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MISINFORMATION AND COVID-19 INFODEMIC: IDENTIFYING OFFLINE SOCIAL SPACES FOR INFODEMIC DIFFUSION IN COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The study argued that there is an intersection between social media and informal offline social spaces and for the world to win the war against infodemic' on COVID-19, there is the compelling need to disseminate information on COVID-19 and its safety protocols in informal offline social spaces for community information dissemination where even the vulnerable population in communities have access to. A qualitative case study design with embedded cases was adopted in this study. Ten participants purposively selected from three tea houses that were chosen for the study were interviewed. Findings indicated six informal channels of information dissemination existed in Samaru community, Kaduna State. They are businesses, local hangout, and venue for ceremonies, transportation, service, stations, essential services and workspaces. The paper recommended diffusing information on coronavirus in these channels as they are used by people of different social classes in the community as information sources. Information emanating from these spaces are also trusted by people in the community.

Keywords: Covid-19 Infodemic diffusion; Offline social spaces; Misinformation; Communities; Northern Nigeria.

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) coined the term “Infodemic” to describe the excessive amount of information that spreads misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency (UN Department of Global Communications, 2020; Wade, 2020) Generally speaking, Infodemic include the conspiracy theories of the origin of the virus, 5G telecommunication facilities spreading the virus and advice about spurious treatments of the disease like the consumption of high quantities of ginger and garlic. Infodemics hamper an effective public health response and creates confusion and distrust among people. It has also been harmful to the fight against the outbreak and the effective implementation of countermeasures that will curb the spread of this disease. In extreme cases, infodemic leads people to not acknowledging the existence of the disease and this undermines peoples' willingness to abide by public health advice (Lee, 2020). It has been argued that the covid-19 infodemic diffuses faster than the pandemic itself (Hua and Shaw, 2020; Lee, 2020). This infodemic has been fueled by the ease with which information diffuses on social media.

The effect of this covid-19 infodemic has become a fight that the WHO has given high priority. For example, it has partnered with search and media companies like Facebook, Google, Pinterest, Tencent, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube. These social media platforms are using their newsfeed function to direct users to the WHO websites and the websites of other local health authorities when a user searches for information on coronavirus (Gold, 2020; Merchant & Lurie, 2020). They are also flagging down posts that may impact public health negatively. WHO also launched a new information platform EPI-WIN Information Network for Epidemics. This website (www.who.int/epi-win) provides access to timely, accurate and easy-to-understand advice and information from trusted sources on the evolving covid-19 pandemic. Even with these efforts covid-19 cases are still on the rise. In Nigeria, people are seen breaking the lockdown directives and many still believe the information on the disease is just so that the

Government will receive a part of relief fund from WHO. Nigerians believe it is the disease of the rich who travel abroad. There is general mistrust of authorities in Northern Nigeria. There is also the cry of community transmission of covid-19 in Northern Nigeria (Odeogwu & Muntari, 2020)

All these efforts are geared towards curbing the spread of infodemic online while countering with timely information online. However, diffusing the right information online is not enough as Brennen, Simon, (Howard & Nielsen 2020) opined that for public health messages to be successful, they must reach over 80% of the population and no single channel can achieve that. The infodemic continues offline as information diffuses from social media to informal channels of information dissemination (Pettersen, 2016; Lee, 2020). Studies have shown the intersection of social media with informal channels of information dissemination and the way information diffuses from social media to informal channels of information dissemination (Steinfeld et al. 2009; Riemer et al., 2015; Pettersen, 2016). More so, Vanden Abeele, De Wolf & Ling (2018) opined that the mobile technology stays with us everywhere and anytime in our everyday lives. They have become a container for all our social media accounts especially WhatsApp accounts. The individual becomes a content creator and also a medium for information diffusion in both realms (Online and Offline).

In order to reduce the covid-19 cases in Nigeria as a result of infodemic, there is a compelling need to identify informal offline social spaces of information dissemination where information diffuses in the communities. This is critical because such spaces serve as cognitive authorities (Muhammad, 2018), where individuals visit to seek and verify information. It is also critical to identify these spaces as they are informal information grounds where people of the community visit for their everyday life information and they trust the information emanating from these spaces. Diffusing information on covid-19 in these spaces will increase the uptake of the information and this will reach even the vulnerable groups in the society.

The objective of this study is to identify informal offline social spaces for information dissemination where infodemic diffuses in Samaru Community, Sabon-Gari Local Government, Kaduna State, Nigeria. The structure propositions of Fisher's Information Grounds theory as amended by Nugent (2016) provided the lens used to identify these spaces.

