

EXPLORING THE USE OF WHATSAPP IN DISSEMINATING COVID-19 INFORMATION AMONG JOURNALISTS IN ZAMFARA, NIGERIA

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Abstract. Uses and Gratification Theory guides this research to explore how journalists in Zamfara, Nigeria use WhatsApp to disseminate COVID-19 information to public. Despite some evidence from previous studies indicating that WhatsApp played a major role as a tool for communicating on health crises in African nations, such research in Nigeria is still quite scant. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore (i) why journalists use WhatsApp to disseminate information about COVID-19; (ii) how did journalists use it and (iii) how does WhatsApp help them in achieving their job satisfaction. 21 journalists with more than six years working experiences in communicating health issues were purposively selected for this study Findings revealed that journalists use WhatsApp because they are familiar with the apps, it is simple to use, and it is more effective than other social networking sites. They also disseminate COVID-19 news through WhatsApp groups and use hypertext to reach bigger audience. Majority of journalists found employment satisfaction through WhatsApp receiving work appreciation, frequent comment on news, and developed a journalist-audience network. This study adds to filling an academic vacuum in the use of social media in conveying health crisis in Nigeria. It is also capable of explaining how WhatsApp usage showed the social and psychological demands of journalists, their expectations in which indicated the required gratification, and other implications of WhatsApp use in communicating health crises.

Keywords: *social media, media staff, pandemic, health communication, uses and gratification theory*

Introduction

Modern technology's mentality surfaces the way for multi-functional products such as smart wristwatches and smartphones. With all of this transformation, technology has rendered our lives simpler, speedier, richer, and more enjoyable. Indeed, technological advancement has become a major changer globally in order to handle difficult development challenges on the ground, particularly during pandemic like COVID-19, in order for communities to survive. This enormous technological revolution has a huge impact on the management of the economy, health enlightenment and education, as well as communication means through the adoption of innovative techniques of technology to ensure operations are carried out successfully. Social media is fast becoming the preferred method of creating social/professional networks among media professionals, as well as communicating with potential audiences, particularly in the COVID-19 pandemic era. Internet-based, social media channels of communication such as WhatsApp are encouraging perceptions of relationships among users, drawing value primarily from user-generated material (Carr and Hayes, 2015). Mobile instant messaging (MIM) programs, in particular, are crucial to social media communication practices (Sheer and Rice, 2017). In contrast to Short Message Service (SMS), MIM

programs like WhatsApp have allowed users, including journalists, to share real-time locations as well as send and receive multimedia content (Kümpel et al., 2015). Brian Acton and Jan Koum developed the messaging program WhatsApp in 2009. (Bakare et al., 2021) It provides voice and text communication using the internet protocol. WhatsApp is a fantastic tool for communicating with people from all backgrounds, including friends, classmates, and co-workers (Kaufmann et al., 2021). However, WhatsApp was used more frequently in some nations than others.

India is the leading country in the world in terms of WhatsApp application, with approximately 390.1 million users, followed by Brazil with 108.4 million, the United States with 75.1 million, Indonesia with 68.8 million, Russia with 64.7 million, and Mexico with 62.3 million, among others. In Nigeria, 33 million WhatsApp users were documented. This demonstrates that Nigeria is among the countries with moderate WhatsApp users, and the statistics also indicated that Nigerians place a high value on socialization when compared to other countries around the world. Furthermore, according to Africa technological development, Ghana had 83.8 percent WhatsApp subscribers as of the third quarter of 2020, while Nigeria had 83 percent. This demonstrates the socialization-importance credited to using WhatsApp by Nigerians when compared to Ghana's adoption of the WhatsApp technology because Nigeria has a larger population than Ghana. In Nigeria, social media applications such as WhatsApp have been used. During pandemics such as bird flu, WhatsApp and other messaging platforms were utilized to communicate about COVID-19 in Nigeria (Iorfa et al, 2020). In 2014, an Ebola virus outbreak struck several African countries, and media professionals used social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to report on the outbreak (Azeema and Nazuk, 2017; Nagpal et al., 2015). Recently, media practitioners have increasingly employed social media, notably WhatsApp, to manage the crucial aspects of news transmission.

