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10. Social Media and Health Communication during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Impacts, Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract:

The presence of social media platforms such as What Sapp, Facebook, Twitter, etc., has made sharing of information faster and easier although with the challenges of being able to spot fake news. The outbreak of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) became a major concern as over 200 countries were affected leading to over 1,500,000 deaths. This quickly caused a panic worldwide and the social media took centre stage for misinformation. While some are jokes, some are not. Medical professionals and organization resorted to using social media platforms to educate people of ways to contract, the virus, prevention, symptoms, etc. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) quickly created a Facebook page and updated Nigerians at around 11:00 pm daily on newly reported cases, deaths and recoveries in the country. As media experts and educators, we have an important role to play both now and in the future of the world. Governments and healthcare authorities should use social media to spread updates, news, and scientific discoveries about COVID-19. Information to be spread can include who should be tested, when they should be tested, and where they would go to get medical care.

Keywords: Social media, health communication, disease outbreak, pandemic, coronavirus.

10.1 Introduction:

During the outbreak of the "Spanish" influenza pandemic in 1918-19, people did not have the same sources of communication we now have in the 21st century to quickly share news and information, hence this period has been described as social media age. Social media is an important element in disaster and health crisis related communication.

First reported in Wuhan, China in December and declared a pandemic by World Health Organisation (WHO) on March 21st 2020, the coronavirus disease 2019, also known as COVID-19, caused by a novel human coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) has rapidly spread to over 200 countries and territories globally (Zhu, Zhang, Wang, Li, Yang and Song, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020a; Worldometer, 2020). The on-going COVID-19 pandemic has threatened the lives of almost 80 million people. As in December, 2020, there were 76,028,497 cases recorded and 1,681,521 deaths while 53,299,788 have recovered worldwide. Researchers globally are racing to identify an effective vaccine and treatment for the viral disease, in order to curb the high morbidity and mortality associated with this virus.

WHO has recommended maintaining a social distance universally to reduce human to human transmission of COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2020b). As a result, there has been widespread lockdown in most countries in a bid to reduce public gatherings and rapid spread of the disease (Tanne, Hayasaki, Zastrow, Pulla, Smith and Rada, 2020). This has affected nearly all sectors, the health sector not spared. Except for COVID-19 related studies, other biomedical researches that involve contacts with participant's onsite have reduced significantly in many countries (Omary, Eswaraka, Kimball, Moghe, Panettieri and Scotto, 2020). Researchers have been advised to utilise virtual means including teleconferencing, virtual lab meetings and research seminars to maintain studies that can be conducted remotely (Olum and Bongomin, 2020).

In our society that relies on effective and efficient communication, media plays an important role in informing multiple aspects of individuals' lives, including their access to health information. Traditionally, public health organizations have used print and radio media and social marketing frameworks to disseminate important health messages to the public. In the past few decades, electronic media have stepped to the forefront of communication, and public health communication has evolved to reflect this. In the wake of the "Web 2.0" phenomenon, public health communication strategies are also changing to match the increasingly influential and rapidly evolving social media revolution (Anand, Gupta and Kwatra, 2013).

10.2 Social Media:

Social media refers to websites and applications that are designed to allow people to share content quickly, efficiently, and effectively without geographical hinderance. While many people access social media through smart phone apps, this communication tool started with computers, and social media can refer to any internet communication tool that allows users to broadly share content and engage with the public (Hudson, 2020). The ability to share photos, opinions, and events in real-time has transformed the way we live and the way we do business. Here are the basics of understanding social media and how it can be used to help promote your business.

Though social media can broadly be defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), many variations and types of social media exist. Facebook (a social network), Snapchat (an instant photo messaging application), Instagram (a photo-sharing application), Twitter (a microblogging application), LinkedIn (a business- and employment-oriented social networking service), Google+ (an interest-based social network), and Pinterest (a "catalog of ideas" or photo-sharing website) represent different types of social media, each with unique architectures, cultures, and norms (Van Dijck, 2013). For example, while Snapchat allows users to share 10-second videos, and Twitter allows them to share brief tweets of 140 characters (with hashtags, @mentions, a photo or video, URLs, or geotags), a platform such as Facebook allows communication using more elaborate messages (Voorveld, van Noort, Muntinga and Bronner, 2018).

Social media is any digital tool that allows users to quickly create and share content with the public. Social media encompasses a wide range of websites and apps. Some, like Twitter, specialize in sharing links and short written messages. Others, like Instagram and TikTok, are built to optimize the sharing of photos and videos. What makes social media unique is that it is both broad and relatively uncensored.

While many social media companies impose some limitations—such as taking down images that display violence or nudity—there are much fewer limitations on what someone can share than there with other means of mass communication like newspapers, radio stations, and television channels.

Anyone with internet access can sign up for a social media account. They can use that account to share whatever content they choose to, and the content they share reaches anyone who visits their page or profile.

