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RESEARCH ARTICLE

COVID-19 CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGIES: THE PLACE OF MASS MEDIA

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Abstract

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a health crisis that has introduced fear, anxiety, uncertainties, and anger in many individuals across the world and in Nigeria. Alongside the deep distress and pains felt and exhibited by many citizens in the country, there is also a growing concern and confusion about the several myths and information associated with this virus: as such, the need for demystification with the various mass media channels. This study, however, discussed the importance of mass media with special emphasis on film during crisis and their roles in sensitizing citizens on the various crisis response strategies employed by a country during a crisis. The study found that film is an important mass media tool for health/healthy communication towards behavioural change during a crisis because of its persuasive physiognomies and its ability to evoke audiences' emotions and induce them into taking positive health actions. The study also found that in the wake of COVID-19 in Nigeria, that the country adopted several pre-and-on-the-crisis response strategies to handle the crisis including documentaries by Actors Guild of Nigeria, Animated Videos, Pre-instructing strategies, lockdowns, social distancing, use of celebrities/influencers, screening at different ports of entries in the country among other. The study recommended that for effective behavioural health change to occur during a crisis, the mass media especially films must be adopted in the sensitization, education of masses, as this would help in instilling in the masses certain behaviours required to survive a pandemic. It also recommended that crisis response strategies are germane during a crisis because they help reduce the negative effects of a crisis on citizens of a country but must be simplified and effectively communicated using various mass media channels.

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Introduction:-

The importance of good health and safety for citizens in the development of a nation cannot be overemphasized; and as such, should be accorded utmost priority by the Government and concerned bodies in view of the recent health crisis and challenges posed by the Coronavirus pandemic otherwise known and referred to as COVID-19. Presently, virtually all countries in the World have been saddled with the outbreak of this deadly virus, a lot of lives have been lost, and several active cases are being recorded too. This pandemic has also crippled almost all the sectors of affected Countries. In an attempt to tackle and bring this pandemic to a standstill by different government globally,

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communication and awareness driven campaigns have been employed by different countries including Nigeria to ensure that certain Myths about the Novel Virus are demystified and the right information disseminated to large audiences in order to achieve behavioural changes towards positive and healthy health practices.

The news of Coronavirus outbreak in Nigeria introduced anxiety, panic attacks, and tension in citizens and made some citizens so vulnerable that they digested and swallowed every available information about COVID-19 hook line and sinker without verifying the veracity of these information, thereby, indulging in actions that were more harmful than the virus itself. The rate of transmission and contagion of this virus also heightened the fear and anxiety expressed by citizens in the Country; as such, triggered an urgent need for rapid crisis communication, enlightenment, sensitization, and education among citizens of Nigeria by the Federal Government and concerned bodies through the various mass media channels including radio, television, film, internet among many others, to promote healthy practices.

Outbreak of Coronavirus in the World:

Corona virus (COVID19), is a pneumonia like virus that was detected in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan in China. On 31st December 2019, 27 cases of unknown etiology were identified in Wuhan city, Hubei Province in china (Lu et al. 2020). Wuhan is the most populous city in central China with a population exceeding eleven million (Sohrabi et al. 2020).The coronavirus belongs to a family of viruses that may cause various symptoms such as pneumonia, fever, breathing difficulty, and lung infection (WMHC, 2020).This novel virus was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on the 30th of January 2020 as a Public health emergency of International Concern, with high devastating risks to different Countries and more detrimental to those with deplorable health systems.Successful efforts in containing the COVID-19 virus in Asia resulted in WHO declaring Europe as the epicenter of the disease on March 13, 2020 (WHO, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic had spread to more than 114 countries before it was officially declared as a pandemic by the World Health organization (WHO) on the 11 March 2020 (Anjorin, 2020). Regrettably, this pandemic has hit several countries including, United states of America, United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Canada, Australia, Netherlands, Japan, Croatia, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Argentina, Norway, France, Germany, Malaysia, India, Thailand, Indonesia, Greece, Sweden, Philippines, Singapore, Iran, Panama, Bolivia, Honduras, Cuba, Gabon, Turkey, Mongolia, Cyprus, Mata, Peru, Togo, Namibia, Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Nigeria,and many other countries.