WhatsApp applications have the capacity to identify and address problems in the traditional media sector, including long-term infections and disease outbreaks, excessive transaction costs, and information asymmetry. Additionally, COVID-19 establishes a framework for long-term assistance from the international media in enhancing and strengthening health reporting. In 2014-2015, for instance, the BBC used WhatsApp to communicate with viewers while it covered the Ebola outbreak in West Africa (Valenzuela et al., 2021). Interestingly, WhatsApp has the ability to improve the relationship between media professionals and audiences. Study groups may utilize WhatsApp to distribute information about recent findings to media industry colleagues for additional audience communication. Reporters may also use the same WhatsApp platform to offer feedback on stories that are developing from their beats, which will be transmitted to the newsroom for newswriting. WhatsApp, revolutionized the business of the industry. According to Udenze (2019), the majority of Nigerian media organizations have embraced multiplatform journalism; journalists are now trained not only to specialize in print journalism, but also to manage video and some internet operations, such as the merger of an online team with a traditional newsroom. However, little research has been conducted on the usage of WhatsApp in spreading COVID19 material among journalists in Zamfara, Nigeria. Among others are studies on dramatic shift from the traditional social media such as Facebook and Twitter to WhatsApp in journalistic practices (Dodds, 2019), challenges in using WhatsApp by radio journalists in their daily professional life (Damri, 2020) and how journalists used WhatsApp to socio-economic development in Africa (Pindayi, 2017).

Therefore, this study abided on the impetus created by the use of WhatsApp in disseminating COVID-19 information among journalist in Zamfara, Nigeria; conversely bridging the gap left by researchers across board, hence adding weight to body of knowledge in Nigeria and world at large. Consequently, the purpose of this research is to investigate the use of WhatsApp among journalists in Zamfara, Nigeria, and how they spread COVID-19 material by employing the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT). Because of its dissimilarity to other media effect theories that ask, "What does a medium do to people? UGT is concerned with what people do with media; it considers media to be a highly valuable product, and audiences are consumers of the same product. It is a theory that seeks specialized media technologies to meet specific requirements (Sundar and Limperos, 2013).

Role of WhatsApp in crisis and natural disaster

Social media offers a more potent tool for knowledge finding and delivery, even during crises and natural tragedies when other sources of information and communication are unavailable. In addition to individuals, public and private organizations are using corporate identities on social media to find and share information (Hussain and Shabir, 2020). In order to find the unmediated, academics looked into the mediated environment of social media. Sharing information, ideas, and emotions with friends, family, and the wider public has grown to be a fundamental human need, and social media offers the ideal platforms to satisfy these needs particularly during COVID-19 (Chambers, 2013). Utilization of WhatsApp has been linked to social support and overall wellbeing for the individual's integrative needs. It encourages teacher-student interactions (Khan, 2021). WhatsApp conversations provide users a stronger sense of presence and connection. Due to WhatsApp's multimodality, media professionals in organizations can also send and receive political news, as well as links to media content, their own observations on current affairs, as well as images, sounds, videos, and emoticons. While some research suggests that WhatsApp's ability to display only certain types of content is a highly valued feature for users who believe that their friends' sharing decisions on the app are deliberate and result in several information streams, rather than being casual or accidental.

WhatsApp is very different from other social media platforms for news sharing and social interaction. While political discourse on Facebook and Twitter has been linked to political engagement (Omotayo and Folorunso, 2020), WhatsApp's yet-private conversational feature can support continued communication among media professionals in a variety of settings. Due to the staleness of the information and exposure to objectionable material, WhatsApp users also rely less on Facebook for news these days and instead use the app to discuss personal and public concerns in private conversations with their friends (Newman, 2018).

What public share on WhatsApp?

