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Influence of African Indigenous language media in COVID-19 digital health messaging

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic era has further energized humans to consider their health more than before, especially in the digital age when they experience a deluge of health information. This study, therefore, examined COVID-19 digital sources, health message types and how the use of African Indigenous language media enhanced people's utilization of coronavirus health messages. Using an online questionnaire and in-depth interview data collection methods, respondents received preventive COVID-19 health messages on social distancing and personal hygiene from mostly interactive digital sources, which hardly infused African Indigenous language media in the health message. However, African Indigenous languages motivated respondents to utilize COVID-19 messages, though people still spread COVID-19 fake news through Indigenous media. Nonetheless, integrating African Indigenous language media into digital health communication can confer credibility on information sources. Still, there is a need to fight the use of digital media to spread fake news.

KEYWORDS

African Indigenous language media
source credibility
information accessibility
digital health messages
COVID-19 pandemic
fake news
digital media

INTRODUCTION

Like the rest of the world, Africa has found itself in the clutch of the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020, which has necessitated creating public awareness to reduce physical and psychological effects among the people. Amidst the fear of death or the unknown in the face of climbing fatalities that people and world nations are recording in 2021, it can quickly compel anybody to seek any 'redeeming' health information anywhere without first minding their consequences to their well-being. Thus, health sensitization campaigns are needful for this perilous time. According to Rimal and Lapinski, 'health communication is seen to have relevance for virtually every aspect of health and wellbeing, including disease prevention, health promotion and quality of life' (2009: 2). Unfortunately, this pandemic situation has further compounded the debilitating effects of COVID-19 fake news or misinformation (Rommer et al. 2020; Sheares et al. 2020).

On the other hand, it might have made those seeking digital health messages pause to question the credibility (Fanoberova and Kuczkowska 2016; Moreno et al. 2020; Rajkhowa 2020) of information sources, especially the preponderant digital sources of communication. Besides, there is also a digital health information accessibility issue (Gonzalez-Polledo 2018; Lupton and Maslen 2018) to people during this pandemic period. Consequently, studies need to consider the experience of COVID-19 information dissemination in African settings. Due to the significance of African Indigenous language media in the communication process, it is germane to consider its contributions in disseminating digital health messages in fighting coronavirus disease. After all, Owolabi and Nurudeen (2020) affirm that African Indigenous language media are practical tools through which campaigners can disseminate health information to many people still living in the rural abodes. Unfortunately, most Africans who can benefit from using Indigenous language media to disseminate health information are ICT illiterates. Digital access in South Africa and the Sub-Saharan region is still considered low (Bukachi and Pakenham-Walsh 2007; Lesame 2014). While Ponelis and Holmner (2015) identified challenges to ICT development in Africa as education, linguistics and culture, which revolve around human capacity development, Chisango and Lesame (2017) attributed this problem to poor implementation of ICT policy in the rural areas. Still, deploying ICT for health communication is likewise helpful for Africans living in the urban areas as long as a pandemic like this does not discriminate. The nexus between ICT, health communication and African Indigenous language media can result in human capacity development. This study, therefore, examined COVID-19 digital sources, health messages and how the use of African Indigenous language media influenced people's belief in and usage of coronavirus health messages. The researchers hope that the findings from this study will add to the literature in the areas of African Indigenous language media, health literacy, promotion and education in the context of digitization.

INFORMATION SOURCE CREDIBILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

The accessibility and credibility of information sources when misinformation about COVID-19 pandemic rages can help researchers understand the psychological and emotional effects on people of the world. Rommer et al. (2020) affirmed that misinformation has substantial adverse effects on people experiencing a global health situation. They believe people experience

emotional confusion when exposed to inaccurate information on the media, which affects their health-seeking behaviour. Specifically, Sheares et al. (2020) confirmed that spreading misinformation about COVID-19 was shared on social media and messaging apps. They compared the situation with televised broadcasts featuring experts who could defuse misinformation that could aggravate people's COVID-19-related mental stress and anxiety. Similarly, Lăzăroiu et al. (2020), like Bratu (2020), also attributed people's psychological distress to questionable news headlines and inaccurate media reports on COVID-19 messages. Also, Rajkhowa (2020) commented on the need to close information gaps of the COVID-19 communication strategy. He believes there is a danger in commentators' assessment of perceived initial inconsistency in the government's public health messaging; thus, he encouraged the government and the commentators to speak with one voice when disseminating instructions on the pandemic.

