

CONSTRUCTION OF FEAR APPEAL MESSAGES IN THE REPORTAGE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ONLINE NEWSPAPERS IN NIGERIA (MARCH 2020-FEBRUARY 2021)

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Abstract

This study, “Construction of Fear Appeal Messages in the Reportage of COVID-19 Pandemic in Online Newspapers in Nigeria (March 2020 - February 2021),” examines how fear appeals were constructed in online Nigerian newspapers—Blueprint, Daily Trust, The Sun, and Vanguard—and their effectiveness in conveying the severity of the pandemic and promoting protective behaviors. Grounded in the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) and Persuasion Theory, this study employs qualitative content analysis to explore the content, sources, and strategies of fear appeal messages. Findings revealed that the newspapers predominantly emphasized the severity of the COVID-19 threat, with frequent mentions of rising death tolls and healthcare system constraints. While some articles included clear efficacy messages, others lacked sufficient guidance on effective responses, potentially increasing fear without offering constructive solutions. The study also found that fear appeal messages largely relied on credible sources, such as government officials, health organizations, and medical experts. However, there were instances of sensationalism noted, which could undermine public trust and lead to panic. The study concludes that credible sources enhance the persuasive impact of fear appeal messages, but ethical considerations are essential to avoid causing unnecessary alarm. It recommends that journalists in online newspaper organizations adopt ethical guidelines to avoid exaggeration and ensure that their messages are both constructive and informative.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was declared a global health crisis, declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) by the WHO in January 2020. The disease, characterized by symptoms such as fever, cough, and shortness of breath, affected nations worldwide, including Nigeria. Globally, as of February 28, 2021, there were over 113 million confirmed cases and 2.6 million deaths. In Nigeria, the NCDC reported 155,657 confirmed cases and 1,907 deaths by the same date (NCDC, 2021).

The 2019 emergence of SARS-CoV-2 posed unprecedented global challenges, impacting healthcare, economies, and societal norms. Economic downturns hit industries such as hospitality and tourism due to restrictions. Supply chain vulnerabilities have emerged, and remote learning has widened technology disparities among students (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020).

Despite challenges, resilience and innovation emerged during the pandemic. The severity of the pandemic called for multifaceted efforts, emphasizing effective communication in preparedness, response and recovery strategies (Chouliaraki&Vestergaard, 2022), apart from pandemic preparedness plans that address medical, epidemiological, psychosocial and ethical perspectives on reparation.

Media coverage during health crises has distinct characteristics that significantly shape public perceptions and behaviors. Three prevalent features—sensationalism, fear appeal, and the role in information dissemination—stand out (Seeger, Pechta, Price, Lubell& Rose, 2017). Sensationalism, which is often present in crisis coverage, uses exaggerated language to grab attention but can lead to increased anxiety, misinformation and distortion of the true risks. This exaggerated tone can sway public perception, hindering a clear understanding of the crisis's actual nature.

Fear appeal, another common element in media coverage, centers on emphasizing potential risks and threats to evoke fear, intending to persuade individuals to take preventive actions. Although fear can indeed prompt behavioral changes, an excessive or continual focus on fear within media narratives might inadvertently lead to widespread panic and irrational decision-making among the public (Witte, 1992). The balance between cautionary information and overwhelming fear is crucial for fostering a constructive public response.

Online newspapers particularly garnered significant attention during the COVID-19 pandemic because of their higher readership. Olapegba, Ayandele, Kolawole, Oguntayo, Gandi, Dangiwa, Ottu and Iorfa(2020)highlighted that online newspapers served as sources for coronavirus-related medical advice and news. The pandemic amplified the usage of online newspapers, driven by factors such as diverse global lockdown measures and increased reliance on the Internet and social networks.

Despite the critical role of media in shaping public responses to emergencies, limited research has examined the nature and impact of fear appeal messages in the reportage of COVID-19 by Nigerian newspapers, particularly those operating online (Depoux, Martin, Karafillakis, Preet, Wilder-Smith & Larson, 2020).The prevalence of online news platforms highlights the need to assess how these digital media outlets contribute to public understanding and response to health emergencies like COVID-19.Thus, to what extent were the fear appeal messages in the reportage of the COVID-19 pandemic by online Nigerian newspapers effective?