Covid-19 in Nigeria:

On 27th February 2020, Nigeria reported its first case of Corona Virus in the state of Lagos, with an index case of a man who arrived in the country on 25 February from Milan, Italy. Ever since the index case was reported by the Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC), so many COVID-19 cases have been recorded and reported in almost all the states in the Country; with particular reference to Lagos and Abuja the Federal Capital Territory which have recorded more cases of the novel virus due to their economic and administrative position to the Country, with both having major port of entry into the Country. The total number of this pandemic has risen to one thousand, five hundred and thirty two (1,532) in the country as at 28th April 2020; and out of the 1532 cases in Nigeria, a total of two hundred and fifty five (255) persons have been discharged while a total number of forty four (44) persons have regrettably died as a result of the deadly pandemic.

This deadly virus has plunged many countries into precarious situations and has created global health crisis, introducing fear, anxiety, unrests, and uncertainties among citizens of different countries, including Nigeria. According to Abone (2008), “the wealth of any nation depends on the health of her citizens”; as such, must be prioritized.

Crisis, as defined by Coombs (2012), is “an unpredictable event that presents real or potential negative outcomes such as financial loss, deaths and injuries, and reputation damage for organizations, their stakeholders, and their industries.” Similarly, Rouse (2013) says that crisis can occur because of an unpredictable event or as an unforeseeable consequence of some event that had been considered a potential risk. The implication of these definitions is that crisis hits an individual, organization, countries and or nations unaware; and when they happen, they leave these individuals, organizations, countries vulnerable and in a precarious state. Crisis, due to its sudden and unpredictable characteristics requires immediate actions and responses to deal with. Organisations/ nations, however, must ensure that they are proactive in handling crisis of any sort to protect and maintain their reputation. This measure requires providing information to citizensutilizing all channels of communication both interpersonal,

mass media and new media, and taking necessary actions during the different stages of crisis, which are pre crisis stage, on- the crisis stage and post crisis stage.

In the context of this paper, crises can be referred to as health challenges posed to individuals globally because of this pandemic. This health crisis has brought the socio-economic aspects of human existence to a pause, instilling fear, anxiety and creating information vacuum in the minds of individuals particularly Nigerian citizens. In the event of a crisis, crisis response strategies, health related communication and safety information are needed for health promotion and positive behavioural changes; and these can be actualized with the various mass media channels including television, radio, newspaper, films, internet among others.

Thus, in positioning this paper in a proper theoretical framework, the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) would be adopted. SCT could be adjudged to have emanated from the work of Albert Banduras (1989). It simply posits that individual's knowledge acquisition can be directly related to observing others within the context of social interactions, experiences, and outside media influences; and that when people observe a model performing a behaviour, they tend to remember the sequence of events and use this information to guide certain behaviours. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory by Timothy Coombs (1995), posits that crisis response strategies are employed by crisis managers in the event of a crisis; and as such, Organizations, Nations and or Individuals must ensure that they respond adequately and timely during a crisis to ensure that the crisis does not affect the organization's reputation. Thus, it is considering these assertions that this study seeks to understand the importance of mass media in crisis and health communication from a multi-faceted perspective.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

The indispensability of Mass Media in crisis and health communication and promotion

The Mass Media perform important role in the society in informing, educating, enlightening citizens. Its major function can be seen and appreciated in any community and or nation during a crisis of high magnitude. The mass media refer to the type of media in which messages can be presented simultaneously to multiple audiences in different locations, and they include radio, television, film etc. (Abone, 2008). All these media are useful in any nation's development because they are used for communication campaigns desired during a crisis to promote behavioural change.

