Research Paper　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　Open Access

CORONA VIRUS AND THE UPSURGE IN VIRTUAL MEDIA USAGE FOR ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA

[1]Okoli Angela Mariae, PhD, Okpongkpong Grace Imaikop[1] &Ukpong, Edikan Nseobong[2]

Department of Mass Communication
Imo State University, Owerri

ABSTRACT: *When the outbreak of coronavirus started in Nigeria, many could not predict how their lives and event would be affected. However, with the restriction of movements and interstate lockdown, many businesses and firms began to create new ways to operate their businesses. This unpredictable change gave rise to an increase in the use of digital media for both internal and external communication. While the use of virtual communication media and platforms is not new, being faced with an unpredictable situation such as a pandemic that places one at a static point has opened the eyes of employers and business owners to see the possibility of having an effective digital platform despite the pandemic. Using a quantitative research design, this study examined the role of virtual media platforms for communication. It further addresses the effect of the Corona Virus pandemic (Covid-19) on organisational communication. This study assumes that the outbreak of the coronavirus has resulted in changes that would promote global communication just at one's fingers tips. The study revealed a significant increase in the usage of digital platforms for organisational communication. A further stretch into the research found out that the outbreak of the coronavirus (Covid-19) gave prominence to the usage of virtual communication media as a formal tool for organisational communication. Nevertheless, despite this progress, it was discovered in this study that adapting to the usage of this digital media posed some challenges. Bearing this in mind, this study recommends a further study to assess the challenges of using digital media for organisational communication. It further recommends that business owners, organisations and employers of labour as well as employees should ensure the promotion of virtual communication even after the coronavirus pandemic.*

Key words: Organisational Communication, Corona Virus, Pandemic, Virtual Media, Digital media

I.　　　　INTRODUCTION

As the spread of COVID19 increases, scientists and health professionals work day and night, vigorously to prevent further contaminations. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as of 24 April 2020, there were close to 3 million confirmed cases globally and since then the statistics have risen substantially. As these health professionals search for new ways to improve our health system, businesses and organisations also redefine strategies to operate their business. While these organisations have operated the conventional way of using memos, face to face, letters and recently emails and text messages for their day-to-day communication, plunging into the virtual media especially social networking sites as a tool for formal communication has had little to no attention. Basically, organisations are established with specific goals and objective which they intend to attain. These objectives, according to Okpongkpong, Nwogwugwu, and Ukpong (2019), helps the organisation to gain a comparative advantage over the competition. For these goals to be attained, of crucial importance is organisational communication which implies communication among workers, customers, prospects and partners as well as communication between different hierarchy levels in the same organisation (Okpongkpong, Nwogwugwu&Ukpong, 2019).

Little wonder Moller (2013) is of the opinion that social media entail the use of web-based mobile technologies that transform the process of communication into an interactive dialogue and has the power to change extensively the way organisation and people communicate. He further postulates that the social media, which can take various forms such as magazines, weblogs, micro-blogs, podcasts, photographs, video, social networking, among other; has a way of transforming communication pattern from official to non-official and

vis-à-vis. However, with the heat of the coronavirus pandemic and the execution of drastic measures such as the shutdown of businesses and organisations not to add the interstate lockdown and the restriction of movement, finding a new way to communicate became necessary. With this, organisations embark on the need to use communicative platforms that are not limited by time or space such as virtual media for their daily activities.

According to Pacheco (2020), the world witnessed an upsurge in the usage of virtual media. In the U.S. and U.K.,there was a 55% increase in the use of virtual media in 2020 as against its 30% usage in the past year. In Africa and Asia, countries including Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates have been recorded to have the biggest increase among 18 markets. As consumers become more concerned about wellbeing for themselves and others, their worry over digital wellbeing has dropped. People donot monitor screen time as they did a year ago, especially among those who stay online the most. As coronavirus increases, the web is perceived as less of an interruption of our everyday life, and more an avenue to everyday life. What is left is if this is a current sentiment or an intent to be acted upon. If it is to what extent does it affect organisations and their communications? If it affects what platforms are these organisations adopting for their communication? How effective are these platforms in organisational communication? And finally, what challenges did organisations face while using this medium during the pandemic?

II.   OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general objective of this study was to examine the role of coronavirus on virtual media usage by organisations in Nigeria. The following specific objectives were formulated to guide the execution of this study:
  i.   Find out which virtual media platforms were mostly used during the covid-19 lockdown by organisations in Nigeria
  ii.   Determine the purposes for which these platforms were used by the organisations.
  iii. Identify the effectiveness of virtual media for organisational communication during coronavirus lockdown.
  iv.   Examine the challenges of using virtual media for organisational communication during coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria.