Moreover, Moreno et al. (2020) discovered that multiple media platforms were used simultaneously while determining how information sources influence the public's information-seeking behaviour and perception of the government's crisis response strategies during the pandemic. Three of the four most used sources (television, online newspaper and radio) were mainstream media, while people used WhatsApp primarily as the digital medium. Also, they found that people who favoured pandemic information from mainstream media gave positive opinions about the government COVID-19 communication strategy, while those who did not were critical of government responses. However, Moreno et al. (2020) observed that people's trust in government authorities diminished as the pandemic crisis continued. In another instance, Candel (2020) examined how people spread an anecdote about an animal experiment that showed how induced fear is enough to kill a person on Facebook. He found that the first published post had the highest reach, which attracted thousands of subsequent shares. Also, people's comments revealed numerous topics, with the most important ones supporting the anecdote or evidence for various COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Thus, the above studies revealed that misinformation about COVID-19 has negative consequences on people's physical and psychological health globally. Social media platforms were most susceptible to disseminating fake news and conspiracy theories about the pandemic. Also, people believe that the mainstream media's credibility can be enhanced if health campaigners can close the gap between experts' commentaries and observations and government strategies to tackle the pandemic.

Based on the preceding, information source and how opinion leaders interpret the information itself can affect the credibility that people attach to health information. Information source credibility theory describes how an audience perceives the information source as believable, competent and trustworthy (Hovland et al. cited in Fanoberova and Kuczkowska 2016). For example, Lowry et al. (2014) confirmed that websites' credibility features such as expertise and trustworthiness can positively influence consumers' trust in an organization, making them do business with the firm. This example can be related to COVID-19 information sources predominant in the studies on the pandemic. These include social media platforms, televised broadcasts, experts' interpretations and newspapers' headline news. Focusing on Facebook, blog, Twitter, WhatsApp, an online newspaper and YouTube as the significant mainstream forums for discussing COVID-19 pandemic issues in Nigeria, Obi-Ani et al. (2020) established that social media platforms are indispensable in

information dissemination. However, they argued that people had used the platforms to spread fake news on the pandemic. Schmidt et al. (2020) also reinforce that COVID-19 information shared on social media platforms resulted in fear, anxiety, confusion and stigmatization among the people in South Africa. Apuke and Omar (2021) sampled Nigerian respondents to determine the effects of six factors in increasing fake news on COVID-19. They discovered that altruism was the principal motivation for fake information about COVID-19. Information sharing, socialization, information seeking and pass time factors followed this. Nevertheless, the entertainment factor did not lead to their sharing of fake information about the pandemic.

DIGITAL HEALTH MESSAGES

The digitalization of news sites enables people's use of social media platforms. With the emergence of mobile technology, it has become more accessible for people with their smartphones to have direct access to information in three-dimensional forms (Pavlik cited in Salawu 2019a). So, people receive information from various social media platforms that come with advantages of feedback, seeing, hearing and watching information/messages on the digital sphere. Again, people can use these messages to treat different human needs, including health-related issues. However, due to the unavoidability of digital news content consumption, people have to seek information, especially about the pandemic still ravaging the world. This development also reveals the possible effects of digitizing information on human well-being in the twenty-first century.

On a positive note, Gonzalez-Polledo asserts that 'multiple health activisms enabled by digital technologies open up how diverse experiences may inform digital healthcare in the future' (2018: 639). Health activists can easily expose the disparities inherent in how people access and experience digital health information. In another instance, Trivedi et al. (2020) examined source trust of cancer-related messages on simulated Facebook posts. Basing the posts on information veracity (evidence based vs. non-evidence based) and source type (government agency, health organization, lay individual), they found that respondents trusted government sources more than the other sources despite information veracity due to reputation and familiarity of government sources. Those exposed to non-evidence-based information reported higher trust in health organizations than the individual sources. Still, the respondents' attention to the post did not correlate with their level of trust in the message. It can be inferred from these scholars that the digitalization of information media has helped people seeking health needs to be more aware and critical about their well-being and, to an extent, critical of digital sources of health messages.

AFRICAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE MEDIA

African languages are significant in communicating development issues. Salawu says,

> the media that use Indigenous languages are important for the purpose of information, mobilisation and continuity i.e. survival of the language and culture […] The language in which a development message is disseminated is a very important aspect of the message treatment.
>
> (2015: 4)

Moreover, African Indigenous language media are many, but they have become prominent over time due to their being used frequently for different development communication programmes. Aikat (2009) refers to them as folk media. They represent the Indigenous people's ways of life encapsulated in their customs, beliefs and arts. Some of the folk media include storytelling, street theatre, puppetry, song and dance. Storytelling is a way of documenting people's news, history, character and identity in African communities. It is the central component of the African folk media ensemble.

In conjunction with other folk media types such as song, dance and street theatre, people can teach morals, sensitize and educate African audiences. Moreover, the diversity of African cultures and languages is no doubt is its strength, with Chigudu (2018) confirming Nigeria having some 470 languages, the Democratic Republic of Congo hosting some 242 languages, Sudan (both North and South) having 134 languages, Ethiopia having 89 languages and Gambia having ten languages to mention a few. Thus, language is central to communication and its channels. Equally, it is significant to health matters dissemination in African contexts (Oyesomi et al. 2020). For example, while Salawu (2019b) confirmed the use of Yoruba and IsiZulu languages in *Alaroye* and *Isolezwe* newspapers, Alexander (2019) explored the use of Okun dialects, a subsect of Yoruba language in Okun Radio Online. Their studies established that practitioners integrated African Indigenous language media into the contents, structure and interactivity modes of the online digital operations. Indeed, the digitalization of information media has penetrated Africa to an extent, but it is incomparable to the level it has gone in the western world. To a greater extent, Africans, wherever they are, rural or urban areas, still rely on some Indigenous language media that they engage in to send, receive and share information for their well-being. However, Onyenankeya (2021) acknowledged the challenges in integrating African Indigenous language media into digital media as inadequate funding, stiff competition from traditional media and low patronage of Indigenous language media.

Despite these challenges, African language media, like conventional media, can be integrated with digital media platforms to perform education, information, entertainment, socialization and surveillance roles in African settings. The integration is important because it can give credibility and reach to media use for development purposes. About health-related issues, Owolabi and Nurudeen observe that:

> Indigenous language media are potential channels through which health information could reach the grassroots where more than 70 percent of the nation's populations are resident. It is also perceived that health communication could be made to produce more effect in this digital era as more citizen journalists could be raised to communicate in the Indigenous language.
>
> (2020: 123)

Integrating African Indigenous language media into digital health messaging comes with some notable merits, which scholars have acknowledged. For instance, Oduaran and Okorie (2020) found that entertainment messages motivated the audience to watch TV. In addition, the use of African dramas/plays positively contributed to customer engagement. Also, due to the high rate of illiteracy in African rural areas and African Indigenous knowledge exclusion from the western education system, Owiny et al. (2014) suggested

using social media and mobile technologies to create, preserve and disseminate Indigenous knowledge. Likewise, Dia (2014) proposes that development agents should train rural people in Africa in ICT that would link African Indigenous languages such that they would be used to create awareness in health prevention that can improve their living conditions.

