

Covid-19 Information Behaviour of Social Media Users in Nigeria

Adetola Ayotunde Kehinde

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5991-1066>

Nobel International Business School, Accra

kehinde@nibs.edu.gh

Kehinde Kadijat Kadiri

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4389-5129>

University of Ilorin, Nigeria

kadirikk0207@gmail.com

Rakiya Aliyu Bello

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3684-3857>

University of Maiduguri, Nigeria

rakiaaliyubello@gmail.com

Halimah Odunayo Amuda

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4147-0792>

Al-Hikmah University, Nigeria

amudahalimah@gmail.com

Beatrice K. Tobashe

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2541-5205>

Thomas Adewumi University, Nigeria

beatrice.tobashe@tau.edu.ng

Abstract

The study that directed this article investigated the Covid-19 information behaviour of social media users in Nigeria. Based on the nature of the study population, the data for the study were collected using Google Form to create an electronic questionnaire. Altogether 348 social media users participated in the survey. Findings from the study showed that the participating social media users in Nigeria were interested in knowing everything about Covid-19. Also, they preferred the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) social media platforms as their main sources of Covid-19 information. The study also showed that Covid-19 information was majorly shared among these social media users in Nigeria through WhatsApp. However, data revealed that the participating social media users in Nigeria were satisfied with the available Covid-19 information. Finally, findings indicated that fake news and misinformation, as well as too much information on Covid-19 available on social media, constituted the major challenge that the interviewed social media users encountered when searching for Covid-19 information.

Keywords: Covid-19; information behaviour; social media users; Nigeria; NCDC; WHO

Introduction

The 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV), officially declared as the Covid-19 pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO), has been described as a global threat. Hussain (2020) asserts that the Covid-19 pandemic has produced a global health crisis that has had a deep impact on the way we perceive our world and everyday lives. According to WHO (2020a), Covid-19 can cause a range of symptoms, ranging from mild illness to pneumonia. Symptoms of the disease are fever, cough, a sore throat and headaches. In severe cases, difficulty in breathing and even death can occur (WHO 2020a/b). However, at the start of the outbreak and at the time of writing, there was no specific treatment for people who were sick with Covid-19 and no vaccine to fully prevent the disease (WHO 2020a).

Being one of the emerging outbreaks in recent decades, Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the socio-economic activities of citizens across the globe. The coronavirus disease has overcome geographical barriers, achieving a remarkable proliferation (Zegarra, Vilca, and Guerrero 2020). The novel Covid-19 pandemic has spread outside China to more than 180 countries, and it has since become a global public health emergency (Shigemura et.al. 2020; Vara 2020). The first case of Covid-19 in the world was reported in Wuhan, China, in late December 2020 (Chen, Lerman, and Ferrara 2020). In Nigeria, the first confirmed case of Covid-19 was reported in Lagos by the Federal Ministry of Health on 27 February 2020 (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control [NCDC] 2020a). As of August 20, 2020, the outbreak has resulted in 22 256 220 confirmed cases and 782 456 deaths (WHO 2020b). In Nigeria, as of Thursday at 9:00 pm, August 20, 2020, the outbreak had been recorded in all the 36 states of the federation, including the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, totalling 50 488 confirmed cases, 12 199 active cases, 37 304 discharged cases and 985 deaths (NCDC 2020b).

According to Amini and Mostafavizade (2017), WHO considers health literacy as the main determinant of health, and, because of its importance and emphasis as well as monitoring and coordinating health literacy promotion activities, the establishment of a community is recommended globally. According to Cinelli et al. (2020), information dissemination can strongly influence people's behaviour and alter the effectiveness of countermeasures deployed by governments. In this respect, models to forecast virus spreading are starting to account for the behavioural response of the population regarding public health interventions and the communication dynamics behind content consumption (Kim, Fast, and Markuzon 2019; Shaman et al. 2013; Viboud and Vespignani 2019). As a result of this, it can be deduced that finding information about Covid-19 is one of the most important and essential requirements for health literacy and, consequently, personal and social health.

