ANALYSIS OF FEAR APPEAL MESSAGES IN SELECTED NIGERIAN NEWSPAPERS REPORTING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

This study examines the reportage of the COVID-19 pandemic in selected Nigerian newspapers. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has had a significant impact on global health, making it crucial to understand how media outlets reported the issue. The objectives of this study were to determine the frequency of fear appeal messages, identify their components, and assess the balance between threat and efficacy. The study focused on four purposively selected newspapers: Blueprint, Daily Trust, The Sun, and Vanguard. The study population comprised 7,415 COVID-19-related articles published between March 1, 2020, and February 28, 2021. Findings revealed the widespread use of fear appeal messages across newspapers. Furthermore, both the threat and efficacy components were present, with a slight dominance of threat appeals. Reporting by newspapers showed a modest imbalance, favouring threat over efficacy. The study concludes that Nigerian newspapers significantly contributed to shaping the public perception of the pandemic through fear-based reporting. It recommends, among other things, that future health crisis communication in newspapers should strengthen the balance between the components of threat and efficacy to promote responsible public behaviour.

Introduction

Throughout history, pandemics and epidemics have posed persistent threats to human survival, significantly shaping health systems, societies, and economies. Infectious disease outbreaks such as the 1918 Spanish

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influenza, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the Ebola outbreaks in West Africa, and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrate the recurring global challenge of public health crises. These crises demand coordinated interventions, with communication playing a central role in shaping public understanding, compliance with safety measures, and trust in health authorities (Toppenberg-Pejcic et al., 2018).

Communication in public health crises has been widely recognized as crucial to preparedness, response and recovery. Health communication has emerged as a vital tool for mitigating risks, fostering awareness, and mobilizing collective action during emergencies (Pieri, 2019). Health communication seeks to address not only the dissemination of medical facts but also the social and psychological dimensions of crises. Health communication helps counter misinformation, reduce uncertainty, and encourage communities to adopt protective behaviors by providing timely and accurate information (Ophir, 2018).

The COVID-19 outbreak in December 2019 underscored the importance of effective communication. Declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the World Health Organization (WHO) in January 2020, the pandemic rapidly spread across the globe, disrupting economic, social, and political systems (WHO, 2021). In Nigeria, the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC, 2021) reported 155,657 confirmed cases and 1,907 deaths by February 28, 2021. Governments and health authorities responded with lockdowns, travel restrictions, and public health campaigns. Meanwhile, the media became indispensable in relaying crucial information and shaping public compliance with safety measures.

The media's role in pandemics extends beyond information dissemination; it also frames narratives, influences risk perception, and contributes to behavioral change (Garfin et al., 2020). Historical evidence shows that media reporting during crises affects the extent of public anxiety and the willingness of the public to adhere to official guidelines. During the COVID-19 pandemic, both traditional and digital media channels in Nigeria provided real-time updates, clarified misconceptions, and reported on government policies (News Agency of Nigeria, 2020). However, the manner in which these media outlets communicated risk, particularly through fear appeal strategies, remains a subject of growing scholarly attention.

Fear appeal is a persuasive communication technique that highlights the severity of a threat and the audience's susceptibility to it, with the aim of motivating protective behaviors (Witte, 1992). Two influential frameworks, namely, the Protection Motivation Theory (Rogers, 1975) and the Extended Parallel Process Model (Witte, 1992), suggest that fear-inducing messages can be effective if they balance perceived threats with clear, actionable solutions. However, excessive fear without efficacy information may backfire, leading to panic, denial, or resistance. Fear appeals thus present both opportunities and risks in public health crises (Tannenbaum et al., 2015).

Despite growing scholarship on media and pandemics globally, there remains limited empirical research on how Nigerian newspapers specifically used fear appeal strategies in their COVID-19 reporting and what implications this had for public perception and behavioral response. Most existing studies focus on social media misinformation or general media coverage trends, leaving a gap in understanding the nuanced role of fear appeal in Nigerian print and digital journalism. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the use of fear appeal in the reporting of COVID-19 in selected Nigerian newspapers.