In summary, the studies have highlighted why experts need to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems into information technologies despite their challenges. This need is even more critical in African settings where African Indigenous language media still play crucial roles in constructing sociocultural realities related to development issues that affect people's living standards.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers sought respondents' opinions on digital sources, digital health messages, the use of African Indigenous language media in digital health messaging and how it motivated people to use COVID-19 health messages. Consequently, a mixed-method design with a triangulation approach was adopted. The researchers collected data using both an online questionnaire and in-depth interviews simultaneously, where the data from the interviews were used to interrogate and validate the data from the online questionnaire. Doyle et al. posit that triangulation 'allows for greater validity in a study by seeking corroboration between quantitative and qualitative data' (2009: 178). Likewise, Almalki (2016) recommends that researchers can use the triangulation approach in any project because it generates a greater depth and an array of helpful information. Thus, it is reasonable to say that combining different approaches to research studies in the health field allows the generation of robust data that researchers can use to interpret present health care issues in the African setting. Also, the study employed a non-probability sampling method due to non-availability and access to respondents and ongoing worldwide restrictions on movements.

The researchers put together a questionnaire with multiple-choice items through an online Google form server that was active between 5 November and 6 December 2020. A snowball sampling method was used to send invitations to respondents explaining the purpose of the study and asking for their favour to fill the questionnaire. The researchers sent a self-explanatory link of the form to respondents through WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and sometimes e-mail addresses. The respondents were not compensated for filling the online questionnaire as they did so out of interest in the research. The researchers took the sample from among available people who showed interest on university campuses in Nigeria and South Africa. Eventually, 87 responses were collated, from which 85 of them, duly completed, were presented for analysis. The researchers transferred and re-codified the responses to Google spreadsheet and Excel format and examined the sample through the descriptive statistical method. The demographic data showed that 58.8% of respondents were men, and 41.2% were women. The most prominent age-range groups in the sample include between 16 and 25 (31.8%), 26 and 35 (24.7%), and 36 and 45 (30.6%). This shows that the majority of the respondents fall within the era ICTs have started gaining prominence, where nearly 30% of them are Millennials. Concerning their education, the respondents were Ph.D. (20.7%), master's degree (26.8%), bachelor's degree (22%) and HND degree holders (17.1%), respectively. Though this may not mean that all the respondents are ICT literate, nearly all of them possess educational degrees.

Moreover, the researchers interviewed ten media practitioners and health campaign experts from Nigeria and South Africa. A total of seven interviews were conducted through the telephone, while a copy of the interview guide was sent to three interviewees who requested that medium. The researchers sought interviewees' opinions on using Indigenous language media in disseminating COVID-19 digital health messages and their impressions about how incorporating Indigenous language media in digital messaging motivated people to believe in digital sources and utilize the COVID-19 digital health messages. The reason for purposively choosing the interview participants was that they were experienced enough because of their professions, including communication studies, broadcasting, public relations and digital communication. Also, most of them combined teaching in educational institutions and practicing in these fields, which they have all done on average for eight years. The interviewees were not part of the survey questionnaire sample. After collecting the data, the phone interviews were carefully listened to and transcribed verbatim. Using thematic analysis, the researchers categorized the issues raised in the study's objectives into content categories aligned with those items in the online questionnaire guide. All relevant data were classified under these categories. The researchers used qualitative data to interrogate the findings in interpreting the core findings derived from the quantitative data. In the following, both quantitative and qualitative data are presented in the findings section, with excerpts showing qualitative data, while statistics showing quantitative data.

RESULTS

COVID-19 digital health sources

Information media sources play a significant role in the dissemination of messages to people during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Table 1, findings

Item	Percentage (%) of cases
Online newspaper	45
Twitter	39
Facebook	48
Instagram	20
YouTube	14
WhatsApp	58
Telegram	14
Webs/blogs of public institutions	18
Health webs/blogs	15
Online television	27
Online radio	17
Others	8

Number of respondents (n = 85). Question answered: 'What types of digital sources do you get COVID-19 messages from?'.