Kehinde et al. (2016) note that information users make active and intentional attempts to seek up-to-date information from library resources, including electronic sources. Information on Covid-19 is publicly made available through international organisations like WHO, national organisations like the NCDC, and some other organisations like

NGOs and media houses via every available medium of communication so that the population can be informed and have adequate knowledge on how best to take the necessary preventive measures. The information behaviour of social media users has been on the increase since the novel Covid-19 was first reported in Wuhan city, China.

Information behaviour, being a complex phenomenon, is contextually shaped by personal needs, learning styles, available resources, and affective components, among other factors (Clarke et al. 2013). Case (2002) refers to information behaviour as the ways through which people seek and use information. Also, Omopupa (2016) describes information behaviour to include: information needs, information seeking, information utilisation, information sharing, information sources and information communication/dissemination. During the period of Covid-19, information behaviour entailed vital activities toward achieving Covid-19 behaviour change and toward ensuring Covid-19 preventive measures and psychosocial adjustment to the pandemic. Sharma et al. (2017) posit that during a period of pandemic, accurate and credible dissemination of the right information about the virus causing a pandemic could help in controlling the spread of the virus and associated anxiety among the populace. Therefore, Covid-19 information behaviour can be described as the Covid-19 information needs, Covid-19 information seeking, Covid-19 information utilisation, Covid-19 information sharing, Covid-19 information sources and Covid-19 information communication/dissemination.

With the aid of the Internet, social media platforms have long been recognised as powerful forces shaping the information dissemination and consumption of users. Brindha, Jayaseelan, and Kadeswara (2020) assert that social media has been a helpful tool in the dissemination of information and information gathering during the Covid-19 outbreak. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Telegram, and so forth, provide access to a variety of information content. With more than 3.8 billion social media users globally, and over 27 million users in Nigeria, social media has become an indispensable part of everyday life for people all over the world (Kemp 2020). However, Brindha et al. (2020) assert that there are thousands of false information posts being circulated on various social media platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, TikTok, and others—even after the government has taken a number of measures to influence the outcome of the virus outbreak in the best possible way.

Statement of the Problem

Over the last decade, social media has been playing a crucial role in spreading awareness and knowledge about public health (Depoux et al. 2020). The range of Covid-19-related information on social media is huge, and the variety of information types offered by social media is associated with different forms of information behaviour by users.

Consequently, prior to the detection of Covid-19 in Nigeria, there has been a lot of talk about the pandemic on Nigerian social media space. There has been a growing trend of

Covid-19 discussions among Nigerian youths on social media. However, it is important to understand the dynamism of the discussion vis-à-vis their Covid-19 information behaviour, as this may help policymakers in designing policies that can improve the allocation of resources to better disseminate quality Covid-19 information (and information related to other infectious diseases) in the appropriate format, context and content. Hence, the study that directed this article investigated Covid-19 information behaviour of social media users in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study was to investigate Covid-19 information behaviour of social media users in Nigeria. However, the specific objectives were:

- i. To identify the Covid-19 information needs of social media users in Nigeria.
- ii. To ascertain preferred sources of Covid-19 information among Nigerians on social media.
- iii. To examine Covid-19 information sharing patterns among social media users in Nigeria.
- iv. To determine the level of satisfaction experienced by social media users in Nigeria with Covid-19 information available on social media.
- v. To identify challenges encountered by social media users in Nigeria when seeking Covid-19 information on social media.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to answer the research objectives:

- i. What are the Covid-19 information needs of social media users in Nigeria?
- ii. What is the preferred source of Covid-19 information among Nigerians on social media?
- iii. How is Covid-19 information shared among social media users in Nigeria?
- iv. What is the level of satisfaction experienced by social media users in Nigeria with Covid-19 information available on social media?
- v. What are the challenges encountered by social media users in Nigeria when seeking Covid-19 information on social media?

