

**COVERAGE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES ON COVID-19 BY THE GUARDIAN AND PUNCH NEWSPAPERS (MARCH – DECEMBER, 2020)****Ukaegbu, Michael Ibe, PhD. & Kwani, Oforiokuma Isoboye***Email: michaelibe22@gmail.com, oforiokuma2015@gmail.com***Department of English and Communication Art, Faculty of Humanities, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria****ABSTRACT**

*Following the spate of infodemic that trailed the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study sought to examine coverage of conspiracy theories. Adopting the content analysis research methodology, the study among other objectives sought to identify the frames of conspiracy theories in The Guardian and Punch newspapers and the extent to which the reports addressed health myths and related challenges in the nation's health sector. The study was anchored on the theory of Planned Behaviour and Framing theory. The population consisted of all the 38 national dailies in Nigeria in the first stream and a total of 300 (i.e. 150 each) issues of The Guardian and Punch newspapers respectively, in the second stream. A sample size of 40 was determined from the population, using the composite week method. This was aided by the constructed study calendar that covered the period between March to December 2020. The instruments for data collection were the coding sheet and coding guide, while the units of analysis were straight news, editorial, interview, special reports, cartoons and letters to editors. Quantitative data were presented using frequency distribution tables and percentages, and analysed with the constant comparative technique. In view of the above, findings in the study indicated that reports on conspiracy theories appeared prominently on both The Guardian and Punch newspapers, while the dominant conspiracy theory frames were that COVID-19 is a means to install 5G network, COVID-19 is a Western ploy to weaken the rest of the world's economies, and that the failing health sector exacerbated the spread of COVID-19. Results also showed that there were sustained reportage of COVID-19 stories in The Guardian and Punch newspapers, and that these reports adversely addressed health myths and related challenges in the nation's health sector. Thus, the study concludes that there has been a preponderance of media reports on COVID-19, of much interest to communication researchers, including the extent to which the media have succeeded in juxtaposing facts with misinformation and conspiracy theories. It therefore becomes imperative for the media to shift from merely reporting COVID-19 pandemic from the periphery to further focus on issues that mitigate containment efforts. To this end, the study recommends that in tackling the effect of conspiracy theories on COVID-19, media should dedicate substantial space in providing all the right information about the virus, juxtaposing them with misinformation, while the media should galvanize all stakeholders to live up to their responsibilities by framing reports on efforts stakeholders are making towards containing the virus.*

**Key words: Conspiracy theories, COVID-19, Framing, Infodemic, Misinformation, Myth, Newspaper, Pandemic, Trust, Vaccine**

**INTRODUCTION**

From existence, humanity has continued to grapple with incidents of war, natural disasters and outbreaks of diseases. All of these have left humanity very devastated. The devastation permeates every aspect of human endeavour. More worrisome is the fact that every one of these human or natural disasters not only leaves with it traces of pains and death, but also further exposes the frailty of man – our vulnerability. Arguably, not even the advancements in technology and medicine have shielded us from the debilitating impact of these disasters. In fact, they leave us pondering if we have truly advanced as we claim.

The world has recorded several health crises that left devastating traits. The death rate would have been high due to the state of healthcare and level of advancement in medicine and technology at

the time. Fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century that has witnessed tremendous advancement in medicine and technology. Yet the spate of death witnessed with the COVID-19 outbreak appears to be among the highest recorded. New estimates from the World Health Organization (WHO) show that the death toll associated directly or indirectly with the COVID-19 pandemic (described as excess mortality) between January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 and December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021 was approximately 14.9 million (range 13.3 million to 16.6 million (WHO, 2022)).

In a bid to produce vaccine to contain the pandemic, most laboratories across the world became a beehive of activity of some sort. Since the emergence of this novel corona-virus in December 2019, more than a dozen vaccines were rolled out. Around the world, there are now 101 COVID-19 vaccine candidates undergoing clinical trials and 184 candidates in pre-clinical development (Gavi, 2021). Although effective treatment options are still being developed and researched, each week is witnessed with another over-the-counter medication, supplements or prescription that holds promise with minimal or no data in reducing one's risk of acquiring COVID-19, causing people to buy these agents in mass quantities and taking these products without medical supervision (Burgos et al., 2021).

Following promises from different vaccine manufacturers on the effectiveness of their products, hopes of many across the world were raised that some 'messiah' which will save humanity from this 'curse', had finally arrived. However, not many are still convinced about the efficacy of these vaccines. While these skepticisms about the vaccines may be some worth unfounded, many have been informed of a number of factors ranging from religion, to misinformation, to conspiracy theories. Much of the existing literature on vaccine hesitance and resistance focuses on the explicit reasons individuals provided for their opposition to a particular vaccine or to vaccination programmes in general.

Beyond the heightening apprehension that gripped the world in the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was equally a raging quest for latest information among people. Suffice it to say here that news on COVID-19 took a large part of newspaper space and radio as well as television airtime globally. It was and largely remained major news in both the conventional and social media. Events that have played out with the COVID-19 pandemic are natural sources of attraction for the media and the public. For instance, there is the need to gather more information about this new variant of the COVID-19; there is the need to also find out efforts put in place to develop vaccines against the virus; there is the need to know how much impact the pandemic has had on economies, politics, technology, science, medicine and even relationships. All of these made the COVID-19 news prominent to many people. Of course, the media have been handy to update the public and create the necessary awareness about the virus. Like the frontline health workers, journalists were on the field reporting the COVID-19 pandemic and related stories. They were on the frontline reporting the cases, the death toll and measures the public should take to prevent contracting the virus. This was in a bid to shape public opinion, check misinformation and ultimately help flatten the curve (Nwakpu et al., 2020).

Incidentally, newspapers were veritable source of health communication. Infact they are major sources of factual information, opinion and analysis. They impact knowledge, influence the understanding of issues by their readers and may also act as advocates for the recipients of news items (Westwood & Westwood, 1999). Unlike other media, newspapers give opportunity for extensive analysis of the subject matter thereby enhancing understanding and information. Accordingly, the print media particularly newspapers, have been found to be effective media for influencing the reading public as well as opinion leaders on issues of public health (Evans & Ulasevich, 2005). They are also in some cases accessible and affordable sources of information (Uboh, 2010).

