



Content analysis of mass media reportage on coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) in Nigeria from six widely circulated Nigerian newspapers

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Abstract

A multifaceted approach is needed in combating the COVID-19 pandemic which is getting protracted with increasing cases around the world. The role of the media in tackling pandemics have been established. However, data on the role of mass media reportage in the present COVID-19 pandemic is scarce. The aim of this study was to analyze mass media reportage in newspapers in Nigeria with the view to highlighting its' role in combating the pandemic. Using content analysis, publications on COVID-19 between January, 2020 and May, 2020 of six widely read national newspapers in Nigeria were analysed. Results revealed that news report on the COVID-19 pandemic was high (55.3%) followed by front page news of 6.1%. Between January and March, 2020 the Punch newspaper had a larger chunk (25%) of publication on the pandemic. Sixteen story formats were common amongst the different newspapers and they include news, front page, opinion and features to mention a few. This study has shown that the media has played a great role in the reportage of Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria with 14,585 publications, the highest so far reported in a disease outbreak. Indicating its relevance in the timely eradication of the pandemic.

Keywords: Mass media, Covid-19, Newspaper, Pandemic, Nigeria

Introduction

The role of the mass media including television, radio, print and in recent times social media has remained indispensable in teaming and eradicating pandemics. Information on positive public health practices such as social distancing, hand washing, respiratory hygiene and government policies in tackling outbreaks has often been disseminated via these media (Collinson et al, 2015). The vibrant Nigeria's Mass Media which comprise of over 200 radio stations, 150 television channels, and about 350 print (newspapers) outlets has remained a force to be reckoned with and has been faithful to its social responsibilities as the fourth estate of the realm. According to www.fmci.gov.ng, the official website of the Ministry of Information and Culture, the Nigerian media was commended by the Nigeria's Minister of Information, for bringing

messages of the COVID-19 pandemic to Nigerians, through their media contributions in the advocacy, sensitization and social responsibilities functions as revealed by the poll findings from a survey by noi-poll.com. The poll revealed that 99% of Nigerians were aware of the pandemic with 95% saying that they have received information on how to protect themselves. However, the mass media has also served as a means by which unfounded fallacies, myths, and misinformation about disease outbreaks has been brought to the populace. In the wake of the present coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic that began in Wuhan China in late December, 2019 the media globally has been awash with publications, videos, interviews and commentaries on the virus, its' spread, cases, recoveries and deaths. Furthermore, it has provided a platform for analyzing the impact of the pandemic on the economies, politics and social lives of countries around the globe. COVID-19 is caused by a novel coronavirus that has been christened severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). It belongs to the family Coronaviridae and the genus *Betacoronavirus* (Loeffelholz et al, 2020; Adegboye et al, 2020). The virus has an incubation period of between one to 14 days for it to fully manifest and symptoms include cough, fever, and shortness of breath. The real-time PCR has been the standard test used for the detection of this virus. The virus is highly contagious and has been detected in 213 countries globally with 9,400,295 cases, and 482, 468 deaths globally as at 25th June, 2020 (ECDC, 2020).

In Nigeria, the index case an Italian national returning from Milan was reported on the 27th of February, 2020 in Lagos which practically became the epicenter of the pandemic in the country. Since then over 22,020 cases have been confirmed and 542 deaths reported (NCDC, 2020). The role of media reportage on epidemics and generally disease outbreaks in Nigeria has been analyzed by various researchers in the past revealing a cocktail of facts, spread of panic, education on the causative agent and purported cure/remedy. Smith and Smith et al (2016) reported the copious reportage of the 2014 Ebola disease outbreak in Nigeria by four widely read newspapers with the most common topic on cases and the least on the use of kola and or salt as remedy for the disease. Similarly, Kilgo et al (2019) reported the spread of panic and uncertainty by media reportage of Ebola health crisis in which a social news platform Reddit was suggested to facilitate panic compared to reports of traditional newspapers. Another disease, Lassa fever which is endemic in Nigeria has been brought to the spotlight by media reportage (mostly newspapers). Reports have been found to be high during large outbreaks but dwindle at other times of the year (Smith et al, 2017).