Literature Review

Information Behaviour

Information behaviour is a term used among library and informational science professionals to describe how human beings react to information. Ingwersen and Järvelin (2005) define information behaviour as the human behaviour dealing with generation, communication, use and other activities concerned with information, such as information-seeking behaviour and interactive information retrieval.

Case (2007) describes information behaviour to include accidental encountering, needing, finding, choosing and sometimes even avoiding information. Similarly, Bates (2010) refers to information behaviour as the many ways in which human beings interact with information, in particular the ways in which people seek and utilise information. Case (2007) states that information behaviour “encompasses information seeking as well as the totality of other unintentional or passive behaviours as well as purposive behaviours that do not involve seeking, such as actively avoiding information.”

According to Wilson (2000), information behaviour is the totality of human behaviour in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking and information use. This means that Wilson’s description of information behaviour is underpinned by all aspects of human information behaviour, whether active or passive. Basically, the study of information behaviour is concerned with making a generalisation of information that could be used to explain the behavioural traits exhibited by humans whenever they are in need of and searching for information. Vilar (2015) asserts that information behaviour is governed by general principles, like accessibility, familiarity, circumstances, discipline or domain and technology. Wilson (2000) states that information needs and its drivers (motives for needing information), factors that affect the individual’s response to the perception of need, and the processes or actions involved in that response, are the components that could constitute a general model of information behaviour. Information behaviour refers to those activities a person may engage in when identifying his or her own needs for information, searching for such information in any way, and using or transferring that information (Wilson 1999).

Methodology

Since this study was based on the investigation of Covid-19 information behaviour of social media users in Nigeria, the study adopted a descriptive design. The researchers used a survey method that collects data from a large population. The aim was to get Nigerian social media users’ opinions of the phenomenon in the study. The population of this study was the Nigerian public, most especially those who were social media users. According to Kemp (2020), there are 27 million social media users in Nigeria. Using Raosoft’s online sample size calculator, with precision levels of 5% and a confidence level of 95%, the recommended sample size was 385. Based on the nature of the study population, the data for the study were collected using Google Form to create an electronic questionnaire. The link to the online questionnaire requesting the participation of the respondents in the survey was shared among Nigerian social media users on the researchers’ social media handles (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp). Altogether 348 social media users participated in the survey. The filled online questionnaires were analysed, and the data were presented using tables and charts.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1: Demographic information of the respondents

	Frequency	%
Gender		
Female	150	43.1
Male	198	56.9
Total	348	100
Age		
18–22 years	58	16.7
23–27 years	60	17.2
28–32 years	72	20.7
33–37 years	68	19.5
38–42 years	42	12.1
43 years and above	48	13.8
Total	348	100
Employability Status		
Employed	222	63.8
Unemployed	64	18.4
Students	62	17.8
Total	348	100

Table 1 shows that 150 (43.1%) of the respondents were female, while 198 (56.9%) were male. Also, table 1 shows that 58 (16.7%) of the respondents were between 18–22 years old, 60 (17.2%) were between 23–27 years old, 72 (20.7%) were between 28–32 years old, 68 (19.5%) were between 33–37 years, 42 (12.1%) were between 38–42 years old, while 48 (13.8%) of the respondents were 43 years and older. Lastly, table 1 reveals that 222 (63.8%) of the respondents were employed, 64 (18.4%) were unemployed; while 62 (17.8%) were students.

