

Perception of Members of Virtual Communities Towards the Covid 19 Management Strategies of Delta State Government

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ABSTRACT: *Corona virus disease is a communicable disease that originated in the Chinese town of Wuhan, but caught the eyes of stakeholders in December of 2019. According to Nepal, Shastry, Chand, Nandakumer, Fant and Khanal (2020), a great number of patients were reportedly struck down with an illness of strange dimension and severe pneumonia was one of the most noticeable symptoms.*

KEYWORDS: virtual communities, Covid 19, management strategies, Delta State, government

INTRODUCTION

Corona virus disease is a communicable disease that originated in the Chinese town of Wuhan, but caught the eyes of stakeholders in December of 2019. According to Nepal, Shastry, Chand, Nandakumer, Fant and Khanal (2020), a great number of patients were reportedly struck down with an illness of strange dimension and severe pneumonia was one of the most noticeable symptoms.

The spread of COVID 19 was very rapid. Statistics assessed from the website of World Health Organisation reveals that as at February 6th 2020, a total of 28,276 cases were confirmed with 565 recorded cases of death in 25 countries (WHO, 2020). As at February 20th 2021, Global Statistics reports an estimated 111 million persons have been infected with the virus which had sent over 2 million persons to their untimely end; an estimated 22 million people are considered as active cases out of which 0.4% are in critical condition. In Nigeria, data extracted from the website of the National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) on the 16th of February 2021 showed that an estimated 146,000 cases have been recorded with 1752 deaths. Delta State is the ninth most affected state in Nigeria with a recorded case of 1823 persons out of which 49 persons died (NCDC, 2020; WHO,2020).

As a direct consequence of the outbreak, the World Health Organisation declared it a pandemic. However, this pandemic, like others in recorded history, brought an unprecedented challenge both to the society and general health system. During times of global health crisis especially when the disease is fatal and far reaching, the spotlight should not be limited to the

dissemination of timely and reliable information, but on the role of proper and effective risk communication in combating the dreaded monster.

The world has witnessed pandemics at different times and on various scales. However, the COVID 19 pandemic came with its own peculiarities; hitting the world at a colossal scale. According to WHO (2021), an estimated 2.4 million deaths have been attributed to COVID 19 of which approximately 94,000 lives in sub Saharan Africa. As at February 2021, Nigeria with 149,273 cases ranks 71 in the list of countries affected by COVID 19, while Delta State ranks 9th position in Nigeria behind Lagos, Abuja, Edo State amongst others (NCDC, 2021; WHO, 2021).

The World Health Organisation (2021) states that a pandemic once identified requires deliberate steps to contain, manage and reduce infection rate of the virus. At this stage the key message is mitigation; the use of information by risk communication experts as a strategy for preventing and controlling the virus as emphasized by WHO and other stakeholders. Risk communication is a vital aspect of public health campaign during a pandemic. From the point of declaration of the COVID 19 virus as a pandemic, the WHO advocates for the use of communication as a weapon of warfare against the virus. Stakeholders rolled out different methods of disseminating information aimed at educating the public with timely and verifiable information on habits that can curb the spread of the virus (Varghese, Sabat, Neumann-Bohme, Schreyogg, Stargardt, Torbica, Exel, Barros and Brouwer, 2021).

The emergence of new communication and media technologies and practices such as the internet beamed the spotlight on communication experts, to discuss issues central to health communication (Gaya, 2014). Experts use social media in crisis response by rapidly spreading hazard information and helping inform the public and patients on actions they can take to mitigate risks (Ophir, 2018).