Problem Statement

The corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak in late 2019 became a global health crisis, generating fear, uncertainty, and socioeconomic disruption (WHO, 2020). In Nigeria, newspapers played a key role in disseminating information on the virus, safety protocols, and government interventions, frequently using fear appeal messages to stress the severity and consequences of the pandemic and promote compliance. While such messages can increase vigilance, overreliance may also trigger panic, mistrust, or message fatigue (Olapegba et

al., 2020; Garfin, Silver, & Holman, 2020). Although previous studies have examined fear appeals in online media or cross-national contexts (Ng, 2022; Jia & Zhao, 2023), little research has explored how Nigerian newspapers, both print and online, employed fear appeals, balanced threat and efficacy, or influenced public trust. This study addresses this gap by investigating the frequency and components of fear appeal messages in COVID-19 coverage and assessing the balance between threat and efficacy.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to assess fear appeal messages in selected Nigerian newspapers in reporting the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's specific objectives are as follows:

1.   Examine the frequency of fear appeal messages in reporting the COVID-19 pandemic in selected Nigerian newspapers.

2.   Ascertain the presence of the components of fear appeal messages in reporting the COVID-19 pandemic in selected Nigerian newspapers.

3.   Assess the extent to which fear appeal message components were balanced in Nigerian newspapers' reporting of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Review of the Related Literature

Frequency of Fear Appeal Messages in Reporting the COVID-19 Pandemic

Fear appeals highlight threats that provoke anxiety and motivate protective behaviors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigerian newspapers frequently highlighted fatalities, overwhelmed hospitals, and infection risks. While such frames drew attention to the crisis, they also risked fostering excessive fear and distress. The balance between urgency and reassurance was often skewed.

Apuke and Omar (2020) found that 81.8% of newspaper reports adopted an alarming tone, compared with only 5.9% neutral and 12.3% reassuring. Although effective in capturing attention, this dominance of fear-heavy reporting created anxiety without providing coping strategies. Similarly, Nwakpu et al. (2020) noted that reports focused on fatalities and government actions, sidelining solution-oriented content. Such an overemphasis on threat undermined public trust.

Tannenbaum et al. (2015) observed that threat components were strongly represented, whereas efficacy messages were underreported. This imbalance conveyed urgency but failed to provide actionable reassurance. The Extended Parallel Process Model (Witte, 1992) warns that fear without efficacy risks avoidance or denial. Thus, although newspapers heightened anxiety, they did not always guide adaptive behavior.

Taylor (2019) argued that prolonged exposure to fear appeals induces psychological fatigue. Nigerian reporting, while initially justified in stressing severity, risked desensitization and panic when overused. The literature consistently demonstrates excessive reliance on alarmist framing at the expense of balance. Overall, fear appeals dominated coverage but weakened public engagement.

Components of Fear Appeal Messages in Reporting the COVID-19 Pandemic

Fear-appeal messages rely on severity, susceptibility, response efficacy, and self-efficacy (Witte, 1992; Witte & Allen, 2000). In COVID-19 reporting, this meant highlighting the seriousness of the disease, who was at risk, and practical preventive measures. Fear appeals work best when efficacy accompanies threat (Tannenbaum et al., 2015). Without this balance, audiences may deny or avoid messages.

Apuke and Omar (2020) revealed that Nigerian newspapers relied heavily on alarming tones, emphasizing case counts and fatalities. These represented severity and susceptibility but offered little actionable guidance. While vigilance increased, overexposure to dread undermined compliance. Audiences needed clarity on practical measures, not just risks.

Nwakpu et al. (2020) confirmed that crisis and conflict frames outweighed constructive narratives. Reports highlight official warnings but rarely translate risks into everyday coping practices. Similarly, Gever and Ezeah (2020) noted that warnings lacked procedural detail, weakening their impact. Low efficacy cues diluted the persuasive potential of fear appeals.

A meta-analysis by Tannenbaum et al. (2015) showed that efficacy is a crucial moderator of fear appeals. Nigerian newspapers, however, prioritized immediacy over instruction, leading to confusion during shifting government policies (Apuke & Omar, 2020). While stressing danger may have been necessary at first, it was unsustainable. Thus, Nigerian coverage leaned heavily on threats, neglecting empowering messages.