Understanding how online Nigerian newspapers have framed and communicated COVID-19-related information, particularly through fear appeal messages, is essential for many reasons.This approach can provide insights into the effectiveness of communication strategies employed by media organizations during public health crises, enabling tailored messages for maximum effectiveness.This reveals how the media's portrayal of COVID-19 could significantly influence public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors(Ogunseye,

Oyeyemi&Akinyemi, 2020).Effective communication through fear appeals contributes to evidence-based communication strategies for future pandemic preparedness and response efforts in Nigeria and beyond.

Research Questions

By investigating fear appeal messages in online newspapers, this study addresses the following key research questions:

- 1.What were the fear appeal messages in the reportage of the COVID-19 pandemic by the selected online Nigerian newspapers?
- 2.Which sources were responsible for disseminating fear appeal messages in the reportage of the COVID-19 pandemic by selected online Nigerian newspapers?
- 3.What fear appeal strategies were used in the reportage of COVID-19 pandemic by selected online Nigerian newspapers?

Literature Review

Fear Appeal Messages in the Reportage of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Selected Online Nigerian Newspapers

Online Nigerian newspapers have significantly contributed to disseminating information about the COVID-19 pandemic, often employing fear appeal messages to underscore the severity of the threat posed by the disease (Oladimeji&Adisa, 2020). Headlines frequently feature alarming statistics, such as increased infection rates, fatalities, and the spread of new variants. These messages evoke fear and urgency among readers, highlighting the potential consequences for public health and socioeconomic well-being.

The framing of fear appeal messages within these newspapers varies, encompassing both informative and alarmist approaches. Articles typically offer updates on various aspects related to COVID-19, including government responses, health care infrastructure, and community transmission (Ezike, 2021). Fear appeal messages often focus on the impact of the disease on vulnerable populations, health care systems, and economic stability.

Research indicates that fear arousal through these messages can influence public perceptions and behaviors regarding COVID-19, potentially motivating individuals to adopt protective measures (Omolola&Asemah, 2021). However, excessive fear arousal without clear guidance may lead to anxiety and maladaptive responses. A balanced approach is necessary to raise awareness while mitigating undue panic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred extensive coverage in online Nigerian newspapers, prominently featuring fear appeal messages to underscore the severity of the disease (Ezike, 2021). These messages play crucial roles in promoting public health compliance and alleviating anxiety. Fear appeal messages also highlight the efficacy of measures taken against COVID-19, aiming to garner public support for governmental interventions and encourage adherence to health guidelines (Ajao&Badejo, 2021).

Sources Responsible for Disseminating Fear Appeal Messages in the Reportage of the COVID-19 Pandemic by Selected Online Nigerian Newspapers

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an influx of fear appeal messages in online Nigerian newspapers, aimed at raising public awareness and encouraging preventive behaviors. These messages can originate from various sources, including government agencies, health authorities, media outlets, NGOs, and health care professionals (Jia& Zhao, 2023). The credibility of these sources is crucial in shaping the credibility and reliability of the presented information.

Government agencies and health authorities, such as the Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO), play a significant role in disseminating fear appeal messages in online

Nigerian newspapers. These entities use fear appeals as a communication strategy to convey the seriousness of the pandemic and the importance of adhering to preventive measures (Hung & Lin, 2021). Messages from these sources are based on factual information and scientific evidence, with the aim of promoting public health and safety.

Media outlets and journalists are crucial sources of fear appeal messages in online Nigerian newspapers. Journalists play a vital role in informing the public about the latest developments related to the pandemic and its impact on society. Fear appeal messages from media outlets often aim to capture readers' attention and prompt them to take preventive actions (Jia et al., 2023).

The credibility of sources in fear appeal messages is vital to establishing trust and enhancing the persuasiveness of such messages. Public health crises are characterized by uncertainty and rapidly evolving situations, making it crucial to rely on reputable sources to provide accurate and up-to-date information (Capurro et al., 2021). Credible sources add validity to the severity of health threats and the recommended actions proposed in the fear appeal messages.

Fear Appeal Strategies Used in the Reportage of COVID-19 Pandemic by Selected Online Nigerian Newspapers

Fear appeal strategies are used to emphasize the severe consequences of failing to comply with recommendations, aiming to elicit fear to motivate behavioral change. During the COVID-19 pandemic, online Nigerian newspapers used fear appeal strategies to inform, persuade, and sometimes alarm the public (Witte, 1992). This analysis examines the fear appeal strategies used by selected online Nigerian newspapers in their reportage of the pandemic.

