

Media Information Overload During the First Wave of Covid-19 Pandemic in Benin City

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Abstract

This study examines media Information overload during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic and how it increased the curiosity, anxiety and fear of death in the minds of citizens in Benin City. The study adopted the online survey research method for gathering data. It also adopted the media dependency theory by Sandra Ball- Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur (1976) and also the human Information processing approach by Schroeder et al (1967). After the analysis, findings revealed that majority of the residents were terrified by the messages they got during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic from the media and they were overloaded by the media messages about the pandemic during the first wave. It was recommends that the media should avoid Information overload in order not to arouse fear in the minds of people.

Keywords: *Media, Benin City, Coronavirus, WHO, Mental health, Lockdown, Isolation.*

Introduction

Over the years, information dissemination has gone through several processes and till now some of those ways are still effective. In the African settings years back, Information was passed across to the public through means such as fireworks, canon, town-criers, etc. However, the reach of Information was not far and quick as compared to this present time. This is because the media such as the newspaper, television, radio and the social media has taken over the Information world thereby, making Information available to the wider public.

According to Nworgu (2018, p.73), described communication has remained a vital tool for human existence and survival. This is because, it helps in transmitting ideas, feelings and Information from one person to another.

Since the introduction of the media to the Information world, Information dissemination as taken a whole new level. Information dissemination has become quicker, intensified and widely to people than ever before. In Nigeria, the media (newspaper, radio, television and social media) have cemented their spot in the Information sector as well as in the lives of citizens through the process of disseminating Information to the general public. This is cognizant with the Declaration of

Human Right as stated in Article 19 of Section 39 of the 1999 constitution which states that, “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression which includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart Information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers (Ciboh 2010, p. 2). According to Ohiagu (2010, p.44), he described freedom of expression as the liberty given to express oneself without any form of explicit or implicit control, restraint or effort to stop one from doing so. And so, the freedom including both the freedom to express oneself or impart ideas to others as well as the right to have access to Information.

During the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, the right of the people to Information was not denied as the media (especially the electronic and social media) made sure that information got to the public on a daily basis. During this period, access to information was instantaneous unlike previous pandemics that existed in the world before now. Daily, information such as the number of cases, deaths, medical treatments and breakthroughs, conspiracy theories, racist news etc. which may in a way be related to the pandemic was sent across to the public for consumption whether accurate or not.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP), described the Covid-19 pandemic as a global health crisis and the greatest challenge we have faced since the world war two. And ever since that declaration, information has been flowing in an alarming rate from one end to another thereby, making it difficult for one to differentiate which information is genuine and reliable to them.

In an article written by Mohammed, Sha'aban, Jatau and Baharudin. (2021), it was explained that the novelty of Covid-19 led to the generation of several Information from diverse sources. Many of which are often untrue, conflicting or from false sources. According to Delfina (2019), information overload is a situation whereby you receive too much information at one time and cannot think about it in a clear way. This as a result affects the mental health and behavior of a person which could also lead to fear of death in the minds of people as well as anxiety, fatigue and curiosity especially during a pandemic.

During the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, the public may be at risk of experiencing information overload due to the outpour of information during that period. Thus, this work focuses on information overload by the media during the first wave of Covid-19 in Benin City.

Statement of Problem

This paper is based on several works including Taher, Sara and Lara (2020) work titled "A second pandemic? Perception in information overload in the Covid-19 Era". Mustapha *et al.* (2021) "Assessment of Covid-19 information overload among the general public" and Kristin's (2020) "Media overload and stress (Covid-19).

From the works mentioned above, it is argued that surrounding yourself with information or news related to the Covid-19 pandemic could lead to mental and physical health effects such as fear of death, curiosity, anxiety, isolation and social division. And so, the public should be careful on the kind of Covid-19 messages they expose themselves to so as to avoid information overload. Likewise, the media should limit the information they disseminate to the public during a pandemic in other not to arouse fears in the minds of the people.