Extent to which Fear Appeal Message Components Were Balanced in Reporting the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Extended Parallel Process Model (Witte, 1992) stresses that both threat and efficacy must be present for persuasive outcomes. Maladaptive responses such as denial or fatalism occur when the media heightens threats without efficacy (Witte & Allen, 2000). However, Nigerian newspapers leaned heavily on threat-based reporting. This imbalance limited constructive behavioral outcomes.

Apuke and Omar (2020) found that alarming tones dominated, while sensitization and education were "sparingly covered." Similarly, Nwakpu et al. (2020) noted that crisis frames overshadowed explanatory content. Gever and Ezeah (2020) reported that anticipatory guidance was missing, leaving audiences unprepared. Asogwa, Ojih, and Eze (2021) added that vaccine reportage prioritized official statements over practical uptake informaton.

This imbalance globally mirrors broader journalism patterns. Heo and Lee (2024) showed that newsrooms often overemphasize fatality counts while underreporting efficacy cues. Nigerian coverage was not an anomaly but part of systemic crisis-reporting practices. However, its local effects were profound.

Ochu et al. (2022) linked changing risk perception to media emphasis, whereas Babafunke et al. (2022) showed that efficacy strongly shaped compliance. Gidado et al. (2024) found that efficacy beliefs correlated with preventive behaviors among vulnerable groups. The event-driven reliance on official sources by Nigerian newspapers created a high-threat/low-efficacy mix (Apuke & Omar, 2020). Such reporting heightened awareness but often left audiences anxious, uncertain, or avoidant.

Empirical Review

Moussaoui et al. (2021) investigated fear appeals in online health courses on non-communicable disease prevention and found that fear alone had little effect on behavioral intentions, whereas perceived efficacy strongly predicted behavioral change, highlighting the need to pair fear with efficacy. Similarly, Nwaoboli and Asemah (2021) found that Nigerian online newspapers' COVID-19 vaccination coverage relied on fear framing that often used exploitative tactics rather than balanced persuasion, and Carey and Sarma (2016) showed in road safety messaging that high-threat appeals only reduced unsafe behavior when combined with efficacy, confirming the Extended Parallel Process Model's (EPPM) principle that threat alone is insufficient. However, these studies were either experimental, digital-focused, or contextually distinct from newspaper reporting on the pandemic, leaving gaps in understanding mainstream media practices during real crises.

Taken together, these findings indicate that when paired with efficacy, fear appeals influence public perception and behavior most effectively. However, little is known about how Nigerian newspapers, as key agenda-setters, employed fear appeals across multiple pandemic-related issues. This study addresses this gap by systematically analyzing the frequency, components and balance of fear appeals in Nigerian newspapers' coverage of COVID-19, providing insights into their role in shaping public perception and guiding protective behaviors.

Theoretical Framework

Extended Parallel Process Model

The EPPM explains how individuals respond to fear appeals by balancing perceived threat (severity and susceptibility) with perceived efficacy (SEL and RE) (Witte, 1992; Witte & Allen, 2000). This framework supports the study's first objective by assessing whether Nigerian newspaper coverage of COVID-19 included both threat and efficacy components and whether fear appeals prompted danger control behaviors, such as mask-wearing and social distancing, or maladaptive fear control responses, such as denial and avoidance (Nwafor & Nwafor, 2020). It also informs the second objective, emphasizing that effective fear-based messages must combine threat with clear, actionable solutions to empower readers, including guidance on hygiene, vaccination, and isolation practices (Popova, 2012; Shirahmadi et al., 2020).