The Nigerian media landscape is diverse, with numerous online newspapers catering to various demographic segments. Key newspapers like *Blueprint*, *Daily Trust*, *the Sun*, and *Vanguard*, have significant influence. These outlets played a crucial role in disseminating information about COVID-19, often using fear appeals to emphasize the seriousness of the pandemic (Blueprint, 2020).

Fear appeal messages were often presented through vivid imagery and emotive language. Articles described the virus in dramatic terms, referring to it as a "silent killer" or "invisible enemy," thereby invoking a sense of fear and urgency (Daily Trust, 2020). Citing authoritative sources such as the World Health Organization (WHO), Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC), and health experts added credibility to fear appeals.

The use of fear appeals in Nigerian newspapers had mixed outcomes. On the one hand, they were effective in drawing attention to the seriousness of COVID-19 and motivating behavior changes such as mask-wearing, social distancing, and compliance with lockdown measures (Vanguard, 2020). On the other hand, excessive fear appeals sometimes led to public panic, misinformation, and stigmatization of infected individuals (The Sun, 2020).

Review of Empirical Studies

Stolow, Moses, Lederer, and Carter (2020) studied the damaging effects of fear appeal approaches in COVID-19 health communication, arguing against their inclusion and recommending evidence-based strategies tailored to specific communities. Ng (2022) used the Extended Parallel Process Model to analyze fear appeal usage in 2,152 YouTube trending videos from six countries from January to May 2020. The study revealed an imbalance in threat-efficacy messages in some countries during the pandemic's early stage. Kigatiira (2020) examined the impact of fear appeals on the adoption of COVID-19 preventive measures among BodaBoda riders in Nairobi County, Kenya. Results showed that fear appeals effectively motivated preventive behaviors driven by perceived susceptibility to the virus.

Despite the crucial role of media in shaping public responses, there is a significant gap in understanding the impact of fear appeal messages in online Nigerian newspapers during the pandemic. Limited research has focused on this topic. To address this gap, this study investigates the effectiveness of COVID-19 fear appeal messages in online Nigerian newspapers.

Theoretical Framework

Extended Parallel Processing Model (EPPM)

The Extended Parallel Processing Model (EPPM) proposed by Kim Witte in 1992 integrates threat and coping components to study the effectiveness of fear appeals. According to EPPM, fear appeals are most persuasive when they induce fear and efficacy beliefs, motivating protective action while empowering belief in one's ability to perform recommended behaviors (Popova, 2022). This model suggests that individuals are more likely to adopt proactive responses when both threat and coping components resonate positively.

EPPM highlights the importance of inducing significant fear by framing threats as severe and relevant, rooted in perceived susceptibility and severity, and emphasizing coping appraisal, with self-efficacy playing a pivotal role (Zarghami, Allahverdipour&Jafarabadi, 2021). The model employs parallel processing, where audiences simultaneously evaluate both the threat and coping components. By considering these factors, researchers can design effective fear appeal messages for behaviors such as vaccination and disaster preparedness (Rasul, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, EPPM offers insights into the dynamics of fear appeal messages and their impact on attitudes, emotions, and behaviors. By leveraging EPPM, researchers can identify high-threat, high-efficacy messages tailored to different audience segments, fostering adaptive responses, and countering misinformation (Rasul, 2021). This model provides a framework for designing effective fear appeals that balance fear arousal and efficacy beliefs to promote proactive responses without overwhelming fear.

Communication for Persuasion Theory

Communication for Persuasion Theory, originating from Aristotle's ethos, pathos and logos, became a formal theory in the mid-20th century, highlighting source credibility, attractiveness and expertise in persuasion (Talavira, 2022). Message content, communication medium, and social influence also shape attitudes and behaviors.

Despite criticism for oversimplification and neglecting resistance to persuasion, the theory finds broad application in communication, health campaigns, and pandemic responses (Rubinelli, 2018).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, communication for persuasion theory informs the crafting of fear appeal messages, stressing message design, source credibility, emotional appeals, and audience tailoring. Leveraging this theory, researchers can assess the effectiveness of fear appeal messages in Nigerian online newspapers, thereby promoting responsible actions and improving public health outcomes.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a qualitative content analysis method to examine fear appeal messaging in media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic (Parveen and Showkat, 2017). The population consisted of fear appeal messages in COVID-19 pandemic reports from four prominent online Nigerian newspapers, spanning from March 1, 2020, to February 28, 2021 (Chamberlain, 2020).