Offline Social Spaces

They are physical sites for social life where people meet and interact. This interaction shapes the actions and behaviours of people who visit these spaces. A significant part of human behavior that is shaped by these spaces is their information behaviour. Information behaviour refers to the type of information an individual need, seeks and uses in decision making, (Fisher & Julien, 2009).

During crisis situations, there is an information vacuum that is created before authorities understand the situation. This information vacuum is filled with information individuals get informally from informal sources. These informal sources are spaces where community information diffuses and the inter-subjective nature of the relationships that exist in these spaces makes information emanating from these spaces trustworthy.

Theoretical Lens

Nugent (2016) organised the seven propositions of Information Grounds theory into three Categories: Flow, Structure and Purpose. The propositions that fall into the flow category include:

Information grounds are attended by different social types, most, if not all, of whom play expected and important, albeit different, roles in information flow”.

People engage in formal and informal information sharing, and information flow occurs in many directions.”

These propositions describe how information flows in Information grounds. The propositions that fall under the Structure Category include:

Information grounds can occur anywhere, in any type of temporal setting and are predicated on the presence of individuals.

Many sub-contexts exist within information grounds and are based on people's perspectives and physical factors; together these sub-contexts form a grand context.

These propositions describe the structure of an Information Ground. While the propositions the fall under the Purpose include:

People gather at information grounds for a primary, instrumental purpose other than information sharing.

Social interaction is a primary activity at information grounds such that information flow is a by-product.

People use information obtained at information grounds in alternative ways, and benefit along physical, social, affective and cognitive dimensions.

Literature Review

The study by Hua & Shaw(2020) analysed the timeline of the key actions taken by the government and people on infodemic over three months in five different phases. Original data were collected and analysed in China and from Chinese social media. Although a characteristic information censorship exists in China, there were several positive and negative things that happened in the last three months. This study is a narrative of those events and provides an original analysis. This study used original survey raw data to understand the types of media people used to get information, and the study relied on different types of online services at different phases of the lockdown. It found that although there was an initial delay in responding, a unique combination of strong governance, strict regulation, strong community vigilance and citizen participation, and wise use of big data and digital technologies, were some of the key factors in Chinese efforts to combat this virus. Being inviable and non-measurable unlike radioactive exposure, appropriate and timely information is very important to form the basic foundation of mitigation and curative measures. Infodemic, as it is termed by WHO, is a key word, where different stakeholder's participation, along with stricter regulation, is required to reduce the impact of fake news in this information age and social media. Although different countries will need different approaches, focusing on its humanitarian nature and addressing infodemic issues are the two critical factors for future global mitigation efforts.

Similarly, the study by Pulido, Villarejo-Carballido, Redondo-Sama & Gomez (2020) as carried out to shed new light on the type of tweets that circulated on Twitter around the COVID-19 outbreak for two days and to analyse how false and true information was shared. The study raised four research questions to include:

RQ1: How many tweets contain false information? How many RT do these get? RQ2: How many tweets debunk false information? How many RT do these get? RQ3: How many tweets are based on scientific information? How many RT do these get?

RQ4: What are the implications of the results?

The study adopted the Communicative Content Analysis, a novel contribution to the field of content analysis method. 1000 tweets were analysed. Results showed that false information is tweeted more but retweeted less than science-based evidence or fact-checking tweets, while science-based evidence and fact-checking tweets capture more engagement than mere facts. These findings brought relevant insights to inform public health policies.

In the report by Brennen, Simon, Howard & Nielsen (2020), survey data was collected in late March and early April 2020 to understand how people in six countries access news and information about COVID-19, how they rate the trustworthiness of the different sources and platforms they rely on, how much misinformation they came across from different sources and on different platforms, and what they themselves know about and do about the coronavirus crisis. The report is based on a survey commissioned by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and the Misinformation, Science and Media project run with the Oxford Internet Institute and supported by the Oxford Martin School. Data was collected using an online questionnaire fielded from 31 March and into the beginning of April 2020 across Argentina, Germany, South Korea, Spain, the UK, and the US. Findings indicated that respondents rely on various platforms, but regard the content they access via social media, video sites, and messaging applications (and to a lesser extent search engines) as much less trustworthy than information from news organizations. News media have helped them understand the pandemic. Findings also indicated that people express very high levels of trust in scientists, doctors, and other experts, and often high levels of trust in health authorities and in global health organizations like the WHO – sources of information that many platform companies are currently promoting. It was also discovered that basic social and political factors also influence understanding of the pandemic – in terms of social factors, those with lower levels of education know less about coronavirus than those with higher levels of education, in terms of political factors, those who are uninterested in politics, or alienated from established parties, know less about coronavirus than others. In some countries, there are also very significant partisan differences, as people with different political persuasions see the situation very differently, particularly in the United States.