Historically COVID 19 outbreak is the first pandemic in the global era of widespread mobile devices supported media, in which technological innovations were deployed to keep audience informed, safe and connected (Obi-Ani, Anikwenze and Isiani, 2020; Mheidly and Fares, 2020; Cucinotta and Vanelli, 2020). The advent of the internet and virtual media platforms have changed the way stakeholders interact with their audience on issues. Chakraborty (2017), states that as at 2016 Facebook had more than 1.71 billion active users per month globally, with 1.1 billion log-ins everyday. Nigeria boasts of 122 million internet users and a broadband penetration of 33% and over 31 million active facebook users (NCC, 2019; Danbatta, 2019). Research shows that a huge proportion of global citizens are on digital and interactive platforms, which attract practitioners of risk communication who employs the use of virtual communities to connect with the audience, technological innovations like social media platforms comes in handy for the amplification and dissemination of information (World Bank, 2020).

The present demands of this age require that communication should be integrally woven into the fabrics of any health development strategy (Pidgeon and Barnet, 2013; Petts, Horlick-Jones,

Murdock, Hargreaves, Mclachlan and Lofstedt, 2001; Mundy and Sultan, 2001). As part of the COVID 19 management strategies, the Delta State Government launched emergency response activities via health education campaigns (NCDC; 2020). These campaigns have the primary objective of improving the knowledge of the populace as well as curbing the spread of misinformation that currently surrounds the COVID-19 virus. The various health campaigns create awareness on safety methods to prevent transmission and further spread of the disease. (NCDC, 2020: Gbadamosi, 2020).

Historically, such meetings are held with people who are physically present, but technology has placed a demand on the communities to go beyond geography (Diaz-Chao, Torrent-Sellens, Lacasta and Saigi-Rubio, 2014). These online groups are called virtual communities; it is a relatively new concept involving group of people communicating in cyberspace (Struminger, Arora, Lawrence and Zallud-Ceratiolo, 2017). Given the various efforts of stakeholders aimed at protecting public health, it is of utmost importance to investigate the perception of netizens towards these strategies

The perception of an individual determines the knowledge and adoption of preventive methods as it concerns the transmission of COVID-19. Perception performs a pivotal role in behavioural modification for the control of the transmission rate of any virus. The perception of the members of virtual communities of Delta extraction towards the COVID 19 management practices of the Delta State Government is currently unknown. An evaluation of the perception of the members of these virtual communities is important to decrease the risk of transmission of the virus.

The general scope of the study is virtual communities of Delta State in the internet. These communities can be found in various social media platforms such as Face Book, Instagram, Snapchat, Twiiter, Whatsapp, Pinterest, Linkedin, Reddit, Tumbir amongst others. However, the study did not look at the entire social media platform as it was limited to virtual communities on facebook.

Research Questions

1. To what extent did Delta State use virtual communities on a social platform for addressing COVID 19 related misinformation?
2. What is the perception of members of virtual communities on COVID 19 management strategies of the Delta State Government?

Pandemic in The Present Era: The Corona Virus Pandemic

Pandemic is a large scale disease outbreak due to a virus that can be transmitted via human to human infection. (Balicer et al: 2006). The disease outbreak simultaneously occurs throughout a country and spread beyond national borders into one or more continents at the same time. (Honigsbaum, 2009). Harris (2000) states that the Dictionary of Epidemiology defines pandemic in a standard and internationally accepted way; it states that “pandemic is an epidemic occuring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and

usually affecting a large number of people. Moren et al, (2009) considers it a classical definition because it views pandemic as an epidemic that can occur annually in various locations of the globe. The World Health Organisation defines a pandemic as a situation in which a new and highly pathogenic viral subtype, one to which no one (or few) in the human population has immunological resistance and which is easily transmissible between humans, establishes a foothold in the human population, with a sustained simultaneous transmission in at least two regions, at which point it rapidly spreads worldwide (WHO, 2011a).

In December 2019, an outbreak of patient with severe pneumonia was reported in Mainland China with a geographical focus in the city of Wuhan, Hubei. A novel corona virus was isolated as the cause of the disease. The virus was named by the WHO as “the severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2” (SARS-COV-2)” otherwise known as COVID 19. It belongs to the family of corona virus, which contains the strain responsible for the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003 and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak in 2012 with symptoms ranging from common cold, to respiratory illness, organ failure amidst others peculiar to airborne viruses.(WHO,2020).