In the case of COVID-19, the Nigerian mass media has churned out tons of reportage since the disease was first reported in Nigeria and the Nigerian Union of journalist applauded its members on their efforts in reporting the pandemic in the face of challenges such as lack of sufficient and inadequate protection equipment coupled with remuneration being owed some of their members by some employers (APA, 2020; Ripples Nigeria, 2020). However, a mere pass of a vote of confidence on the media will not do as the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on the management of COVID-19 in Nigeria has stated that the pandemic is just beginning in the country as cases of infection are on the rise by the day (Punch June 9, 2020). This is in consonant with the position of the WHO that the pandemic is far from over even as governments around the world, Nigeria inclusive are relaxing lockdown (Economic times June 9, 2020). Therefore, it is imperative to assess and analyze the content, reportage pattern and influence of the media in the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria.

This study looks at the content analysis of mass media reportage in six Nigerian newspapers, the first study to the best of our knowledge that looks at six national newspapers.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. To assess the degree of visibility and sensitization of COVID-19 reportage by the newspapers
2. To assess the prominence of the story format as it relates to COVID-19 reportage in Nigeria.

3. To determine the number of stories reported by the six newspapers from the point of the first index case to the status attained by 31st May 2020.
4. To assess generally the Nigerian media impact of reportage and coverage of COVID-19 on the citizenry.
5. To evaluate the month-by-month COVID-19 reportage by the six national newspapers.
6. To evaluate and assess the monthly trend of COVID-19 reportage by the six national newspapers.

Methods

The Study primarily dwelt on the reportage and coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria by six national newspapers. These newspapers include: The Guardian, The Punch, The Nation, The Sun, Vanguard and The Nigerian Tribune.

Theoretical Framework

The fulcrum of this novel study on COVID-19 pandemic which has so far 9,400,295 cases is anchored on what Borah (2016) refers to as “The media effects theories” postulating on how, “The media effect includes theories that explain how the mass media influences the attitudes and perceptions of the audience members.” Operationally and functionally, there are about 15 family members of the media effect theories out of which our focus will be on the ‘Agenda-Setting Theory’ and the ‘Gate-keeping theory.’

1) **The Agenda-Setting Theory:** The print, broadcast and social media news platforms coverage and reportage of the COVID-19 pandemic is simply a validation of the potency of the Agenda-Setting theory propounded by McCombs and Shaw (1973).

Basically, the Agenda-Setting theory which revolves around the awareness, priorities and salience models are founded on the three assumptions and principles as listed by Anaeto et al (2008). These assumptions and principles include; the mass media such as the press do not reflect social reality, because news is filtered, chosen and shaped by newsroom staff and broadcasters. People get their news from limited sources because people do not pay attention to all outlets, thus they rest on mass media. Few media agenda which were chosen by professional gatekeepers, lead people to perceive given issues as important.

2) **The Gatekeeper:** Since COVID-19 pandemic birth in Wuhan, China in December 2019, the mass media operationally and functionally has risen to its social responsibility functions as a gatekeeper as propounded by a German Psychologists Lewin (Wikipedia.org, Gilani et al., 2020). The gatekeeping responsibility simply revolves around who comes in and probably who goes out after complying with due process (surveillance, monitoring and evaluation). This assertion is validated by masscomm.com, when it submitted that the gatekeeper is the process of selecting and then filtering, items of the media that can be consumed within the time or space that an individual happens to have.

3) **The Status Conferral theory:** In view of its destructive effects and impact globally across over 213 countries of the world with 9,400,295 cases and 482, 468 deaths globally (ECDC, 2020). The mass media reportage and coverage has certainly validated the principles and assumptions of the status conferred theory of the mass media effect theory propounded by Lazarsfield and Merton (1948). The media effects status conferral postulations is further validated by Smith (2016), in ‘Status Conferral Functions’ when it submitted that ‘the role that the mass media gives to a person, group of people or event that makes these things seem significant or important whether justified or not. Adding that, the functions and the power that the mass media has in our society is the ability to force so much information from anywhere, at any given time about any topic; that can make this topic seem like the most pressing matter to date.