A new kind of mobile communication called group chats is also introduced, in addition to being less expensive than traditional SMS communication. Group discussions on a number of topics can be held in these kinds of organizations with great success. WhatsApp group discussions are especially appealing during periods of intense social mobilization, such as strikes and election campaigns, because they encourage information exchange between interested parties. Recent events, however, have raised

worries about the transmission of false information via WhatsApp (Resende et al, 2019). Furthermore, WhatsApp is frequently utilized for political campaigning. As an example, general elections in Brazil were held in 2018 to select a new president, vice presidents, and governors. Examination into WhatsApp's use during the election campaign, it can disseminate false information and is a source of misinformation. The goal of WhatsApp is to allow a restricted group of researchers, journalists, or fact-checking organizations access to the system so they may validate the information provided to those. While, Valenzuela et al. (2021) looked at what WhatsApp users shared and how it affected news knowledge, polarization, and participation in Chile. They found that sharing on WhatsApp was fairly equal across social groups and that it could have a big impact on people's knowledge of politics and news issues, as well as protesting and other political behaviours.

This study will examine the potential reasons, limits, and implications of these findings for digital journalism study and practice. Swart et al. (2019) discovered that the social role of news and current events in location-based, work-oriented, and leisure focused communities is crucial for sharing and discussing news in private social media groups. WhatsApp's appeal among online media professionals is being constrained by a number of fundamental challenges, including ICT legislation, expensive ICT prices, and ICT fear. Previous study of the determinants influencing ICT adoption among selected Caribbean journalists, found that media professionals' educational backgrounds were the contributing variables impacting their use of ICT. Other studies, in contrast, found age, gender, and other factors. Another study conducted on news engagement to identify the elements that affect people's exposure to news on WhatsApp found three such aspects, including the platform's technology affordances, personal human factors, and in-group social dynamics.

Technology, WhatsApp and journalists

The spreading of information and new technologies to onlookers across media houses is made possible by the access that media experts have to a range of social media tools and application software. Mobile phones, audio-visual kit, and computer software all play a key role in the broadcasting of media information in Ghana. Study by Tata and McNamara (2016) found cellular phones, the Internet, radio, and web-based apps are the key tools for South African media practitioners to exchange and distribute information. Correspondents in India use social media to educate audiences on the need of a healthy diet. In a related development, Udem et al. (2020) found that the use of WhatsApp groups for sharing information among library and information science professionals in Nigeria encourages several other Library and Information Science professionals to recognize the importance of the use of WhatsApp channel to disseminate timely information such as conferences, workshops and training opportunities. It was experiential that Rwandan journalists actively used WhatsApp to contact sources, government sources (Niyitegeka, 2020). Journalists asserted that WhatsApp messages were verified by calling or speaking with the sender to arrange a meeting time without distressing the source (Aal et al., 2014). Most reporters in Rwanda confirmed that news organizations use Whatsapp in promote social interaction. Furthermore, many people use Facebook and educated people use Twitter, virtually everyone uses WhatsApp since it is inexpensive and simple to use. This is causing Facebook to lose popularity. Another advantage is that WhatsApp improves contact

between journalists and the public. In fact, journalists are embracing social media to deliver news items more swiftly and to a larger audience.

Uses and gratification theory

The Uses and Gratification theory has been used by many researchers in their observation of line of communication. They abide on the concept of UGT as an audience-centred approach to understanding Mass Communication. Hence, the audience has power over their media consumption and assumes an active role in interpreting and integrating media into their own lives. Diverging from other media effect theories that question "what does media do to people?" UGT focuses on "what do people do with media?" It postulates that media is a highly available product and the audiences are the consumers of the same product. This study too applied the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) in seeking to understand why and how people actively pursue out specific media to satisfy specific needs. This theory guides the objectives that wanting to explore how and why journalists use WhatsApp to disseminating COVID-19 information and how WhatsApp satisfies the journalists needs in doing their tasks.

Materials and Methods

This study used in-depth interview to achieve research objectives. It is qualitative systematic research approach that results in a secure interaction between a researcher and the interviewees (Campbell et al., 2013). In-depth interview able to obtain insight into a comprehensive knowledge of interviewees' point of view. It enables this study to design and appraise suitable source of information by using open ended questions, to discover in an oriented technique, which then allows the study to explore the feelings and perceptions of respondents about their WhatsApp usage.