III.   REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Virtual media and its role in organisational communication

For a long time, the effectiveness of virtual media as a formal tool for organisational communication has been bartered to the ground. Communication according to Okpongkpong, Nwogwugwu and Ukpong (2019) serves as a bridge that connects the employees, customers, prospect and partners to the organisation towards a mutual goal. Be it internal or external, communication is the life wire that boosts all aspect of an organisation. In Okpongkponget al (2019),Željko and Ivana (2006) records that communication helps in the setting and realisation of the company's goal and objective; management of human and material resources and finally motivating and creating a condition for members to air their view.

Virtual media also referred to as digital media, web-based media or social media as the case may be is one of the enviable trendy tools available in our world today. Through the Internet, the virtual media world has strongly become part of our daily routines. Paving their way through social networking sites, these online platforms have redefined the ways in which consumers and businesses interact with each other. In the western region of the world, online media especially social media, have been speculated tobeatransforming drive among consumers behaviour (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), This change as highlighted by Muntinga*et al*., (2011) has liberated drastic change and consequences for firms, products and brands. Accordingly, Forrester Research, 2008 and Nielsen (2012) say consumers are increasingly spending their time online and using this virtual or digital media. This media tool provides some advantages over the contemporary medium of organisational communication. According to Langer(2014), using virtual/digital media promotes active participation and engagement of all parties especially the customers; help shapes business and organisation marketing experience, and provides the organization with information to adapt to the changing needs of consumers.

In today's world of communication, virtual media dominates every sector especially business and organisational communication. Recent statistics show that Facebook a virtual media platform currently boasts of over 400 million users and continues to grow at an astounding rate (Crunchbase, 2009). While Twitter has had an impressive reach of over 10 billionth tweet as of March 4, 2010 (Patterson, 2010), WhatsApp according to Perez saw a 40% increase in its usage due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She records the increase from an original 27% hit at the beginning of the pandemic to 41% in the mid-phase. For countries that already had a high rate of WhatsApp usage before the pandemic, WhatsApp usage increased to 51% (Perez, 2020; Kantar, 2020). With this, we realize the advent of a pandemic such as a coronavirus that has one locked at a spot calls for a digital or virtual media inclined audience. Although usage of virtual media platforms for organisational communication has been said to be progressively popular, Langer(2014) indicates a necessity towards developing a knowledge

of how this affects the way organisational communication occurs both internally and externally especially during a pandemic.

IV.   EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Langer (2014) examined "What's Trending in Social Media and its Effects on Organisational Communication." In her study, she investigated how social media affects organisational communication within an organization, and with consumers and the public. Using structured interviews her findings indicated that social media has affected both internal and external organisational communication by providing a means for interactions at all level. Although,Badea (2014) affirms that virtual media indicates a level of influence in organisational communication. He,however,believes that organisations need to create new approaches. He further says that while social media can become significant tools for organising communication the question is whether conceptual models of affecting virtual media can be recognized within the organisation with minimal risk.

Despite this, Hindshaw (2016) opine that social media can be prone to harm products which is a challenge to the full adoption of this media. Prior to this Siljanovska (2015)in his work on The Influence of Social Media on Organizational Communication: Case Study in the Republic of Macedonia says the usage of the internet is characterised by many benefits, especially in organisational communication. This communication however is limited not because of the medium of delivery but by cultural ethical coding. Each region of the world has diverse ways of operating both in their personal and work life. These codes affect all network of communication even virtual media, hence having a streamlined form of communication poses difficulty. Nevertheless, for organisations to use virtual media and obtain a great result, these ethical codes need to be checkmated.

Supporting this view is Janet (2017) who in her report on the Impact of Social Media on the Quality of Organisational Communications opined that organisational communication holds a prime role towards the success of the organization. However, the application of the various media used in the communication process affects the quality of information. Thus, Ekwueme and Okoro (2018) revealed that there are a number of challenges mitigating the adoption of virtual media by business entities in Nigeria. These challenges are what makes the contemporary model of organisational communication still prevail. Hence, the adoption of virtual media in organisational communication calls for an integration of communication strategies that could have both positive and negative bearings on the quality of communication and information circulatedby the organisation.

Theoretical Framework: Technological Determinism Theory

The Technological Determinism Theory was formulated by Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) but was popularised by Marshal McLuhan in 1964. The central argument of the technological determinism theory is that the media are extensions of the human body Asemah (2011). The theory maintains that the media not only alter their environment but the very message they convey. The media bring new perceptual habits while their technologies make new environment.

