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HARNESSING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR HEALTH COMMUNICATION IN ANAMBRA STATE, AWKA METROPOLIS

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Abstract

The advancement in information and communication technologies coupled with the advent of the internet has changed the narrative in health communication just like every other endeavour globally. The adoption and usage of social media platforms in health communication and journalism generally has opened up many opportunities to be maximized. This study therefore is hinged on harnessing social media for health communication in Awka metropolis. Using Extended Parallel Processing Model as theoretical framework and in-depth interview as methodology among other things; the study examined the multifarious opportunities social media usage portends in health communication. Findings from the study indicated that social media usage in health communication in Nigeria has great prospects of increasing access to information as well as doctor patient relationship. In spite of that, misinformation and conspiracy theories constitute major challenges for social media usage in health communication. The study concluded that regulatory measures should be implemented in order to reduce the negative effects social media usage portends. The study also recommended that the government should also expedite actions in making and implementing regulatory measures to check on the misusage of social media that seems to be thriving at the moment.

Keywords: Challenges, Communication, Health, Opportunities, Social Media

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INTRODUCTION

Technological innovations are redefining communication patterns the world over. Recent innovations have revolutionized modes of reception and dissemination of information. Over the years, the predominant means of contact with a medical institution or health professional majorly were limited to face to face, reading from a book, magazine, or newspaper or through the electronic media such as a report on the radio or footage in film (Batta & Iwokwagh, 2015). However, with the advancement in information and communication technologies coupled with the advent of the internet, the narrative has changed in health communication just like every other endeavour globally. Advent of social media courtesy of the ICT and internet has redefined and still redefining the way health information is being received, disseminated and utilized globally. This development has phased out the hitherto barrier occasioned by time and distance in communication thereby shrinking the world to a global village as prophesied by Marshall McLuhan (Nwabueze, 2014).

With the requisite device and internet connection today, users can access plethora of health information and also connect with health professionals and institutions across different parts of the world (Batta & Iwokwagh, 2015). This development has closed the prior existing gap and has also narrowed to challenge of imbalance patient-doctor ratio in most particularly developing nations like Nigeria. More so, the stress and longtime taken to see health professionals for consultation has also been reduced to the barest minimum as patients can connect with medical practitioners and health institutions to make consultations online courtesy of social media platforms. These attributes are what make the social media instrumental for health communication purpose.

Health communication describes the process of passing information to the public, to create awareness about health issues. This implies that health communication plays a significant role in the society. This perhaps explains why Nwabueze (2010) describes health communication as the process of using or adopting communication strategies to enlighten the public on health related issues or matters and influence individual, government or community decisions that positively affect or impact on health. Health communication is a key strategy to inform the public about health concerns and to maintain important health issues on the public agenda (Asemah, Cole & Eyindah, 2023).

The use of the mass media to disseminate useful health information to the public facilitates acceptance of health interventions/programmes, increases awareness of specific aspects of individual and collective health, as well as, importance of health in development, cannot be over-emphasised. Health communication is directed towards improving the health status of individuals and the society as a whole. Research has shown that theory-driven mediated health promotion programming can put health on the public agenda, reinforce health messages, stimulate people to seek further information and in some instances, bring about sustained healthy lifestyles (Glik, 2004, cited in Asemah, 2011).

The intrusive impact of social media has made them popular tools for both dissemination and reception of health information thereby promoting the overall aim of health communication. With the distinctive nature social media platforms being able to connect users on the internet to share text, audio, video among other contents almost instantaneously; they have become potent tools for health communication in Nigeria. Social media have the ability to break social, cultural, geographical and time barriers thereby standing out to be the most effective and efficient media for mass mobilization and sensitization for health awareness. These sterling qualities of the social media help in given health messages wider reach and coverage as witnessed in the circulation of health messages during the outbreak of diseases like bird flu, Ebola virus, Zika virus and of recent the dreaded COVID-19 virus among others. Issues bordering on these diseases received global attention due to the coverage they enjoyed on the social media thereby making them agenda for broadcast media and front burner on national dailies. This clearly shows that social media platforms can set agenda for public discussion in the society which can consequently lead to formation of public opinion and behavioural change.