On the 20th of February 2020, the rate of increase in cases became greater in the rest of the world than inside China.(Legrand and Donnelly, 2009). SARS-COVID 19 spread rapidly across the world and the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel human coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, which began in Wuhan, China on December 8, 2019, a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on January 30, 2020 (WHO, 2020). Statistics from World Health Organisation reveals that as at December 2020, more than 66 million cases of COVID 19 was reported daily with more than 1.5 million deaths. It was declared a pandemic by March 2021.(WHO, 2021). With over 182 million cases globally as of June 29 2021 with an estimated death of 4 million: United States (over 33 million cases), Brazil (over 18 million cases), Russia (over 5 million cases), and in Africa, South Africa (over 47.284 cases) and Egypt (over 280,000 cases) bear the greater brunt. (CDC, 2021).

Following this WHO declaration, the Corona Virus Preparedness Group was constituted on January 31st in Nigeria (a country with 36 states and a Federal Capital Territory [FCT]). WHO categorized Nigeria as a high-risk African country with respect to the spread of COVID-19. Nigeria was also among the vulnerable African nations, given the weak state of the healthcare system (Marbot, 2020).

New variants of COVID 19 have been identified in different countries and such discoveries are not abnormal because it is the nature of corona viruses to mutate. All ribonucleic acid evolve over time, and it is in their nature to mutate: some of the new variants are more deadly, like the beta variant which is resistant to some of the corona virus vaccines and has a higher ability of re-infecting former patients of COVID 19 (WHO, 2021). The Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2021) pronounced the “delta variant” as a “variant of concern” because of its status as the most contagious form of COVID 19.

Social Media and Pandemic Management

Information plays a huge role in pandemic preparedness and management because of its strategic roles in achieving objectives of public health campaigns. These objectives are generally designed to raise awareness of health threats and to move target audience to actions in support of public health. Information Communication Technology is the power behind disseminating information, and enabling communication amongst stakeholders of public health campaigns. In modern times, these objectives are achieved via social media platforms which are utilized for the amplification and utilization of information. It achieves its objectives in a way that Rauchfleisch and Kovic (2016) describe as faster as and further than the science.

Social Media basically refers to platforms that allows individual users to connect with one another, forming virtual communities for the sole purpose of information, education and entertainment. “Interactivity” is a distinguishing element that separates social media from traditional media because it allows for interactivity information sharing and solicits feedback, unlike the traditional media which is more centralized. They amalgamate social interaction with technology for value co-creation. A well-known corollary of it is a wide form of user generated content, in formats of ideas, text, and videos amongst other.

In this era of globalization, the peculiarities and innovative nature of communication on these platforms make it an indispensable tool of information dissemination. In the sphere of public communication as it relates to health information. Social Media has been proved to be most effective in the broadcasting of information related to healthy practices and living. Ventola (2014), Saigal (2020), Zhao and Zhang (2017). Studies have shown that the peculiarities of social media sites have created a huge success for organizations interested in information sharing and dissemination. (Karpinski, Kitschner, Over, Mellot and Ochuro, 2013).

In Nigeria social media is highly patronized, a research carried out by the Business Day Research Intelligence Unit and Terragon Insights in 2013 on the state of the digital media in Nigeria quoting data from internet world statistics reveals that in 2009, 70% of Nigerians visited social networking sites but in 2013 that figure rose to 72%. The report was confirmed by CP-africa (2016) who released a report that was supported by several other online sites stating that Nigeria houses the second most active users of the internet in the continent after Egypt. According to the report, the population grew from 200,000 at the end of the year 2000 to 16.000,000 at the end of August 2016. As at January 2021, Statista (2021) reveals that Nigeria boasts of 33 million active social media users.