Moreover, EPPM highlights gaps that this study addresses, as most prior applications focus on Western contexts with limited insight into how developing countries' newspapers balance threat and efficacy during crises. Factors of cultural and media literacy that shape message reception in Nigeria remain underexplored. By applying EPPM to Nigerian newspaper reportage, the study fulfills its third objective of evaluating how the interplay of threat and efficacy in media messages may have influenced public behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Health Belief Model

The HBM highlights perceived susceptibility, severity, benefits, barriers, and cues to action as key determinants of health behavior (Rosenstock, 1950; Zartaloudi, 2022). This supports the study's first objective of examining how Nigerian newspapers framed COVID-19 fear appeals to raise awareness of risk and motivate compliance with preventive measures such as hygiene, social distancing, and mask use. It also informs the second objective by emphasizing cues to action, showing that effective messages must provide clear instructions, reminders, and authoritative guidance to enable protective behavior, while addressing barriers such as misinformation or vaccine hesitancy (Dumbadze et al., 2022).

Despite its strengths, HBM's focus on individual cognition leaves gaps in contexts such as Nigeria, where socio-cultural, religious, and communal factors strongly shape health behavior. Its rational decision-making assumption also struggles to account for emotional and dynamic responses during a pandemic (Development Study of HBM Scale, 2021). To address these limitations, the study applies the HBM alongside EPPM to evaluate whether Nigerian newspapers' fear appeal messages effectively balanced threat and efficacy cues, overcame barriers, and promoted adaptive public responses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative content analysis to examine fear appeals in Nigerian newspaper coverage of COVID-19 from March 1, 2020, to February 28, 2021. The population consisted of all COVID-19-related articles in four purposively selected national dailies—Blueprint, Daily Trust, The Sun, and Vanguard—chosen for their prominence, credibility, and strong online presence. The study focused on items containing fear appeal elements, and purposive and systematic sampling was used to narrow the corpus for detailed analysis.

Of the 9,301 COVID-19-related articles, 7,415 contained fear appeal messages (Blueprint: 1,793; Daily Trust: 1,961; The Sun: 1,643; Vanguard: 2,018). The sampled items included news reports, features, editorials, and opinion pieces. Units of observation encompassed headlines, subheadings, quotes, body texts, visuals, and messaging strategies, all analyzed for explicit and implicit fear appeal content. Fear appeals were categorized into threat (severity, susceptibility) and efficacy (response efficacy, self-efficacy) components, operationalized across multiple dimensions such as health impacts, community spread, preventive measures and confidence in adopting protective behaviors.

A structured coding sheet and codebook derived from the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) and existing literature on fear appeals guided the data collection was. Four coding approaches—manifest, latent, deductive, and inductive ensured the capture of both explicit and symbolic content. Quantitative findings were presented in frequency tables and percentages to reveal threat and efficacy framing patterns. Validity and reliability were ensured through expert review, pilot testing, and multiple coders, with inter-coder reliability confirmed via Cohen's kappa and Holsti's coefficient ($\rho \approx 0.81$), indicating substantial agreement. Regular coder discussions and expert validation strengthened the analysis's accuracy.

Data presentation and analysis

This section presents and analyzes the data sourced from the selected newspapers in Nigeria —*Blueprint, Daily Trust, The Sun*, and *Vanguard*—centered on the reportage of fear appeal messages on the COVID-19 pandemic in selected Nigerian newspapers.

Table 1

Frequency of Fear Appeal Messages in Reporting the COVID-19 Pandemic in Selected Nigerian Newspapers

Fear Appeal in COVID-19 Pandemic Reports	Newspaper									
	Blueprint		Daily Trust		The Sun		Vanguard		Total Frequency	
	N	%	N %		N	%	N	%	N	%
Number of COVID-19 pandemic reports Appeal Messages Without Fear	439 19.6		468 19.2		437 21.0		542	21.1	1,886	20.2
Number of Fear Appeal Messages in Reports of the COVID-19 Pandemic	1793 80.3		1961 80.7		1643 78.9		2,018 78.8		7,415	79.7
Number of COVID-19 pandemic reports	**2,232 100**		**2,429 100**		**2,080 100**		**2,560 100**		**9,301 100**	

Source: *Content Analysis 2020-2021*

Table1 shows that *Blueprint, Daily Trust, The Sun,* and *Vanguard* published 9,301 COVID-19-related articles from March 1, 2020, to February 28, 2021. Of these, 7,415 (79.7%) contained fear appeal messages, highlighting the strong reliance on this communication strategy. Nigerian newspapers deliberately framed the pandemic to emphasize its severity and urgency, reflecting a socio-cultural context where emotionally charged narratives effectively encourage caution and compliance with preventive measures.