The research methodology adopted was content analysis. Between January 2020 (after the first case was discovered in December 2019, in Wuhan China) and May 2020, articles on COVID-19 in Nigeria were

identified in The Guardian, The Punch, The Sun, The Vanguard, Tribune and The Nation. The choice of the newspapers was because they are regarded and listed as national newspapers covering reasonably the six-geopolitical zones of the country. The element of the content analysis taken into consideration included unit of analysis such as Front page, News, Features, /Opinion, Letters to the Editor, Editorial, Advert, health, Metro, Back Page, Education, Covid-photo, Cartoon, Interview, Sports etc. Data Obtained from the six national newspapers (The Guardian, The Punch, Vanguard, Tribune, The Nation and The Sun) were analyzed with the aid of Microsoft Excel. The frequency distribution was used to present some of the story formats in relation to months of publication, bar charts and pie charts were also used for pictorial presentation of results, while line graph was used to exhibit the trend of monthly publications of COVID-19 related news.

Results

Table 1 gives a summary of six newspaper publications on COVID-19 in Nigeria from January to May 2020. There were 16 news format that were common amongst the six newspapers with a section in which was titled others. This section included other areas of reporting such as Business, Energy, Entertainment, ICT clinic/Guardian Tech, Money, Politics, Ramadan/ Sallah celebration, Show Biz/ Blast, Sunday parade/Special, Travel and Tourism, issues etc. News reports on COVID-19 was the majority with 55.3%, followed by Front page news of 6.1%. The number and percentage of publication on COVID-19 by the six newspaper from January to March showed that The Punch newspapers had the majority accounting for 25% of the total publication, followed by The Tribune (21%) and lastly, The Nation with 9% (Figure 1).

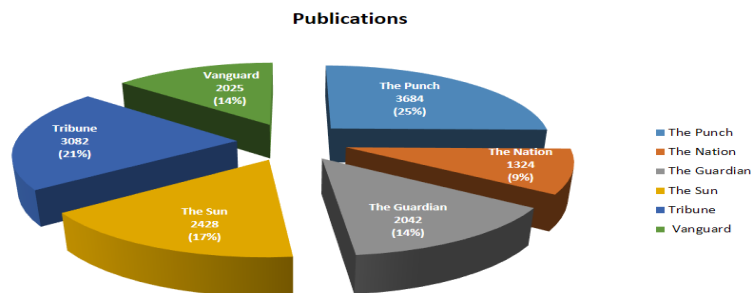


Figure 1: Number and percentage of publications on COVID-19 by six newspapers from January to May 2020.

Table 1
Summary of Six newspaper publications of COVID-19 in Nigeria (January – May, 2020)

News Paper	News	Front Page	Health	Opinion / Features	Editorial	Metro	Cover	Back page	Cartoon	COVID-19 (Photo)	Education	Sports	Comments	Interview	Letter	Advert	Others*	Total
The Punch	2518	181	21	94	29	126	0	37	16	9	60	79	35	53	64	57	305	3684
The Nation	550	93	11	95	15	0	0	49	18	9	9	44	8	0	11	16	396	1324
The Guardian	463	97	27	96	31	45	27	60	50	10	11	77	9	11	13	45	970	2042
The Sun	1493	159	ND	193	22	107	ND	27	10	ND	31	100	64	25	3	23	171	2428
Tribune	1845	253	ND	170	16	119	ND	29	5	ND	48	210	54	42	62	36	193	3082
Vanguard	1203	103	ND	178	4	77	ND	5	5	ND	35	100	63	35	42	18	157	2025
Total	8072	886	59	826	117	474	27	207	104	28	194	610	233	166	195	195	2192	14585
	(55.3)	(6.1)	(0.4)	(5.7)	(0.8)	(3.2)	(0.2)	(1.4)	(0.7)	(0.2)	(1.3)	(4.2)	(1.6)	(1.1)	(1.3)	(1.3)	(15.0)	(100)

Others: (Business, Energy, Entertainment, ICT clinic/Guardian Tech, Money, Politics, Ramadan/ Sallah celebration, Show Biz/ Blast, Sunday parade/Special, Travel and Tourism, issues, etc.)