Table 2: Covid-19 Information needs of social media users in Nigeria

Please indicate by ticking (✓) whether you strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D) or strongly disagree (SD) with the following statements.									
S/N	Covid-19 information needs	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
	My Covid-19 information need is on the risk of Covid-19 to my health	166	47.7	146	42.0	28	8.0	8	2.3
	My Covid-19 information need is on how to handle personal hygiene	178	51.1	114	32.8	42	12.1	14	4.0
	My Covid-19 information need is on government policies on movement	156	44.8	146	42.0	42	12.1	4	1.1
	My Covid-19 information need is on testing for Covid-19	108	31.0	148	42.5	78	22.4	14	4.0
	My Covid-19 information need is on the number of daily Covid-19 cases confirmed or discharged	86	24.7	156	44.8	88	25.3	18	5.2
	My Covid-19 information need is on the rules for social distancing	130	37.4	160	46.0	48	13.8	10	2.9
	My Covid-19 information need is on Covid-19 in general	184	52.9	124	35.6	28	8.0	12	3.4

On the Covid-19 information needs of social media users in Nigeria, table 2 shows that 166 (47.7%) of the respondents strongly agreed that their Covid-19 information need was on the risk of Covid-19 to their health, 146 (42.0%) agreed, 28 (8.0%) disagreed while 8 (2.3%) strongly disagreed. Table 2 also shows that 178 (51.1%) of the respondents strongly agreed that their Covid-19 information need was on how to handle personal hygiene, 114 (32.8%) agreed, 42 (12.1%) disagreed, while 14 (4.0%) strongly disagreed. Table 2 shows that 156 (44.8%) of the respondents strongly agreed that their Covid-19 information need was on government policies on movement, 146 (42.0%) agreed, 42 (12.1%) disagreed, while 4 (1.1%) strongly disagreed. Table 2 further reveals that 108 (31.0%) of the respondents strongly agreed that their Covid-19 information need was on testing for Covid-19, 148 (42.5%) agreed, 78 (22.4%) disagreed while 14

(4.0%) strongly disagreed. Table 2 also shows that 86 (24.7%) of the respondents strongly agreed that their Covid-19 information need is on the number of daily Covid-19 cases confirmed or discharged, 156 (44.8%) agreed, 88 (25.3%) disagreed while 18 (5.2%) strongly disagreed. Table 2 further reveals that 130 (37.4%) of the respondents strongly agreed that their Covid-19 information need is on the rules for social distancing, 160 (46.0%) agreed, 48 (13.8%) disagreed while 10 (2.9%) strongly disagreed. Lastly, table 2 shows that 184 (52.9%) of the respondents strongly agreed that their Covid-19 information need is on Covid-19 in general, 124 (35.6%) agreed, 28 (8.0%) disagreed while 12 (3.4%) strongly disagreed.

From the aforementioned, it is evident that a majority of the respondents' Covid-19 information need was on Covid-19 in general and how they can handle their personal hygiene.