The study used a purposive sampling technique to select four online newspapers: *Blueprint*, *Daily Trust*, *the Sun*, and *Vanguard*. A sample size of 304 editions was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table. Each newspaper had a sample size of 76 editions. Systematic random sampling was employed, with every 4th edition chosen for inclusion in the sample (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2021).

Data collection instruments include a coding sheet to collect data, using codes to symbolically represent portions of language-based or visual data (Taherdoost, 2021). The units of analysis include online Nigerian newspapers and their articles focusing on COVID-19 fear appeal messages. Data-coding modes include manifest, latent, deductive, and inductive coding. Intercoder reliability is assessed through reliability coefficients like Holsti's technique to ensure the dependability and validity of the coding process (Khaldi, 2017).

Qualitative analysis involves thematic analysis to identify fear appeal messages in the COVID-19 pandemic coverage by selected online Nigerian newspapers. The study examines the sources of these messages and the strategies used and employs rhetorical discourse analysis to explore how these messages are constructed and communicated, focusing on language, rhetorical strategies and underlying ideologies within the context.

The interceder reliability is assessed through reliability coefficients like Holsti's technique, ensuring the dependability and validity of the coding process.

Calculate Initial Agreement

Number of agreements (C) = 1200

Total number of coding decisions made by each coder (N1 = N2) = 1483

Apply Holsti's formula as follows:

$$P = \frac{2C}{N1 + N2}$$

$$P = \frac{2 \times 1200}{1483 + 1483}$$

$$P = \frac{2 \times 1200}{1483 + 1483}$$

$$P = \frac{2400}{2966}$$

$$P = \frac{142,500}{35,626}$$

$$P = 0.8095$$

The coefficient of reliability (ρ) is approximately 0.8095, indicating substantial agreement between the two coders in identifying the fear appeal messages in the sampled articles (Khaldi, 2017). A coefficient of reliability above 0.70 is generally considered acceptable for content analysis studies; therefore, this study demonstrates a high level of reliability in identifying fear appeal messages within the analyzed articles.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section examines data sourced from four prominent Nigerian newspapers—*Blueprint*, *Daily Trust*, *the Sun*, and *Vanguard*—centering on COVID-19 fear appeal messages in online Nigerian newspapers. The research scope covers a year, from March 1, 2020, to February 28, 2021, aligning with the global and Nigerian surge in COVID-19 cases.

Fear appeal Messages in the Reportage of the COVID-19 Pandemic by the Selected Online Nigerian Newspapers

The following are examples of COVID-19-related fear appeal messages in COVID-19 reported in *Blueprint*, *Daily Trust*, *The Sun*, and *Vanguard*. The component of threat has the following: The headline "Coronavirus: 9 doctors confirmed dead" highlights the severe impact of COVID-19 on healthcare

workers(*Blueprint*, March 26, 2020). The confirmed deaths of medical professionals served as a fear appeal, emphasizing the threat to those on the front lines. The headline “FG Scrambles for Oxygen as COVID-19 Deaths Rise” underscores the strain on health care resources due to increasing deaths from COVID-19(*Daily Trust*, July 14, 2020). This fear appeal aims to raise awareness about the overwhelmed health care system.

The headline “Breaking News: Borno announces total lockdown following first COVID-19 case” emphasizes government warnings and regulations (*The Sun*, April 20, 2020). This fear appeal aimed to convey urgency for preventing further spread of the disease after the initial case. The headline “UK coronavirus strain detected in at least 60 countries — WHO” highlights the global spread of the UK strain (*Vanguard* 20, 2021). This fear appeal underscores the challenges of containment efforts.

The component of efficacy has the following: The headline “NBMA cautions Nigerians as COVID-19 spreads into communities – DG” aligns with the expert recommendations of the *Blueprint* (April 20, 2020). This efficacy appraisal encourages community adherence to guidelines for mitigating COVID-19 spread. The headline “COVID-19: How Lockdown Benefits the Country—Medical Experts” emphasizes the health benefits resulting from lockdown measures (*Daily Trust*, March 31, 2020). This efficacy appeal promotes response efficacy by advocating for adherence.