10.3 Covid-19:

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus (World Health Organization, 2020). Cases of COVID-19 first emerged in late December 2019, when a mysterious illness was reported in Wuhan, China. The cause of the disease was soon confirmed as a novel coronavirus, and the infection has since spread to many countries worldwide and has become a pandemic disease (NewScientist, 2020).

The COVID19 epidemic, and our knowledge about the virus, has exponentially grown since media reports of a cluster of acute respiratory infections in Wuhan, Hubei province, China were first reported in December, 2019 (Pollett and Rivers, 2020). By January 08, 2020, the etiology of these cases was identified as a novel betacoronavirus, then named 2019-nCoV, and 41 cases had been reported. Three months later, over 1.3 million cases and 75,000 deaths had been reported across the world. The human and social toll of this pandemic has already spurred several major public health 'lessons learned', and the theme of effective and responsible scientific communication is among them. The expansion of the outbreak has demanded a rapid response from public health authorities; fundamental epidemiological and scientific evidence has been acquired at break-neck speed to support those decisions. The demanding pace and large volume of COVID19 science generated in the last three months, however, has made timely scientific communication through the conventional route of published biomedical journals at best challenging, and at worst obsolete. Twitter has an estimated global user network of 330 million monthly users, including an extensive network of scientists and epidemiologists who frequently use this media for scientific exchange. We propose that Twitter has played a fundamental – but often precarious - role in permitting real-time global communication between scientists during the COVID19 epidemic, on a scale not seen before.

10.4 Social Media and Health Communication:

We live in a digital world surrounded by a deluge of information. The Internet has made us more connected than ever in one sense, and yet we seem disconnected from each other in a fundamental sense. In this new information age, we are always surrounded by information, a large part of which is reliable with the more significant chunk unverifiable (Ugwuanyi, 2017). Prior to the adoption and widespread acceptance of the Internet as a source of health information, people received health information from many sources of information such as the physician, family members, acquaintances and mass media (Habibi, Farpour and Pirzad, 2017). Since 2000, the dependence of people on the Internet search engines has been increased, because the search engines have allowed access to all the web pages around the world (Hamshahri Training Center (2013). So it can be said that we live in a time of expansion in access to health information.

Data that previously could be obtained by spending hours researching medical libraries, all can be readily found by Internet access. Thus, the ability to acquire extensive knowledge of research findings from many different medical specialties has been increased. However, medical specilists are not the only people who search the Internet for such information. Also, patients have the ability to search a medical topic entirely via the Internet (Biermann, Gollada, Greenfield and Baker, 1999).

COVID-19 pandemic is currently the greatest public health concern affecting majority of countries globally. Social distancing guidelines and lockdowns have also posed a challenge to public health campaigns. This therefore necessitates a shift from popular print media (newspapers, magazines, banners, etc.) to wireless media. Our study suggests that common wireless media like televisions, radios and social media can be effective in improving awareness on COVID-19. Over 40% of the world's population have access to internet to date (Internet Live Stats, 2020). Health campaigns aimed at increasing the awareness of the public on transmission and prevention of the virus are also being employed by various international and local organisations.

Members of the general public, patients, health professionals, and health organizations are all part of the users of social media for health communication include. Social media is used for health communication to provide health information on a range of conditions; provide answers to medical questions; facilitate dialogue between patients and between patients and health professionals; inform users and general public of outbreak of diseases such as Ebola, Lassa fever, COVID-19, etc., symptoms of such diseases, preventive measures, possible ways to contract them, reduce stigma, etc. With emerging advances over time, including new platforms and purposes, these uses will change and expand, increasing usability and thus providing more opportunities to use social media in connection to healthcare in the future. However, both patients and health professionals may require training to fully maximize the uses of using social media in healthcare (Moorhead, 2017).

Delivering fast and reliable information is crucial to decrease the transmission of highly contagious infections, not only for healthcare workers but also for the general population (Chan, Nickson, Rudolph, Lee and Joynt, 2020). Several websites have published information about COVID-19 and have given different instructions to their users about ways to prevent the spread of the virus, such as keeping a distance between themselves and others, using masks, and washing their hands (Hernández-García, Giménez-Júlvez, 2020).

The biggest challenge may be to deliver information to the people who are at the battlefront in severely affected areas faster than the dissemination rate of the disease. Many scientific journals have allowed open access for most manuscripts on COVID-19. For health professionals, this may be adequate. However, for the general population, this has no impact on raising awareness. These days, people are overwhelmed by the information they receive on their smartphones through channels such as Facebook, Twitter, What Sapp, YouTube and Instagram (Lima, Lopes and Brito, 2020). The biggest problem is in determining which news to trust. Even a pandemic can be used as a political battle, where some will recommend social isolation while others recommend doing nothing that will stop the economy. Who is right, the ones who recommend chloroquine or those who tell you to take your antipyretic medicine and stay home if you have mild symptoms? It is not uncommon to see hundreds of daily texts, videos and even scientific publications in social media groups defending each argument.