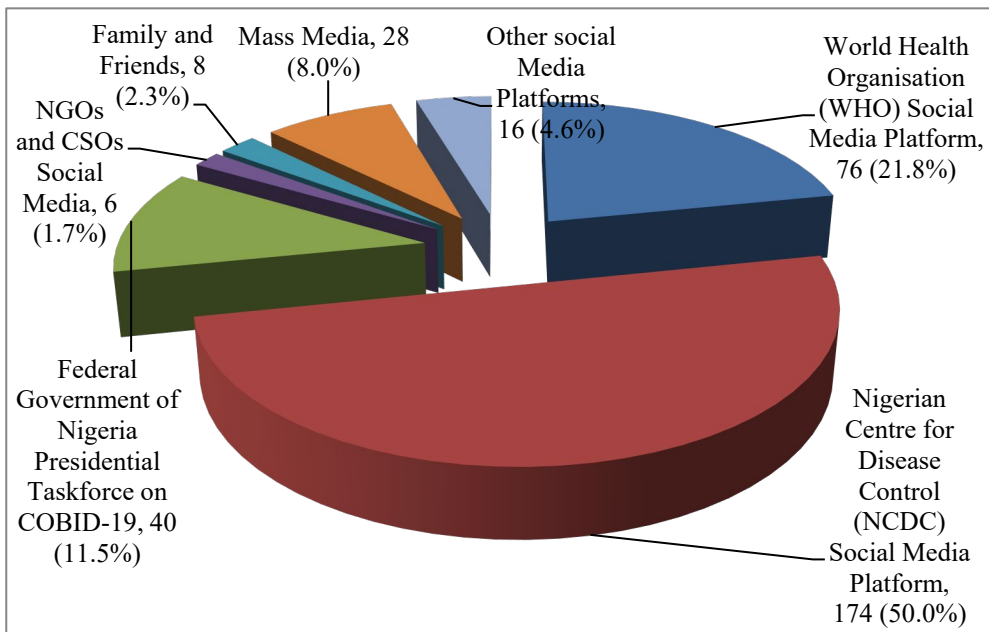


Figure 1: Preferred source of Covid-19 information

On the preferred source of Covid-19 information, figure 1 reveals that 174 (50.0%) of the respondents sourced for Covid-19 information from the NCDC social media platform; 40 (11.5%) sourced for Covid-19 information from the Federal Government of Nigeria Presidential Taskforce on Covid-19; 6 (1.7%) sourced for Covid-19 information from NGOs' and CSOs' social media; 8 (2.3%) sourced for Covid-19 information from family and friends; 28 (8.0%) sourced for Covid-19 information from the mass media; 16 (4.6%) sourced for Covid-19 information from other social media platforms; while 76 (21.9%) of the respondents sourced for Covid-19 information from the WHO social media platform.

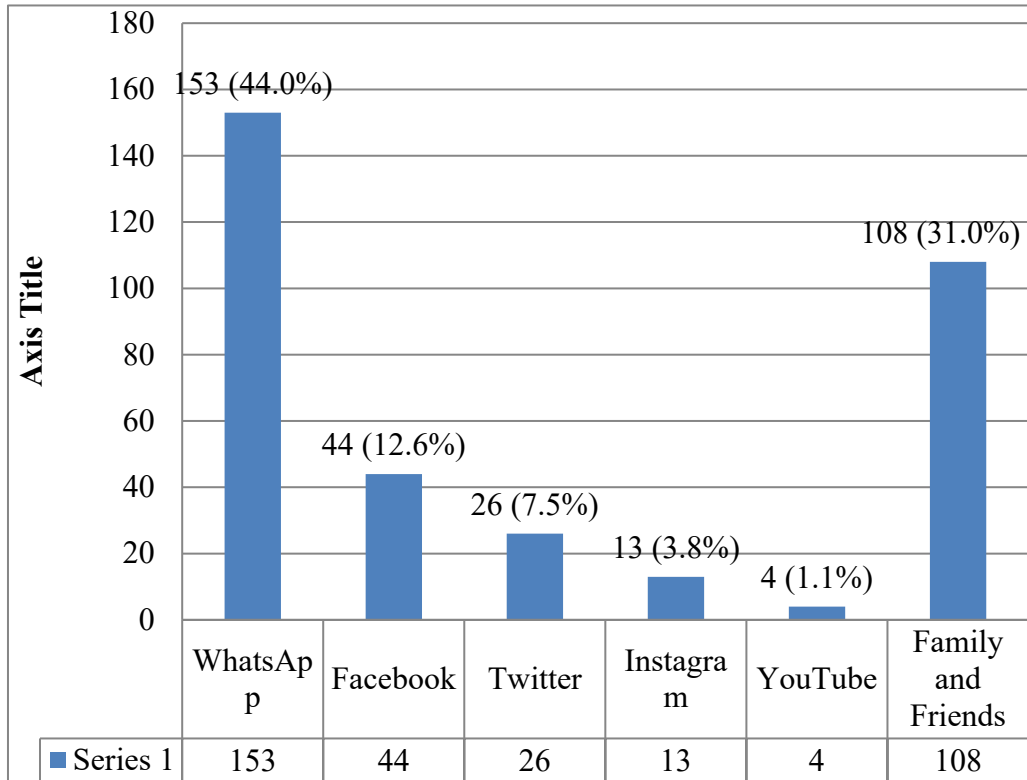


Figure 2: Covid-19 information sharing pattern among social media users in Nigeria

Based on the above, the major source of Covid-19 information among social media users in Nigeria was through the NCDC social media platform, followed by the WHO social media platform. This shows that the two major leading organisations on the frontline are also the major sources of Covid-19 information.