However, there are few studies that focuses particularly on the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic; media Information overload. And so, this work aims at studying the attitudes and behaviors of select citizens of Benin City towards media information overload during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Questions

1. To what extent were the residents of Benin exposed to Covid-19 messages by the media?
2. Did the message enhance the knowledge of Benin City on Covid-19?
3. What is the attitude of Benin City residents towards Covid-19 media messages?
4. Did the message had any psychological effect on the residents of Benin City?
5. Were the residents of Benin City overloaded by the media during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Conceptual Review and Empirical Studies

According to Kim, Lustria, Burke and Kwon's (2007), the term "information overload" is based on the exposure to information and experience of information seeking, which is influenced by individual properties, such as socio-demographics and health status. For the social demographic

influence, studies have shown that those who are older, less educated and of lower socioeconomic status are more liable to information overload. Also, those who have poor physical and mental health tends to be affected heavily from information overload.

According to Jensen, Pokharel, Carcioppolo, Upshaw, John and Katz *et al.* (2020), Information overload can negatively be related to the level of knowledge (of an individual) about an issue, such as that of sun-safe protection. Studies from Jensen *et al.* (2020) and Obamiro and Lee (2019), support the idea that an individual's knowledge level and their capacity for information gathering, processing, and understanding an information is associated with the occurrence of information overload. And so, the occurrence of information overload is pertaining to one's ability to gather, process and also to understand and interpret the information given to them. Therefore, people with wider knowledge gap and lower level of capacity are liable to be overloaded by information because of new information is poorly understood by them (Chae 2016).

Following the argument on information overload, many have accused the media of being the perpetrator of information overload. According to Kim, Lustria, Burke and Kwon (2007), the media which includes the television, newspapers, magazines radio and the Internet are regarded has the potential predictor of information overload, but there was no evidence that greater attention to media caused greater information overload. Chae (2016) highlighted four media perceived to be the perpetrator of information overload such as the print, television, internet and interpersonal communication. Amongst them the print and the television were associated negatively with cancer information overload in three out of the four sample studied. According to Chae (2016) the television compared to the print media and the internet are seen as active channels and are often used by motivated and engaged individuals. In a study to examine the relationship between news media and information overload, it was discovered that there is a partial inverted U-shape relationship between traditional news media and information overload but no relationship was found between the Internet and information overload (Ji, Ha and Sypher. 2014).

According to Mohammed *et al.* (2021), in a research titled "Assessment of COVID-19 Information Overload among the General Public" aimed at evaluating the Covid-19 Information Overload among the general public. In other to collect the necessary data for the work, a cross-sectional online survey was conducted between April and May 2020 using a modified Cancer Information Overload scale. The survey was developed and posted on four social media platforms. The study concluded that Covid-19 information overload is common and that the sources of information and the frequency of receiving Covid-19 messages were majorly associated with COVIO and that, health institutions and stakeholders should set up or improve on their strategies and programs in other to enlighten the public more on the best ways to manage COVIO and health consequences that comes with it.

Taher, Sara and Lara (2020) in their work titled "A Second Pandemic? Perceptive on Information Overload in the Covid-19 Era", it was explained that the global pandemic led to an outpour of ever-changing information daily. A PubMed search related to Covid-19 was carried out in other to garner the necessary date needed for the study. Four months after the virus was defined, about 8000 articles were published. This hindered their ability to discover the scientific importance as the numbers increased monthly. The work concluded that practical guidelines during the pandemic should be based on high quality and well powered research.

