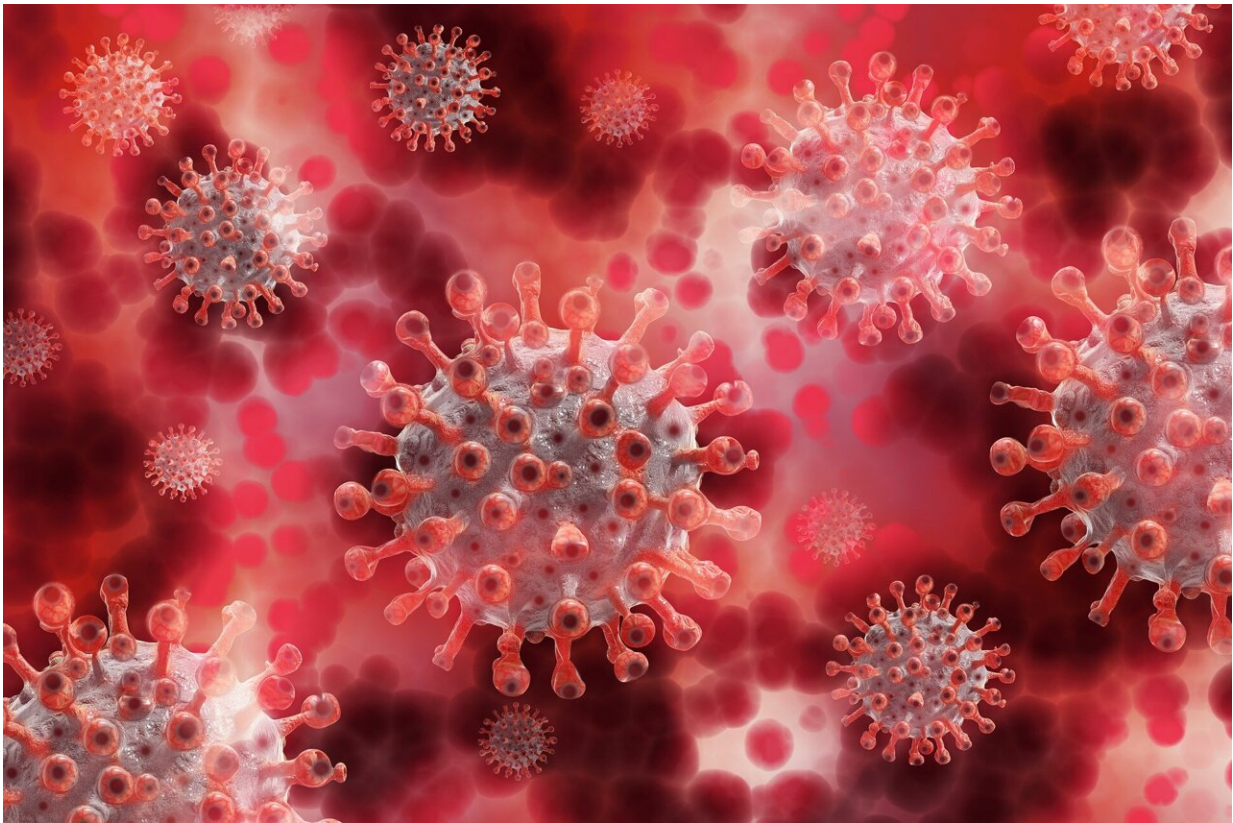


How young Nigerians' distrust of political leaders fuels COVID misinformation

February 21 2022, by Olutobi Akingbade



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Ever since the World Health Organization [declared](#) COVID-19 a global public health emergency in January 2020, there's been a need for studies that help explain what people understand by public health messages.

Research into the nuances of communication is especially important when conspiracy theories and misleading rumors about the [pandemic](#) are in circulation. Misinformation can be dangerous.

Early in the pandemic, it [appeared](#) that [younger people](#) (in their teens, 20s and 30s) had a low risk of infection with SARS-CoV-2 or severe illness with COVID-19. Yet the number of [young adults](#) getting infected did [rise](#).