On the Covid-19 information-sharing pattern among social media users in Nigeria, figure 2 shows that 153 (44.0%) of the respondents attested that they shared Covid-19 information via WhatsApp; 44 (12.6%) shared via Facebook; 26 (7.5%) shared via Twitter; 13 (3.7%) shared via Instagram; 4 (1.1%) shared via YouTube; while 108 (31.0%) of the respondents shared via family and friends. This implies that WhatsApp is the most commonly used Covid-19 information-sharing pattern among social media users in Nigeria, while YouTube is used the least.

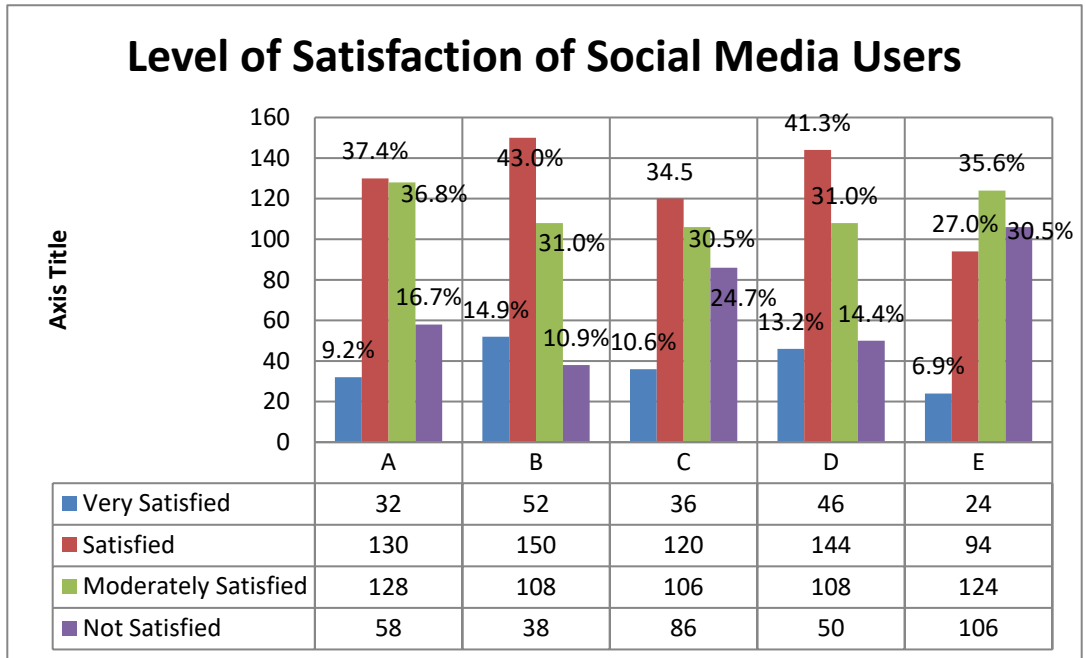


Figure 3: Level of satisfaction of social media users with the available Covid-19 Information

KEY:

A: Level of satisfaction with the available daily update of Covid-19 information from the available sources.

B: Level of satisfaction with the sensitisation of Covid-19 on social media.

C: Level of satisfaction with the daily Covid-19 information update from the NCDC.

D: Level of satisfaction with the Covid-19 preventive measures available on social media.

E: Level of satisfaction with information regarding government policies on Covid-19 available on social media.