While fear appeals raised awareness and promoted adherence to guidelines, excessive use carried risks. Overemphasis on threats could increase anxiety, panic, and mistrust, especially in a society facing economic challenges and misinformation. The impact varied across socio-economic and political lines, literacy, cultural values, and audience affiliations shaped responses. Thus, newspapers played a dual role: informing the public while politically influencing government action, yet risking disillusionment if fear was overused.

Fear appeals also had economic consequences. Compliance with health protocols may reduce transmission, support reopening, and stability. Conversely, heightened fear could deter informal sector activity, lowering

spending and slowing recovery. Sustained reliance on fear messaging risked desensitization, reducing responsiveness to future warnings. The 79.7% prevalence of fear appeals underscores the media's strategic role, but balanced messaging combining threat, empowerment, and actionable guidance is essential to maintain public trust and ensure health and economic resilience.

Table 2

Fear Appeal Messages on the Component of Threat in Reporting the COVID-19 Pandemic

Threat Appraisal	Newspaper									
	Blueprint		Daily Trust		The Sun		Vanguard		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Severity of the Threat										
Health impacts and fatalities	84	8.7	131	12.3	73	8.1	122	10.9	410	10.1
Overwhelmed health care system	41	4.2	333.1		71	7.9	62	5.5	2075.1	
Economic and social disruption	56	5.8	75	7.1	57	6.4	82	7.3	270	6.7
Warnings and regulations	40	4.1	56	5.3	42	4.6	62	5.5	200	4.9
Global spread	26	2.7	35	3.3	36	4.0	39	3.5	136	3.3
New variants and mutations	20	2.1	19	1.8	16	1.8	17	1.5	72	1.8
Lack of effective treatment	17	1.8	23	2.2	20	2.2	23	2.1	83	2.1
Susceptibility to the Threat										
Community spread and local transmission	185	19.1	180	17.0	127	14.2	187	16.6	679	16.7
Lack of immunity and vaccination	160	16.5	132	12.4	149	16.6	165	14.7	606	14.9
High-transmission environments	111	11.5	106	10.0	89	10.0	109	9.7	41510.2	
Underlying health conditions	124	12.8	125	11.8	106	11.9	96	8.6	45111.1	
Asymptomatic spread	57	5.9	70	6.6	49	5.5	68	6.1	2446.0	
Behavioral risk factors	46	4.8	76	7.2	59	6.6	90	8.0	271	6.7
Total	**967**	**100**	**1,061**	**100**	**894**	**100**	**1,122**	**100**	**4,044**	**100**

Source: *Content Analysis 2020-2021*

Table 2 shows that four newspapers—*Blueprint, Daily Trust, The Sun,* and *Vanguard*—published 4,044 instances of fear appeal messages related to COVID-19 from March 1, 2020, to February 28, 2021. Messages emphasizing community transmission (679, 16.7%), underlying health conditions (429, 10.5%), high

transmission environments (451, 11.1%), and behavioral risk factors (271, 6.7%) highlight the newspapers' strategic focus on severity and susceptibility, aiming to inform and motivate collective responsibility. Health impacts, fatalities, and socioeconomic disruptions (270, 6.7%) further underscore the pandemic's urgency within Nigeria's sociocultural context.

The newspapers also highlighted governmental measures (200, 4.9%), global spread (136, 3.3%), vaccination and lack of immunity (606, 14.9%), new variants (72, 1.8%), and absence of definitive treatment (83, 2.1%), reflecting the media's dual role in public health education and political accountability. By disseminating this information, the media reinforced compliance with official directives, fostered public discourse on health care preparedness, and emphasized the interconnectedness of health and socio-economic stability. Simultaneously, overreliance on fear-based messaging risked panic, desensitization, and mistrust toward authorities.