### **Statement of the Problem**

During health crisis situation the public depends on the media for accurate and detailed information. This information comes in form of awareness creation, prevention and efforts at containment. In

other instances, emphasis is on attitudinal and positive health behavioural changes. News media play a crucial role in communicating health and policy information. The relevance of news media report is not lost in the fact that they help to fill in the gap of possible misinformation. Beyond that, is the fact that news coverage communicates risks to readers and shapes public perception through the amount, content and tone of reporting. The outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria and the public reactions to the pandemic also brought to bear the extent the media succeeded in shaping public perception and positive health behavioural pattern, especially through the frequency of coverage, the quality of the content as it relates to the adequacy or right information about COVID-19 and the tone as to whether it complimented government's awareness campaigns or it was divergent to suggesting seeming lack of proactivity or poor response to containing the virus in the country.

In the other breadth, the dearth of science reporting, which entails methodological presentation of facts and figures in health crisis situations tends to be lacking. For instance, the seeming lack of scientific coverage could have created an opening for speculations and misinformation as well as lack of trust in report on COVID-19. Inadequate scientific quality in news coverage of past pandemic has posed risks and limited capacities to disseminate public health guidance and coordinate responses. Arguably, inadequacy of science reports on COVID-19 in the media created a communication void that was exploited to create a secondary epidemic of misinformation. Since the journalists themselves were grappling to understand this novel virus, they were not in a vantage position to question the authenticity of certain information provided by medical professionals. For instance, a number of preventive measures like the lockdown and wearing of facemasks in public places were barely contested by the media at the initial stage of their introduction despite the resistances and concomitant effect on the economy.

Again, the media were also in a situation to first deciphering between facts, conspiracy theories and misinformation. This could explain why most reports on COVID-19 focused more on casualties than providing relevant information about the virus. There was little emphasis on media literacy on COVID-19. While efforts were made to flatten the curve of COVID-19, the media did not make similar effort to flatten the curve of disinformation, misinformation and fake news in Nigeria. The seeming lack of media literacy would have partly accounted for the growing spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories that festered freely in the heat of the COVID-19 virus in Nigeria. For instance, certain conspiracy theories such as the 5G network with COVID-19; reduction in the world's population; end time signs, among others persisted mainly due to lack of media literacy and a more superior counter stance against them.

The concern of this study therefore are: were media reports on COVID-19 enough to create the needed literacy and awareness that would contain the effect and spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories in the public? Also, did the media have all relevant information needed to counter misinformation and disinformation that festered during the COVID-19 outbreak and whether the reports on dominant conspiracy theories of COVID-19 by the media inadvertently boosted their spread?

### **Objectives of the Study**

Generally, this study sought to examine coverage of conspiracy theories on COVID-19, through a content analysis of *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers. Specifically, the study sought to achieve the following objectives:

1. To determine the frames of reportage in *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers within the designated period.
2. To find out the frequency of reportage of COVID-19 conspiracy theories in *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers.
3. To ascertain the dominant conspiracy theories in COVID-19 reports of *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the frames of reportage in *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers within the designated period?
2. What is the frequency of reportage of COVID-19 conspiracy theories in *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers?
3. What are the dominant conspiracy theories of COVID-19 reports in *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Conceptual Review**

#### **The Concept of Health Communication**

Arguably, efforts to convince people to adopt favourable healthy behaviours or getting policy makers to take proactive steps in addressing health related issues have not usually come easy. This is more, among other intervening variables based on personal idiosyncrasies and demographic exigencies. Consequently, Amos (2014) cited in Ikhioya (2019) observes that "through effective health communication system, most people are properly informed on health issues especially when viewed within the perspective of accessibility and efficiency" (p.284). They argue that the prospect for better and efficient healthcare delivery system in Nigeria and in other parts of the developing nations of the world is dependent on the level of health information system. Ikhioya (2019) further notes that "through proper communication strategies, there are positive results in health development dynamics", stating that the healthcare communication system in Nigeria has brought about outstanding innovation in healthcare delivery system. This include among others, the use of new communication technologies to spread health information to people such as Internet facilities, health machines to detect health problems, which have drastically helped to improve health care delivery. The need to make health information comprehensible to all categories of audience members cannot be over-emphasized. Whereas health communication will require the dissemination of medical or science related information, there is the need to break them down into bits for better understanding. One of the basic roles of health communication strategies is to adequately translate scientific language into understandable information on health and other related issues in the society. Health communication should be designed and sent across to the public through lectures, seminars, workshops, leaflets, posters and other instrumental resources that could be developed in a simple and concise way that will ease understanding (Ikhioya, 2019).

More so, a few challenges have been identified in health communication. Kelly (2013) identifies the following challenges plaguing health communication:

1. The negative impact of health communication on the health status of individual could be undesirable especially among people who are economically deprived of the basic social needs and services such as education and health care. The negative effect of health communication seems to be far more than the positive since poverty is closely related to health conditions.
2. Continuous spread of infectious disease is probably one of the most mentioned health effects of health communication and past disease outbreaks. For instance, the globalization of food production and consumption has been associated with the increased spread and transmission of food borne diseases.
3. Shortage and uneven distribution of fund to effectively embark on proper dissemination of health information has been a serious setback facing the health sector.
4. Coordination of health communication has been very poor. This development has also led to inconsistency in providing good health services to individuals in society.
5. Lack of professionals in the health sector that are capable of providing wide range of health information of the people of the local communities.

Thus, the containment of any disease or its prevention cannot be effective until the communication component of the campaign is properly designed, executed and monitored. Again, other intervening variables measuring the effectiveness of health communication is the extent to which it effectively influences behavioural changes. To this end, communication materials will have to be tested to give

valuable insight into how effective the campaign may be (publichealth.tulane.edu). Despite the importance of health communication as a measure to containing disease outbreak there appear to be a serious knowledge gap in this area of communication (Sixsmith et al., 2013).

The point is that, there appear to be more emphasis on crisis than health communication. Both of them do not have same objectives. While the former is about influencing positive health attitudes, the latter is reactionary, and in most instances emphasizes the disease outbreak with little or no much information on prevention. Sixsmith *et al.* (2013) contend that "health communication activities are not clearly delineated in national public health structures and policies and there is an emphasis on crisis communication". Accordingly, research design and measurement are critical to assessing behavioural outcomes during disease outbreaks (Lith, 2014). This implies therefore, that health communication is both arts as it is scientific. Both the arts in terms of strategies and science in terms of evaluation are required for effective health communication.