Table 1: COVID-19 digital health sources.

indicated that WhatsApp (n = 49), Facebook (n = 41) and online newspaper (n = 38) were the most used digital sources to access COVID-19 messages. Conversely, others like health web/blogs (n = 13), Telegram (n = 12) and YouTube (n = 12) constitute some of the least used digital sources. The results reveal that most sampled respondents in Nigeria and South Africa preferred online interactive platforms like WhatsApp as sources of health information during the COVID-19 pandemic and as avenues to engage numerous issues and health professionals to solve their problems. These results support the outcomes of the studies conducted by Obi-Ani et al. (2020) and Moreno et al. (2020). It also shows that most of the respondents are ICT literate, which may reflect their education and age. However, this study's demographic findings show that women (41.2 per cent) are still far less than their male (58.8 per cent) counterparts in ICT use. This disparity may reflect the gender disparity associated with ICT use generally. Also, these most sought-after online sources allow respondents to employ and interact using text, sound and sight to share and receive health care solutions.

Kinds of COVID-19 digital health messages

Subsequently, the researchers asked respondents to indicate the COVID-19 digital health messages they received through digital sources. Findings revealed in Table 2 that messages about social distancing (n = 65), handwashing (n = 54) and sanitization (n = 48) are the most received. Conversely, messages about vaccination (n = 5), sensitization and caution and use of face mask (n = 1 each) are among the least received COVID-19 health messages, all of them represented in Table 2 under the category Others. Ironically, using a face mask is one of the most engaging issues surrounding health guidelines against the pandemic. People may not like this precautious health guide, maybe because already other restrictions have affected their rights to some freedom. It can be assumed that most respondents are young and energetic. They will want their freedom when they expect everybody to follow health rules stringently. The finding may be worsened by the misinformation being peddled, especially on social media platforms, regarding the harmful effects of using a face mask or any manner of face mask at the beginning.

Again, the social distancing message is one of the top three issues favoured by the respondents. It is a challenging health instruction, yet people supported

Item	Percentage (%) of cases
Social distancing	77
Handwashing	64
Sanitization	57
Self-isolation/quarantine	51
Daily case update	39
Lockdown/curfew restrictions	33
Others	8

Number of respondents (n = 85). Question answered: 'What kind of COVID-19 health messages disseminated through the above Indigenous language media on your digital space?'.

Table 2: Kinds of COVID-19 digital health messages.

it, unlike a face mask. Maybe the carnage being recorded at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic definitely not only impressed it upon the people's survival instincts to adhering to social distancing but also practising self-isolation and sanitization. Also, most interviewees revealed that personal hygiene messages dominated COVID-19 information. For example, a public relations expert explained in one of the interviews that the messages included information mostly about 'frequent washing of hands, use of face mask and social distancing' (personal communication, December 2020).

African Indigenous language media that enhanced use of COVID-19 digital health messages

Table 3 shows that the use of Indigenous languages in the messages (n = 51), the use of Indigenous music/song (n = 33) and the use of Indigenous storytelling formats (n = 22) mostly enhanced the respondents' ability to use COVID-19 digital health messages. Conversely, the use of Indigenous drama/theatre (n = 21), the use of traditional Indigenous institutions (n = 13) and traditional Indigenous attires (n = 6) were the minor media that enhanced use of COVID-19 digital health messages. It is not surprising that most respondents agreed that African Indigenous languages motivated them to use COVID-19 digital health messages. Scholars like Salawu (2019a) have attested to the power, the strength of (Chigudu 2018) and the need to integrate (Owolabi and Nurudeen 2020) African Indigenous languages into digital health communication. Using non-Indigenous languages to communicate important health messages to an African audience cannot be more effective than using their native languages. There are particular nuances to African Indigenous languages that can aid the reception of certain information which people cannot find in other languages. These nuances reflect in the choice of expressions, sense of identity or collective experience, and creation and reproduction of meanings. One of the interviewees supports this, explaining that 'those messages were disseminated in the language they [the people] can understand and decode. It also appeals to them because it is purely their grassroots languages' (media broadcaster, personal communication, January 2021). The use of other African Indigenous language media such as music, storytelling, drama and traditional dressings

Item	Percentage (%) of cases
Indigenous language	60
Indigenous music/song	39
Indigenous traditional institutions	15
Indigenous traditional attires/dressing	7
Indigenous drama/theatre	25
Indigenous storytelling formats	26
Others	2

Number of respondents (n = 85). Question answered: 'Which of these Indigenous language media enhances your ability to use COVID-19 digital health messages?'.