The National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) is Nigeria's leading Public Health Institution. It has the mandate of protecting public health and safety, through the implementation of preventive and control strategies aimed at protecting Nigeria from communicable diseases. A key responsibility of NCDC is to provide Nigerians with timely and correct insights to prevent the risks of infections. (NCDC, 2020) They established a website and other virtual communication strategies fully dedicated to the COVID 19 pandemic, with the mandate of providing insights into the structure and management of the pandemic as well as combat misinformation. A communication campaign termed *#take responsibility* was also instituted.

The actions brought the NCDC to the forefront of messages of public health on the COVID 19 pandemic. The Director General of NCDC, Dr Chikwe Ihekweazu took advantage of technology to strengthen delivery of his mandate. This action was necessitated by recent trends that have its roots in research and reality, showing that leveraging digital technology is necessary for the success of any campaign on public health issues. A 2020 Facebook post made by Mariela Miranda who heads the Bolivian Red Cross, " we consider that the buses of social media help us not only to give information, but also to know what people are thinking, what are their main concerns and doubts about COVID 19, and this allows us to adjust to the message, so that they can address these information gaps. In this way, though physically apart, we remain close (NCDC, 2020; NCDC,2021).

Risk Communication and Pandemic Management

The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (2023) defines risk as the possibility of an individual experiencing harm as a consequence of a hazardous event. These definitions emphasize that a hazardous event cannot be interpreted as risky unless there are huge positive or negative stakes in the area of human, economies or environment (ISO 31000, 2020).

Risk is defined differently by various people in different fields of study. (Adams, 2014). If a request for the definition of risk is communicated amongst ten persons, the probability of getting same definition is very low. Johanson and Rausand (2014). According to Sotic and Rajic (2015), some definitions are based on probabilities, others on expected values, some on uncertainty and others on objectivity. The situation remains unresolved as the definition given by a professional will be different from the views of a layman on the subject matter. Like all other fields of social science, there is no single generally accepted definition or interpretation of risk. Avens (2011).

The question is, how can risk be best communicated to the people? With the large network of information availability, there is the risk of disseminating inaccurate information or information that is put in the wrong context thus preventing people from acting on it. The onus is on stakeholders to be proactive in developing effective strategies of risk communication, aimed at steering the people around various landmines that exists, in their quest for information. The World Health Organization (2012:1-4) defines risk communication as" the exchange of real time information, advice and opinions between experts and people facing threat to their life, health, economic or social well-being". Rohrmann (2008) defines it in a similar way, stating that risk communication is a social process in which information about potential hazards are disseminated with a view to influence or discourage behavior that supports the rapid spread of the hazard, and encourage them to participate in an informed manner in risk related decision making.

The purpose of risk communication is to inform the public and other bodies about certain large scale risks. It exists to recognize potential risks and to take steps towards avoiding crisis situations. (Sellnow and Sellnow, 2010). It aims at providing meaningful, accurate and reliable information to the targeted audience in a simple and understandable format. Such information might not lead to the point of realization or resolve all differences between stakeholders, but

may lead to a better understanding of those differences. The result might be a comprehensible and accepted risk management decisions. Evaluative studies have consistently shown that the effectiveness of risk communication practices lies in helping stakeholders achieve three major communication objectives providing the knowledge needed for informed decisions making about risk: building or rebuilding trust amongst stakeholders; and engaging stakeholders in dialogue aimed at resolving disputes and reaching consensus. (Covello, Peters, Wojtecki and Hyde, 2001).

Risk Communication is central to all aspects of public health including epidemic and pandemic control. It has been practiced in the past with different levels of success. (Gamhewage, 2016). The level of importance attached to it has led to a description of being the core of crisis, risk and public health emergency communication. (Zimmerman, Diclemente, Andrew Hosein and Society for Public Health, 2016).

The beginning of this century saw the WHO documenting an unprecedented magnitude of outbreak of novel communicable disease. A critical lesson learnt from all of these is the importance of risk communication. According to Tumpey, Daigle and Nowak (2018), communication is placed on the same ranking with epidemiology and laboratory analysis in terms of infection control. An essential part of communication is disseminating information on risk. The objectives of risk communication is to help stakeholders in the definition of risk, identify hazards, assess vulnerabilities and promote community resilience thereby providing the capacity to cope with an unfolding health emergency.(WHO, 2011).