Kalina, Genevieve and Bridgette (2013), "Social Media and Information Overload: Survey Results". The work adopted a UK based online questionnaire to investigate the user-generated media (UGM) usage. The user generated media (UGM) investigated includes Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook and a sum of 587 participants were attracted. The results revealed that the degree of engagement with social networking such as Facebook is high, as well as other professional media, blogs and microblogs. The work concluded that the less frequent users of the media are the ones who experience information overload, rather than the ones with fewer posts to read. Unlike less

frequent media users, the professional user's behavior was different. However, complains emanated from the micro-bloggers regarding information overload as two thirds of Twitter users complained of too many posts and more than half proposed a need for a tool to filter out irrelevant posts. In conclusion, majority of the media participants expressed their satisfaction while minority complained of information overload and privacy.

Chathika, Nisha, Ivan, Chathura and Chathurani (2020), in their work titled "The Effects of Information overload on Online Conversation Dynamics", made use of an agent-based model of information overload to examine the effects of information overload and also to investigate the effects of information overload threshold as well as the rate of information loss online. It explained that the higher the participation, the higher the liability of being overloaded with information while the lower the participation, the lower the liability of being overloaded with information.

Araz and Hersh (2020) conducted a study on "The Impact of Social Media on Panic During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Iraqi Kurdistan: Online Questionnaire Study". The objective of the study was to determine how social media affects self-reported mental health and the spread of panic about COVID-19 in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. An online questionnaire was prepared and conducted in Iraqi Kurdistan for the study. The study also deployed a content analysis method for data analysis. The study showed that social media has an impact on the spreading of fear and panic in Kurdistan Region of Iraq during the Covid-19 pandemic. Facebook was the most social media for spreading panic messages during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also showed that it had a negative influence on the people's mental health and psychological wellbeing. The results also showed that youths within the ages of 18-35 years were the majority faced with psychological anxiety.

A study by Elnadi, Ismail, Odetokun, Obasanjo, Ahmed, ochulor and Ahmad (2020), titled "Knowledge, Attitude and Perception Towards the 2019 Coronavirus Pandemic: A Bi-national Survey in Africa", with the objective of measuring the knowledge, attitude and perception of Nigerians and Egyptians towards the Covid-19 pandemic, found out that most of the respondents were knowledgeable of the virus. Also, the majority of the respondents had a satisfactory attitude towards the preventive measures. Also, majority of the respondents had a satisfactory perception of the pandemic such as the effort of the world in preventing the spread and also to curb the spread of the virus. The adopted the survey research method. In gathering the data, a cross-sectional community-based questionnaire was designed.

A study by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Turkey Red Crescent Society (2020), titled "Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP): Assessment on Covid-19 Community Based Migration Programme, September 2020" with the following objective; to know the understanding of community perceptions as well as their knowledge about Covid-19, also to shape risk communication, behavioural change and community the engaged activities. The study found out that members of the community were aware of the Covid-19 disease outbreak as well as the symptoms. It also shows that the perception and attitudes of respondents towards the curbing of the spread of the virus was satisfactory in Turkey. The study also found out that in order to curb the spread of the virus, respondents are taking measures such as practicing personal hygiene, staying indoors, washing their hands frequently with soap, avoid going out, fumigate the home, make use of masks, as well as maintaining social distance.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the Media Dependency Theory and Human Information Processing Approach.

Media Dependency Theory

The Media Dependency theory was propounded Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur in 1976. The theory is combined with several perspectives like psycho analytics & social system

theory, systematic & casual approach and base elements from Uses and Gratification theory but less focus on effects. Media Dependency theory is one of the theories, first of its kind which regards audience as an active part in communication process. The dependency theory is expanded from the uses and gratification theory.

According to this theory, there is an internal link between media, audience and large social system. The audience learning from the real life is limited, so they can use media to get more information to fulfil their needs. An extensive use of media generates dependent relation in audience. Also, Media can be able to create dependence relationship with target audiences to achieve their goals by using its media power.

In general, the extent of the media's influence is related to the degree of dependence of individuals and social systems on the media. Two of the basic propositions put forward by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur are: (1) the greater the number of social functions performed for an audience by a medium (e.g., informing the electorate, providing entertainment), the greater the audience's dependency on that medium, and (2) the greater the instability of a society (e.g., in situations of social change and conflict), the greater the audience's dependency on the media and, therefore, the greater the potential effects of the media on the audience.