The theory seeks to explain how technologies shape the content of the communication. It stresses that technology, particularly the media, decisively shape how individuals think, feel and act and how societies organise and operate themselves. The medium determines the content of the communication. Some examples of messages that are created for the medium are online video, audio podcast, photographs, texts, etc. This is what McLuhan described as the "Medium is the Message."

This theory is appropriate for this study because technology modifies the perception of the human mind and its thoughts. The advent of virtual media has altered the mode of communication and operation for organisations and businesses in society. It has created a structure that encompasses not only speed but also distance. Hence, within this structure, the contemporary means of information dissemination is redefined to include both formal, semi-formal and informal way of communication.

V.   METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION

Research Design: This study adopted an online survey method of scientific inquiry using social media and Google forms. This method was selected because of the demands of the topic to generate businesses and organisations view on the study. Furthermore, as a result of the pandemic, this study was conducted during the pandemic where everywhere was locked down. Using the conventional survey method was not possible.

The population of the Study: The population of this study was a Telegram group purposively created for this study. The group comprised 592members – of this number, 3 were researchers while a total of 589 were organisation owners and managers of both corporate and private firms as well as non-governmental organisations from across Nigeria.

Sample Size: Given the fact that all these business owners and managers could be found in this group and were not limited by time or space, the researcher adopted the census sampling principle. The principle states that

when the population is small, the researchers should sample all the elements of the population. So, the sample size for this study remained 589.

Sampling Technique: The availability sampling technique was adopted for this study. According to Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2012), convenience sampling (also known as availability sampling) is an example of a non-probability sampling method that uses data collected from population members who are conveniently available to participate in the study. To ascertain respondents' availability, date and time were stipulated on the group for the filling in of the online questionnaire. Only respondents available on the stipulated date and time were sampled for the study. A total of 386 respondents filled in and submitted the online questionnaire created on Google form.

The instrument for Data Collection and Administration: The researchers used the online questionnaire for this study. The Google survey was used to create a four-item questionnaire for the study. Links to the form was made available on the Telegram group for respondents to access on the stipulated date and time. The researchers gave a space of five days to ensure that forms were appropriately filled.

Method of Data Presentation and Analysis: The researchers used frequency tables and percentages to analyse the presented data.

VI.   PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

The focus of this study was on the coronavirus and the upsurge in virtual media usage for organisational communication in Nigeria. Out of the 589 respondents that voluntarily joined the Telegram group using the group link, only 386 respondents were available to fill in and submit the online questionnaire. This represented 65.5% of the respondents.

Table 1: Virtual media platforms mostly used during the covid-19 lockdown by organisations in Nigeria

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Zoom	81	21
Telegram	27	7
WhatsApp	224	58
Twitter	12	3.2
Face book	42	10.8
Total	**386**	**100**

(Field survey, 2021)

This table reveals the Virtual media platforms mostly used during the covid-19 lockdown by organisations in Nigeria. From the data collated a majority of the respondents opine that during the coronavirus lockdown, the WhatsApp media platform was highly favourable in their communication within and outside the organisation. On the other hand, there was a low response rate on the usage of Twitter by these organisations.

Table 2: Functions/Purposes of Virtual Media Platforms Used by Organisations.

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Meetings	56	14.5
Customers services/ networking	45	11.7
Product/ service advertising	113	29.3
Reaching out to new customers	43	11.1
Retaining partners and existing customers	57	14.7
COVID 19 awareness and sensitisation	72	18.7
Total	**386**	**100**

(Field survey, 2021)

Table 2 showed response on the purposes/functions for which organisations and businesses used the virtual media during the coronavirus lockdown. Of all the functions listed, it was revealed that 103 of the respondents which represented 29.3% of the total respondent agreed to use this media platform for mostly advertisement of their goods and services.

Table 3: Effectiveness of virtual media for organisational communication during Coronavirus lockdown.

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Useful	97	25.1
Somewhat useful	145	37.6
Not useful	38	9.8
Very useful	106	27.5
Total	**386**	**100**

(Field survey, 2021)

The above table set out to measure the effectiveness of virtual media for organisational communication during Coronavirus lockdown. From the data collated, it was discovered that usage of this medium was somewhat useful to most organisations but not very useful as some anticipated.

Table 4: Major challenges facing the usage of virtual media for organisational communication during COVID19 lockdown in Nigeria.