Today risk communication is recognized a two-way, multidirectional engagement with affected population, such that they can take informed decision to protect themselves and their loved ones. It can and should utilize the most appropriate and trusted channel of communication and engagement. It brings together a diverse range of expertise in the field of communication, social science (mass media, emergency and crisis communication, social media experts, health educators, health promoters, communication and behavioural change experts amongst others) and system strengthening techniques in order to achieve public health goals in emergencies.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

The Agenda Setting Theory was adopted for this research. It is a psychological process in which the mass media acts as a mediator between the outside world and the picture in our head, the media may not always be successful in telling people what to think but they are successful in telling people what to think about (Wimmer and Dominick, 2000).

This theory is relevant to the study because the content generated by public health stakeholders in the new media might not reflect the complete realities, but it is shaped to fit the desired public health goals of the sender who repeatedly bombards the target audience with tailor fitted content till they consider such issues as important.

Population of Study

The research was carried out in the virtual environment of Delta State. The local population consists mainly of the Isoko, Itsekiri, Ijaw, Anioma and Urhobo people from the three senatorial districts of Delta South, Delta North and Delta Central. (NPC DATABASE - 2006 CENSUS)

In view of this, the researcher purposively picked four (4) virtual group of Delta State extraction; one from each senatorial district and one with state wide orientation.

Instrument for Data Collection

The researcher also used an observation checklist under the observational technique of data collection. (See Observation checklist on Appendix 2).

Validity of The Research Instrument

Research experts reviewed the objectives of the study, and the various items in the checklist to decide on the appropriateness of the test items.

Reliability of The Research Instrument

The reliability of the observation checklist was done using the inter-rater reliability. The researcher assessed the agreement of how various raters assigned same category to the various posts and comments. The Cohen's Kappa Co-efficient was used to analyse data from the inter-rater reliability, and a co-efficient of 0.7 was realised.

The Procedure of Data Collection

Data collection took place over a total of fourteen (14) months; actual engagement with the study setting was backdated to begin from January 2020 to February 2021 to facilitate prolonged engagement in the study setting. Collecting and analyzing posts and information from Facebook groups, pages, and profiles has been utilized by researchers as an established data source Almansa, Fonseca, & Castillo (2013). All posts within the sample Facebook pages on the COVID 19 pandemic was collected on one to two days per week during the data collection time period.

Data was collected in the form of posts and comments within the pages (Kozinets,2010, 2015). All member posts were considered for data collection; however, spam and sidebar advertisements was ignored and not collected. As noted by Kozinets (2010), most Netnographers choose to treat spam and advertisements in this way. Berdychevsky & Nimrod (2017); Lee (2015) and Nimrod (2012).

Techniques of Data Analysis

The study employed a netnographic approach to data analysis, and as such, logical reasoning was used to build up individual observation into an order that provides a holistic representation. (Kozinets, 2010; Kozinets, 2015).

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**TABLE 4.4: The Netnographic Analysis of the extent of Delta State usage of virtual communities to fight COVID 19 related misinformation.**

S/N	THEME	UNR	SO	DHUS	APF
1	Social Media Infleuncers	19			
2	Ethnic Leaders	15	4	11	12
3	Political Aides	43	36	49	49
4	Religious Leaders	10			
5	Eminent Personalities	5			
6	Others	16	8	17	
7	Academic	3			
8	Government owned Media		8	7	7
9	Government		20		
10	Opinion Leaders			8	5
11	Media Outlet			10	15
	Total	111	76	102	88

= UNR means Umeh needs Road

=SO means Sapele Oghenek

=DHUS means Delta How Una See Am

=APF means Anioma People's Congress

The table above shows that the government considered a wide range of virtual options in a bid to address the problem of misinformation associated with the COVID 19 pandemic. The government entered into strategic collaboration with religious leaders, eminent personalities and opinion leaders to launch a sensitization campaign on the volume of misinformation available in our virtual space.