Sampling, data collection and analysis

The study will take place in North West Nigerian State of Zamfara because of the lockdown situation which will not allow me to cross over to the rest 4 neighbouring core north-western states of Sokoto State, Kebbi State, Kaduna and Katsina State which all bordered with Zamfara State. However, the choice of seven media outfits which are, Nigerian Television Authority, Zamfara State Television Services, Gamji Television, Standard Voice Television; Federal Radio Cooperation of Nigeria (Pride FM), Zamfara State Radio and Zamfara Gold FM is because they are the major electronic/traditional media with offices and headquarters within Zamfara area only. The rest print media despite being national dailies were avoided because 95% of them had offices in different parts of the federation which does not fall within the axis of northwest. Furthermore, out of the seven slated media outfits, 3 respondents will be selected from each station, making the total number 21 respondents to partake as partners in the research as shown in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Sample size.

Television/Radio station	No. of staff	No. of sample
Nigerian Television Authority (NTA)	15	3
Zamfara State Television (ZSTV)	14	3
Gamji Television	16	3
Standard Voice Television	13	3

Federal Radio Corporation (FRCN)	22	3
Zamfara State Radio	30	3
Goal FM	15	3
Total	107	21

All interviews were recorded with permission and interviews took about 50 to 70 minutes for each respondent. Each respondent was also labelled for confidentiality. The interviews were then transcribed and coded thematically. Six (6) steps were adopted in concluding the thematic analysis. The steps include: familiarization with the data, generation of codes, constructing themes, reviewing potential themes, identified potential themes and producing the report according to Braun and Clarke (2012).

Results and Discussion

All the participants responded in English language. Four of the participants were female while 17 were male. They are well educated as they possess one journalism qualification or the other. This background level undoubtedly created a mutual rapport between the researcher and the participants as issues of novice and naivety is not there as a distortion of the interview process. Majority of the participants aged between 31 and 40 and have 6 to 16 years of working experience.

Why do journalists use WhatsApp to convey COVID-19 information to the public?

Three (3) major themes emerged from the interviews are familiarization with WhatsApp, easy communication and efficacy of WhatsApp as compared to other applications. Besides these three (3) themes, respondents also mentioned in brief about enhancing services delivery and to know audience reaction.

(1) Familiarization with WhatsApp

Almost all respondents have been using WhatsApp for more than five years to do news reporting. This indicates that the participant's use of WhatsApp predates COVID-19 emergence. As WhatsApp is also used daily as a mean of communication among family members, most respondents had no difficulties in manoeuvring its features. This familiarization has motivated the majority of media staff to engage themselves in unique storytelling and audience engagement using WhatsApp. For them daily intense reporting for COVID-19 does not limit their daily reporting routine. Besides, the respondents felt that WhatsApp has more advantages as compared with other social media because they can reach bigger audience especially those who live in rural areas where they were not familiar with other social media such as Facebook or Twitter. One respondent said:

WhatsApp is the platform I have been using to convey information during the outbreak of COVID-19 to enlighten the public to protect themselves from the disease. It is easy to use and can reach more people especially outside the city (RDJ4).

(2) Easy communication

The majority of the respondents also said the restriction of movement is the key reason why they used WhatsApp in sharing COVID-19 news to the public in Zamfara.

Besides, the public can easily use their hand phones to views news. WhatsApp offers features that make their work easier. The application enables them to write news, send pictures, record videos/voice notes. A respondent stated:

Because WhatsApp is the fast way of disseminating information...it is convenient in using WhatsApp platform to pass information of all kinds including COVID-19 to public (TVJ2).

Other two participants referred its features as capable of accommodating their needs as journalists and for work efficacy. They said:

...basically, timeliness, accommodating and allow for quick response between users” (TVJ6).

Mostly is for ease of access, you know if you have WhatsApp, you can reach many people as possible especially if you have their contacts (RDJ5).

(3) Effectiveness and efficacy of WhatsApp in disseminating COVID-19 information

Effectiveness of WhatsApp has been expressed by more than half of the participants. Some participants indicated that WhatsApp is 60% effective in their work. Other participants see the effectiveness of WhatsApp in its ability to allow full utilization of timeliness feature. One participant come with the opinion that:

It is effective because it facilitates speedy information dissemination and discovery which follows feedback regarded by individual understanding of the contents” (TVJ2).