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lack of facilities	157	40.7
Poor internet network in most areas of the country	49	12.7
Expensive data bundles	32	8.3
App regulations and limitations	13	3.4
Poor attitude and attendance	38	9.8
Fraudsters and cyber crimes	86	22.3
None of the above	11	2.8
Total	**386**	**100**

(Field survey, 2021)

Table 4 showed some key challenges that mitigate the usage of virtual media for organisational communication during The COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria. From the table, it was discovered that the majority of the organisations were faced with some of the challenges given above and the lack of facilities was most prominent with a response rate of 157 (40.7%).

VII. DISCUSSION OF STUDY FINDINGS

Virtual Media platform used by organisations for communication during coronavirus lockdown

The study reveals that during the coronavirus lockdown, most organisations implored the usage of virtual media for maintaining communication within and outside the organisation. Of the list, all participant indicated that in one way or the other they made use of virtual media platform to communicate to both internal and external parties of their organisation. Nevertheless, from the data collated a majority of the respondents opine that during the coronavirus lockdown, the WhatsApp media platform was highly favourable in their communication within and outside the organisation. On the other hand, there was a low response rate on the usage of Twitter by these organisations. What this indicates is that in one way other a majority of the participants were exposed to the internet and its tools of communication. This is in line with Kaplan and Haenlein, (2010) who says that through the Internet, the virtual media world has strongly become part of our daily routines and has patterned the way organisations behave. This summation agrees with Pacheco (2020) who says that as the coronavirus spreads, concerns about digital wellbeing has dropped as consumers now perceives the web as less of an interruption to their everyday life, and more an avenue to everyday life.

Another discovery from this study is that owners of businesses and organisation are aware of digital media as a tool of communication within and outside the organisation and this media platform can be used to provide an established means of communication. This opposes Siljanovska (2015) who says that having a streamlined form of communication using virtual media poses difficulty to the organisation. With major organisations, business owners and managers using the virtual media platform for their daily modus operandi, this study agrees with Pacheco (2020) who says that the coronavirus pandemic has led to a significant upsurge in the usage of virtual media. This ease of usage further agrees with the Technological Acceptance Model(TAM) which perceives the introduction of certain technology to enhance communication flow. Hence, despite the lockdown, organisations were still able to communicate with little or no interruption.

Function /purpose of virtual media platforms

Another key discovery in this research was on the functions and purposes for which organisations used virtual media. From the data collated, it was discovered that during the coronavirus lockdown, most organisations made use of the virtual media for the conduction of meetings; customers' services/ networking; Product/ service advertising; reaching out to new customers; Retaining partners and existing customers and creating of Covid19 awareness and sensitisation. Of all the functions listed, it was revealed that 103 of the respondents which represented 29.3% of the total respondent agreed to use this media platform for mostly advertisement of their goods and services. In respect to this, Langer (2014) affirms that using virtual/digital media promotes active participation and engagement of all parties especially the customers. This media helps shapes business and organisation marketing experience while still providing the organisation with information to adapt to the changing needs of consumers.

This gives credence to the submission of TAM that people also accept and use technology if they perceive the media to be useful to them – perceived usefulness. The acceptance of technology such as virtual media has enhanced communication within and outside the organisation. This has salvaged the problem that most organisations would have faced during a pandemic. More so, this study agrees withTajudeen, Jaafar and Ainin (2018) who in their work pointed out that usage of social media positively impacts an organization's performance in terms of cost reduction, customer relations, and information accessibility. Organizations who accept this media stand a great chance of benefitting an increased interaction, two-way communication, and improved relationships with a greater number of stakeholders and competitors, thus creating a competitive advantage.

Effectiveness of the media in organisational communication

From the study, the result from the respondent propelled the usage of virtual media as somewhat effective for the process of organisational communication during the coronavirus lockdown. Although the existence of some of this platform is not new, usage of this media specifically for achieving organisational communication requires some level of professionalism which is new. According to Tajudeen, Jaafar and Ainin (2018), for any technology to be successful and to have an impact on organizational performance, it has to be properly adopted by organizations. However, with the spread of the coronavirus, there arises an increasing yearning for the virtual media, with little time to train members on the proper way of using the platform to achieve the set goals. Hence, Tajudeen et al (2018), says that while previous research has considered technology adoption in many contexts and has identified various factors that lead to its usage, the virtual media is unlike any other innovations which have both positive and negative impact.