The health, safety, emotional stability and welfare of a people of a nation should be paramount to leaders of a nation during a health crisis; as the absence of these would plunge a nation into a miserable state, thus, allowing diseases and plagues to ravage the country. During crisis, response and intervention strategies must be communicated to various stakeholders/ citizens of a nation, and this can only be made possible with proper and timely dissemination of health communication using all forms or mass media channels. Considering the fact that health crisis does not only affect individuals physically, it also affects them psychologically and evokes some negative feelings; as such, there is need for proper sensitization and enlightenment of the crisis situation and the preventive and corrective measures put in place by leaders to ensure safety of citizens which is the utmost priority required of any nation's leader.

Communication in its simplest form is the exchange and distribution of information, ideas, attitudes, and feelings from a sender to a receiver. It is central to the heart of any endeavor, therefore, cutting across all spheres of human activities (Umeri&Galadima, 2008). This implies that without effective communication especially in the wake of crisis like that of COVID-19, it will be a daunting task to achieve any meaningful and positive result and behaviours. Communication creates room for a common pool of ideas, strengthens the feeling of togetherness through exchange of messages and translates thoughts into action, reflecting every emotion and need from the humblest tasks of human survival to supreme manifestations of creativity or destruction (Umeri&Galadima, 2008).

Effective and timely communication during crisis cannot be exaggerated because it promotes knowledge, awareness and it is also a good means of creating, understanding, and clearing the air against information overload and misinformation. Communication is a process through which needs, emotions, desires, goals, and sentiments are expressed among human beings using codes, symbols, and language understood by several parties (Keghku, 2008).

COVID-19 PANDEMIC:**Film as a powerful intervention strategy for crisis health communication, sensitization, and promotion**

Films are series of recorded images, stored in a retrievable manner. It is a communication tool that provides an idea from an identifiable source, using its specific format and medium, to share experience with persons serving as its audience or consumers of its contents (Owuamalam, 2007). In the same vein, film also can be referred to as movie or motion picture, is a visual art-form used to stimulate experiences that communicate ideas, stories, perceptions, feelings, beauty or atmosphere, by the means of recorded or programmed moving images, along with sound and other sensory stimulation (Andrei, 2013).

The interesting and captivating aspect of film is that it uses dependable, honest, factual, and impelling information, to attract audience, secure, arouse, and sustain viewership interest (Owuamalam, 2007). This implies that films can be utilized for sensitization, education, enlightenment, and positive health campaigns towards behavioural change due to its persuasive, manipulative, and educative nature.

In the wake of 2020 Coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria, different mass media sensitization campaigns have been implemented by different agencies to ensure proper sensitization, enlightenment, education of citizens. Today, the role of film in Nigeria is enormous and cannot be overplayed because films have a way of penetrating individuals, creating in them lasting memories that are positive when behavioural changes are required, and they make use of special effects and dramatic presentation of ideas to get intended messages across to audience (Nwabueze, 2007). The roles films play in any society can be said to be educative roles, entertainment roles, informative roles, enlightenment roles, among others.

Documentaries and Animated Videos as a COVID-19 Communication Strategy by Nigerian Filmmakers to explain lockdown and coronavirus to citizens with special target on kids:

In an attempt to educate citizens and kids on the lockdown precautionary measures taken by the Nigerian Government to fight against COVID-19, some Nigerian establishments in conjunction with Filmmakers created documentaries and animated videos to effectively communicate the crisis and disseminate preventive and precautionary information to the masses with special target on the kids. For instance, a statement from one of the filmmakers reads:

“We have made this beautiful 90secs animation in four languages to explain the lockdown and coronavirus to kids. I have created a folder with all videos, please let us get it on all TV stations and if anyone can sponsor on YouTube, they should” (William & Semeniworima, 2020).

Influencers and Celebrities as persuasive and communication strategy to address the problem of Fake news and COVID-19 Myths:

Panic and anxiety about the Coronavirus were heightened among citizens of Nigeria due to information overload, myths, and fake news spread on different social media platforms. These misinformation and myths surrounding this deadly outbreak in the Country, prompted a lot of celebrities/ Influencers into addressing these issues by taking to their different social media platforms to address the issue. All these measures were geared towards ensuring that citizens of Nigeria were properly sensitized on the preventive, protective and precautionary measures against COVID-19; and towards ensuring that citizens do not fall prey to fake news on social media. Statements by some of these celebrities are as follows:

“Abegconfam information before you share am,” meaning, “Please confirm every piece of information before you share with others.”