Table 3: African Indigenous language media enhancing COVID-19 digital health messages.

reinforces the supremacy of African Indigenous. Another interviewee testifies to this by saying that 'at least I have come across short skits and animations produced in Nigerian Indigenous languages tailored at sensitizing the people on COVID-19, the dangers, symptoms and possible preventive measures' (media researcher, personal communication, January 2021). Indeed, the study's respondents mostly affirmed that the use of African Indigenous languages in the COVID-19 digital health messaging enhanced their utilization of the health messages. However, the media researcher interviewed also cautioned this optimism, as highlighted in the following excerpt:

> No, it has not helped. Regardless of the usage of indigenous languages, people still do not believe the messages they hear. And this is not a problem of the digital media or mainstream media, neither is it an issue of language used. It is more of a fundamental factor of trust in government.
>
> (personal communication, January 2021)

The interviewee was talking from his observation of how people reacted to COVID-19 digital health messages. People's attitudes are not blamed on the messaging style but on not trusting government sources of information.

African Indigenous language media motivating respondents' use of COVID-19 digital health messages

Table 4 explains further that the use of Indigenous language motivated most respondents to read and act on COVID-19 messages (n = 41). Respondents also shared that they enjoyed the use of African Indigenous music/songs in the messages (n = 23), stating that Indigenous song/music made them be aware of the pandemic. Nevertheless, respondents also stated that the use of African Indigenous storytelling format instilled in them the dangers of the disease (n = 14). It was also the respondents' belief that traditional African institutions like family and kingship made them identify and trust the messages (n = 10). Lastly, some respondents said that the use of African Indigenous attires in the COVID-19 digital health messages helped them confirm the reality of the pandemic in their environment (n = 8).

These findings essentially reveal how the use of African Indigenous languages motivated the respondents. Participants use African Indigenous language media in COVID-19 digital health information to reach out and identify with people. Feeling a sense of belonging to a language when used in some circumstances can spur someone to engage in activities where they use such a language. How African people see themselves portrayed in such health messaging can appeal to their sense of belonging such that they easily gravitate towards the contents. This is because they would encounter a narrative that uses their sociocultural reality and identifies with their experiences, thus increasing their engagement with the digital health message. One of the interviewees corroborated this perspective:

> [African indigenous language media] has made them easily relate to COVID-19 and how to observe the protocol and stay safe. Moreover, some of our local artistes have been used in disseminating this information via some digital platforms at least to a greater percentage.
>
> (radio marketing manager, personal communication, December 2020)

Item	Percentage (%) of cases
Indigenous language motivates to read and act	49
Indigenous language appeals to their sense of belonging	26
Indigenous song/music makes them to be aware of pandemic	27
Participants enjoy the Indigenous music/song on COVID-19	30
Use of traditional institutions make them to identify and trust the messages	12
Indigenous attires help them confirm the reality of the pandemic	10
Indigenous theatre/drama teaches them better how to follow health instructions	18
Indigenous storytelling format instils in them the dangers of the disease	17

Number of respondents (n = 85). Question answered: 'How has the use of indigenous language media by campaigners motivated you to utilise COVID-19 digital health messages?'.

Table 4: African indigenous language media motivating respondents' use of COVID-19 digital health messages.

However, another interviewee cautioned that 'as good as it is to use Indigenous languages for COVID-19 messages via digital platforms, believing and relying on the messages is dangerous because some people still use Indigenous language to spread fake news about COVID-19' (radio producer, personal communication, January 2021). Moreover, though all the interviewees supported the preponderant use of the interactive digital media, an interviewed media scholar from South Africa objected to the lack of integrating the internet-driven media with African Indigenous language media in the COVID-19 digital health messaging:

> Radio tries, although this is not enough. Motsweding FM is one radio station of our national broadcaster, the SABC. The station should be active in coming up with creative ways in which messages can be disseminated but instead, the English language has influenced how they disseminate their messages. Look at their Twitter platform, they do not translate messages they share in the language of their listeners.
>
> (personal communication, December 2020)

The interviewee came from the area where the primary language is Tswana, though the country has eleven major Indigenous languages. Another interviewee attributed this lack to Africans' low self-esteem about their Indigenous languages and the mainstream media's preference for the dominant European languages to disseminate health messages in African settings.

