

# Evaluation Of Covid-19 Themed Comedy Skits In Social Media Health Reportage In Southern Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

The paper probes the Nigerian government's social media campaign to combat the outbreak of COVID-19. Focusing on government's public policy measures to curtail the transmission of the new coronavirus disease through standard infection control measures and social distancing, the research evaluates ordinary Nigerians' perception of social media dramatized coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study assesses the impact of viral comic videos shared on social media platforms like Whatsapp, Facebook, Instagram etc. on people's critical perception of the pandemic as well as their health behavior. The aim is to establish how the Nigerian government has effectively harnessed the social media entertainment platform in its charge to disseminate credible information to a largely young and semi-literate population which is economically imperiled with limited access to mainstream media. Stressing the deficit of trust between the Nigerian public and the ruling elite, the paper analyses how social media skits interrogate elitism and the counter infection strategy of lockdowns in a struggling economy, The paper emphasizes the crucial roles social media platforms have played in shaping misinformation and prevalent myths about Covid-19 in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Social media, Comedy, Skits, Viral, Transmission.

## 1. Introduction.

COVID-19 is an illness caused by a novel coronavirus which was first identified following an outbreak of numerous respiratory illness cases in Wuhan city, Hubei Province, China (CDC, 2019). Coronaviruses are well-established pathogens of humans and animals (McIntosh & Peiris, 2009).

The virus “spreads primarily through saliva droplets or nasal discharges when an infected person coughs or sneezes” (World Health Organization, 2020). It swept rapidly across China to over one hundred and twenty countries outside China, surpassing 179 million cases and 3.8million deaths globally to date. The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 disease a global emergency on January 30, 2020 and later on March 11, 2020 a global pandemic. Scientists are still learning about the disease. There have been specific vaccines or antiviral therapy developed for COVID-19 such as: Sinovac, Sinopharm, Pfizer BioNTech, Oxford/AstraZeneca, Johnson and Johnson, Moderna, Janssen Ad26 vaccines (WHO, 2021). There are also on-going research and clinical trials of drugs for potential cure. With the first case of the corona virus disease reported in Egypt, Africa on 14 February, 2020 the pandemic has spread across a total of 52 countries on the continent with every African nation recording a positive case. South Africa and Morocco are in the lead with the most positive infection rates of 1,823,319 and 526,651 cases respectively out of an African total of 5,212,918 cases, 137,518 deaths and 4,523,013 recoveries (Africa Centers for Disease Control, 2021). Globally, 2.9 billion vaccine doses have been made available with 826 million people, representing 10.6 of world population, fully vaccinated. Nigeria has received 3.1 million vaccine doses with 1.01 million fully vaccinated, representing a meager 0.5 of its entire population. With more than half of its over 182 million people being under 30 years of age (Mbachu, D. & Alake, T., 2016), Nigerian youths represent an important demography in planning any effective public health campaign.

The Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) on 27<sup>th</sup> June, 2021 reported 1,399 active cases of COVID-19 in 36 states including the Federal Capital Territory (2021). Till date 167,467 cases have been confirmed with 163,949 cases discharged and 2,119 deaths recorded from the first reported transmission on 27 February, 2020. COVID-19 is also transmitted by humans through close contact with an infected person by exposure to coughing, sneezing or respiratory droplets which penetrate the human body via the mouth, nose or eyes (Shereen, MA, Khan, S, Kazmi, A, et al, 2020; BBC, 2020). The source and manner of transmission is important to manage prevention strategies to contain the infection. There are also substantial consequences for Nigerians because of their penchant for social displays of affection like hugging, handshaking, staying in close proximity during social gatherings, meetings and religious activities etc. The Nigerian government appears lagging in its drive to fully educate and mobilize youths in this most important fight against a pandemic that threatens their future. Rather, the federal government had at various times sought to criminalize the use of the social media through a bill ostensibly seeking to restrict access to such platforms under the guise of ‘Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulations’ (Guardian, 2021). On 5 June 2021, the Buhari administration indefinitely banned Twitter, the American micro blogging and social networking service provider, from operating in Nigeria after it deleted the President’s rules violating tweets (Aljazeera, 2021). The Twitter ban learnt credence to government’s perceived antagonism to the social media space largely visited by Nigeria’s teeming youth population.