“Do not be terrified. Listen not to rumors about coronavirus.”

Communicating COVID-19 Health Promotion and Crisis using The Actors Guild of Nigeria (AGN).

All hands have been on deck since the outbreak of Coronavirus in Nigeria, to ensure that basic preventive and safety messages needed for the fight against COVID-19 are disseminated to the masses including those in the urban and rural areas with various mass media channels including inter personal communication. These efforts are geared

towards ensuring that people understand what the virus is all about and how to keep safe and prevent the spread of the virus. The Actors Guild of Nigeria (AGN) as part of their Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR), thought it wise to come up with preventive, educative, and informative messages through radio, television and YouTube channels to sensitize the masses on the need to stay safe and observe all precautionary measures given to prevent the spread of the virus and ultimately encouraging citizens that the pandemic would be defeated.

Crisis Communication: The Ineludible Nature of Film

Crisis Communication has been defined in many ways by various scholars and authors. Madigan (2017) defines crisis communication as the effort made by an organization to communicate with the public and stakeholders when an unexpected event occurs that could have a negative impact on the organization's reputation. Crisis communication can also refer to the efforts to inform employees or the public of a potential hazard which could have a catastrophic impact. Every crisis calls for information and this information can and will only be actualised with effective communication. In the context of this paper, crisis communication could be said to be the preventive, and health information needed in the wake of Coronavirus in Nigeria to mitigate the crisis.

In the wake of any crisis, response strategies are required by organization and or nations to tackle and cushion the effects of a crisis or a pandemic. Coombs in his Situational Crisis Communication Theory, maintained that crisis response strategies are what crisis managers employ when a crisis hits, and went further to provide crisis managers with certain guidelines that are expected to be followed in the event of any crisis. This implies that during crisis there is need to evaluate and assess the crisis response strategies employed by a nation or an organization, in order to ascertain which strategies, work best for a crisis type.

Film, unarguably, is one mass media channel that is required for crisis communication, education, sensitization, and motivation during a crisis; and its importance and place in communication cannot be exaggerated, because it is a powerful communication tool needed in advancing public health. Story telling is an important way of providing important information (Thompson & Bayer, 2015); because people often retain information and act on them easily when they are presented in a narrative way.

Furthermore, the production of film during a crisis period can be said to be one of the most effective and persuasive ways of penetrating the target audience towards behavioural change. Crisis causes emotional and psychological instability and requires adequate and persuasive messages to help drive people into action. These messages can be conveyed, and desired effects gotten with the use of film as a channel of communication. Furthermore, films possess the potentials of evoking emotions from the audience, whilst educating and persuading them (Quickclass, 2017); thus, most individuals prefer its contents and tend to act on its messages better than any other channels of mass media.

Due to the lockdown caused by COVID19, films and other social media contents became most sought-after channels of communication by citizens as major sources of information and relaxation; as such, making it a more convenient channel of information dissemination.

The importance of Mass media channels of communication cannot be complete without film as a powerful tool. This is because it has importance in crisis communication and health communication, as most persons tend to easily stimulate messages they are exposed to visually and act on them without easily forgetting them. This, however, places films at advantageous positions than every other form of mass media, the implication is that films are considered very useful in effecting attitudinal changes, thereby presenting itself as one mass media channel that is powerful, persuasive and effective in conveying strong messages to a target audience; and as such, evoke actions and changes in individuals in a profound way with regards to crisis response strategy communication.