The above table shows a total of 14,585 publications were made by six newspapers on COVID-19 within the period of January to May 2020.

ND: Not done

From the monthly evaluation of COVID-19 publications by the six newspaper types from January to May 2020 a total of 14,584 articles were published with the month of April having the highest publication as shown in Table 2 and Figure 2. Furthermore, a month-by-month analysis of publication on COVID-19 and monthly trend of national newspaper publication of COVID-19 from January to May 2020 showed that the month of January had the lowest number of publication and there was an upward swing from January to April and then a decline from April to May as shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4.

Table 2

Monthly evaluation of COVID-19 publications by national newspapers types from January to May 2020.

Month / Newspaper	The Punch	The Nation	The Guardian	The Sun	Tribune	Vanguard	Total
January	23	12	18	26	28	47	154
February	106	46	50	99	99	127	527
March	1084	190	460	540	852	821	3947
April	2165	145	911	1762	2103	1030	8116
May	306	931	603	ND	ND	ND	1840
Total	3684	1324	2042	2427	3082	2025	14584

ND: Not done

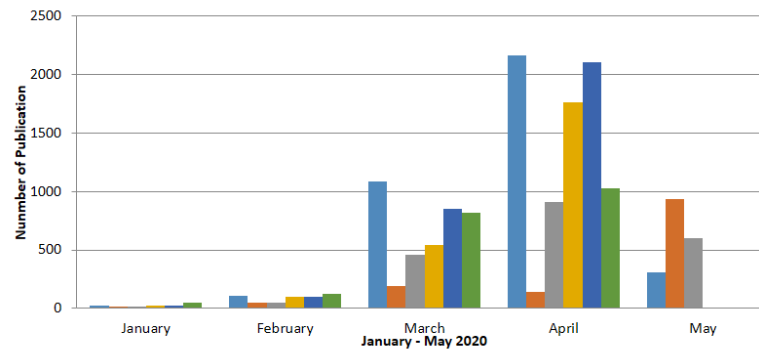


Figure 2: Monthly evaluation of COVID-19 publication by newspaper types from January to May 2020

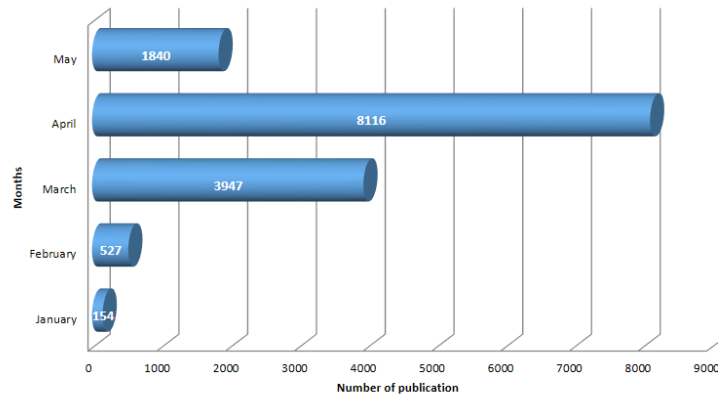


Figure 3: Month by month publication of COVID-19 by the six national newspapers (January-May, 2020)

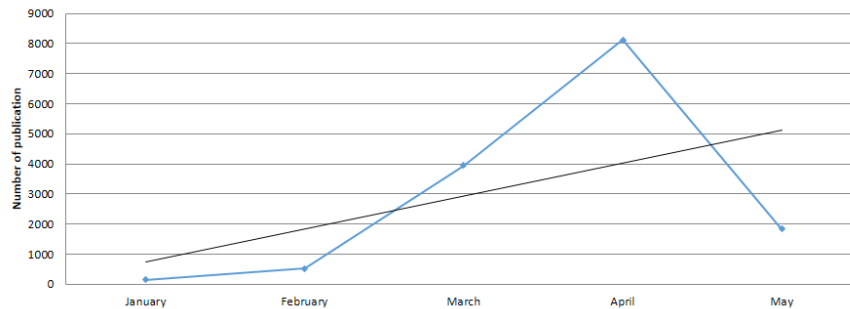


Figure 4: Monthly trend of national newspaper publication of COVID-19 (January – May, 2020)

The story format used by the six national newspapers in the coverage of COVID-19 from January to May 2020 revealed that The Guardian (34%) had the highest number of story format used, followed by The Punch (21%) (Figure 5). While the monthly date rate recorded by three national newspapers on COVID-19 showed that the Nation had the highest May as shown in Figure 6.