As for most other health-related issues and interventions, changing public and professional minds and convincing the public to adopt positive health attitude has over time become a tall order. Schiavo (2007) observes that "convincing people to adopt healthy behaviours or policy makers and professionals to introduce and change practices in support of better health has never been an easy task" (p.xix). Suffice to say that there has been a growing gap in the link between health communication and corresponding actions. That is the extent to which all the components that, not only education or sensitization, but also driving the needed actions and attitudinal change are impeded in health communication, makes it a critical subject of discourse. In this light, as Schiavo (2007) notes, the effectiveness of health communication is to the extent that it achieves the following:

- i. Providing the public with research-based and reliable information that will reassure her about the importance of immunization or vaccination and its low risk.
- ii. Improving communication with health care providers, by teaching what questions to ask, and raising awareness among health care providers of patient's needs and most frequent concerns.
- iii. Developing tools such as brochures, posters, web pages and other informational vehicles from reputable sources that will reinforce the information the public will hear from her health care provider.

To this end, Schiavo (2007) explains that health communication approaches will work only if they rely on providing in-depth understanding of disease patterns, lifestyles, concerns, beliefs, attitudes, barriers to change and sources of information about preventive measures. It follows that one of the cardinal focus of health communication is to influence individuals and communities. The goal is admirable since health communication aims to improve health outcome by sharing health-related information (Schiavo, 2007).

It is imperative to note that health communication is proactive in nature. That is to say that, the communication of health related issues should target disease prevention. However, upon the onset of a disease, the communication is equally proactive to ensure containment through attitudinal change. Arguably, not much can be achieved in addressing health awareness if the right information is not disseminated in an effective manner. Improving health literacy and behavioural change is largely dependent (among other intervening variables) on proper dissemination of health information that influences personal health choices. The promotion, maintenance and restoration of health, require health related information (Beato et al., 2013 cited in Nkanunye & Obiechina, 2017). Furthermore, the effectiveness of health communication is largely to the extent that the right communication tool is strategically deployed to target audiences. These health communication strategies include: campaigns, entertainment, advocacy, media advocacy, new technologies and inter-personal communication (Noar et al., 2007). More so, effective health communication strategies include, the use of research base strategies. In this instance, communication is tailored in line with cultures, setting and languages among others (Rural Health Information Hub, 2017 cited in Nkanunye & Obiechina, 2017). For instance, research on targeting specific segments of population

and tailoring messages for individual use are exemplified in Harrison (2003) cited in Lederman, Krep & Roberto (2017) which examined how exposure to mediated images of men and women influence how people perceive the sizes of their bodies.

Like every other form of communication, the end-point of health communication is to foster health literacy and effect attitudinal change. Health communication could further be said to be effective when there is a high level of understanding of health issues including information about healthy living and disease prevention. Achieving health literacy through health communication is one of the social determinants of health and a reflection of how well individual in a society can understand, assimilate and critically reflect on information with regard to health and illness (Veenker & Paans, 2016).

### **Examining Mass Media Role in Health Campaign**

The role of the media in creating awareness about disease prevention and control has been widely established. Over the past few decades, media campaign has been used in an attempt to affect various health behaviours in mass population (Wakefield *et al.*, 2010). The media are the major source for health information. During health crisis situation, the public relies on them for updates. Mass media campaign are widely used to expose high proportions of large populations to messages through routine uses of existing media, such as television, radio and newspapers (Wakefield *et al.*, 2010). Incidentally, the surveillance function of the media also entails that they alert society on disease outbreaks and engage experts to proffer solutions. The mass media played very important roles in creating awareness among the general public and in the dissemination of the government orders/guidelines to the health workers, sanitation workers, including the police at grassroots levels (Sharma *et al.*, 2020).

Health issues have gained prominence in the media in recent times. This is against the backdrop of its importance to society and the natural instinct to want to give attention to issues that concern life and human existence. For instance, the unfolding news coverage of HIV/AIDs provides a good example of how an important health issue may be invisible to the public eye until the media bring it to light. This is further made possible by the ubiquitous nature of the news media which makes it a powerful tool for directing attention to specific issues (National Academics Press, 2002). Wakefield *et al.* (2010) further noted that "the great promise of mass media campaigns lies in their ability to disseminate well defined, behaviourally focused messages to target audiences repeatedly. Over time, in an incidental manner, and at a low cost per head" (p.6)

Accordingly, Sharma (2015) cited in Sharma and Gupta (2017) suggests that "print media (newspaper, magazines, leaflets, brochures, etc.) play an important role in informing and educating the people about important events related to their daily life" (p.28). Newspapers are among the most important sources of health related issues around the world. The print media provide detailed information on almost every topic related to health (Sharma, 2015 cited in Sharma & Gupta, 2017). More so, the media have been known to play the role of influencing positive attitudinal change. In fact, they act as instruments for reinforcing existing health belief and behaviour. They are also instrumental in bringing behavioural change about knowledge, and attitudes about health and healthy behaviour (Sharma & Gupta, 2017). For Collins, et. al (2003) media play the role of change agent. It can influence the behaviour of the people for the sake of better health by adapting to preventive measures which stop the spread of diseases i.e. the use of condom to stop HIV/AIDs. By informing and educating about different health issues, media keep promoting healthy lifestyle and positive behaviour changes among the common public (Sharma & Gupta, 2017).

Meanwhile, Schinger (1976) cited in Schiavo (2007) notes that there are evidences to affirm the fact that mass media efforts to improve public health can and have accomplished the following tasks: (1) increase awareness of a health problem; (2) raise the level of information about health topics; (3) make a health topic or problem more salient, thereby sensitizing the audience to efforts such as personal selling; group education or direct-mail brochures; (4) stimulate interpersonal influence via

conversations with family, friends, doctors and other experts; (5) generate forms of self-initiated information seeking; and (6) reinforce existing attitudes and behaviours.

Furthermore, there are attendant challenges in reporting health issues. Although news media coverage can help place a specific health issue on the national agenda, tensions exist among news reporters, scientists and public health professionals as they seek to convey health news and information to the public especially during crisis (NAP, 2002). The National Academics Press explains that scientists and public health professionals believe that journalists, in writing attention grabbing stories, often violate the traditional norms that guide scientific communication. Media constraints of time, brevity and simplicity for example, impede the careful documentation, nuanced positions, and caveats that scientists believe are necessary to discuss and present their work (Nukin, 1996, 1998, cited in NAP, 2002).