Besides effectiveness, participants also acknowledged that WhatsApp is more effective and friendly than other online platforms such as Facebook, YouTube etc. in disseminating COVID-19 information. In essence the accuracy of the information needs to be checkmated before it goes viral. In line with the above, one participant said:

In conventional media it is necessary for journalist to authenticate stories before sharing, but in WhatsApp most of the content or news shared has no authentication of sources and this can lead to higher rate of citizen journalism which is against the professional standard... (TVJ3).

How do journalists use of WhatsApp for COVID-19 information dissemination?

Two sub-themes found are: (i) Sharing information through dedicated audience/journalist groups and (ii) used of hypertext (picture, visual and audio).

(i) Sharing information via WhatsApp

By creating WhatsApp groups, journalists could share information among themselves from different organizations. This is important when certain information was not gathered by some journalists due to location and lockdown restriction. At the same time, creation of groups to reach bigger audience as explained by two respondents as below:

Journalist create avenue for allowing members of public to enact their views and also share contents of news that can advise the public to be careful about COVID-19 diseases (RDJ2).

We use WhatsApp to disseminate COVID-19 information through the groups we created and ask some members to share it among other audience because of its networking capacity and accessibility (RDJ1).

(ii) Using short hypertext (picture, video & audio)

In particular, respondents agreed that using hypertext would help increase audience understanding about COVID-19 situation. Because, text information is enclosed with audio-visual (picture, video) and audio. Participants used the messaging app's to quickly sends pictorial news to deliver top health stories and traffic news to readers, give an audience update to an ongoing COVID-19 story. One participant explained:

Through writing news stories, using cartoons, picture and other images can create awareness and convey COVID-19 information more effectively (TVJ5).

Another participant believed that using hypertext via WhatsApp enables him to educate the public efficiently.

By using it as a means of disseminating information to the public either by text messages or visual presentation for the purpose of educating the masses (TVJ 11).

However, pictorial content was faced with limitations as some audiences do not use WhatsApp. Therefore, they back it up with the provision of a telephone number to call during the relevant program as extended. Some said:

We use WhatsApp to send information but the information has limitations, it cannot be generalised. Some use WhatsApp, others do not. We create programs for public enlightenment on the health-related issue, during the program we give house number for the audience to call and share their opinions (RDJ4).

Additionally, like the case of visual content used on WhatsApp, participants also used video content to interpret COVID-19 information. Moreover, using videos enhance credible journalism as mentioned by one respondent:

We send text messages that some might have difficulty to read, because they don't have the knowledge or the idea of reading. But whenever they notice a video clip or a picture story, they will believe it because pictures can easily take them close to the scene of an event (RDJ7).

Interestingly, participant use video to reach non-literate audience because of the language-barrier, but quality video contents can break such barriers.

.... even illiterates use WhatsApp with the aid voice note and videos in order to pass across happenings around them (TVJ9).

Just like video content, a short audio clip has the potential of adding credibility in addition to going viral as explained by two participants:

Through the use of voice note and text message which when shared will go viral hitting the phones of many in a short period of time (TVJ9).

WhatsApp has some technicalities that one has to follow to draw audience attention. We send voice note and pictorial content to audience because, picture tell story better than written words (RDJ7).

How does WhatsApp help journalists to achieve their job satisfaction?

Participants expressed satisfaction with the role WhatsApp played in their job during the COVID-19. The analysis discovered four underlying major themes: (i) work acknowledgment, (ii) feedback from audience through WhatsApp, (iii) journalists-audience relationship, and (iv) distortion of WhatsApp content by audience.

(i) Work acknowledgement

According to half of the participants, work acknowledgment, job satisfaction can be achieved when their efforts in communicating about COVID-19 is appreciated by public and fellow journalists. For example, when other journalists from other media organization found their news on WhatsApp or other social media this provides them job satisfaction. A participant revealed that:

Each and every time we use WhatsApp platform to convey messages it eases our civic responsibility and reduced expenses, make our job credible on the eyes of the public that attracting job satisfaction on our side (RDJ1).