Be that as it may, the adoption of social media for health communication comes with concomitant effects like misinformation, fake news, disinformation and circulation of conspiracy theories among others (Adum, Ekwugha, Ojiakor & Ndubuisi, 2016). These issues portend serious challenges for health communication in Nigeria thereby limiting the success of health campaigns as it was witnessed during Ebola outbreak and COVID-19 pandemic which were both characterized with misinformation on the social media platforms. During the outbreak of Ebola virus for instance, a message went viral that the usage of salt for bathing and drinking will fortify people from contracting the virus. Those who believed it not only took the recommended action but also forwarded the message to family members and friends, thus replicating the misinformation. At the end of it all, four

persons were reported to have died as a result of too much salt finding its way into the body through the pores of the skin and jacking up the blood pressure (Obukoadata, & Abuah, 2014). Considering the aforementioned cases and many more, it therefore becomes expedient to conduct research on harnessing the multifarious potentials of social media to be maximized for health communication in Awka metropolis.

Research Objectives

The overall aim of this study is to Harnessing social media for health communication in Awka metropolis. The specific objectives are to;

1. Identify the multifarious opportunities social media present for health communication in Awka metropolis.
2. Examine the challenges of harnessing social media for health communication in Awka metropolis
3. To proffer possible solutions to the challenges of social media usage for health communication in Awka metropolis

Conceptual clarification

Social media

The social media is a twenty first century innovation in communication, but they have gained a wide acceptance and usage all over the world (Okoye, 2011 cited in Adum, Ekwugha, Ojiakor & Ndubuisi, 2016). Over the years, a body of conceptual and empirical literature on social media and how it influences people's beliefs and action on a wide range of phenomena including health has grown. As emerging technologies, different definitions continue to flood literature in an attempt to succinctly describe the concept of social media.

Social media are technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberation by stakeholders across boundaries, time and space. These technologies include: blogs, wikis, media (audio, photo, video, text) sharing tools, networking platforms and virtual worlds (Bryer and Zavatarro, 2011). Social media sites courtesy of the internet have gained popularity over the last decade. These sites have attracted millions of users worldwide (Boyd, & Ellison, 2007 cited in Adum, Ekwugha, Ojiakor & Ndubuisi, 2016), and due to this fact many people are changing the outlets where they search for news, information, business and entertainment. These social media

sites let those who use them create personal profiles, while connecting with other users of the sites prevailing over time and distance barrier.

Social media according to Kita and Thesanvitz (2010) cited in Batta and Iwokwagh (2016) are Internet tools that permit users to participate and produce content. They are regarded as digital appendages of interpersonal means of promotion and the narrowing of broadcast type communication. They make co-operation, exchanges, interactions, transactions possible among different kinds of people regardless of where they live. People use the Internet for a variety of purposes: Creation and retrieval of information, banking, payment of bills, ticket broking, purchase of goods or services, voting, posting of comments and images, blogging and chatting among others. Examples of social media include Facebook, Orkut, YouTube, Myspace, Linkedln, Live Journal and Twitter.

Health communication

Kayode (2021) define health communication as the use of the mass and multimedia and other technological innovations to disseminate useful health information to the public, increases awareness of specific aspects of individual and health of the population as well as importance of health in development. Health communication is directed towards improving the health status of individuals and populations alike. It basically entails the use of various media platforms to disseminate health messages to the public to the end that the public health is enhanced. Health institutions and professionals make use of radio, television, newspaper, magazine, outdoor media and of a recent the social media to sensitize the public about diseases and the safety measures to be taken to be nipped in the bud. The whole gamut of health communication borders on enhancing health education for better health behaviour through the instrumentality of the media.

Kayode (2021) further averred that health communication encompasses several areas including edutainment or enter-education, health journalism, interpersonal communication, media advocacy, organizational communication, risk communication, social communication and social marketing. It can take many forms from mass and multimedia communications to traditional and culture-specific communication such as storytelling puppet shows and songs. Different programmes and strategies are being employed by the mass media to spread health information in order to reach the general public towards spurring positive health behaviours. This underscores the significance of health communication to the overall well-being of the society.