There are evidences showing that the media have significantly been successful in influencing people's attitude during health crisis situations and other negative health behaviour. Comprehensive reviews of controlled field experiments and population studies show that mass media campaigns were associated with a decline in young people starting smoking and with an increase in the number of adults stopping (National Career Institute, 2008; Bola, Strzeszynski & Cahill, 2008 cited in Wakefield *et al.*, 2010). Similar successes have been recorded in influencing people's attitude about contraceptives for family planning and anti-retroviral drugs for HIV/AIDS prevention (Wakefield *et al.*, 2010). Conversely, Snyder *et al.*, 2004, argue that "the ability of health communication campaigns to change health behavior is typically modest" (p.76). On the other hand, even a modest effect size for a large scale campaign can still translate into thousands or even millions of people changing their behaviours for the better (Snyder *et al.*, 2004).

The media influence goes beyond individuals to policy makers. Media interventions can potentially play a major role on influencing health policies (Bou-Karroum *et al.*, 2017). Media can influence how the public and policy makers view or think about certain issues through selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text (Chapman, 2004). Another way media influence policy makers is through shaping public opinions, which in turn, exerts pressure on policy makers to respond. For instance, media advocacy is known as a popular strategy in public health that can assist in increasing public awareness and mobilizing decision-makers for policy change (Wallack & Dorfman, 1996; Buse *et al.*, 2012 cited in Bou-Karroum *et al.*, 2017).

### **Mass Media Conspiracy Theories and Reporting Covid-19 in Nigeria**

Like other countries of the world, Nigeria has had its share of the novel corona virus otherwise known as COVID-19. The first case of the virus was recorded in the country in February 27, 2020. The Federal Ministry of Health confirmed the first COVID-19 case in Ogun State, Nigeria; making the country the third country in Africa to recognize an imported COVID-19 case after Egypt and Algeria (Dan-Nwafor *et al.*, 2020). The index case was that of an Italian citizen who flew from Milan, Italy to Lagos, Nigeria on February 24, 2020 and travelled to his company site in Ogun State the same day in a private vehicle. On February 26, 2020 he presented at the company clinic with symptoms consistent with COVID-19 and was referred to the Infectious Disease Hospital (IDH) in Lagos where a COVID-19 diagnosis was confirmed by real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) on February, 27, 2020 (Dan-Nwafor *et al.*, 2020).

Through the first case, the 36 States of Nigeria recorded cases of COVID-19. Although Lagos State was initially the epicenter of the outbreak, Kano State and the FCT joined as high-burden States contributing over 64.5% of the cumulative cases in Nigeria by the end of May 2020 (Dan-Nwafor *et al.*, 2020). Between February and May 31, 2020, 63,882 persons were tested for COVID-19 in Nigeria of which 10,162 (15.9%) were confirmed as being infected with SARS-COV-2 by RT-PCR. Males appear to be disproportionately affected accounting for 67.7% (6,882) of the confirmed cases. Well over 287 deaths were recorded among the confirmed COVID-19 cases resulting in an observed case

fatality ratio (CFR) of approximately 2.8% (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020 cited in Dan-Nwafor *et al.*, 2020). What started as an imported case had grown steadily in Nigeria, and assumed an elitist pattern to community transmission. The World Health Organization (WHO) categorized Nigeria as one of the 13 high-risk African countries with respect to the spread of COVID-19. This is not unconnected to the weak state of the nation's healthcare system (Amzat *et al.*, 2020; Marbot, 2020).

Expectedly, a pandemic of this magnitude is a beautiful bride to attract massive media reportage. It was the biggest news story around the world; and in Nigeria, the media beamed their search light on it. Reports on the pandemic permeated the airwaves and indeed newspaper and magazine pages. It was almost the 'only' talk of the town. Journalists in Nigeria stopped at nothing to give a blow by blow account of this novel corona virus. The apparition and anxiety were tensed such that there was need for a sustained reportage to attempt to assuage an already tensed public. For instance, the needed instruments including resources, manpower and the requisite data as well as expertise to effectively report a pandemic that held the world spell bound, was lacking. Suffice it to say that the media are only bound to report such issues that have enormous public concern. Part of the role of the media is to report any issue affecting the society to the public. Eventually, corona virus became an issue of transnational concern. The importance of the media in the coverage of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Nigeria and its implications among Nigerian populace cannot be overestimated (Nwakpu *et al.*, 2020).

Consequently, one of the challenges that have affected effective media reports on COVID-19 in Nigeria borders on misinformation/fake news. Much disturbing was the fact that such misinformation and fake news gained the 'endorsement' by the mainstream media, most of which just adopted online reports without due diligence and painstaking verification. The emergence of COVID-19 came with it an upsurge in rumours, controversies and fakes news reported by media houses, which threatened public trust in media information about the pandemic (UNESCO, 2020).

Considering that the media in Nigeria have overtime been faced with the responsibilities of reporting novel disease outbreaks, like the Ebola virus disease, anthrax, SARS among others, the outset of the COVID-19 virus came with its own attendant challenges. Beyond the challenge of expertise in terms of effectively breaking down the information about the disease to the public, there was the issue of finance, and a much bigger issue of managing misinformation and fake news about the virus. To start with the requisite expertise, there appears to be a dearth of science reporters.

The conspiracy theory that trended in the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic was the magnet theory. Mischief makers had claimed that COVID-19 vaccine creates magnetic field that causes metal objects to stick to vaccination sites and causes the body to light up an electric bulb (Akoni, 2021). All of these point to the fact that misinformation triggered by conspiracy theories have left toils of devastation like the COVID-19 pandemic itself, while COVID-19 spreads aggressively and rapidly across the globe, many societies witnessed it. De Coninck *et al.* (2021) identify some of the prevailing narratives about COVID-19 to include the following:

1. That the virus is caused by 5G cellular technology (Vincent, 2020 cited in De Coninck *et al.*, 2021).
2. That Bill Gates used the virus to enslave humanity by enforcing a global vaccination and surveillance programme (Shahsavari *et al.*, 2020 cited in De Coninck *et al.*, 2021).