The headline “Breaking News: 3 COVID-19 patients discharged in Abuja” shares real-life success stories (*The Sun*, April 15, 2020). Discharging patients reflects successful recovery and treatment efficacy, instilling hope in the community. The headline “COVID-19: Ban church, mosque worships for 40 days, Buhari’s campaign director tells FG” advocates for time-sensitive action (*Vanguard*, March 16, 2020). Suspending religious gatherings underscore timely prevention to enhance response efficacy.

Sources Responsible for Disseminating COVID-19 Fear Appeal Messages

Some of the fear appeal messages in the published newspaper articles originated from government sources. In the *Blueprint* article dated August 13, 2020, the fear appeal message with the headline “Resurgence of COVID-19 infection among health workers worrisome—Minister” is attributed to the Minister, indicating governmental concern over public health. Additionally, a report from *The Sun* on March 26, 2020, with the headline “COVID 19: 6 recoveries may be discharged today—Lagos health commissioner” was also sourced from government channels, specifically the Lagos health commissioner.

Some of the fear appeal messages in the provided newspaper articles originated from health organizations, particularly the WHO and the Nigerian NCDC. For instance, an article from *The Sun* on April 20, 2020, with the headline “Breaking News: COVID-19: NCDC confirms 38 new cases; death toll hits 22” is also sourced from health organizations, indicating the ongoing monitoring and reporting of the pandemic’s impact. Additionally, an article from *Vanguard* dated March 26, 2020 with the headline “COVID-19: Rivers records case; Nigeria’s total rises to 51—NCDC” reports on the rise in COVID-19 cases in Nigeria, highlighting the organization’s role in providing updates on the spread of the virus and highlighting the relevance and credibility of this source.

The fear appeal messages in the newspaper articles also originated from journalists reporting on various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. An article from *The Sun* on April 10, 2020, with the headline “Lockdown: Ilorin residents” besiege gas stations” and another from *Vanguard* on June 4, 2020, with the headline “Cameroon government under fire as COVID-19 tally rises” are also attributed to journalists.

The fear appeal messages in the published newspaper articles originated from medical experts who have expertise and authority in public health matters. In an article from the *Blueprint* dated March 26, 2020, titled “Coronavirus: 9 doctors confirmed dead,” medical experts confirmed the deaths of doctors due to COVID-19,

highlighting the severity of the pandemic. Similarly, a report from the *Daily Trust* on April 15, 2020, titled “COVID-19 Lockdown Violation: Fear Heightens over Community Transmission in States,” featured experts expressing concern over community transmission resulting from lockdown violations.

Some of the fear appeal messages in the newspaper articles originated from patients who had experienced COVID-19 firsthand. In an article from *Blueprint*, June 4, 2020, titled “COVID-19 Patient Shares Journey: Navigating Symptoms, Treatment, and Recovery,” a COVID-19 patient provided a personal account detailing their experience with the disease. A report from *Vanguard*, May 20, 2020, entitled “We Survived!” My wife and I came face-to-face with death—Okupe, COVID-19 survivor,” shares the personal story of a COVID-19 survivor and their near-death experience.

Fear Appeal Strategies used in the Reportage of COVID-19 Pandemic by Selected Online Nigerian Newspapers

Rhetorical Devices and Strategies: Articles from government sources employ techniques such as parallelism, alliteration, and the use of numerical data to enhance persuasiveness and capture audience attention. For instance, in the *Vanguard* article titled “Lagos COVID-19 cases near 48,000” (January 30, 2021), the repetition of the “C” sound creates a rhythmic effect, and the use of numbers in the *Daily Trust* article “587 Persons in Kano in 5 Weeks” (June 9, 2020) emphasizes the magnitude of the situation.

Articles from health organizations also use rhetorical devices such as parallelism, alliteration, and metaphor, as seen in *The Sun*’s article “Breaking News: COVID-19: NCDC confirms 38 new cases; death toll hits 22” (April 20, 2020), where the repetition of the “C” sound and the use of numbers create a persuasive impact. Journalists’ articles utilize metaphors and alliteration, as in *The Sun*’ report “Lockdown: Ilorin residents besiege gas stations” (April 10, 2020), where the use of “besiege” and the alliteration in “Lockdown: Ilorin Residents” enhance the persuasiveness and memorability of the report. Articles from health experts employ numerical data, alliteration, and emotionally charged language, as seen in the *Blueprint* article “Coronavirus: 9 doctors confirmed dead” (March 26, 2020) and the *Vanguard* article “take COVID-19 prevention advisories seriously” (December 15, 2020), to appeal to both logos and pathos.