Literature Review

This section presents a review of related literature on social media and health communication.

Harnessing Social Media for health Communication in Nigeria

Prior to the advent of information and communication technology and the internet, accessing health information was strictly via the traditional media or face-to-face interaction with health personnel. However, with the recent development in the ICTs and the advent of social media, health communication has gone beyond physical interactions to limitless of the internet where there is information democratization. This development has brought about significant changes in information gathering, processing, dissemination and reception. It has presented limitless opportunities to be harnessed for health communication and communication generally (Vivian & Elizabeth, 2015). These benefits include but not limited to wider and increased access to health information, speedy access to virtual health services, greater connections between health institutions/professional with clients among others.

The use of social media in health promotion and other health intervention activities, however, is essential since it enhances the potential for quick access to public health care providers. Furthermore, social media can address a number of aspects that ensure effective communication in health promotion (Coiera, 2006); Asemah, 2012). Noar, (2006) cited in Abdulazeez and Asemah (2023) points out that the mass media have long been utilized as a strategy for promoting public health since they are routinely used to expose huge populations to messages through the usage of television, radio, and newspapers and recently the social media. Educating people about diseases and afflictions, outbreaks, prevention, control, and treatment, according to Akarika (2019), is a key responsibility of the media. In his research, Jackob (2010) discovered a strong link between media dependence and media trust.

In addition to that, social media platforms are also used to improve the efficiency of administration in the health systems (Batta & Iwokwagh, 2015). This practice improves the public relations of health institutions and professional with both internal (staff) and external publics (patients/clients). Usage of social media in health communication also reduces the bureaucracies involved in health consultation. The bottle necks and processes involved in booking to see doctor by patients is also reduced to the barest minimum as

patients can connect with doctors directly without intermediaries. This increased accessibility in medical consultation is good for most especially developing nations where there are no adequate number of health professionals to meet the teeming population and the ever increasing medical needs of the people. Hence, the indispensability of social media for health communication in Nigeria cannot be overrated.

Challenges of Harnessing Social Media for Health Communication in Nigeria

Social media application for health communication also as some negative effects which include but not limited to fake news, health fraud, circulation of conspiracy theories.

Social media have become an integral part of how people communicate, connect with one another, stay abreast with new developments and connect with the world around them (Okoye, 2011; Nwosu, 2012 cited in Nnaemeka & Onunkwor, 2021). With their ubiquitous and interactive nature, social media have now become a major source of information and interaction among Nigerians (Nwosu, 2012 cited in Nnaemeka & Onunkwor, 2021). However, given its uncontrolled nature, social media can be potentially harmful in the event of misleading information from ignorant or merely malevolent users going viral through them (Akindehin & Akindehin, 2011; Adaja & Ayodele, 2013).

As a result, social media users are always confronted with the danger of falling prey to such misleading information (Okoye, 2011). This is even truer when what is involved is something as urgent and frightening as an epidemic, given that people tend to rely on the media for direction in such situations of uncertainty, as postulated by the media system dependency theory (Baran, 2010 cited in Adum, Ekwugha, Ojiakor and Ndubuisi, 2016). A practical example was what happened during the outbreak of Ebola virus and COVID-19 pandemic. Social media platforms became major purveyors of fake news used to mislead the people into taking and bathing wit salt water as a preventive measure against Ebola virus which consequently led to loss of lives and health complications (Obukoadata, & Abuah, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

Extended Parallel Processing Model (EPPM) for behavior change (also commonly known as Threat Management or Fear Management) was propounded by Kim Witte in 1992. According to the EPPM, people will engage in self-protective acts when they see a danger as being strong and their perceived degree of efficacy as being high. On the other hand, the

model predicts denial or rejection of protective activities when perceptions of a threat are strong but perceived levels of efficacy are low (Samane et al., 2020).