In Nigeria, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, founder of Believers Loveworld, added his voice to the 5G debate, when he claimed that COVID-19 lockdown was decoy to sequester the population for government to covertly deploy 5G (Ndinoguo, 2020).

Specifically, conspiracy theorists are curiously contending that rolling out the fifth generation (5G) network by the Chinese and other stakeholders was the cause of the pandemic that gripped the world since December, 2019 ( *The Guardian* Editorial Board, 2020). The conspiracy theories seem to



have been fueled by a number of actors prominent of which is the yawning gap in information about COVID-19 and the seeming mistrust in government. Distrust in the government and vaccination linked to belief in the conspiracy theories and vaccine hesitancy (Bangura et al., 2020 cited in Nigeria Health Watch, 2021).

### **Conspiracy Theory and Related Health Challenges in Nigeria**

During health crisis situations there are growing demands for information. In many instance, other than the conventional media, many other sources serve as means of information. The implication of this is that misinformation thrives as a situation where information on sensitive issues on health becomes a free for all. At the onset of the pandemic there were submissions that any global health crisis should be conceived, also, as a global information crisis that requires paying major attention to information behaviours observed during times of crisis, as much of the knowledge of information behaviour is based on research carried out under normal circumstances.

Aside science, people have framed their opinions and perception about the COVID-19 virus. It is these opinions and perceptions that guide their health behavioural patterns and responses to the messaging and other containment efforts. For instance, conspiracy theories that attributed a socially significant event, in the case of the novel coronavirus, to unknown and sinister actors were circulating within social and traditional media (Douglas *et al.*, 2019; Funke, 2020; Infotagun, 2020, Lee, 2020 cited in Romer & Jamieson, 2020). In another breadth, some conspiracy beliefs are associated with unsubstantiated fears of vaccination and unwillingness to vaccinate. This makes efforts at flattening the COVID-19 curve difficult (Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Greenwood, 2014; Hornsey *et al.*, 2020 cited in Romer & Jamieson, 2020).

In Nigeria, the situation was not any different as certain conspiracy theories, similar to the global dominant ones shapes public perception and responses to the containment efforts. As the pandemic subsisted in Nigeria, so the conspiracy theories. Like in other parts of the world conspiracy theories had largely shaped responses to vaccinations and adherence to other COVID-19 protocol. In fact, many Nigerians rather found 'succour' in the conspiracy theories than information from the main media. Conspiracy theories were seen as alternative narratives to the status quo, people turn to them to compensate for their thwarted needs. Such narratives accentuate the threatening characteristics of demonized out-groups and praise the people who endorsed the beliefs and behaviours put forward by the ideology; hence, cognitively and behaviourally polarizing believers (Kruganski *et al.*, 2019 cited in Leonard & Philippe, 2021). There also was a trust deficit occasioned by the fact that COVID-19 vaccination was a process of 'giving people the mark of the beast'; there are predictions that the belief in alternative narratives triggered by conspiracy theories leads to (1) lower institutional trust, (ii) lower support of governmental regulations, (iii) lower adoption of physical distancing and (iv) lower social engagement (Pummerer et al., 2021). These also accounted for the challenge of effective vaccine administration in Nigeria. Over the years, Nigeria has grappled with highly disruptive vaccine resistance and refusal resulting from negative rumours and loss of public confidence. For a vaccination programme to succeed, health promoters must first understand and contextualize the range breadth, and depth of circulating misinformation and conspiracy theories (Wonodi & Faden, 2022).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on two theories namely, Theory of Planned Behaviour and Framing Theory.

#### **Theory of Planned Behaviour**

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) was propounded by Icek Ajzen in 1985. It is an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), which is based on the notion that individuals make logical, reasoned decisions to engage in certain specific behaviours by evaluating the information available to them (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980 cited in Ryan, 2010). The theory is further premised on the fact that performance of a behaviour is determined by the individual's intention to engage in it (influenced by the value the individual places on the behaviour, the ease with which it

can be performed and the views of significant others) and the perception that the behaviour is within his/her control (Ryan, 2010). The justification for the use of this theory stems from the fact that human behaviour is influenced by a number of factors including their level of exposure to information and information source as well. Overtime the media have been known to influence behavioural patterns as they set agenda for issues of salience. Beyond that is the deliberate emphasis for positive health behaviour especially during disease outbreak. While it is within the cognitive posture of individuals to form intents which inform their behaviour towards health information, it is expected of the media to further encourage positive health behaviour by framing reports in ways that will bring to the fore the accruable benefits in adopting healthy behavioural patterns.

### **Framing Theory**

The Framing Theory was propounded by Erving Goffman in 1974 (Ibrahim & Yakubu, 2017). The concept of frame or framing itself has diverse theoretical origins. Other scholars who are credited with the concept include Minsky (1975), Bateson (1972), Watzlawick et al., 1974, Tversky and Kahneman (1981), Takeshita, (1997). Among the scholars listed above, sociologist Goffman and cognitive psychologists Tversky and Kahneman might be the ones most referred to by framing researcher in mass communication (Takeshita, 1997). Framing is a pervading communication practice. Frames essentially help message sources to couch their communicated messages in a certain direction and allow receivers of information to gain a certain perspective of a subject (Batta et al., 2014). Again, Donk et al., 2012 cited in Batta *et al.*, 2014, note that "a frame is understood as a specific, unique pattern of text that is composed of several elements" (p.12). Entman (1993) cited in Batta *et al.*, 2014, adds that "a frame consists of the following elements (a) problem definition, (b) casual attribution of responsibility, (c) moral judgment of the protagonists and their actions, and (d) treatment recommendations" (p.12).

Goffman's (1974) concept of frame – he owned this concept to Bateson (1955) – means the definition a person gives to the situation or context in which human interaction occurs (Takeshita, 1997). But the idea of framing stemmed from agenda-setting theorists who viewed it as a natural way in which second level agenda setting occurs (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008 cited in Ibrahim & Yakubu, 2017). Media depictions frame events in ways that constraint how audiences can interpret these events. This can happen by various textual features of the "story" such as headlines, audio-visual components, metaphors used, and the way in which the study is told, to name only a few of the ways framing functions (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008 cited in Ibrahim & Yakubu, 2017). In the same vein, framing happens when the manner, events are reported in the media has an impact on how they are understood by the audience. Mass media content producers decide where and what to place emphasis on in a story by the choice of phrases, images, and positioning as well as content type to be used (Chioma et al., 2017).