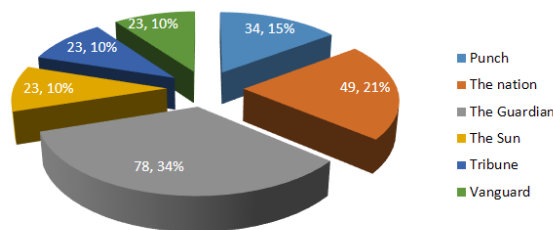


Figure 5: Total number of Story formats used by the six national newspapers in the coverage of COVID-19 (January –May, 2020)

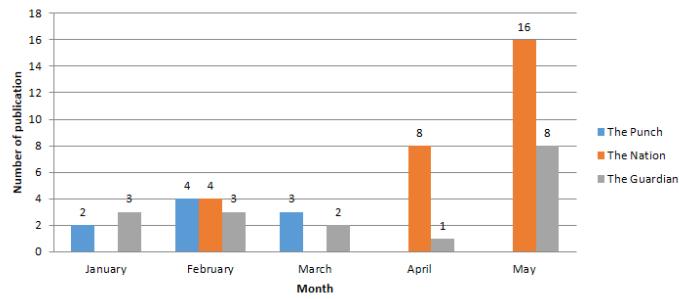


Figure 6: Monthly publications on COVID-19 death rates recorded by three national newspapers

Monthly publication on precautions the public can take and preparedness to confront COVID-19 from January to May had the Nation newspapers with the highest number of publication for precautions and highest publication on preparedness to confront COVID-19 in the month of February as shown in Figure 7 and Figure 8. Also the Nation newspapers had the highest number of publications in the month of May on risks taken when treating COVID-19 patients (Figure 9).

Figure 7: Monthly publications on precautions the public can take on COVID-19 by the six national newspapers (January –May, 2020)

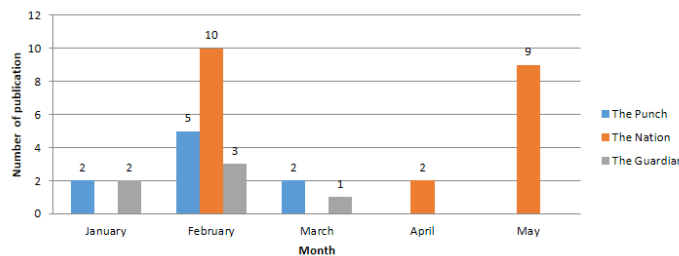


Figure 8: Monthly publications on preparedness to confront COVID-19 by newspaper type (January – May, 2020)

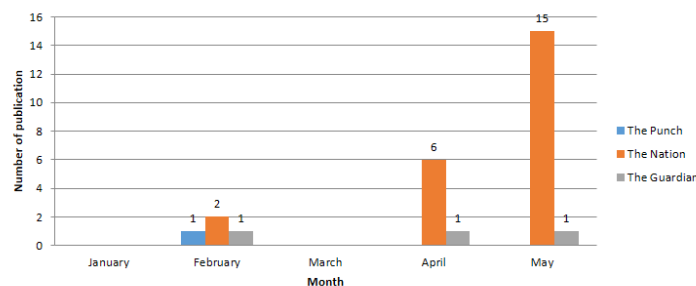


Figure 9: Monthly publications on risks taken when treating COVID-19 patients by newspaper type (January – May, 2020)

Monthly publications on type of drug and cure for COVID-19 and movement /economic shut-down due to COVID-19 pandemic are shown in Figures 10 and 11. The Nation newspapers reported these the most in the month of May.