A total of 28 posts were made by this set of people with thematic messages bothering on the true nature of the virus, mode of transmission, the need to adopt preventive measures and spread the message to keep our communities safe. A total of 47 posts can be attributed to government owned media and media outlets. They disseminate information and updates on the virus, encourage the communities to support the government by adhering to protocols stipulated by Delta State Government

Posts made by political aides, social media influencers and others buttresses the information disseminated by the government in the previous category. They also disseminate reports on the activities of the various committee inaugurated by the state government. Unlike the religious leaders and eminent personalities: this group are actively involved in the processes of information, with emphasis on regular interactions and sponsoring gifts to make their voices heard.

Research Question 2: What is the perception of members of virtual communities towards the COVID 19 management strategies of the Delta State Government?

Netnographic Analysis Of The Perception Of Members Of Virtual Communities Towards The Covid 19 Management Strategies Of The Delta State Government.

The netnographic exploration on perception basically concerns itself with the reaction of members of the virtual communities to posts, links and comments, that bothers on the management strategies of COVID 19. A total of 490 posts and comments were analyzed and the researcher streamlined it to the following themes.

Face Mask:

The comments of members of virtual communities indicate a high level of compliance with the government policy on compulsory usage of face mask. They embrace the law that sends face mask defaulters to isolation centres, and educated media aides and government officials on the right usage of face mask.

Some of their comments are listed below

- i. "Good Talk"
- ii. "Please, law enforcement officials, particularly the police you are not above the law".

Some few negative comments appeared in the thread

- iii. "But after trial"
- iv.. "If facemask violators are quarantine then where will you keep those tested positive"

Such comments are common and display the characteristics of passion, as shown in their determination to join hands with government to keep the state free from scourge. Members were appealing to the task force committee to strictly implement such policy in their area of resident. For instance, a post that informs members of the arrest of face mask defaulter in was highly commended. The comments read thus,

- i. "Please extend your enforcement to Ughelli"
- ii. "At Ogwashi Uku, drinking parlours have started operating with customers seated in "groups
- iii. "Market Women are in clusters without face mask"
- iv. "In my area, it's called face chin"
- v. "Better, it will serve as a deterrent"

Members who felt adherent to the usage of face masks is a sign of faithlessness were bullied into silence by other members. The persistence and determination of such members made them either switch opinions or close their mouth. A member wrote

- . "Face mask or no face mask,
God's children are safe.
I am safe, Are you safe?"

The above post generated 57 comments from people who generally attack the sender and spoke to her ignorance. Some of the comment reads,

- i. "We are safe; we should not try god"
- ii. "Obey the law"
- iii. "yes we know, but wear it"
- iv. "So people wem e kill na devil pikin?"
- v. "To obey is better than sacrifice, wear your face mask"
- vi. "There was one American Pastor holding service, when he knows there is COVID, but today he is resting in peace"

However there were little complains about the ability of facemask to protect them from the virus, while others complain of the cost and inaccessibility of face masks:despite the government release of 1 million face masks to the public

Lockdown

Members of the communities said that the lockdown was in accordance with international practices, and very appropriate to limit the spread of the pandemic. They complained of boredom and economic crisis, then started consoling one another with words like,

- i. "it is for our good"
- ii. "this too will pass"

The government was highly criticize for the porosity of our borders especially the Delta- Benin routes. Some individuals gave out information on areas where the lockdown was being flouted, while others cry about the rise in curve, despite the lockdown. Such tears elicited comments like,

- i. "look up to God while following NCDC guidelines"
- ii. "the thing tire me"
- iii. "Maybe, the lock down came too early"
- iv. "it is better for another lockdown, because the disease is on the rise".

Few members made posts asking for the purpose of the lockdown. One of such posts reads,

"If Delta State with four weeks lock down has 1131 cases
and Edo State with no lockdown has 1165.