DISCUSSION

Seeking health information during a precarious time as the COVID-19 pandemic ravaging the world now can be dangerous itself. If not taken cautiously, the quest can add more to the physical and psychological effects which the raging disease is already contributing. So, the fear and anxiety arising from the barrage of misinformation people face about the COVID-19 pandemic need to be taken seriously. Health care systems also have found space in online digital technology, which they have used to educate people about their health care (Gonzalez-Polledo 2018). Studies examining the effects

of fake information have established the significance of digital information sources in spreading fake news.

For instance, Lăzăroiu et al. (2020) and Bratu (2020) opine that lack of credible information sources can cause unnecessary anxiety and fear in people receiving COVID-19 messages. Already, interactive digital media sources such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram with online newspapers and online radio and television are the significant sources of COVID-19 messages (Apuke and Omar 2021; Obi-Ani et al. 2020; Schmidt et al. 2020) in South Africa and Nigeria. The majority of the respondents used those digital media platforms to confirm their high ICT literacy level. Their young age and high educational levels may also attest to the use. However, one of the interviewees stated that 'some people still use digital platforms to spread fake news about COVID-19 despite integrating Indigenous media into the source' (radio producer, personal communication, December 2020). This act can lead to information disorder at times. One may want to agree with this observation because there have not been firm regulations of these online media platforms. Salaverría et al. (2020) also corroborated that people used social media networks extensively for COVID-19 fake news dissemination in Spain.

Most of the health campaign and media experts interviewed believe that the majority of media outlets that used online digital sources did not integrate African Indigenous language media into their structure, contents and operations to benefit people during this COVID-19 period. This is unlike what Salawu (2019b) and Alexander (2019) reported about media organizations that fully integrated African Indigenous languages (Yoruba and IsiZulu) into their online news platforms. Also, Onyenankeya (2021) submits that African people themselves do not patronize media that have integrated African Indigenous language media as they do non-African ones. However, the interviewees mainly consented that the people's Indigenous language media should be integrated into COVID-19 digital messaging in an ideal situation as African settings demand. This can make health campaigns have a more significant impact such that it engenders behavioural change needed to tackle the alarming spread of coronavirus disease. While findings revealed that people used certain digital media to disseminate COVID-19 messages, the health messaging overall did not take much cognizance of the significance of African Indigenous language media. This failure could negatively influence both the source and information credibility of COVID-19 health messages in African settings (Lowry et al. 2014).

Concerning the kinds of COVID-19 messages, respondents chose mainly social distancing, handwashing, sanitization, face mask use and self-isolation/quarantine. These are the essential pieces of information that the government, health experts and organizations usually disseminated to the public to curb the rapid spread of the pandemic. Everything boils down to people maintaining rigorous personal hygiene and reducing person-to-person physical contact. Prevention, they say, is better than cure. There is no doubt that adhering to these health measures is far more important than other kinds of health information. After all, hearing or watching daily case updates often induces some undue anxiety in people, primarily through most online media sources reporting the news contents.

Notwithstanding, those receiving the most critical kinds of COVID-19 messages possess some advantages. Information can engender knowledge and power, and Gonzalez-Polledo (2018) refers to the fact that people's experience of engaging health information in the digital sphere brings about

health activism regarding their health issues. Moreover, diligently following simple health information can be the difference between life and death in the COVID-19 pandemic period. Now that the pandemic has restricted humans to their spaces, the digital sphere serves as a place to receive, share and send health-related information.