The justification for the use of the theory stems from the fact that it is appropriate given the nature of the study which seeks to examine media frames on CoVID-19. There are several sides to a story. A newspaper chooses to slant its report on a particular event in line with certain intervening conditionalities including house style, editorial policies, and ownership among others. In some instances, media organisations may deliberately tilt towards appealing to public sensations and as such frames reports that reinforce generally held sentiments on issues.

### **Empirical Review**

**De'Coninck *et al.* (2021) study entitled: "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation about COVID-19: Comparative Perspectives on the Role of Anxiety, Depression and Exposure to and Trust in Information Sources"**: This study examined the impact of conspiracy theories and the extent they play on anxiety and create depression in individuals in society. Accordingly, the study investigated the nexus between exposure to and trust in information sources, anxiety and depression and conspiracy theories, misinformation beliefs in eight countries/regions including Belgium, Canada, England, Philippines, Hong Kong, New Zealand,

United States and Switzerland during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data for the study were sourced using online survey method. The study period spanned from May 29, 2002 to June 12, 2002, resulting in a multinational representative sample of 8,806 adult respondents (De'Coninck *et al.*, 2021).

The findings of the study showed that greater exposure to traditional media (television, radio, newspapers) is associated with lower conspiracy and misinformation beliefs. On the contrary, findings also indicated that exposure to politicians and digital media and personal contacts are associated with greater conspiracy and misinformation beliefs (De'Coninck *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, the study showed that both depression and anxiety are associated with health crisis situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. In other to further control threat, the study revealed that more information is sought. Yet, it notes that seeking for information actually backfires and could even increase levels of stress and anxiety owing to the fact that one encounters new, stress-evoking information such as graphic imagery in mainstream news media but also misinformation and conspiracy theories (Taylor *et al.*, 2020 cited in De'Coninck *et al.*, 2021).

**Ndinoguo (2020) study entitled: "5G, Religion and Misconceptions in the Age of COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria"** This study examined one of the conspiracy theories that emerged in the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Among the objectives of the study was to address the issue of fake news and its ability to cause civil disobedience in the society. The content analysis method was adopted to review arguments on 5G controversy in the Nigerian context (Ndinoguo, 2020).

The study observed that the conspiracy theory on 5G and its relationship with COVID-19 was triggered by uncertainties that usually characterize crisis situations. This occurrence is exceptionally dire due to the paucity of reliable scientific unanimity on the spread, containment, and long-term social and economic effects of COVID-19 on the society (Ndinoguo, 2020). The study made reference to Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of the Christ Embassy church, who had alluded that the COVID-19 was a ploy by the government to covertly deploy 5G. The study found out that previous studies on the health implication of the 5G lack conclusivity and definitiveness. It further looked at the impact of religion vis-a-vis its relationship with conspiracy theories. It contends that, like in the case of Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, spiritual leaders could wield considerable level of influence on people's belief system. The study further contends that Pastor Chris' assertions "falls within the sphere of conspiracy theory not necessarily because he is wrong but because he fails to provide any empirical foundations to his claims" (p.103).

The study concluded that the Internet is increasing the influence of social and religious influencers to cause hysteria with unconfirmed and unverified information. It further concluded that the government owes the public transparency on issues capable of causing anxiety, and charged on religious leaders to refrain from putting out information from conspiracy theories (Ndinoguo, 2020). It maintained that "media should also ask the relevant questions and try to get the facts of any controversy from authorized government officials and experts in the field of discourse" (p.110).

**Agley and Xiao (2021) study entitled: "Misinformation about COVID-19: Evidence for Differential Latent Profiles and a Strong Association with First in Science"** This study sought to draw a distinction between facts and falsehood about COVID-19. The study observed that the global spread of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was mirrored by diffusion of misinformation and conspiracy theories about its origins (such as 5G cellular networks) and the motivation of preventive measures like vaccination, social distancing and face masks (for example, as a political ploy); maintaining that these beliefs have resulted in substantive, negative real world outcomes but remain largely unstudied (Agley & Xiao, 2021).

Consequently, the study adopted a cross-sectional online survey of 660 participants. Participants were asked about the believability of five selected COVID-19 narratives, their political orientation, their trust in science, on a 21item scale (Agley & Xiao, 2021). Data for the study were assessed

descriptively, and then latent profile analysis was used to identify subgroups with similar believability profiles. Bivariate (ANOVA) analyses were run, and then multivariable; multivariate logistic regression was used to identify factors associated with membership in specific COVID-19 narrative believability profile (Agle & Xiao, 2021).

Accordingly, the study's findings revealed the following:

1. Respondents varied in their believability of the narratives about COVID-19.
2. It showed that respondents' level of believability of the 5G narrative is high.
3. For the scientific narrative, over 70% of the respondents believed the scientifically accepted narrative as against the misinformed or conspiratorial narratives.
4. Findings showed that trust in science was a strong, significantly predictor of profile membership.

However, the study concluded that belief in misinformation or conspiratorial narratives may not be mutually exclusive from belief in the narrative reflecting scientific consensus, that is, profiles were distinguished not by belief in the zoonotic narrative, but rather by concomitant belief or disbelief in additional narratives (Agle & Xiao, 2021). It further submitted that renewed dissemination of scientifically accepted narratives may not attenuate belief in misinformation. The study recommended that COVID-19 misinformation might be achieved by taking concrete steps to improve trust in science and scientists, such as building understanding of the scientific process and supporting open science initiatives (Agle & Xiao, 2021).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted the content analysis design method. The justification of this research design is that the study sought to analyze manifest contents of *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers reports on conspiracy theories on COVID-19. Content analysis as a technique aimed at describing with optimum objectivity, precision and generally, what is said on a given subject, in a given place, at a given time (Lasswell et al., 1999 cited in Macnamara, 2005). Walizer and Wiener (1978) cited in Wimmer and Dominick (2000) state that "it is any systematic procedure devised to examine the content of recorded information" (p.301). The population of the study was all the 300 issues of *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers spanning a period of nine months. That is from March 1, to December 31, 2020. 150 issues of *The Guardian* and *Punch newspapers* respectively form the composite population of 300. The sample size of this population was determined by adopting the composite week approach. This approach enabled the researcher to select a day in every week of the month for the sample. To this end, the researcher adopted even dates in the composite weeks to be selected. Justification for this is that the approach is preferable to both the random sampling and the consecutive day sampling when dealing with newspaper content (Riffe et al., 1993; Wimmer & Dominick, 2003 cited in Osi-Ajie, 2020). Consequently, issues to be selected fall between 4<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> March, 6<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 8<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> May, 10<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> June, 4<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> July and 2<sup>nd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> August. Others fall between 16<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> September, 10<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 14<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> November, and 10<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> December, 2020. The sample size therefore is drawn from a constructed calendar. From the constructed calendar above, 20 issues each was selected from the 300 issues of *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers respectively. The sample size for this study therefore is 40 issues (*The Guardian* 20 and *Punch* 20 issues each).