(ii) Feedback from another through WhatsApp

Most of the participants revealed that they usually receive feedback especially when audience need to ask for authenticity of news that went viral on WhatsApp. A participant noted that:

Yes, we do receive feedback from audience, every time we share content on social media (WhatsApp), majority of people appreciate and comment. Therefore, this will make us to say that the goal is achieved (RDJ8).

(iii) Journalists-audience relationship

While responding to the issue of the sender-receiver relationship, most participants agreed that their relationship on WhatsApp is cordial, while others say it is partial. In cordial relationship, audience do send stories back to the journalist for authenticity. Some participants illustrated that:

The relationship is so cordial; everyday journalist tells emotional stories through WhatsApp, people become so emotional to their responses (TVJ2).

This type of relationship is symbiotic whereby both journalist and public are in need of each other. Two participants stated:

The relationship is cordial sometimes, when audiences see stories related COVID-19, they do send it back to us and put question marks (TVJ1).

Well, the relationship is cordial between the users/journalist, the audience/journalist relationship is like two bread and butter (TVJ4).

In contrast, the relationship can sometimes be partial as mentioned by one participant as:

The relationship is partial because of the way people view stories on CONVID-19. While some believe the pandemic is happening, others doubt the disease (RDJ5).

This suggests that participants have challenging responsibilities in communicating about COVID-19 because audience thinking is not homogenous about the pandemic. Yet, very few described their relationship as casual and said:

Relationship is casual because, not all times that audience can get back to us, they only do so if they need news or need clarification of an issues (RDJ3).

(iv) Distortion of WhatsApp content by audience

One theme has however emerged indicating that is not always that traditional media journalists find satisfaction from the user of WhatsApp. Hence, majority of participants agreed the audience distorted the WhatsApp content, by share fake news. One participant noted that:

Contain regarded to images and written text being send on WhatsApp, are sometimes distorted by the users. Some use video, images and give it a different explanation that suits their thinking, just to mislead others (TVJ7).

Discussed above when some irresponsible audience would tamper the news with misleading information and this can give wrong impression of the original news sent by journalists. It is also found that journalists faced some challenges in communicating the pandemic information using WhatsApp. First, participants find it difficult to know the authenticity of the news items sent through WhatsApp. Second, majority of participants mentioned network problem whereby within the lockdown period, they could not share important messages about COVID-19 to certain areas of Zamfara due to poor internet connection. Third, a few participants identified that some audiences do not use WhatsApp, signifying difficulty to share COVID-19 information with rural dwellers. A participant is quoted saying:

I don't see much challenges especially for us who is staying in the state capital apart from the network problem and the lockdown situation. But by using WhatsApp it become easier for us to reach public (RDJ1).

One participant mentioned challenges of fake news:

The challenge is always associated with Intruders into journalism profession. As we all know that the work of journalist is to ensure peace and harmony within the society (TVJ3).

Conclusion

WhatsApp opened up communication channels for broadcast media staff and audience (Hussain and Shabir, 2020). WhatsApp technologies help spreading COVID-19 information by journalists in Zamfara Nigeria during the Coronavirus-induced lockdown. This study examined how these technological know-hows shaped journalists' practises and cultures during COVID-19 period. The findings of the study revealed the reasons for using WhatsApp to convey COVID-19 information by the journalist in Zamfara, Nigeria. Traditional media journalists have developed manners that ensured effective ways of using the WhatsApp platform during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria. These findings have implications for not only the electronic journalism practice, but journalism spheres at large, government institutions', news agencies, managers of media organizations, health communication experts, and the communication academic community. To this end, more studies need to be conducted in other electronic media of different states of Nigeria, African and the world at large in order to test the evolving reasons of using WhatsApp that are emerged in this study. This study offers a novel contribution into how broadcast media journalist in Zamfara, Nigeria, used WhatsApp in disseminating COVID-19 information to public. All media professionals who operate in the media industry cannot be generalised by this research. The results of this study were based on analysis with 21 interviewers, which allow the research to triangulate the research findings despite the informants' extensive experience, all of whom had more than six years of working experience using WhatsApp.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest with any parties involved with the study.

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