Furthermore, crisis response strategies are trite and highly needed during crisis but cannot be used to effectively achieve their desired effects on stakeholders if stakeholders do not understand what the crisis response strategies are. Thus, as crisis response strategies are important and needed in crisis situations; so are mass media channels also needed and useful during crisis because they will be utilized in disseminating and demystifying these various crisis response strategies to various stakeholders or citizens of a nation.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: Other Pre-Crisis Response Strategies adopted by Nigeria

Pre-Instructing Information Strategy: Before the country recorded its index case in Nigeria, information about the crisis and the preventive measures were circulated on different mass media platforms including the various social media platforms. A statement by one of the managers of Nigeria's Coronavirus Emergency Operation revealed this: "we ensured information went round to Nigerians, especially on personal hygiene and cough etiquette, for more than a month. We have shared case definition with health workers, [and] we have a network of state and public health emergency network centers around the country so that we can coordinate information. We have skilled manpower [who] can do contact tracing, and treat, [and] we now have five testing laboratories that have helped in shortening our response time for detection." (Adepoju, 2020).

Establishment of a Coronavirus rapid response team: Nigeria had in December 2019, completed the training of rapid response team in all states in Nigeria; fortifying and preparing all the 36 states and ensuring that each state in the Country had a team ready to be deployed in the event of an outbreak. In the same vein, strong systems that will enable the prevention of the pandemic, early detection and rapid response was also built by Nigeria (Ihekweazu, 2020). All these were done towards mitigating the crisis.

Leveraging on past lessons and experiences: Nigeria integrated the lessons and experiences they learned during the 2014 Ebola outbreak into the pre-crisis stage to help strengthen risk communications capacity and prepare for future outbreak. This was evident in the statement of one of the respondents:

"One of the key lessons from our response to the Ebola outbreak was the need to build systems in 'peace time' that can be used during outbreaks. Over the last three years, we have strengthened capacity at our National Reference Laboratory to provide molecular diagnosis for all epidemic prone diseases and highly infectious pathogens such as the Ebola virus" (Ihekweazu, 2020).

Provision of Public Health Advisory: Before the Pandemic broke out in Nigeria, a public health advisory was provided for Nigerians detailing all they should do when they suspect a case of coronavirus, as well as how to protect themselves from being infected.

Establishment of a Multi-Sectoral National Coronavirus Preparedness Group by Nigeria Center for Disease Control:

Nigeria was one of the first countries to recognize the risk and threat of Coronavirus; thus, they started planning the response for COVID-19. In a massive effort of national coordination, a multi-sectoral National Coronavirus Preparedness Group was established by Nigeria Center for Disease Control on January 7, 2020, one week after China first reported the cases and three weeks before World Health Organization declared the disease to be of international concern (Kapata et al, 2020). Prior to the index case of Coronavirus in Nigeria, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) set up a coronavirus preparedness group that included representatives from Port Health Services of the Federal Ministry of Health and other stakeholders.

"Efforts were intensified to ensure that screenings of arrivals for COVID-19 at the airports and seaports were carried out on all passengers entering the country at different points of entries". This was a measure geared towards identifying individuals with the virus especially those returning from China (Ihekweazu, 2020).

Establishment of COVID-19 Diagnostic Capacity in Three Laboratories in Nigeria: In a bid to preparing for the COVID-19 health crisis, Nigeria established diagnostic capacity for COVID-19 in three laboratories within the country in one month. In addition, Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) established a national team that meets daily to assess the risk coronavirus poses to the nation and review its response to it (Kapata et al, 2020).

COVID 19 PANDEMIC: On-the-Crisis- Response Strategies employed by Nigeria

Contact tracing as a strategy for mitigating further spread: Immediately the index case was recorded in Nigeria, all concerned bodies including health workers in conjunction with the Lagos State Government, Ministry of Health, and Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) began contact tracing. This effort was immediately made to ensure that all the people who met the Italian man were identified, isolated, and tested to ensure that they are free from the virus. This measure/ strategy was adopted by almost all the States that recorded cases of Coronavirus. This was in a bid to mitigating the spread of the virus and reducing community transmission.

Nation-wide Lockdown as a strategy for reducing the spread of COVID-19: As the number of Covid-19 cases gradually increased in the country especially in three States in the Country including Lagos, Federal Capital Territory and Ogun, the President on March 30, 2020 declared a lockdown on these three states. This measure was taken to ensure that the containment of the virus in the Country. However, this lockdown extended to almost all the states that recorded cases of COVID-19. Citizens of the states were asked to stay at home and avoid public gatherings to enable the Government to fight the virus to a standstill. People were only allowed to go out and get essential commodities; and while at it, maintain social distancing.