Table 3

Fear Appeal Messages on the Component of Efficacy Threat in Reporting the COVID-19 Pandemic

Efficacy Appraisal	Newspaper									
	Blueprint		Daily Trust		The Sun		Vanguard		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Response Efficacy										
Experts' recommendations	104	12.9	131	14.6	100	13.3	150	16.7	485	14.3
Health Benefits of Adherence	109	13.1	115	12.7	120	16.0	104	11.6	448	12.9
Real-life success stories	67	8.1	50	5.5	58	7.7	67	7.5	242	7.1
Time-sensitive action	89	10.8	103	11.4	70	9.3	73	8.1	335	9.9
Efficacy of protective measures	95	11.5	92	10.2	83	11.1	121	13.5	391	11.5
Self-Efficacy										
Step-by-Step guidance	106	12.8	105	11.6	79	10.5	101	11.2	391	11.5
Adaptability to daily life	63	7.6	90	10.0	70	9.3	77	8.6	300	8.8
Supportive environment	55	6.7	70	7.8	43	5.7	58	6.5	226	6.7
Overcoming barriers	67	8.1	61	6.8	67	8.9	70	7.8	265	7.8
Building confidence	71	8.6	83	9.2	59	7.9	75	8.4	288	8.5
Total	**826**	**100**	**900**	**100**	**749**	**100**	**896**	**100**	**3,371**	**100**

Source: *Content Analysis 2020-2021*

The analysis of efficacy components in 3,371 COVID-19 fear appeal messages across *Blueprint, Daily Trust, The Sun,* and *Vanguard* highlights a strategic media focus on response efficacy. Expert recommendations were featured in 485 reports (14.3%), bridging scientific knowledge and public understanding, while 448 reports (12.9%) focused on the health benefits of adherence, motivating individual and collective responsibility. Success stories (242, 7.1%) and time-sensitive action messages (335, 9.9%) further reinforced compliance, demonstrating the media's role in guiding behavior and fostering resilience in a socio-cultural context prone to misinformation and skepticism.

Media coverage also emphasized community support (226, 6.7%) and overcoming adherence barriers (265, 7.8%), reflecting an understanding of socioeconomic disparities that may affect compliance. Messages detailing the effectiveness of protective measures (391, 11.5%), step-by-step guidance (391, 11.5%), adaptability to daily life (300, 8.8%), and confidence-building (288, 8.5%) underscored the importance of psychological empowerment and practical solutions. Government-endorsed messages (485, 14.3%) and expert advice strengthened public trust, enhancing responsiveness to health protocols and balancing urgency with guidance.

The findings reveal that Nigerian newspapers integrated health, social, political, and economic considerations in their efficacy messaging. The media promoted informed decision-making, collective responsibility, and resilience by combining expert recommendations, positive outcomes, and community-focused strategies. This comprehensive approach not only educates the public but also supports compliance, strengthens social cohesion, and contributes to public health and economic stability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 4

Extent to which Fear Appeal Message Components Were Balanced in Reporting the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigerian Newspapers

Components of the Fear Appeal Messages	Newspaper				
	Blueprint	Daily Trust	The Sun	Vanguard	Total Frequency
	N %	N %	N %	N %	N %
Threat Appraisal	967 53.9	1061 54.1	894 54.5	1,122 55.6	4,044 54.4
Efficacy Appraisal	826 46.1	900 45.9	749 45.5	896 44.4	3,371 45.4
Grand Total	1,793 100	1,961 100	1,643 100	2,018 100	7,415 100

Source: *Content Analysis 2020-2021*

Table 4 shows that COVID-19 reporting in *Blueprint, Daily Trust, The Sun,* and *Vanguard* slightly prioritized threat-based messages, which accounted for 4,044 instances (54.4%), compared with 3,371 efficacy-oriented messages (45.4%). This indicates that newspapers placed marginally greater emphasis on highlighting the severity and susceptibility of the virus, aiming to alert the public to the pandemic's risks and urgency. The high proportion of threat messages underscores a media strategy that leverages fear to capture attention and convey the seriousness of COVID-19.