Furthermore, considering that health communication is one of the cardinal features of development communication and a yardstick to measure the quality of life, disseminating digital health messages, especially in an African context, without integrating African Indigenous language media into the messaging might not be that effective (Owolabi and Nurudeen 2020). Language is a means of education, information and socialization (Salawu 2015). After all, the respondents also broadly acknowledged the use of Indigenous language in digital messaging. They believe it appealed to their sense of belonging and motivated them to read and act on the COVID-19 messages. Language is an identity. As a potent medium of communication, campaigners can use Indigenous language media to confer a certain level of credibility on the digital information sources used to disseminate health messages. However, no matter the language used by the government in health information dissemination to the people in a critical time as this, if people doubt the sincerity of the government, such information will not be effective (Moreno et al. 2020). In the case of Nigeria, one can infer that the trust issue stems from the manner the government alleviated the effects of the pandemic on the people economically and physically. With educated, young and ICT literate respondents, they very well can monitor the government activities in this period.

Also, the respondents indicated that the use of African Indigenous music/songs, theatre/drama and storytelling format also spurred them to use COVID-19 messages. Aikat (2009) describes these as folk media representing the African Indigenous people's ways of life. They manifest in their customs, beliefs and arts from time immemorial. Specifically, besides making them aware of the pandemic, the respondents confirmed that these Indigenous media taught them how to follow the stipulated health guidelines related to the disease and the dangers of not following the instructions. The advantages of these African Indigenous media for health communication purposes reside in their ability to demonstrate actions and instructions in words, pictures, gesticulations and sounds to people by using African Indigenous motifs they can quickly identify with (Oyesomi and Salawu 2020). Oduaran and Okorie (2020) mention this as the qualities inherent in African drama. These are qualities used for entertainment and for galvanizing Africans to embrace developmental issues like health campaign messages and instructions from the widespread COVID-19 pandemic. However, believing in digital health information disseminated in the Indigenous African language may be dangerous as people can cast online fake news in the same mode.

Despite the valuable insights this study provides, the researchers acknowledge study's sample was too small for generalization as it was difficult getting people to fill the online questionnaire. They gathered data at the time when COVID disease was still raging. Governments closed down campuses. Also, they restricted people in their various abodes where in some instances they had denied people access to some facilities, like electricity and internet services. Psychological effects like anxiety and fear of the unknown also constituted the limitation. Some of the online platforms used belonged to the workers on these campuses. The researchers used their mailing lists which contained hundreds of people. Nevertheless, very few showed interest.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the influence of African Indigenous language media in digital health messaging on the reception of COVID-19 messages. It mainly determined digital sources of health information, health message types and how African Indigenous language media in digital messaging enhanced people's belief and use COVID-19 messages. Thus, it argued that integrating African Indigenous language media into COVID-19 messaging would make such messages much more effective and accessible to African audiences, and give some credibility to the digital sources employed in disseminating health messages. Of course, other studies have confirmed that effective health communication in any African setting benefits immensely from African Indigenous language media (Owolabi and Nurudeen 2020; Salawu 2015; Dia 2014). After all, findings showed that most respondents received COVID-19 messages through digital information sources that afforded them easy accessibility and interaction due to their African Indigenous language media use. The findings mean that they attribute some credibility to the sources from which they have accessed the health messages. However, despite the problems associated with digital information sources, people create psychological anxiety due to misinformation. Beyond this, there is a need for social orientation regarding the attitudes of Africans towards embracing their Indigenous language media. Also, online media owners in the African continent should consciously integrate African Indigenous language media formats in their content creation, dissemination and feedback. The menace of fake news is pandemic in itself. For instance, studies have reported COVID-19 online messages as a joke, exaggeration, decontextualization and deception, resulting in information disorder that can have dire effects on people seeking a way out of the pandemic. Therefore, all stakeholders need to continue to fight it, especially African Governments need to spearhead the fight such that it would not make their citizens doubt their efforts at combating a virulent pandemic as COVID-19 disease in the future.

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Media broadcaster (2021), telephone interview with the author, 21 January.
Media researcher (2020), telephone interview with N.A. Bakenne, 15 December.
Media researcher (2021), telephone interview with the author, 21 January.
Media researcher (2021), telephone interview with the author, 27 January.
Radio marketing manager (2020), e-mail interview to author, 8 December.
Radio producer (2020), e-mail interview to author, 5 December.
Radio producer (2021), telephone interview with N.A. Bakenne, 21 January.

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