The efforts to combat the outbreak of COVID-19 have largely been concerned with how to prevent transmission by maintaining measures like isolation, quarantine and basic infection control protocols and social distancing. Nigeria has recorded significant number of cases across the federation with attendant fatalities out of the tested cases. The need to examine the role of viral social media comedy skits and the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria and its impact on health awareness and behavior informed this investigation. The study objectives are as follows:

Nigeria has recorded significant number of cases across

1. To evaluate perception of social media dramatized coverage of COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To assess the impact of viral videos shared on social media platforms like Whatsapp, Facebook etc. on people's perception of the pandemic as well as their health behavior.
3. To establish challenges faced by the government in effectively harnessing social media entertainment platforms to disseminate information to a largely young citizenry mostly based in rural areas and lacking access to mainstream media.

The need to examine the role of viral social media

Methods this investigation. The study objectives are as follow: 1. To evaluate people's knowledge of the COVID-19 virus. 2. To evaluate perception of social media

The Study adopted the cross-sectional survey method for the purpose of data collection. The study was conducted in the Southern part of Nigeria. Southern Nigeria is made up of 17 states with a population of over 100 million people spread into 3 geo-political zones: South-east, South-south, and South-west. The study was conducted in adherence with the research principles of WMA Declaration of Helsinki. The ethics committee at the authors' respective institutions approved the study. Respondents completed informed consent forms for participation in the study. A total of 900 respondents were chosen as samples, 300 each from the 3 study areas.

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. Respondents completed informed consent forms for participation in the study. A total of 900 respondents were chosen as samples, 300 each from the 3 study areas. A multi-stage cluster random sampling technique was used to achieve this purpose. The researchers purposively decided to select equal sample sizes from each study area.

A 10-item structured questionnaire captioned: ‘ Awareness of Media Campaign A multi-stage cluster random sampling technique was used to achieve this purpose. The researchers purposively decided to select equal sample sizes from each study area. A 10-item structured questionnaire captioned: ‘Awareness of Media Campaign Against COVID-19 in Nigeria’ was created by the researchers through analysis of previous literature (CDC, 2019; Korsman, van Zyl, Nutt et al, 2012; World Health Organization, 2020; Africa Centers for Disease Control, 2020; Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), 2020; Shereen, MA, Khan, S, Kazmi, A, et al, 2020; BBC, 2020). The structured questionnaire was divided into 2 sections to facilitate the collection of data relating socio-economic variables such as age, gender, education etc. and questions concerning social media awareness of COVID-19 in Southern Nigeria. The questions were structured on a 2 proportion percentage rating scale: Strongly Agree/ Agree and Strongly Disagree/Disagree. Three Evaluators, comprising 1 Theatre Arts Lecturer, 1 Mass Communication lecturer, and 1 medical officer from the University of Nigeria Medical Center respectively, carried out a face validation of the questionnaire. Test re-test reliability was adopted at 2 weeks intervals to administer 20 copies of the questionnaires to respondents in a setting similar to the main study areas at Enugu, the capital of Enugu state. The 2 sets of responses obtained were correlated using the Pearson product- moment correlation (r). Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient of 0.95 was obtained, and the internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire was 0.86 alpha. was created by the researchers through analysis of previous literature

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The questionnaire was administered in 2 weeks in April 2020, and 1 week in June 2021 with the aid of research assistants. The research assistants were trained by the researchers during a 2-day group tutoring on how to collect the needed data. The researchers instructed them to ensure that the questionnaires were only distributed to people willing to take the study. Percentage score from SPSS version 20 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL) was used to analyze the data collected. The mean difference was significant at  $P \leq .05$  and guided the result of the analysis. on how to collect the needed data. The researchers instructed them to ensure that the

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3.1. Participants demographic characteristics Results from the data analysis showed the following demographic information: there were 265 male respondents (44.2) and 335 female respondents (55.8) who voluntarily participated in the study. Furthermore, 26.0 of the respondents were between the age group of 18 and 27 years, 30.5 were between 28 and 37 years of age, 28.3 were between 38 and 47 years of age, and 15.2 were 48 years and above. The educational levels of the respondents were: West African Examination Certificate (WAEC) National Diploma (ND) 34 .2, Bachelor’s degree (39 .4), and 115 Masters /Ph.D( 26 .4) ( see Table 1 ). 116 Table 1 117 Socio – demographic data of respondents

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**Table 1 Socio – demographic data of respondents**

City	No.	Gender		Age in years				Education		
		Male	Female	18-27	28-37	38-47	48 & above	WAEC &NE	First Degree	Masters/Ph D
Enugu	300	152	163	85	82	65	47	108	99	76
P/H	300	161	174	93	85	69	49	97	118	81
Ibadan	300	167	183	103	95	76	51	142	104	75
Total	900	480	520	281	262	210	147	347	321	232

Source: Field work, 2020

ND = National Diploma, WAEC = West African Examination Certificate

**Table 2 shows the results from the proportions (%) of strongly agree/agree and strongly disagree/disagree to the questions**