Methodology

A qualitative single case study design with embedded subcases was adopted for the study. A qualitative case study design is a holistic strategy that provides rich and in-depth information about an event, an individual, an organization or groups in a naturalistic setting, (Samkange, 2012; Ridder, 2017). Maximum Variation Sampling was used to select three tea shops from forty-five (45) tea shops in Samaru Community so as to accommodate as many variations of tea shops as possible. Ten participants were used for the study. The tea shops served as the site for this study based on the assertion by Fisher, Landry & Naumer (2006), that individuals have more than one social space. After identifying the tea shop as a popular social space, participants were asked to mention other places they go to interact with friends. Semi-structured interview was used to collect the data for this study. The data collected for this study were analysed using the thematic analysis.

Results and Findings

This study found six typologies of offline social spaces in Samaru community. Four of these offline social spaces for Covid-19 information dissemination (Businesses, Local Hangouts,

venues for ceremonies, and transportation service stations) serve as third spaces (Mehta & Bosson 2010), While the other two are first spaces (Essential Services centres and Workspaces). Third spaces are informal public places that connect individuals of different social classes beyond the realms of home and work. It is regarded as a space contrasting with first place (Work space) and second place (Home space) (Pennington, 2012). However, literature has shown that two categories of third spaces exist: Relaxation space and “hostage-like” space, (Fisher, Landy & Naumer, 2006; Landry, 2014; Siagian, 2016; Steigemann, 2017). In this study setting, Businesses, Local hangouts, and Venues for ceremonies fall under the relaxation spaces category while transportation service stations fall under the hostage-like spaces category.

This study found that the designation of spaces as first space and third space is not clear. The Tea shops, Suya (Barbecue) Spots, Kiosks (Corner) Shops and Mechanic workshop are first places for the owners. While they are third spaces for the customers. For example, this study found that the Mechanic Workshop while it is a first space for the mechanic, it is a third space in the hostage-like category for people who take their cars for repairs. It is surprising that while literature have indicated little or no inter subjective discourse in first spaces, people who go for vehicle repairs experience on the average two to four hours. Unlike in developed societies, vehicle owners do not have to wait this long, but in this study setting, vehicle owners are forced to wait by their vehicles to be fixed regardless of the time it will take. In the process of waiting, it is not uncommon for inter-subjective discourse and information diffusion to take place with other vehicle owners.

Finally, the study found that four of the offline social spaces for covid-19 information dissemination are well established permanent spaces are businesses, local hangouts, essential services centres and workspaces. While two of the informal channels are transient spaces. These include venues for ceremonies and transportation service stations. These findings contradicts that of Efe, (2020) who found that the preferred information sources by the rural dwellers during COVID-19 include; family members/friends, mass media, herbal doctors and town criers among others.

In relation to the participants, findings indicate that participants seek information (Purposively or Non-purposively) through social interaction in these spaces. Information flows in many directions between the different social actors that visit these spaces. Similarly, findings indicate that Participants benefit from the information exchanges in these informal channels in the physical, social, affective and social dimensions. These sub-contexts together give a grand context of informal channels of information dissemination as information sources and filters for individuals in Hausa communal settings in northern Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is apt to conclude from the study as follows: First, this study has established that participants have more than one offline social space. The typologies of these offline social spaces are businesses, local hangouts, venues for ceremonies, transportation service stations, essential services centres and workspaces. The study also established that the structure propositions of Nugent (2016) amendment of the information grounds propositions aptly described these spaces as information sources and filters for individual in Hausa setting in northern Nigeria.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were proffered:

This study discovered that there is high degree of inter subjective discourse in third spaces with hostage-like characteristics in Samaru community. In addition, the study also discovered that four of the informal channels are well-established permanent spaces while two are transient. The Nigerian Centre for Disease Control can disseminate information regarding the coronavirus in these permanent spaces and repackage them in the language the people understand. They can for

instance, put posters containing information on the coronavirus in tea shops, motor parks, and local hangouts so that they are seen by individuals. Also since individuals have more than one of these spaces the information diffuses in the community in no time.

Similarly, this study revealed that informal channels foster the creation of social networks and social capital among participants of the study by virtue of the inter-subjective discourse that takes place in these spaces. This implies that the cooperation and exchange of information that takes place at these spaces breeds trust among participants and the information that is acquired. Therefore, it is recommended that the government can create informal channels like transportation service stations or even partner with businesses like the fast food businesses to disseminate timely information on coronavirus in these spaces. This is because individuals trust any information they get from these spaces.

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