Message preparation and campaign implementation will evaluate audience segmentation and techniques to solve efficacy and threat issues while utilizing the EPPM model. For instance, messaging will convey a clear call to action urging audiences with high threat and efficacy to take precautionary actions. The risk will be explained to audiences with low threat and efficacy thresholds, and they will be given remedies to help them feel more confident. For audiences with high threat and low efficacy, messages will focus on protective behaviors as solutions to the threat. While messages for audiences with low threat and high efficacy will center on providing information about the risk thus empowering them to adopt recommended behaviours.

This theory dovetails with the current study on harnessing social media platforms for health communication in Awka metropolis. The promotion of health messages on social media has the tendency to make people engage in self-protective acts when they see the health danger portrayed on social media as being strong and their perceived degree of efficacy as being high. This was practically exemplified during the outbreak of COVID-19 where many people where influenced to take the vaccine and or adhere to the safety protocols owing to the social media campaigns on the dangers of COVID-19 and the increasing death rates in other countries.

METHODS

To investigate "Harnessing social media for health communication in Awka metropolis," in-depth interview was adopted to elicit relevant data from residents in Awka metropolis. Hughes, Williamson and Young, (2022) averred that interviews allow the in-depth exploration of the respondents' experiences on the subject matter.

The researcher conducted interviews until it reached point of data saturation. Saunders et al. (2017) averred that saturation has attained widespread approval as a methodological principle in qualitative research. It is commonly used to mean that, on the basis of the data that have been collected or analyzed hitherto, further data collection and or analysis are unnecessary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study were gathered from the data collected via in-depth interview with residents in Awka metropolis. The findings were discussed and analyzed qualitatively vis-à-vis the findings of other scholars who conducted similar studies. Be that as it may, the work is novel within the area of study as there was dearth of extant studies on the subject within the study area. Names and other personal information about the respondents were withheld. Saunders, Kitzinger & Kitzinger (2014) stated that many official ethics guidelines recommend disguising the personal identities of research participants as a default position in qualitative research. The findings of the study were discussed thematically in line with the objectives of the study.

Identifying the multifarious opportunities social media present for health communication in Awka metropolis

This objective sought to identify the various opportunities social media adoption presents for journalism practice in particularly *ThisDay* Newspaper. One of the interviewees opined that;

The uses of social media for healthcare(sic) communication provides us with various opportunities which include providing health information on a range of conditions, providing answers to medical questions, facilitating dialogue between patients and health professionals, collecting data on patient experiences and opinions used fir health intervention, reducing stigma and providing online consultations.

This is in tandem with Fayoyin (2016) also carried out a study on *Engaging Social Media for Health Communication in Africa: Approaches, Results and Lessons.* He stated that advancements in digital media and communications technology have generated considerable optimism on the role of social media in achieving developmental and public health outcomes globally. The unmatched availability of digital devices and platforms has also prompted different development institutions to design and implement a range of social media interventions for social and behaviour change. The study revealed the existence of an avalanche of interventions using different mobile devices and mobilization approaches in addressing multiple health issues. The interventions target different population groups and are not limited to young people who are considered as the major users and consumers of social media content. However, the study cautions against "new media utopianism" or "social media-centricism" because technology is a tool of development not an end in itself. Salmon

and Arkins (2003) cited in Fayoyin (2016) stated that social media platforms have now become indispensable for health literacy and an overall improvement of health outcomes. Furthermore, some forms of E-Health interventions include data collection and disease surveillance, health information management and point of care, treatment compliance and emergency response (Michael, 2009). Other areas of application include health information dissemination, health care monitoring, training of health care workers, tracking of disease outbreak and diagnostic support.