He got responses like,

- i. "ensure COVID does not spread"
- ii. "Where was the total lock down?"
- iii. "It would have been worst"
- iii. Social Distance

Members of the virtual community posted different photographs of themselves with different captions, observing social distance even in social gatherings. They also encourage members of the communities to obey them if they want to stay alive.

The general perception to the posts on social distancing were positive, as members used words such as

- i. “commendable”
- ii. “stay alive”
- iii. “stay safe”
- iv. “wise man”
- v. “increase social distancing please”
- vi. “too close”

A few other expressed sadness, stressing that the lock down should be relaxed to enable them survive. While responding, a member said

“we nor go fear corona, go die for lockdown”.

i.v Sensitization Campaign

The media aide, political aides and influencers often flood the group with sensitization campaigns as produced by the awareness committee set up by the state government. For instance, the COVID 19 sensitization committee landed at the Uvwie Motor Park for a sensitization campaign to ensure that regulations are not flouted by the drivers. Most comments revealed that the sensitization campaign was not necessary, because members have started adhering to the protocols. Nevertheless their efforts were commended with comments like

- i. “welcome development”
- ii. “lets adhere strictly to precaution”
- iii. “Good one, but NURTW will not comply without increasing price”

Members of virtual communities also participated in sensitizing members of the awareness committee who were highly criticized for flouting COVID safety rules.

Their actions attracted comments like

- i. “Is this a joke or what?”sensitizing people without face masks!!!”
- ii. “And you have 100 gathered under one roof”.
- iii. “Whoever led this campaign, needs to have his head checked?”

In a related development, while trying to create awareness; a media aide posted an update of the affected patient in Ughelli, which result in the self isolation of six health workers. The reaction generated shows that Deltans do not believe in self isolation. Their comments were

- i. “Why self isolation?”
- ii. “Our government is not serious”
- iii. “Please take them to an isolation centre”
- iv. “Allowing them to self isolate is not a good measure”

The comment was in same direction except one member who wrote

- v. “It is better to self isolate than go into an isolation center with COVID patients.

Findings of the netnographic study relating to the perception of members of virtual communities towards the COVID 19 management strategies of the Delta State Government,

shows that the publics are in tune with recent practices that curbs the spread of the disease. It also reveals that the people are very concerned about public health judging by their utterances to the members of the prevention committee as set up by the Delta State Government.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings suggest that the Delta State Government took advantage of a wide range of option to tackle the problem of misinformation as it relates to COVID 19. Some of the options explored by the government are whatsapp, facebook, twitter and social media influencers to alert the public on the existence, volume and risks of COVID 19 related misinformation. The government also used whatsapp to improve media literacy and engaged in joint communication with various agencies to limit the spread of incorrect information on COVID 19.

This finding supports Akashraj and Pushpa (2014) which states that virtual communities facilitates collaborations and various forms of communication that transforms users from information consumer to information participants in a never ending cycle. It is also consistent with the findings of Polanska (2014) that Virtual Communities creates strategic communication (UNDP, 2001), transmit contents through connections and conversation (Nwabueze, 2005), enabling people around the world to share, comment and interactively discuss a wide range of issues. Liu, Austin and Jim (2011). It also empowers senders and receivers with the ability to articulate their needs, control their message and achieve set goals determine by local choices (Atakpu, 2001).

Findings show that respondents have a positive perception of the COVID 19 management strategies of the Delta State Government. They believe that the lockdown, social distancing, wearing of facemasks, hand hygiene are very critical tools in the fight against the expansion of the Virus. The respondents believe that Isolation Centers are vital hence nobody should put anyone at risk by self-Isolation; all suspected case of COVID should be taken to an Isolation center.

This finding supports WHO (2020) which instructs people to adopt preventive health habits, as a means of tackling the pandemic. Individuals are advised to wear face masks, avoid crowdly places and observe social distancing in their quest to stay free of COVID 19 infection (WHO, 2020 : UN, 2020).

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