Measures to contain the spread of the virus, such as physical distancing and hand hygiene, have also been a challenge in low-income communities worldwide. Residents in such communities therefore seemed to be a group at risk.

I felt it was important to [study](#) how young adults in low-income communities in Nigeria perceived news and messages about the pandemic. Hearing their responses matters because it could help counter misinformation and contribute to stopping the pandemic.

In Nigeria, public health campaigns and [preventive measures appear](#) to have played a role in reducing the rise of new infections. But [studies](#) have reported that there are also misconceptions and misinformation about COVID-19.

Social media as a priority

I enlisted 11 young adults, aged 21 to 24, who are resident in Ajegunle, a low-income community in Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital. In March and April 2020, we held focus group discussions and individual interviews, with the aim of getting in-depth qualitative information and insights.

The respondents' levels of education ranged from a high school

certificate to a college diploma. At the time of the study, they said they had some form of paid employment, but it didn't meet their basic needs.

I asked them about their thoughts on COVID-19, where and how they got updates and news stories about the pandemic, with whom they shared and discussed it, and their thoughts about the function of government agencies in mitigating the spread of the pandemic.

The findings indicate that [social media](#) platforms are central to how the young adults make sense of COVID-19 news and messages. They all referred to Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp as their primary sources for information about the pandemic. They got, and shared among themselves, both trustworthy and less reliable information from these [social media platforms](#).

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, social media were an integral part of these young adults' daily activities. Thus, it was natural for them to turn to these platforms to make sense of the pandemic. This aligns with [studies](#) that highlight the pervasiveness of social media usage among Nigerian youths.

While study participants also got some information from traditional media (print and broadcast), they often accessed it on the social media channels of these mainstream media.

Despite complaints about their financial challenges, they prioritized their ability to receive communication at all times through their social media accounts. This is even though networks and internet subscription plans are expensive for them.

Disbelief, skepticism, and sharing of misinformation

The discussions revealed respondents' varying levels of skepticism and

disbelief about COVID-19 realities. Some referred to the pandemic as "propaganda" and called the government's response "silly," "overhyped" and a "silly charade." They argued that the lockdown was an exaggerated response which was not necessary: "We defeated Ebola without locking up everywhere, so why must we foolishly copy other nations and lock everywhere down because of this overhyped propaganda?"

Respondents said the lockdown had reduced their income, or had led to loss of their jobs. Some said that even though COVID-19 was real, for them hunger was much more real and deadlier.

During the discussions, respondents downplayed the seriousness attached to the pandemic by the various media reports and government authorities.

It emerged that their skepticism and disbelief stemmed from their long-time mistrust of the political office holders conveying and enforcing decisions to combat the pandemic.

Before and during the lockdown, the participants daily experienced social inequalities and marginalization. Over the years, they have seen government's continued neglect of their community. They found it difficult to wholly accept that political office holders were suddenly interested in their welfare. Or that a total lockdown that kept them hungry for weeks was in their best interest.

Respondents said they regularly discussed COVID-19 among themselves physically and virtually through their social media platforms. Here's an example: "Like I told a friend earlier today when we chatted online, I can't be bothered about this COVID scam that these politicians have cleverly packaged to deceive and manipulate people ... they're just trying to play on our intelligence like they always do, and I've told my guys through my Whatsapp story and Facebook timeline not to believe

the scam ... I even said the same thing on Facebook while sharing a news story from Tribune's page."

Through their online posts, status updates, and other forms of social media engagement or behavior, they regularly communicated their perceptions and understandings about the pandemic.

There is a likely consequence to this. Misinformation can be amplified through social [media](#) because of people's lack of trust in the people who are leading the efforts to combat the pandemic.

Implications

The findings demonstrate how information can be interpreted within the context of a person's socio-economic realities and experiences. People who feel marginalized may be more inclined to disbelieve, neglect, or refuse to participate in efforts intended to combat it, if the efforts are spearheaded by political leaders whom they do not trust. The more vocal such people are about their stance, the more misinformation tends to thrive.

That's one reason why consistent efforts to deepen democratic values and institutions should be encouraged. The more this happens, the more trust can be established between citizens and political leaders.

Where there is trust, political leaders can rely on citizens to cooperate with public health measures.

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