Social media has numerous benefits for health communication, including increased interactions with others; more available, shared, and tailored information; increased accessibility and widening access; and increased peer/social/emotional support. While there may be further benefits of using social media in healthcare, there are many limitations of social media for healthcare communication as well. The main reported limitations include a lack of reliability; quality concerns; and lack of confidentiality and privacy. From the available evidence, it is clear that maintaining patient privacy as well as the security and integrity of information shared are concerns when using social media.

As patients and members of the general public use social media widely, some may expect it in healthcare, thus it important for health professionals and organizations to manage expectations of social media in healthcare communication. This results in challenges ranging from encouraging staff to use social media to dealing with user problems and complaints (Moorhead, 2017). It is recommended that organizations embrace social media but have a specific purpose for each activity and platform while continually monitoring traffic. Regardless of the nature or size of the healthcare organization, it is time to adopt appropriate guidelines for the use of the social media in healthcare communication to address the challenges and the growing expectations of using social media, especially within healthcare contexts. The key message is that social media has the potential to supplement and complement but not replace other methods to improve communication and interaction among members of the general public, patients, health professionals, and healthcare organizations.

Social media has become a source of disseminating information to the public. Many individuals will experience isolation during hospitalization or when quarantining at home (Pappot, Taarnhøj and Pappot, 2020). Social media can be an efficient source of information and an effective means for staying abreast of the vast amount of medical knowledge (McGowan, Wasko, Vartabedian, Miller, Freiherr and Abdolrasulnia, 2012). While Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have all recently ramped up efforts to take down COVID-19 misinformation following public outcry, social media platforms “fall short” when it comes to curbing the flow (Pazzanese, 2020)

10.5 Jokes and Fake News:

Despite the use of social media for communication of information, we are as well wary of the great threat it poses in sharing of fake news through unconfirmed sources. During the outbreak of the Ebola virus disease, news circulated online that salt water helps prevent the disease. Many Nigerians bought into this idea and ended up being killed, not by the virus itself, but by their excess consumption of salt. During the steady update of the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) on social media, it was observed that some social media users started making jokes out of it as a result of their perception of the whole pandemic to be a hoax in Nigeria.

Mass media and social media have been frequently used to disseminate infographics on the pandemic (Chan, Nickson, Rudolph, Lee and Joynt, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced unique challenges for health communicators. One of these challenges is the increasing amount of false content circulating on social media platforms. Even though some of this information is spread without malicious intent, the language, sentiments and tactics are similar to that observed from antivaccination proponents (e.g. emotionally charged false narratives of vaccine side effects), conspiracy theorists (e.g. COVID-19 was started in a Chinese laboratory) or climate change deniers (e.g. COVID-19 is a hoax).

No aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic – from origin, to symptoms, to prevention – has been left untouched. Particularly concerning is the spread of misinformation relating to a potential vaccine for the disease, even well before a vaccine is available for public use. Rumours of safety scares and conspiracies relating to a COVID-19 vaccine have swirled throughout social media, leading to social media outlets taking active measures to limit misinformation (Rosen, 2020 and Silverman, 2020). These measures, although important, have not prevented a saturated information system nor blocked harmful misinformation from undermining science-backed sources. Similarly, WHO has boosted its own efforts to address a "second 'disease'" that is spreading parallel to the virus, one of an infodemic – when excessive amounts of information become detrimental to addressing a certain issue (World Health Organization, 2020c).

10.6 Impacts of the Coronavirus Pandemic:

The coronavirus pandemic brought about the new normal. The spread of the virus across the world led to many countries declaring lockdown. The lockdown made families who hardly had time to spend together to be together for months. Parents got to know of their children's behaviours. However, on the negative aspect, this led to the rise of incest especially in Nigeria. Siblings caught feelings and had sex. Also on the negative side, businesses were heavily affected. New health behaviours were also learned. These include wearing of facemask in public places; avoidance of hugs and handshakes among friends and families; use of hand and surface sanitizers; wearing of face guards; social/physical distancing especially in public places; no more large gatherings; etc.

10.7 Conclusion and Recommendations:

The COVID-19 crisis has been the first pandemic to be almost 'livestreamed' on social media and digital platforms. It is critical that health communicators worldwide are more proactive in tackling risk communication challenges related to COVID-19, with likely prevention achieved through vaccination and societal COVID-19 resilience. Social media is extremely important to fight this contagious disease, not only to get information and be updated about it but also to understand how it spreads, how people interact, and how we can respond to it.

As media experts and educators, we have an important role to play both now and in the future of the world. We must work to educate media consumers on what constitutes good and reliable information and how to critically think through this information. Since younger people are also consuming information from social media and then spreading it to their family and friends, universities are ideal places to design courses and symposiums that can help students and faculty discern how to search for, find, and evaluate health information in the case of an epidemic or pandemic.

Governments and healthcare authorities should use social media to spread updates, news, and scientific discoveries about COVID-19. Information to be spread can include who should be tested, when they should be tested, and where they would go to get medical care. Due to the overflow of information, practical steps should be taken when dealing with the social media infodemic. Information from reliable sources such as government healthcare authorities and specialists should be trusted. Unreliable information should not be circulated before evaluating the sources and their conflicts of interest.

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