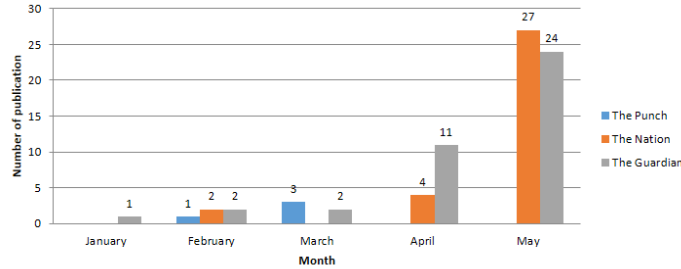


Figure 10: Monthly publications on type of drug and cure for COVID - 19 patients by newspaper type

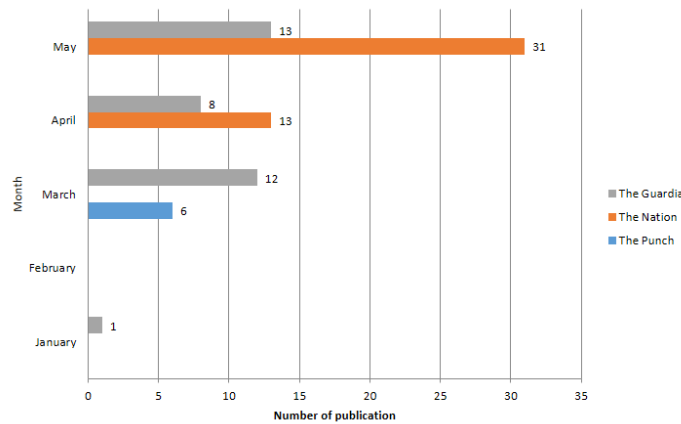


Figure 11: Monthly publications on movement and economic shut-down due to COVID - 19 pandemic

Discussion

The fact that the media plays a vital role in information dissemination especially during epidemics or disease outbreaks is a known fact (Smith et al, 2017; Olapegba et al, 2020). The first official COVID-19 case was reported on the 27th of February 2020. The case was an Italian that came into Lagos and the second positive case was soon reported in Ogun state from a patient that had contact with the index case. Since then the reported cases of COVID-19 has skyrocketed in Nigeria. In a report by Ducharme (2020), news coverage of COVID-19 in 2020 was very different from that of Ebola in 2018, due to the heavy reportage of COVID-19. Our study corroborates this view because although we looked at six newspapers with a total COVID-19 reportage of 14,585, a previous report by Smith and Smith (2016) on Ebola within 4 months was 1,625. Our study began to research into newspaper coverage of COVID-19 in the Nigerian newspapers from January even before the onset of the first case in Nigeria. The aim was to find out how well the Nigerian media brought awareness of this outbreak to the Nigerian populace. We found that even in January, almost a month before the pandemic, newspaper reportage of COVID-19 was 1%, with The Nation newspapers having the lowest publication.

A summary of the six national newspapers on COVID-19 publication showed that the most common story format of reportage was news (55.3%) and this has been consistent with outbreak reportage of cases such as those reported by Smith and Smith (2016), news reportage of Ebola was the most common with 69.4%, Smith et al, (2017), news reportage of Lassa fever (LF) was highest with 57.1%. The story format for the Ebola and LF was just grouped into 5 and 12 respectively, that of our study on COVID-19