Human Information Processing Approach

The Human Information Processing Approach theory was propounded Schroder et al (1967). The theory explains information load, eucity and noxity factors. The evidence suggest that an additive relationship is found for at least part of the ranges of these variables, but further work will be needed to determine more precisely the interaction of these variables over all input ranges. The complexity of input into a system has an effect on system complexity in addition to its varied impact on system content.

It is a cognitive approach that is often equated with contemporary cognitive psychology. The central tenet of the information-processing approach is that the human can be characterized as an information-processing system, which encodes input, operates on that information, stores and retrieves it from memory, and produces output in terms of actions. The architecture and operation of the subsystems can be revealed through use of various behavioral, psychophysiological, and brain-imaging methods. Information-processing models for particular tasks describe the flow of information through the various stages and predict response times, error rates, error types, and other aspects of human performance.

Methodology

The researchers adopted an online survey research method. The simple random sampling technique was used to choose the population needed for the study. The instrument used for this study is questionnaire. Benin State population according to the United Nations 2021, is 1,782,000. The study used the sample size of 384 of which 14 were invalid while 370 were valid for the study. In calculating the sample size for this study, Wimmer and Dominic online calculator was used, using the confidence level of 95 and the error margin of 0.05.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Which of these platforms are you familiar with?

Option	Responses	Percentage
Television	105	28.3
Radio	90	24.3
Newspaper	35	9.4
Social Media	140	37.8
Total	370	100

This table shows that majority of the respondents are familiar with social media (37.8%) followed by television with 28.3%, radio with 24.3% and newspaper with 9.4%.

Table 2: At what frequency do you use this media platform?

Option	Responses	Percentage
Always	160	43.2
Often	155	41.8
Occasionally	55	14.8
Never	-	-
Can't Say	-	-
Total	370	100

This table 1 represents the total number of respondents and the percentage of each option to the question. It shows that 43.2 of the respondent uses this media platform always, 41.8 often uses this media platform, 14.8 occasionally uses this media platform.

Table 3: At what frequency do you receive Covid-19 messages from this media platform

Option	Responses	Percentage
Always	135	36.4
Often	170	45.9
Occasionally	60	16.2
Never	5	1.3
Can't Say	-	-
Total	370	100

Responses from table 2 shows that majority (45.9%) often receive Covid-19 message from this media platform.

Table 4: I understand what Covid-19 is through messages I receive from this media platform

Option	Responses	Percentage
Strongly Agree	120	32.4
Agree	225	60.8
Disagree	20	5.4
Strongly Disagree	5	1.3
Undecided	-	-
Total	370	100

Responses from table 3 shows that majority (60.8%) agree on receiving Covid-19 message through this media platform.

Table 5: I receive different information on the preventive measures during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic

Option	Responses	Percentage
Strongly Agree	110	29.7
Agree	230	62.1
Disagree	20	5.4
Strongly Disagree	5	1.3
Undecided	5	1.3
Total	370	100

Responses from table 4 shows that majority (62.1%) agree on the different information on the preventive measure during the first wave Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 6: I find it hard to know which of the preventive measures to follow because of the different information I receive during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic

Option	Responses	Percentage
Strongly Agree	60	16.2
Agree	195	52.7
Strongly Disagree	20	5.4
Disagree	55	14.8
Undecided	40	10.8
Total	370	100

Responses from table 5 shows that majority (52.7%) agree that they find it difficult to which preventive measures to follow because of the different information they receive during the first wave of Covid-19 pandemic

Table 7: I felt terrified during the first wave of the pandemic because of the information I receive from the media platform

Option	Responses	Percentage
Strongly Agree	100	24.0
Agree	185	50
Strongly Disagree	5	1.3
Disagree	40	10.8
Undecided	40	10.8
Total	370	100

Responses from table 6 shows that majority (24.0%) strongly agrees on feeling terrified during the first wave of the pandemic due to the information they receive from the media platform.