Provision of Palliatives to Citizens of the Country: Due to the compulsory lockdown imposed on the citizens of the Country to enable in the fight against the spread of corona virus, the Federal Government and some State Governments provided palliatives to some individuals in the Country to help alleviate the poverty and financial problems caused by the lockdowns as a result of the pandemic.

Compulsory use of Face Masks and Hand Gloves: Due to its nature of spread and contagion, citizens were advised to wear face masks and hand gloves to ensure that they keep themselves safe and protected from the virus.

Free Coronavirus Testing: The Federal Government in conjunction with the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control provided testing facilities in some States to enable free testing of citizens. This measure was as a means of identifying and curtailing the spread of the virus in these states, especially the highest hit states.

Social Distancing as an on-the-crisis strategy: Citizens of Nigeria were sensitized on the need to avoid hugging, shaking each other, and maintain social distancing to ensure that they reduce their chances of contracting the virus. These messages were circulated and disseminated to citizens with the various mass media channels.

Conclusion/ Recommendation:-

Crises, unavoidably, hit organisations, individuals, and or nations, and present difficulties and challenges for these organisations, individuals, and or nations affected by them; this is due to its sudden, shocking, and unpredictable characteristics. No organization, nation or individual is immune to crises; and as such, must be overly prepared for it. Regrettably, the reality of today is that Coronavirus pandemic otherwise known and referred to by many as COVID-19 has posed a big health challenge to many countries of the world including Nigeria; and as such, has aroused curiosity in the citizens of Nigeria and has necessitated the need for effective health communication and the proper dissemination and sensitization of the crisis response strategies used by Nigerian Government and health bodies in tackling the crisis through various mass media channels. It is as a result of this sad reality that this study was conducted to ascertain the place of mass media with special emphasis on film in the dissemination of health information and the sensitization of citizens about the crisis response strategies employed by the Federal Government of Nigeria in the wake of COVID 19.

On the one hand, the study discovered that film in its entirety is one powerful mass medium that can be used to promote healthy communication and sensitize citizens because of its persuasive characteristic and its capabilities of evoking individuals' emotions. Most persons tend to believe and act in certain ways because of their exposure to certain broadcast contents including films. This finding, however, resonates with the assumptions of Albert Banduras in his Social Cognitive Theory which believes that individual's knowledge acquisition can be directly related to observing others within the context of social interactions, experiences, and outside media influences; and that, when people observe a model performing a behaviour, they tend to remember the sequence of events and use this information to guide certain behaviours. In addition to its remarkable characteristics, film was also identified in this study as a reliable and effective means of communication during crisis owing to its visual and dramatic nature which leaves in their audiences lasting memories that are effective in behavioural change.

On the other hand, the study found that all essential services and the Federal Government of Nigeria employed various crisis response strategies in handling the crisis. These response strategies included, pre-instructing information, preventive information which are needed in any nation before the emergence of any crisis. This finding strongly aligns with the assertions of the SCCT by Coombs. Furthermore, the study also found that during the crisis, the Federal Government employed certain measures to mitigate the effects of the crisis on citizens including adapting information like the nationwide lockdown, palliatives, social distancing. These findings also resonate with the assumptions of the SCCT and could be said to be very beneficial during any crisis type.

Based on these findings, the study strongly recommends that for an effective behavioural change to take place in the event of any crisis; mass media channels, especially film, should never be relegated to the background and must be properly utilized during a crisis to get certain messages and clarifications across to various audiences both in the rural and urban areas. It further recommends that films should be used as a means for promoting health/healthy information because they possess the capability of influencing people towards behavioural change. Additionally, the study recommends that crisis response strategies are relevant and handy during crisis, and must be adopted, properly demystified, and adequately communicated to citizens with the use of various mass media channels especially films to ensure that people understand certain measures and do not misunderstand the crisis response strategies; because, misinformation and misconceptions can trigger in the audience negative feelings which would and can plunge a Country into bigger crisis and damage its reputation.

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