S/No	Item	Agree Percentage		Disagree Percentage	
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree
1.	Know the nature, carriers, symptoms and treatment of COVID- 19	14	26	35	25
2.	Learnt about COVID-19 through the mass media or social media	6	12	63	19
3.	Learnt about COVID-19 through friends, church, school, hospital/health workers or meeting	45	28	15	12
4.	The media created effective and broad awareness campaign about COVID-19 that mobilized the masses against the pandemic	15	30	30	25
5.	The social media created important and effective awareness campaign about COVID-19 that mobilized the masses against it.	60	5	20	15
6.	Inappropriate and insufficient information in addition to rumors about the COVID-19 pandemic being political myth characterized the campaign against the virus.	8	12	70	10
7.	Government devoted ample time , resources and space to create public awareness on the social media about the transmission and method of preventing COVID-19	35	11	45	9
8.	Media campaign against the outbreak and spread of COVID-19 led to changes in Nigerian culture	2	18	65	15

	of hugging, handshake, nasal cleaning and social gathering.				
9.	People’s culture, economic activities and poverty militated against the impact of media campaign to prevent the spread of COVID-19 by avoiding contact	12	7	72	.9
10.	Inappropriate and insufficient social media interventionist measures caused by a lack of cohesive containment plan limited the war against the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria	63	20	2	15

Source: Field work, 2020

### 3.2 Discussions

#### 3.2.1 People’s knowledge of COVID-19 and access and use of social media programs.

The analysis of responses to question 1, as shown in table 2, reveals that respondents had inadequate knowledge of the nature of COVID-19, its transmission mode and prevention mechanism . From their responses to question 2, 82% of respondents disagreed that appropriate information about COVID-19 was known through the social media while 18% agreed they got critical information about the virus through both media sources. The analysis of responses to question 3 furthermore indicated that 73% of the respondents agreed to have received awareness or additional information about the pandemic through the church, friends or town hall meetings. In response to the fourth question, a higher percentage of respondents (55%) narrowly disagreed there was an effective media campaign. The analysis of responses to question 5, which required finding out if inappropriate and deficient information combined with rumors and misinterpretation of what Nigerian social media influencers derogatorily tagged ‘plannedemic’, ‘political lockdown’, and ‘money transfer up’, characterized the social media campaign against COVID-19. It showed 65% of respondents in agreement that there was widespread misrepresentation of information on social media comedy skits. This response reflected the high deficit of trust and suspicion that the federal and state governments could not adequately protect citizens’ best interests. The respondents, by implication, had little or no access to mainstream media campaign against COVID-19 pandemic and its spread in Nigeria. Also, the responses on whether the social media created effective and comprehensive awareness about COVID-19 pandemic that mobilized enormous public response against the virus, revealed 60% respondents strongly agreeing out of the 65% in agreement. More analysis of the results above indicated that according to responses to question 6 the respondents disagree there was apt and adequate information about the social media

campaign against COVID-19. It is evident that government failed to contest myths, perceptions about the nature, transmission and methods of preventing the spread of corona- virus. With youths' evident disdainful view of those in positions of power, owing to Nigeria's long history of bad governance, government should have explored this new lens to understand how the serious challenge of resistance and vaccine hesitancy is shaped. The

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63 20 2 15 124 Source: Field work, 2020 3.2 Discussions

3.2 .1 People's knowledge of COVID-19 and access and use of social media programs

3.3. The impact of social media campaign on COVID-19 pandemic and spread.

From the analysis of responses to question 7, which aimed to find whether government devoted ample time, resources and space to create public awareness on the social media about the pandemic, it was revealed that 54% of respondents disagreed. Additionally, the analysis showed that respondents believed that the government's media campaign, following the outbreak and spread of the pandemic, did not lead to any significant change in Nigeria's social interaction behavior like, hugging, handshaking closeness during social gatherings, religious gatherings, political gatherings and ceremonies among others. These results suggest that government's mass and social media campaigns about COVID-19 pandemic and spread in Nigeria had no clear effect on public hygiene, personal cleanliness or health behavior. Nigerian social media skits as key behavioral assessment variables to study, clarify, envisage and sometimes correct human behavior give perception to the pandemic cutting across aspects of Nigeria society viz- politics, religion, health care management, economy among others enunciated the failure of government's campaign to elicit significant changes in Nigeria's social culture. Social greeting patterns involving hugging, handshaking, and close seating at social, religious and political gatherings as well as other



ceremonies remained unchanged. These intimate social behaviors constitute viral modes of transmission of COVID-19 and government's mass and social media campaigns were therefore deemed deficient and unproductive in changing public opinion about the nature and prevention of the pandemic (see Table 2).