Articles from patients use personal narratives and anecdotes to evoke empathy and emotional responses from readers, as exemplified by the *Daily Trust* article “COVID-19 Survivor” (March 31, 2020) and the *Vanguard* article “We Survived!” (May 20, 2020).

Argumentation and Persuasion: Government sources construct arguments by presenting claims supported by evidence, such as the *Daily Trust* article “587 Persons in Kano in 5 Weeks” (June 9, 2020), which emphasizes the death toll to persuade readers to take preventive measures. Health organizations’ arguments are also evidence-based, highlighting the vulnerability of healthcare workers, high infection rates and rising death tolls to persuade readers, as seen in *The Sun*’s report (April 20, 2020). Journalists’ arguments focus on the consequences of non-compliance with COVID-19 regulations, using fear appeals to urge readers to adhere to safety measures. Experts’ arguments leverage the authority and credibility of medical professionals to underscore the importance of following preventive protocols, emphasizing ethos. Patients’ arguments draw on their personal experiences, providing vivid accounts to persuade readers of the seriousness of the disease and the need for preventive measures, appealing to ethos.

Discursive Strategies: Fear appeal messages framed by government sources position governmental entities as authoritative voices on pandemic-related issues, enhancing the credibility of the messages. The fear appeal messages attributed to health organizations like the WHO and NCDC are framed to position these entities as authoritative sources of information on COVID-19, increasing the persuasiveness of the messages. By

attributing fear appeal messages to medical experts, the articles frame these professionals as credible sources of information, enhancing the persuasiveness of the messages. The framing of COVID-19 as a serious threat shapes audiences' attitudes and behaviors. Fear appeal messages attributed to patients with COVID-19 frame the pandemic in a more relatable and humanized way, fostering empathy and enhancing the persuasiveness of the messages.

Audience Analysis: The fear appeal messages were tailored to resonate with audiences concerned about the spread and impact of COVID-19, particularly health care workers, policymakers, and the public. The articles address the concerns and interests of individuals seeking accurate and reliable information about the pandemic's impact on public health.

Contextual Factors: The fear appeal messages are situated within the broader sociocultural and political context of the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting the evolving nature of the crisis and the ongoing efforts to combat its spread and mitigate its impact on society. Health organizations, governments, and medical experts play crucial roles in informing the public and shaping response to the pandemic.

Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the findings of the study, which examines the role of media in emergency pandemic response, specifically focusing on the analysis of fear appeal messages in the reportage of the COVID-19 pandemic by online Nigerian newspapers (*Blueprint*, *Daily Trust*, *the Sun*, and *Vanguard*) from March 1, 2020, to February 28, 2021. The discussion is structured around the three research questions that guided our inquiry.

1. What were the fear appeal messages in the reportage of the COVID-19 pandemic by the selected online Nigerian newspapers?

The selected online Nigerian newspapers—*Blueprint*, *Daily Trust*, *the Sun*, and *Vanguard*—employed fear appeal strategies to communicate the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fear appeal in health communication is a common strategy that aims to elicit a fear response to promote preventive behavior. The fear appeal in these reports largely focuses on the threat component, emphasizing the dangers posed by the virus, and the efficacy component, encouraging adherence to health guidelines to mitigate these dangers.

The threat component in fear appeal messages is designed to highlight the severity and susceptibility associated with a particular health issue, in this case, COVID-19. The headlines such as “Coronavirus: 9 doctors confirmed dead” (*Blueprint*, March 26, 2020) and “FG Scrambles for Oxygen as COVID-19 Deaths Rise” (*Daily Trust*, July 14, 2020) are potent examples of fear appeals. These headlines highlight the threat posed by COVID-19 to healthcare workers and the general population by emphasizing the rising death toll and the strain on health care resources.

The theoretical foundation of these messages aligns with the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM). According to Witte (1992), fear appeals can be effective if they successfully balance the perceived severity and susceptibility of the threat with the audience's belief in their ability to effectively respond to the threat (self-efficacy) and the effectiveness of the recommended response (response efficacy). The reported stories demonstrate the high severity of the threat, which can motivate the audience to engage in protective behavior, provided they believe in the efficacy of the recommended actions.