On the level of satisfaction of social media users regarding the available daily update of Covid-19 information from available sources, figure 3 shows that 32 (9.2%) of the respondents were very satisfied; 130 (37.4%) were satisfied; 128 (36.8%) were moderately satisfied; while 58 (16.7%) were not satisfied.

Also, on the level of satisfaction of social media users regarding the sensitisation of Covid-19 on social media, figure 3 shows that 52 (14.9%) of the respondents were very satisfied; 150 (43.0%) were satisfied; 108 (31.0%) were moderately satisfied; while 38 (10.9%) were not satisfied.

Furthermore, on the level of satisfaction of social media users regarding the daily Covid-19 information update from the NCDC, figure 3 shows that 36 (10.6%) of the respondents were very satisfied; 120 (34.5%) were satisfied; 106 (30.5%) were moderately satisfied; while 86 (24.7%) were not satisfied.

Also, on the level of satisfaction of social media users regarding the Covid-19 preventive measures available on the social, figure 3 shows that 46 (13.2%) of the respondents were very satisfied; 144 (41.3%) were satisfied; 108 (31.0%) were moderately satisfied; while 50 (14.4%) were not satisfied.

Lastly, on the level of satisfaction of social media users regarding information on government policies on Covid-19 available on the social media, figure 3 shows that 24 (6.9%) of the respondents were very satisfied; 94 (27.0%) were satisfied; 124 (35.6%) were moderately satisfied; while 106 (30.5%) were not satisfied.

From the aforementioned, it is clear that a majority of the respondents were satisfied with the available daily update of Covid-19 information from the available sources; with the sensitisation of Covid-19 on social media; with the daily Covid-19 information update from the NCDC; and with the Covid-19 preventive measures available on the social. However, a majority of the respondents were not satisfied with information on government policies regarding Covid-19 available to them on social media.

Table 3: Challenges encountered by social media users in Nigeria when seeking for Covid-19 information on social media

S/N	Challenges Encountered	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
	Fake news/misinformation	204	58.6	118	33.9	14	4.0	12	3.4
	Too much of information on Covid-19 is available on the social media	168	48.3	128	36.8	40	11.5	12	3.4
	Late Covid-19 information update from the NCDC	102	29.3	160	46.0	70	20.1	16	4.6
	Lack of adequate and credible Covid-19 information	122	35.1	140	40.2	72	20.7	14	4.0
	Conflicting figures on Covid-19 cases confirmed or discharged	142	40.8	134	38.5	50	14.4	22	6.3

On the challenges encountered by social media users when seeking Covid-19 information, table 3 shows that 204 (58.6%) of the respondents strongly agreed that fake news/misinformation constitutes a challenge; 118 (33.9%) agreed; 14 (4.0%) disagreed; while 12 (3.4%) strongly disagreed. Also, table 3 shows that 168 (48.3%) of the respondents strongly agreed that too much information on Covid-19 available on social

media constituted a challenge, 128 (36.8%) agreed; 40 (11.5%) disagreed; while 12 (3.4%) strongly disagreed.

Table 3 further reveals that 102 (29.3%) of the respondents strongly agreed that late Covid-19 information updates from the NCDC constituted a challenge; 160 (46.0%) agreed; 70 (20.1%) disagreed; while 16 (4.6%) strongly disagreed. Also, table 3 shows that 122 (35.1%) of the respondents strongly agreed that the lack of adequate and credible Covid-19 information constituted a challenge; 140 (40.2%) agreed; 72 (20.7%) disagreed; while 14 (4.0%) strongly disagreed. Lastly, table 3 shows that 142 (40.8%) of the respondents strongly agreed that conflicting figures on Covid-19 cases confirmed or discharged constituted a challenge; 134 (38.5%) agreed; 50 (14.4%) disagreed; while 22 (6.3%) strongly disagreed.

From the aforementioned, it can be deduced that fake news/misinformation and too much information on Covid-19 available on social media constituted the major challenges that social media users encountered when seeking Covid-19 information.