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### 3.4 The challenges faced by the social media campaigns about the pandemic.

The results of the analysis, which purposes to discover whether Nigerians' cultural behaviors and education affected the impact of the federal government's social media campaign to curtail the spread of COVID-19 pandemic through preventing its transmission, showed a whopping 81% of respondents in disagreement. Apparently, the respondents felt the generality of Nigerian culture was not impedance to the social media campaign and information about the virus in its geographical space. Hence the inability of government to exploit the social media as an alternative communication platform in mobilizing effective and sufficient campaign against the pandemic in Nigeria contributed to the warped perception of the virus as a hoax, of elitist concern and highly politicized. A major problem of lack of cohesive health policy direction contributed to this deficiency and further exposed Nigeria's highly dysfunctional health care system (see Table 2).

### 3.5 Implications and Limitations

The findings of this study support the view that social media skits could be important tools to spread awareness about government's health initiatives positively influence people's health behavior and perception. Government's stated aim should not only require knowing the epidemic and strategizing a response but also acting on its politics. Therefore government and health agencies that provide public health and disease prevention through education, sensitization and mobilization should consider utilization of social media programs and primary information tools for mediatory the scourge. Apart from serving as entertainment avenues to lighten people's depression states during the lockdown and economic meltdown, viral social media drama skits highlighting COVID-19 hence potential as poignant vehicles to disseminate crucial information about the nature, transmission and prevention of the pandemic. The implications of the finding of this study is that the federal government as an important stakeholder and policy maker should build cohesive health communication strategies and policies to harness the grassroots potential of the social media in achieving the three crucial I's i.e. information, identification and isolation. The findings therefore support the effort of Nigeria government to harness social media health awareness programs to sustain its public health policy.

Further, government should review its health communication policy and practice, ensure greater access to health information and meet the unprecedented demand for information. The current study has several limitations regarding the impact of low level of education, and the prevalence of bias on people's ability to comprehend and consume media programs in Nigeria. There appears to be a distrust of institutions in Nigeria which social media comedy videos have exploited thereby complicating government's bid to get a clear message about the dangers of the pandemic across to the public. Social media comedy skits have largely shaped the psychological traits impelling a sizable proportion of Nigerians to initially view the corona virus as a political hoax then later label government's attempts to inform as 'patronizing'. Further research in this thematic area should focus on how skits on social media, which have been converted as counter-narratives, impact

people's perception, comprehension and consumption of health information and disease prevention.

Additionally, this study could not account for the impact of culture. Some of the comedy skits project the brutal actions of law enforcement officers against ordinary Nigerians who flout the lockdown restrictions as they engage in existential considerations. This is another area of possible future research. Also the fact that the researchers approached people who were willing to take the survey is another possible limitation of this study. Future researchers should endeavor to be more inclusive in their data collection approach to eliminate any form of collection bias.

#### **4 Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic is a public health concern in Nigeria. Nigeria has recorded significant number of cases across 35 out of 36 states of the federation with attendant fatalities. Government's media campaigns as part of its public health strategies are planned to cultivate awareness about diseases. However, government's COVID-19 media campaigns have not demonstrably altered people's health behavior toward the pandemic. Trust and credibility are key to interventions during public health crisis and have been absent in the perception of government's handling of the pandemic as reflected in viral social media skits. The causal contents of these viral social media comedy skits are counter-narrative in nature and suggest a gap of trust in public leadership. Some behaviors and activities defined by social-cultural norms and practice are channels of Corona virus infection. Government health professionals and media managers should synergize

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Some behaviors and activities defined by social- cultural norms and practice are channels of Corona virus infection. Government and articulate a coherent local containment plan for control and prevention of COVID-19. Interventionist measures taken so far appear to neglect peculiar assumptions, social behavior and economic needs of local communities. Public health officials need to effectively strategize how to adopt the potential new tool of the social media and its attendant social psychology to decipher ways small ideas of reactionary behavior transform into complex positions that translate to vaccine hesitancy.

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## **Declarations**

### **Funding**

The author received no direct funding for this research.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The author confirms that data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Raw data that support the findings of this study was generated by the corresponding author at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. They are available on request from the corresponding author.

### **Conflicts of interest**

**There is no competing interest to disclose**

### **Ethics approval**

The Faculty of Arts, UNN granted ethics approval for the study.

### **Consent to participate**

**Respondents to the survey questions gave their consent to participate.**

### **Consent for publication**

**The authors have given consent for the publication of this research.**