Similarly, Batta and Iwokwagh (2015), stated in their study on social media platforms are also used to improve the efficiency of administration in the health systems. Findings from the research indicated that the major purposes for which Nigerian teaching hospitals utilize the social media are to serve as feedback mechanism from clients (100%), present their vision and mission statements (65%), post administrative and personnel structure information (65%), and give details of contracts (60%). These media are little used for health promotion (25%), financial transactions (10%) and interactive engagement with clients (0%). The study concluded that Nigerian Teaching hospitals recourse for the usage of social media are to serve the purposes of publicity and propagation of self image. This practice improves the public relations of health institutions and professional with both internal (staff) and external publics (patients/clients). Usage of social media in health communication also reduces the bureaucracies involved in health consultation. This apparently shows that the adoption of social media platforms present a wide array of opportunities to be harnessed for health communication not just in Awka but in Nigeria and the world at large towards enhancing global health. Through the information people easily access on social media platforms, lives are easily saved without having to go through the tiring process of queuing up for physical consultation at the hospital. This buttresses the major postulation of Extended Parallel Processing Model which states that people will engage in self-protective acts when they see a danger as being strong and their perceived degree of efficacy as being high. Many people engage in self-protective habits form diseases through the information they access from health professionals online.

Examining the challenges of harnessing social media for health communication in Awka metropolis

This research objective aimed at examining the challenges of harnessing social media for health communication in Awka metropolis. The interviewees identified misinformation, patient privacy concerns, ethical concern, social media intoxification/addiction, poor health sensitization, epileptic power supply, poor network connection as some of the challenges militating against the harnessing of social media for health communication in Awka metropolis. One of the respondents opined thus;

Social media can also be a major distraction, which can be a concern for healthcare professionals. Health care professionals in particular, may be at the risk of being distracted by notifications and other distractions while they are working. This can lead to errors or decline in productivity.

This agrees with Adum, Ekwugha, Ojiakor and Ndubuisi (2016) who conducted a study on *Social Media and Unfounded Health Beliefs: An Assessment of Participants' Response to Health Posts on Epidemics*. The study found out that there is widespread social media usage among university undergraduate students in South-East Nigeria and the students who constitute the respondents for the study are exposed to social media health posts on epidemics. Also, these students, generally, place value on social media health posts, and centre their health beliefs on the gist of these health posts on epidemics. Consequently, the students become vulnerable to misinformation arising from these social media platforms. The findings of this study clearly shows that the use of social media for health communication in Nigeria has attendant effect of making the audience vulnerable to being misled into taking health decision and actions that can cause damage and or complications to their health.

Possible solutions to the challenges of social media usage for health communication in Awka metropolis

Here, the objective focused on identifying the possible solutions to the challenges of social media usage for health communication in Awka metropolis. The interviewees recommended that there should be heightened sensitization on the importance of social media in health communication, provision of stable power supply, presence of health professionals to respond to people with health queries online, ensuring the anonymity and privacy of patients' information, securing accounts for security reasons.

This aligns with the position of Sandhu et al. (2023) who studied *Perceptions and Experiences of Undergraduate Students Regarding Social Media as a Tool for Government COVID-19-Related Messages: A Qualitative Study in Nottingham, UK.* Findings from the study underscored the importance of not using social media as a sole source of health information, and the need for cross-referencing of social media health information with reliable news sources was expressed. This will go a long way in reducing the spate of misinformation and fake news prevalent on social media platforms most particularly during pandemics. In the same vein, Okocha and Akpe(2022) conducted a study on *Fake news and misinformation on COVID-19: implications for media credibility in Nigeria.* The study recommended that further investigation should be done to find out why users still believe social media in spite of the high spate of fake news and its influence on the platforms. The conclusion points towards the need to make social media contents more credible through professionalism and legal control.

CONCLUSION

It can be deduced from the findings of this study that there are multifaceted opportunities to be harnessed in social media usage for health communication as evidenced in the various studies reviewed. Suffice to say that the benefits social media usage presents are more than the challenges the misusage portend. This is to say that if social media will be constructively used for health communication in Nigeria, the challenges will be reduced if not obliterated and the gains will be maximized to promote public health and safety. The study concludes that regulatory measures should be implemented in order to reduce the negative effects social media usage portends.

Recommendations

Based on the findings arising from the study, the study recommends that;

1. There is the need for public sensitization by media and health professionals on how to verify health information they receive online.
2. The government should also expedite actions in making and implementing regulatory measures to check on the misusage of social media that seems to be thriving unabated at the moment.

3. The study further recommends that health institutions and professionals should improve on the usage of social media for health communication so as to maximize the dividends towards promoting global health and reducing mortality rates.

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