Discussion of the Findings

On the Covid-19 information needs of social media users in Nigeria, findings from this study show that information on Covid-19 in general, information on how to handle personal hygiene, information on the risk of Covid-19 to one's health, and information on government policies regarding movement, are the major Covid-19 information needs of social media users in Nigeria. This shows that social media users in Nigeria are interested in knowing everything about Covid-19. Following the outbreak of Covid, particularly in Nigeria on 27 February 2020, people experienced uncertainty about the pandemic and how they could keep themselves safe. However, the fear of the unknown could be attributed to the reasons why social media users in Nigeria are more interested in information that has to do with Covid-19 in general.

On the preferred source of Covid-19 information, findings from this study show that social media users in Nigeria prefer the NCDC and the WHO social media platforms. This finding is in consonance with Tijani's (2020) assertion on why international organisations like the WHO or scientific institutions like the NCDC are reputed key sources for expert information-sharing about the coronavirus. Also, this gives credence to the observable up-to-date and timeliness of Covid information being released by the NCDC and the WHO.

On the Covid-19 information-sharing pattern among social media users in Nigeria, findings from this study show that Covid-19 information is majorly shared among social media users in Nigeria through WhatsApp, while YouTube is used the least. This is not surprising, because WhatsApp has positioned itself over the years as an instant messaging platform that helps people to stay connected with those who matter most. WhatsApp (2020) states that it can be used to look after friends and family, stay up-to-date with the latest official health information, and share information responsibly. For

instance, in leading the fight on Covid-19 information dissemination, WHO and the NCDC launched dedicated messaging services on WhatsApp and other social media platforms to engage the people on how to curtail the spread of Covid-19 (Ogundipe 2020).

On the level of satisfaction of social media users with available Covid-19 information, findings from this study show that a majority of the social media users in Nigeria are satisfied with the available Covid-19 information. This finding is in tandem with the findings of Willems et al. (2020), who report that people living in Austria are satisfied with the communication elements of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lastly, findings from this study show that fake news/misinformation and too much information on Covid-19 available on social media constitute the major challenge that social media users encounter when seeking Covid-19 information. This finding is in consonance with the position of Hassan (2020) on misinformation being the greatest impediment to Covid-19 Information. According to Hassan (2020), in Nigeria, a tsunami of misinformation and disinformation has accompanied the spread of the virus, provoking fear and exploiting vulnerabilities. It is worthy to note that misinformation has created a disposition among the people of not wanting to believe in the reality of Covid-19. This is also corroborated by Brindha et al. (2020) who assert that there are thousands of false information posts being circulated on various social media platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, TikTok, and others, even after the government had taken a number of measures to influence the outcome of the outbreak in the best possible way.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has positioned itself as a great threat to human existence. For humans to navigate their way around it, they have been seeking information on how to stay on top of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, in addition to the existing empirical evidence on human information behaviour, this study has been able to provide empirical evidence on Covid-19 information behaviour of social media users in Nigeria. The study has shown that social media users in Nigeria are interested in Covid-19 information; however, the credibility and integrity of information sources are important. That is why a majority of social media users prefer the NCDC and the WHO social media platforms as their Covid-19 information sources. Also, social media users in Nigeria majorly share Covid-19 information through WhatsApp. The findings also show that they are satisfied with the available Covid-19 information. However, fake news/misinformation and too much information on Covid-19 (which can be described as an information explosion on Covid-19) constitute the major challenges that social media users encounter when seeking Covid-19 information.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and the conclusions drawn, the study recommended that government and social media developers should intensify their effort on how to curb misinformation, particularly on social media and instant messaging platforms. Also, in meeting the Covid-19 information needs and understanding the information behaviour of social media users in Nigeria, there is a need for relevant government agencies, advocacy groups and mass media to be more inclusive in their Covid-19 communications. Being inclusive means that local languages can also be used to communicate Covid-19 information on social media. Platforms.

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