The coding guide is comprised of 15 categories namely: newspaper identity, story genre, story identity, story frequency, story direction, COVID-19 news headlines, COVID-19 news placement, frequency of conspiracy theories on COVID-19, frames on COVID-19, dominant frames on COVID-19, substance or non-issue, purpose of COVID-19 news story, rhetorical strategy, implication of news story on COVID-19, story slant. Categories 1-5 addressed the selection of the types of stories, especially COVID-19 related and frequency of coverage. Categories 6-8 were used to address story placement to further measure prominence. Categories 9-10 set out to identify frames and dominant frames in the coverage of COVID-19 reports.

Furthermore, categories 11-15 were used to measure the COVID-19 stories in terms of substance, purpose, story slant and implication. The coding sheet contained 15 items for scoring the categorizations by coders.

### Data Presentation

A total of 40 issues of *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers were drawn from a population of 300. The study spanned from March to December, 2020. In view of this, data generated using the coding guide were presented using frequency distribution tables, simple percentages and thematically. The Constant Comparative Technique (CCT) was used to analyse conspiracy theory frames identified in the study. To this end, the results are presented below.

### Research Question 1

#### What are the frames of reportage in *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers within the designated period?

This question sought to identify the frames of reportage in *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers. The result is provided in item 9 (frames on COVID-19) and presented in the table below:

**Table 1: Frames of reportage in *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers**

SN	Unit of Analysis	<i>Punch</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	Total	Percentage
1	Sign of the end time	1(5%)	1(5%)	2	5
2	A western strategy to reduce population	1(5%)	1(5%)	2	5
3	Government's lack of prompt response to the pandemic triggered its spread in Nigeria	5(25%)	4(20%)	9	22.5
4	COVID-19 is a Western ploy to weaken the rest of the world's economies	3(15%)	4(20%)	7	17.5
5	Religious beliefs helped in reducing the number of COVID-19 related deaths in Nigeria	2(10%)	1(5%)	3	7.5
6	The failing health sector exacerbated the spread of COVID-19	2(10%)	3(15%)	5	12.5
7	Corruption affected the containment of COVID-19 in Nigeria	1(5%)	3(15%)	4	10
8	News reports triggered conspiracy theories on COVID-19	2(10%)	1(5%)	3	7.5
9	COVID-19 is a means to install 5G network	3(15%)	2(10%)	5	12.5
<b>Total</b>		<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>

Result from Table 1 above reveals that government's lack of prompt response to the pandemic (9 or 22.5%), COVID-19 been a ploy by the West to weaken the rest of the world's economies (7 or 17.5%) were among the frames identified in *The Guardian* and *Punch newspapers* within this period of this study.

### Research Question 2

#### What is the frequency of reportage of COVID-19 conspiracy theories in *The Guardian* and *Punch newspapers*?

The question sought to find out the frequency of reportage of COVID-19 conspiracy theories in *The Guardian* and *Punch newspapers*. The response is provided in table 2 below (frequency of conspiracy theories on COVID-19).

**Table 2: Frequency of reportage of COVID-19 conspiracy theories by newspapers**

SN	Unit of Analysis	<i>Punch</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	Total	Percentage
1	Daily	7(35%)	6(30%)	13	32.5
2	Weekly	8(40%)	9(45%)	17	42.5
3	Monthly	4(20%)	3(15%)	7	17.5
4	Quarterly	1(5%)	2(10%)	3	7.5
5	Yearly	0	0		
	<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>

Results from Table 2 above indicates that COVID-19 conspiracy theories appeared every week (17 or 42.5%) on both *The Guardian* and *Punch newspapers* within the period under study.

### Research Question 3

#### What are the dominant conspiracy theories in COVID-19 reports of *The Guardian* and *Punch newspapers*?

This question sought to identify the dominant conspiracy theories in COVID-19 reports of *The Guardian* and *Punch newspapers*. The answer is provided (dominant frames on COVID-19) and presented in the table below.

**Table 3: Dominant conspiracy theories in the COVID-19 reports of *The Punch* and *The Guardian newspapers***

SN	Unit of Analysis	<i>Punch</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	Total	Percentage
1	Sign of the end time	1(5%)	-	1	2.5
2	A western strategy to reduce population	1(5%)	2(10%)	3	7.5
3	Government's lack of prompt response to the pandemic triggered its spread in Nigeria	4(20%)	2(10%)	6	15
4	COVID-19 is a Western ploy to weaken the rest of the world's economies	3(15%)	4(20%)	7	17.5
5	Religious beliefs helped in reducing the number of COVID-19 related deaths in Nigeria	1(5%)	1(5%)	2	5

6	The failing health sector exacerbated the spread of COVID-19	4(20%)	3(15%)	7	17.5
7	Corruption affected the containment of COVID-19 in Nigeria	2(10%)	3(15%)	5	5
8	COVID-19 is a means to install 5G network	4(20%)	15(25%)	9	22.5
<b>Total</b>		<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>

Result from Table 3 above shows that the dominant conspiracy theories were that COVID-19 is a means to install 5G network (9 or 22.5%), COVID-19 is a Western ploy to weaken the rest of the world's economies (7 or 17.5%), and that the failing health sector exacerbated the spread of COVID-19 (7 or 17.5%).