While threat messages dominate, the near-equivalent presence of efficacy components suggests that newspapers were also attentive to guiding the public on protective actions. Efficacy-oriented messaging, including expert recommendations, health benefits of adherence, and community support, comprises 45.4% of coverage, reflecting an effort to balance fear with actionable guidance. This balance is critical for promoting compliance without causing excessive panic, as efficacy messages empower readers to take informed steps to protect themselves and their communities.

The slight dominance of threat messaging over efficacy can be interpreted in light of Nigeria's socio-cultural context, where fear-based narratives are often highly effective in capturing attention and motivating precautionary behavior. However, the close proportion of efficacy messages indicates a conscious editorial attempt to avoid overwhelming readers with fear alone. Overall, this balance highlights a nuanced media approach that simultaneously seeks to inform, caution, and empower the public, thereby supporting both awareness and responsible action during the pandemic.

Discussion of the Findings

This study examines the role of Nigerian newspapers—*Blueprint, Daily Trust, The Sun,* and *Vanguard*—in shaping public response to the COVID-19 pandemic from March 1, 2020, to February 28, 2021, by analyzing the use of fear appeal messages. The study is guided by three major objectives addressing the prevalence of fear appeals, the nature of their components, and the extent to which these elements were balanced, providing insights into the media's strategic role in emergency public health communication.

Table 1 indicates that fear appeal messages dominated COVID-19 coverage in the selected Nigerian newspapers, with 7,415 out of 9,301 articles (79.7%) containing such messages, while only 1,886 articles (20.2%) lacked them. This high prevalence demonstrates a deliberate strategy to emphasize the pandemic's severity and urgency. The results align with studies by Nwaoboli and Asemah (2021) and Jørgensen et al. (2020), which highlight the use of fear appeals to capture audience attention, influence public behavior, and encourage adherence to health guidelines. The predominance of fear appeals reflects theoretical frameworks such as the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) and the Health Belief Model (HBM), which suggest that when paired with efficacy cues, high perceived threat can motivate preventive action.

Tables 2 and 3 show that newspapers strategically integrated both threat and efficacy components. Threat-focused messages totaled 4,044, with emphasis on community transmission (679 messages, 16.7%), underlying health conditions (429 messages, 10.5%), and socioeconomic disruptions (270 messages, 6.7%). Efficacy messages numbered 3,371, including expert recommendations (485 reports, 14.3%), health benefits of adherence (448 reports, 12.9%), step-by-step guidance (391 reports, 11.5%), motivational success stories (242 reports, 7.1%), and time-sensitive action messages (335 reports, 9.9%). By foregrounding credible sources such as the NCDC and NMA, newspapers reinforced public confidence, operationalizing the HBM constructs of perceived susceptibility, benefits and cues to action. This combination ensured that fear appeals motivated compliance without causing desensitization or undue panic, while contextualizing health behaviors within social, economic, and political realities.

Table 4 indicates moderately balanced coverage, with threat messages at 4,044 instances (54.4%) and efficacy messages at 3,371 instances (45.4%). The slight dominance of threat content reflects the emphasis of the newspapers on COVID-19 severity, mortality, susceptibility, and systemic vulnerabilities, while the efficacy messaging offered guidance to empower preventive action. This balance aligns with the EPPM, which posits that fear appeals are most effective when high perceived threat is matched with actionable efficacy cues. Newspapers fostered self-efficacy, collective responsibility, and public engagement by combining urgent threat

reporting with practical guidance, consistent with prior studies highlighting the effectiveness of balanced fear appeals in health communication (Zhao & Zhan, 2020; Obadare & Adeyemi, 2021).

Conclusion

The study concludes that Nigerian newspapers significantly shaped public discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. They extensively used fear appeal messages to highlight the seriousness of the crisis. Both the threat and efficacy components were included to guide protective actions. However, the slight emphasis on threat risked amplifying fear over reassurance.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

1. Newspapers should continue to use fear appeals but pair them with efficacy content. Emphasizing both severity and preventive measures promotes informed public response.

2. Reporting leaned slightly toward the threat despite including both components. Journalists should integrate efficacy messages to encourage proactive behavior.

3. Editors should ensure that threat and efficacy messages are proportionally represented. Content audits or checklists can help maintain this balance.

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