In contrast to the threat component, the efficacy component focuses on providing the audience with actionable steps to mitigate the perceived threat. For instance, headlines like “NBMA cautions Nigerians as COVID-19 spreads into communities – DG” (*Blueprint*, April 20, 2020) and “COVID-19: How Lockdown Benefits the Country – Medical Experts” (*Daily Trust*, March 31, 2020) emphasize the importance of following guidelines such as lockdowns and community precautions.

The efficacy appeals in these reports correspond to Persuasion Theory, which posits that persuasive communication must not only make the audience aware of a problem but also convince them that the proposed solution is effective (Talavira, 2022). The reports thus aim to persuade the public that adhering to government and health expert recommendations will protect them from the dangers highlighted in the threat component.

2. Which sources were responsible for disseminating fear appeal messages in the reportage of the COVID-19 pandemic by selected online Nigerian newspapers?

The sources of the fear appeal messages varied, including government officials, health organizations like the WHO and NCDC, journalists, medical experts, and patients with COVID-19. Each source's credibility played a significant role in how the message was received. For example, government sources provided a sense of authority, while health organizations and medical experts lent scientific credibility to the reports. On the other hand, personal accounts from patients with COVID-19 helped to humanize the threat, making it relatable and thus persuasive.

This approach is consistent with findings from similar studies that indicate the source of a message can significantly influence its persuasiveness (Rubinelli, 2018). Credibility, expertise, and relatability are key factors that enhance the impact of fear appeal messages.

3. What fear appeal strategies were used in the reportage of COVID-19 pandemic by selected online Nigerian newspapers?

Rhetorical Devices and Persuasive Strategies: The newspapers employed various rhetorical devices such as alliteration, parallelism, and the strategic use of numerical data to enhance the persuasiveness of their messages. For example, the repeated “C” sound in the headline “Lagos COVID-19 cases near 48,000” (*Vanguard*, January 30, 2021) not only makes the headline more memorable but also emphasizes the severity of the situation. These strategies are consistent with the literature on the use of rhetorical devices in persuasion, which suggests that such techniques can make messages more compelling and memorable (Perloff, 2020).

Discursive and Argumentative Strategies: The discursive strategies used in these articles often framed the government, health organizations, and medical experts as authoritative voices, thus enhancing the credibility of the fear appeal messages. This aligns with the EPPM’s emphasis on perceived efficacy—messages from credible sources are more likely to be perceived as effective, thus leading to the desired protective behaviors (Witte, 1992).

Audience and Contextual Factors: The fear appeal messages were designed to resonate with a broad audience, including health care workers, policymakers, and the public. The contextual factors, such as the ongoing spread of COVID-19 and the efforts to contain it, influenced the framing of these messages. This reflects the broader socio-cultural and political environment in which these reports were published, where fear appeals were used as a tool to encourage compliance with public health measures.

Critical Perspective: Although fear appeals can be effective, it is crucial to consider the potential for these messages to cause undue panic or anxiety. The power dynamics in the dissemination of these messages may also reflect underlying agendas, such as government efforts to enforce compliance or health organizations’ attempts to maintain public trust during a crisis. Therefore, it is essential to critically analyze these messages to ensure they are balanced and do not exploit fear for ulterior motives.

Conclusion

The fear appeal messages in the reportage of the COVID-19 pandemic by selected online Nigerian newspapers effectively utilized the components of threat and efficacy to persuade the public to adopt preventive measures. By citing credible sources and employing various rhetorical and discursive strategies, these newspapers contributed to the public’s understanding of the severity of the pandemic and the importance of adhering to

health guidelines. However, it is essential to critically assess the impact of these messages to ensure that they are constructive and do not lead to unnecessary panic.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

1. Online Nigerian newspaper outlets should ensure a balanced presentation of threat and efficacy components in their fear appeal messages. While it is crucial to communicate the severity of threats like COVID-19, equal emphasis should be placed on the efficacy of protective measures to empower the audience with actionable steps.
2. Online Nigerian newspapers should consistently use credible sources, such as government officials, health organizations, and medical experts, when reporting fear appeal messages. It is also important to clearly attribute information to these sources to maintain transparency and trustworthiness.
3. Journalists and media organizations should adopt ethical guidelines when crafting and disseminating fear appeal messages. They should avoid exaggeration or sensationalism that may lead to public panic and ensure that the messages are constructive and informative.

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