had a total of 16 that are common with the six newspapers, with other story format such as Business, Energy, Entertainment, ICT clinic, Money, Politics also making prominence and these consisted of up to 15% of the story format. The reason for COVID-19 having more reportage is not far-fetched because of the nature of the outbreak and the need to create awareness amongst the Nigerian populace. Those in the business sector, the sporting sector (the sports lovers), the cartoons for the fun-lovers and even the travel sector is not also left out. The advert story format on reportage of COVID-19 prevention methods was also published but in only 1.3%. This goes to show the wholistic reporting of the Nigerian news media in trying to capture every sector of the populace. The third story format was in Front Page with 6.1% to emphasize the importance of the COVID-19. The study by A study by Olapegba et al, (2020), confirmed these findings from their study on knowledge and perception of COVID-19 in Nigeria, in which they concluded that Nigerians have relatively high knowledge about COVID-19 all thanks to the traditional media. Although reports concerning the newspapers and socio media spreading panic was reported by Kilgo et al, (2018) in the reportage of Ebola virus. A look at the reportage of COVID-19 in the six Nigerian newspapers studied showed that The Punch reported 25% of the total publications, followed by The Tribune (21%) and least The Nation (9%). The month-by-month publication showed that the highest was The Punch newspaper with peaks in April, although The Sun, The Tribune and The Vanguard newspapers were not assessed for the month of May. The sharp drop in the month of May was due to the fact that three newspapers were not assessed in the month of May. Although the Punch newspaper had the highest COVID-19 publication, The Guardian had the highest number of story format contributing to 34% of the total story format with The Punch coming second with 21%. This goes to show the diversity of The Guardian newspapers in COVID-19 reportage as a means to get to the Nigerian populace using various story formats. An assessment of the COVID-19 death rate reportage in three national newspapers (The Punch, The Nation and The Guardian) showed the Punch having more reportage of death rate, followed by The Guardian with the highest death rate reportage occurring in May for obvious reasons as the cases of COVID-19 have constantly been on an astronomical rise. The Agenda setting theory of the media came to bear when newspaper publications (The Punch, The Nation and The Guardian) on COVID-19 reportage concerning the precautions the public can take on COVID-19 and the month of May had the highest publication with The Nation having the highest publication. This trend is different from previous trend on outbreak reportage of both COVID-19, Ebola and LF (Smith & Smith 2016; Smith et al, 2017, Wogu et al, 2019; Ducharme et al, 2020, Gilani et al., 2020), where trends in newspaper reportage of outbreaks reduce within months, but in this case because the pandemic is still on the rise, newspaper reports on COVID-19 are still on the rise and will probably see a drop when the pandemic comes to an end.

Amongst the three newspapers' (The Nation, The Guardian and The Punch), reportage on preparedness to confront COVID-19, risks taken when treating COVID-19 patients, type of drugs and cure for COVID-19 patients, The Nation newspapers had the highest reportage mainly in the months of February, May and May respectively. A study by Olapegba et al, (2020a) on a survey data of COVID-19 related Knowledge, risk perceptions and precautionary behavior among Nigerians, suggest the possibility of the study helping to curb the COVID-19 as a result of strategic and targeted interventions that will help formulate health policies and implement them. In another report by Ebenso and Otu (2020), the authors expressed fears on the lack of preparedness for community outbreaks of COVID-19 in Nigeria due to insufficient bed space and clinical care.

In terms of restrictions of movement and economic shut down due to COVID-19, the highest newspaper reportage was The Nation and in the month of May, although the first hint came in January in a report by The Guardian. This economic shut down did not prepare the populace with the associated hardships during the lockdown in Nigeria as many resorted to unwholesome acts as stealing and all manner of looting was on the rise. To further buttress this, a report by Kalu (2020), called COVID-19 in Nigeria as

a disease of hunger. Wogu et al, (2019), attributed the year round occurrence of LF to be as a result of poor network connection, period of broad case and people's indifference to the disease.

Conclusion

The media has played a great role in the reportage of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria with 14,585 publications, the highest so far reported in a disease outbreak. The awareness of COVID-19 particularly started early enough in January with few publications before the index case in February. This shows the interest of the Nigerian mass media in creating awareness of COVID-19 in Nigerian populace. It has reported preventive measures for COVID-19, but these are insufficient. It is however advised that more attention should be paid to interviews of professionals and front line health workers on COVID-19 for appropriate prevention steps and education of the Nigerian populace.

Limitations of the Study

This study focused only on the print media reportage of COVID-19 from January to May 2020, without the involvement of electronic media. A total of six newspapers, the highest so far were reported but the limitations was that in three of the newspapers, the month of May was not assessed, due to some limitations faced with working on hard copy newspapers. In addition, three newspapers were also not reviewed for death rate cases, precautions taken, risks taken when treating COVID-19, type of drug and cure for COVID-19 patients and economic shut down.

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