Table 8: I felt overloaded with Covid-19 messages during the first wave of the pandemic

Option	Responses	Percentage
Strongly Agree	95	25.6
Agree	210	56.7
Strongly Disagree	15	4.0
Disagree	25	6.7
Undecided	25	6.7
Total	370	100

Responses from table 7 shows that majority (56.7%) agrees that individuals felt overloaded with Covid-19 messages during the first wave of the pandemic.

Table 9: Because of the overloaded information I receive during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, I remained indoors

Option	Responses	Percentage
Strongly Agree	120	32.4
Agree	190	51.3
Strongly Disagree	10	8.1
Disagree	30	2.7
Undecided	20	5.4
Total	370	100

Responses from table 8 shows that majority (51.3%) agrees that they remained indoors because of the overloaded information they received during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Discussion of Findings

In response to research question one which aims to know the extent to which the residents of Benin were exposed to Covid-19 messages by the media, table 2 and 3 explains that the residents were highly exposed to Covid-19 messages from the media. From the tables, it shows that the media always informed the public during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. This supports the work of Taher *et al.* (2020) that explains that the global pandemic led to an outpour of ever-changing information daily.

As regards research question two which is to find out if the message enhanced the knowledge of Benin residents on Covid-19, table 4, shows that the residents through the media understood what Covid-19 means. The media being a disseminator of information carried out the responsibility effectively as they enlightened the residents of Benin and also narrowed their knowledge gap by sending to them messages about the virus. This supports the findings of Elnadi *et al.* (2020), that respondents have a satisfactory knowledge of the Covid-19 messages in Egypt and Nigeria where the study was carried out. The study was conducted to find out the respondents' attitudes, knowledge and perception towards the Covid-19 outbreak.

In response to research question three on the attitudes of Benin residents toward Covid-19 media messages, table 9 explains that due to the messages they received from the media, the respondents remained indoors, thus, taking preventive measures to avoid the spread of the virus. This gives credence to the work of IFRC (2020), that the attitudes of respondents towards the curb

the spread of the virus was satisfactory in Turkey were the study was conducted. The study found out that in order to curb the spread of the virus, respondents are taking measures such as practicing personal hygiene, staying indoors, washing their hands frequently with soap, avoid going out, fumigate the home, make use of masks, as well as maintaining social distance.

In response to research question four which seeks to find out if the message by the media during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic had any psychological effect on the residents of Benin City, table 7, explains that majority of the residents were terrified by the messages they got during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. This supports the work of Anaz and Hersh (2020) which showed that the media through the use of Facebook had negative influence on the people's mental health and psychological wellbeing.

As regards research question five, which is to find out if the residents of Benin were overloaded by the media with Covid-19 messages, tables 5, 6 and 8 explain that the respondents in all their responses agreed that they were overloaded by the media during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. This shows that the media were the ones spreading information about the virus thereby, causing information overload amongst members of the public of Benin. The media especially the social media are the cause of the information overload experienced by the respondents. This supports the work of Chathika *et al.* (2020), which found out that the extent at which an individual participate in conversation online determines the information overload and information loss under overload. This means that the higher the participation, the higher the liability of being overloaded with information while the low the participation, the lower the liability of being overloaded with information.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It was concluded that the residents of Benin were aware of the Covid-19 pandemic and through the media they were able to understand what the virus is. However, the message disseminated by the media had psychological effect on the residents, thus, the media should endeavor to avoid information overload among members of the public especially during a pandemic such as the Covid-19 pandemic in order not to arouse fears in the mind of people. They should properly sieve the messages they send to the public to avoid information overload. And so, while practicing their information function they should also practice their gatekeeping functions so as to effectively select the type of messages they release to the public.

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