Challenges of using virtual media for organisational communication

In this study, some challenges that mitigate the effective use of virtual media for organisational communication was given. From the data, it was revealed that in the cause of the usage of virtual media during the COVID19 pandemic, most organisations were in one way or the other challenged by these problems. This problem varied from Lack of facilities; to Poor internet network in most areas of the country; Expensive data bundles; App regulations and limitations; Poor attitude and attendance; Fraudsters and cybercrimes. Of the challenges listed, it was discovered that the majority of the organisations were challenged majorly by the lack of facilities with a response rate of 157 (40.7%).

From this data, it can be deduced that part of the reasons why the virtual media could not attain a high level of effectiveness is as a result of these challenges. This result is in line with Siljanovska (2015) who says that having a streamlined form of communication using virtual media poses difficulty to organisations. In addition to this, Ekwueme&Okoro (2018) revealed that there are a number of challenges mitigating the adoption of virtual media by business entities in Nigeria. These challenges are what makes the contemporary model of organisational communication still prevail. However, the advent of a predominant virus such as COVID19 calls for the adoption and usage of a media platform that involves less physical contact.

VIII.   CONCLUSION

The coronavirus pandemic was an unpredictable season, which had a great effect on the world. However, such irregular change boils a need for drastic actions. The adoption and execution of virtual media for organisational communication is one of such changes. In all from this study, we can deduce that though usage of virtual media for organisational communication is no new phenomenon.

IX.   RECOMMENDATION

This study,therefore,recommends the following:

  i.   Organisations should adopt modify and add the use of virtual media to other avenues of maintaining communication within and outside the organisation even after the coronavirus lockdown since these platforms have been considered effective.
  ii. Organisations should also use virtual media, from time to time, to conduct meetings; customers' services/ networking, product/ service advertising as well as reach out to new customers after COVID 19 pandemic.
  iii. Organisations should maximise the effectiveness of virtual media as a new trend organisational communication as well as create a communication chain to help structure the use of these media more effectively.
  iv. Organisations endeavour to look for ways to ameliorate the few challenges facing the use of these platforms so as to ensures its effectiveness, especially the primary challenge of lack of facilities.

REFERENCES

[1]   Asemah, E. S. (2011). *Principles and practice of mass communication* (2nd ed). Jos: University Press.

[2]   Badea, M. (2014). Social media and organisational communication.*Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences,*149, 70 – 75.

[3]   Ekwueme, A.C. &Okoro, N. (2018). Analysis of the use of social media advertising among selected online businesses in Nigeria. *International Journal of International Relations, Media and Mass Communication Studies, 4* (2), 28-43.

[4]   Hindshaw, T. (2016).Effectiveness of advertisement in social networking sites. *The Journal of Advertising Research, VI* (3), 3-6.

[5]   Janet,M. (2017).The Impact of Social Media on the Quality of Organizational Communications. Managerial Communication Report. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/36099891/The_Impact_of_Social_Media_on_the_Quality_of_Organizational _Communications

[6]   Kantar Group and Affiliates (2020). COVID-19 Barometer: Consumer attitudes, media habits and expectations.Retrieved fromhttps://www.kantar.com/inspiration/coronavirus/covid-19-barometer-consumer-attitudes-media-habits-and-expectations/

[7]   Langer, E. (2014). What's Trending? Social Media and its Effects on Organisational Communication, *Journal of Undergraduate Research,* (XVII), 1-14.

[8]   Okpongkpong,G.I.,Nwogwugwu, S. &Ukpong, E.N. (2019). Organisational Communication and Workers' Performance in AkwaIbom State University*,IMSUJournal of Communication Studies, (3)*1, 184 – 199.

[9]   Pacheco, E. (2020). COVID-19's Impact on Social Media Usage. Retrieved from https://www.thebrandonagency.com/blog/covid-19s-impact-on-social-media-usage

[10]   Perez, S. (2020). Report: WhatsApp has seen a 40% increase in usage due to COVID-19 pandemic.Retrieved from https://techcrunch.com/2020/03/26/report-whatsapp-has-seen-a-40-increase-in-usage-due-to-covid-19-pandemic/

[11]   Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A. (2012). *Research methods for business students*(6th edition). Pearson Education Limited.

[12]   Siljanovska, L. (2015). The Influence of Social Media on Organizational Communication: Case Study in Republic of Macedonia,*European Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies,* 3(1), 83 – 96.

[13]   Tajudeen, F. P., Jaafar, N. I., &Ainin, S. (2018). Understanding the impact of social media usage among organizations, *Information & Management, 55*(3), 308-321.

[14]   Wright, E.,Khanfar, N. M., Harrington, C. &Kizer,L.E. (2010). The Lasting Effects of Social Media Trends on Advertising,*Journal of Business& Economics Research*, 8(11), 73-80.