### Discussion of Findings

**Research question one: What are the frames of reportage in *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers within the designated period?** Findings in research question 1 revealed that among the frames of COVID-19 identified on both *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers were that government's lack of response to the pandemic triggered its spread in Nigeria, and that COVID-19 is a ploy by the West to weaken the rest of the world's economies. Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, there were reports that did not only call the attention of the government to the situation but also urged it to be proactive in taking steps to prevent the disease from spreading into the country. As the most populous country in Africa and the sixth most populous in the world, Nigeria plays a significant role in the global response. Nigeria's epidemic response is carried out in the context of a fragile and under-resourced existing health delivery system, and complicated by economic, political, social, and security issues throughout the country (Dan-Nwafor *et al.*, 2020). The finding contradicts Dan-Nwafor *et al.* (2020) which states that confronting epidemics is not new in Nigeria; noting that during the 2014 Ebola epidemic, the media played a sensitization role for the health system, government, and communities which aided the response placed by individuals in tackling the spread of highly infectious diseases and the need to mount rapid proactive measures. Dan-Nwafor *et al.* (2020) argued that "the emergence of a strengthened Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) has enhanced diagnostic and surveillance capacity in the country" (p.6).

The finding therefore confirms the framing theory used in the study. More so, the finding confirms De'Connick *et al.*'s study with respect to the issue of trust in government and main media sources given the notion strongly held that government's lack of proactivity had led to the outbreak of the disease in Nigeria.

**Research question two: What is the frequency of reportage of COVID-19 conspiracy theories in *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers?** Findings in research question 2 showed that COVID-19 conspiracy theories appeared every week (17 or 42.5%) on both *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers within the period under study. This result is not unconnected with the massive attention that greeted the society following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like every event of such magnitude, it hurriedly became one of the most topical issues and expectedly meets the condition of prominence as well as news for newspapers, and indeed the media. Furthermore, the evolving trend made it a story that newspapers stayed on for the period. As bad as it was, the COVID-19 pandemic passed as 'good' news for media organizations. It was a phase of blatant pandemonium and brazen apprehension across the world. True to type, the media lived up to their billings by bringing the public up to speed on the pandemic and related developments.

In the same vein, the finding confirms Sharma (2015) cited in Sharma and Gupta (2017) which suggests that "print media (newspaper, magazines, leaflets, brochures, etc) play an important role in informing and educating the people about important events related to their daily life" (p.28). Sharma (2015) cited in Sharma and Gupta (2017) observes that newspapers are among the most important sources of health related information around the world, adding that the print media provide detailed information on almost every topic related to health.

**Research question three: What are the dominant conspiracy theories in COVID-19 reports of *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers?** Furthermore, findings in research question 3 indicate that the dominant conspiracy theories were COVID-19 is a means to install 5G network, COVID-19 is a ploy by the West to weaken the rest of the world's economies and that the failing health sector exacerbated the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria. The finding confirms *The Guardian* (2020) that notes that "conspiracy theorists are curiously contending that rolling out the fifth generation (5G) network by the Chinese and other stakeholders was the cause of the pandemic that gripped the world in December, 2019. Also, the finding confirms Ndinojuo (2020) study, who observes that the conspiracy theory in 5G and its relationship with COVID-19 triggered by uncertainties that usually characterize crisis situation. Ndinojuo's finding suggests that the conspiracy theory on 5G was fueled by religion.

The finding made reference to Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, who alluded that the COVID-19 was a ploy by the government to covertly deploy 5G. The finding also confirms Bruns et al., 2020 study, that "while focusing in detail on one key component of the infodemic surrounding COVID-19, there is a trace of the dissemination dynamics of rumours that the pandemic outbreak was somehow related to the rollout of 5G mobile telephony technology in Wuhan and around the world" (p.1). The study confirms the dissemination of the rumour on Facebook from the obscure origins in pre-existing conspiracist groups through greater uptake in more diverse communities to substance amplification by celebrities, sports stars and media outlets (Bruns *et al.*, 2020).

## **CONCLUSION**

The COVID-19 pandemic and its variants are still posing severe threats to countries across the world. While the development has given rise to a number of issues including the extent governments have braced up to the challenges posed by the virus, much more questions are being raised on how the media have lived up to their billing of not just setting the right agenda in a bid to tackling the pandemic but also confronting head on other threats posed by infodemics. Granted that there has been a preponderance of media reports on COVID-19, of much interest to communication researchers, including this study is the extent to which the media have succeeded in juxtaposing facts with misinformation and conspiracy theories. It therefore becomes imperative for the media to shift from merely reporting COVID-19 pandemic from the periphery to further focusing on issues that mitigate containment efforts. These issues include socio-cultural, socio-economical, socio-political and religious. Incidentally, there are still resistances to COVID-19 vaccination, and this is arguably because some conspiracy theories have found their ways to the media space. This appears to be another implication of perceived media complacency where they have overtime sustained reports on COVID-19 without giving equal attention to impact of related issues as conspiracy theories and health myth. That the media themselves have been accused of inadvertently or deliberately reinforcing existing health myth and conspiracy theories is rather disturbing. It is further expected that media practitioners understand the techniques of health communication so as to scientifically present all the facts about COVID-19 and as such dispel these conspiracy theories.

It is also imperative to maintain that beyond just meeting the information needs of the public, the end point of health communication should strive towards creating awareness, engendering attitudinal change and driving the needed action to mitigate viral diseases like COVID-19. Suffice to say therefore that the quest to containing the effect of conspiracy theories does not rest squarely



on the media, but the ubiquitous posture they assume in society which places on them the onerous task to galvanize all stakeholders towards accessing the right health information. Until the media square up to closing the health communication gap in societies, conspiracy theories could continue to fester.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Drawing from the conclusion above, the following recommendations are hereby put forward:

1. In tackling the effect of conspiracy theories on COVID-19, media should dedicate substantial space in providing all the right information about the virus, juxtaposing them with misinformation. This will require the timely presentation of data, facts, figures and pictures enough to convince the public and create a distinction between fact and falsehood.
2. Equally, the tendency to mostly present COVID-19 in the straight news format seem to deny the media the opportunity of extensive reportage; where they present all dimensions to the story. The media therefore, should shift from merely reporting COVID-19 pandemic from the periphery to critical and extensive reporting that will directly focus on bringing to the fore prevention and containment efforts as well as creating the right awareness.
3. The onerous task the media play in society, calls for circumspection and the need to be painstaking in their gate-keeping function. It is disturbing to place conspiracy theories as a stand-alone without a juxtaposition of facts. In doing this, the media could be inadvertently reinforcing these misinformation. In checking this also, reports on COVID-19, health myth and conspiracy theories should go through painstaking editorial scrutiny to check perceptions, frames and nuances that could reinforce these conspiracy theories.

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