study is in consonance with the media system dependency theory major assumption which states that in time

of crises or uncertainty, people will depend on the media to obtain information in order to reduce uncertainty and anxiety. Moreso, Noar (2006) notes that the mass media have long been used as a tool for promoting public health such that they are significantly used to expose high population of large populace to messages through routine uses of existing media such as television, radio and newspapers. Similarly, the findings of this study further buttress Akarika (2019) who notes that the media play a fundamental role in educating people about diseases and ailments, outbreaks, prevention, control and treatment.

Furthermore, table 4 shows the extent of media dependency by respondents during the coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria. Majority of the respondents 400 (240, 150) representing 82% (52%, 30%) depended on the media to a very great extent and great extent respectively. This means that majority of respondents depended on the media for information during the coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria. The findings of this study confirms this author's assertion that daily global updates on coronavirus pandemic information is trending immensely on radio stations, scrolled on television screens and broadcast on the social media. Moreover, with the liberalization of the telecommunication sector in Nigeria, which result in over 139 million active mobile phone users and an installed capacity of over 180 million lines (Monye, 2015) the media dependency level of Nigerians increased. Moreso, researchers have further emphasized that media dependency arises from audience trust which is tied to the media content.

Concerning the most preferred media for information during the covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria, tables 5 and 6 clearly depicts this picture. Data gathered and presented in table 5 shows that majority of respondents 340 (100, 90, 150) representing 72% (21%, 20%, 31%) depended on television, radio and the social media respectively for information. The findings of this study corroborates Nkomo et al. (2010) findings cited in Akpan and Epepe (2017) that when searching for information most respondents preferred a medium that is a hybrid of electronic and print media. According to them, the use of electronic media alone was considered transient, while its incorporation of multimedia and currency were advantageous.

Interestingly, news media organizations have also bought into the social media trend as Emmett (cited in Stassen, 2010:117) notes, "The update of social media in news organizations is growing today and journalists are 'romancing new communities' by blogging and posting updates and stories on Twitter, Youtube and Facebook".

Furthermore, the findings of this study gives credence to the observation by Ernest, Level and Culbertson (cited in Nkomo et al. 2010) that electronic access has drastically influenced information-seeking behaviour. Moreso, table 6 shows that majority of respondents 300 (200, 100) representing 63% (42%, 21%) mostly depended on Facebook and Google + for information on coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria. This implies that Facebook and Google + were social media platforms mostly depended on by respondents. The findings of this study further buttress Kierian, Akarika and Ukpe (2017) who observed that the advent of the mass media for example television, magazines, newspapers, the internet and other social networks as facebook, as well as means of communication has become part of human life in the contemporary world. The findings of this

study also shows the impact of the liberalization of the telecommunication sector in Nigeria, where more than 120 million Nigerian now have mobile phones.

Regarding respondents perception of the role of the media during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Table 7 reveals that majority of respondents 350 (250, 100) representing 73% (52%, 21%) perceived the role of the media to be very satisfactory and satisfactory respectively. This means that residents were satisfied with the role the media played during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. This findings agrees with the information society paradigm (ISP) which describes a greater dependence on, and trust in ICTs so that users can lead a normal life (Stassen 2010:123).

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

The major aim of this study was to evaluate the media dependency and information seeking behaviour of residents of Uyo metropolis during the covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The study found out that during health emergency situation like the covid-19 pandemic which was occasioned by anxiety, tension, fear and uncertainty, residents depended more on the media to obtain information that can help reduce tension and fear.

Based on the foregoing, the study recommends the following:

1. The mass media should be objective, fair, honest and devoid of bias during health emergencies like covid-19 pandemic since a lot of media audience rely on them for health updates.
2. Since the internet has altered information seeking behaviour of the audience in the 21st century, traditional media audience should upgrade to contemporary audience in order to access latest news on their social network platforms.

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