

The increasing potency of social media small plays for communication of covid-19 during the April 2020 lockdown in Lagos

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Abstract

Survey shows in this paper, that Lagosians, during the April 2020 Lockdown believed, understood and were better educated about the Covid-19 pandemic majorly through social media small plays on Facebook and WhatsApp. By the second week of Covid -19 lockdown, in Lagos, 67 percent of Lagosians had switched to the social media for Covid-19 information and the percentage increased to 71 by the end of the fourth week. Reasons given range from the social media's informal presentation of the pandemic as against the technical methods of the mainstream media, easier access to WhatsApp and Facebook compared to costly and unavailable newspapers and national grid electricity to power TVs; and social media's encoding the Covid-19 information through small plays and comedies; compared to governments' briefings that came under very formal and sometimes tensed atmosphere that could create tension in the people. These findings do not only reinforce the role of dramatic arts as instruments of communication, but also show how small plays are increasingly challenging the potency of other media in Nigeria when it comes to communicating major issues. In a country with limited electricity supply and restricted access to newspapers before and during the Covid-19 lock down, government needs to identify and adopt the use of dramatic clips for correct management of information during the pandemics.

Key Words: Social Media Small Plays, Facebook, WhatsApp, Social Media, Lagosians, Covid-19, Communication

La puissance croissante des petits jeux de médias sociaux pour la communication de covid-19 pendant le confinement d'avril 2020 à Lagos

Résumés

L'enquête montre dans cet article que les Lagosiens, pendant le confinement d'avril 2020, croyaient, comprenaient et étaient mieux éduqués sur la pandémie de Covid-19, principalement grâce à de petits jeux sur les réseaux sociaux sur Facebook et WhatsApp. Au cours de la deuxième semaine de confinement de Covid -19, à Lagos, 67% des Lagosiens étaient passés aux réseaux sociaux pour obtenir des informations sur Covid-19 et le pourcentage est passé à 71 à la fin de la quatrième semaine. Les raisons invoquées vont de la présentation informelle de la pandémie par les réseaux sociaux par rapport aux méthodes techniques des médias grand public, un accès plus facile à WhatsApp et Facebook par rapport aux journaux coûteux et indisponibles et à l'électricité du réseau national pour alimenter les téléviseurs ; et l'encodage des informations sur le Covid-19 par les réseaux sociaux à travers de petites pièces de théâtre et des comédies ; par rapport aux briefings des gouvernements qui se sont déroulés dans une atmosphère très formelle et parfois tendue qui pouvait créer des tensions dans la population. Ces résultats non seulement renforcent le rôle des arts dramatiques en tant qu'instruments de communication, mais montrent également comment les petites pièces de théâtre remettent de plus en plus en question la puissance d'autres médias au Nigeria lorsqu'il s'agit de communiquer des problèmes

majeurs. Dans un pays où l'approvisionnement en électricité est limité et l'accès aux journaux restreint avant et pendant le verrouillage de Covid-19, le gouvernement doit identifier et adopter l'utilisation de clips dramatiques pour une gestion correcte de l'information pendant les pandémies.

Mots clés : petits jeux de médias sociaux, Facebook, WhatsApp, réseaux sociaux, Lagosians, Covid-19, communication

Background to study

Nowadays, social media have become a hotspot for information, entertainment and popularity amongst groups and individuals. Mustapha et al put it expressly that “the development of social media as tools for simultaneous connection among people globally has given way for new means of mobilizing citizens toward a particular cause” (Mustapha et al 2016:1). The role of social media cannot be overemphasized as it provides multiple opportunities for communication. For (Siddiqui and Singh (2016), social media play a vital role toward student’s education as studies showed there is an increase in the rate of collaboration amongst students, making it easy for information share and social interactions through major sites like Facebook, Instagram and so on. Even other groups that are registered as news outlets have created social media accounts all in order to boost coverage. All these because social media have become a dominant point of information around the world. Although, Harper (2010) posits that, apart from journalists benefitting using the social media, others through their evaluation of the social media, agree that it has helped give individuals the platform to speak up to the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic 2020 has offered opportunity for different groups and individuals to display the potency of the social media. These include those who label themselves as comedians, skit-makers and bloggers who have also taken up the mantle of giving updates pertaining the COVID-19 pandemic. All these efforts: comedy clips, blog, Facebook, etc., are, in this paper, captioned as Social Media Small Plays (SMSP); and will be used all through.

Social media small plays have played different roles in information dissemination and management during the Lagos COVID-19 lockdown that lasted between, the 18th of April and 4th of May 2020. A survey was conducted with focus on the understanding, believe and enlightenment of the COVID-19 amongst Lagosians during the lockdown. Findings were arrived at through quantitative processing of data generated, and they were discussed in ways that led to conclusions. This introduction is followed by an exploration of extant literature on the role of social media in information; and these trickled down to the specific issue of social media small play which is the focus of this paper. People usually turn to the social media Covid-19 information and updates that usually come in small plays. A lot of the bloggers filter information which may sometimes induce fears to people. Sensational titles used most times prompt people to click and view the story thereby earning more money for the news outlet. People turn to social media small plays on Covid-19 not only for the update but also for the comic relief that comes with it?

Literature review

Communication

Communication can be said to be as old as man. It is also believed that communication can take place even among animals and plants. (Sanders 2019), states that irrespective of the immobility and voiceless

nature of plants, communication does take place amongst members and other species of plant beyond human imagination. Taking a step further in defining what communication is in the animal world, (Maynard-Smith and Harper, 2003) posit that communication is the transfer of information from one or more other animals, (receiver or receivers) that affect the current or future behaviors of the receivers. Scholars over time had also given different interpretations to the word communication in the world of man; therefore, stating a few will suffice for the purpose of this paper. DeVito, as cited in (Slater, 2004, p.1 of 6) defines communication as “the process or act of transmitting a message from a sender to a receiver, through a channel and with the interference of noise”. While other writers add that the message transmitted is deliberate and at the same time sends meaning for the purpose of change. Coates, in trying to define communication, explains that the word emanated from the Latin verb *communicare*, which means “to share or to make common”. However, Coates went further to define communication in three dimensional ways: the sharing of information, giving and receiving of messages and the transfer of information from one or more people to one or more other people.(2019, p.19). However, the latter aspect of Coates definition best suites our purpose of this paper which is about communication between people. From the foregoing, one thing evidently clear and common between man, plants and animals is that every creature has a unique way of communicating within themselves, either by movement, voice, gesture and actions, communication sure does take place. Thus, communication is used as a means of interaction between humans, plants and animals and it is pivotal to every relationships. (Carey, as cited in Nordquist, 2019, p.2&3). Posits that, all creatures on earth have devised ways to convey their emotions and thoughts to one another but man being superior to plants and animals use words and language to convey specific meanings which makes them quite distinct from the other creatures. This indicates that every communication is processed through a model. No wonder, a researcher commented that “once a message has been encoded, the next level in the communication process is to transmit or communicate the message to a receiver. This can be done in many ways: during face-to-face verbal interaction, over the telephone, through printed materials (letters, newspapers, etc.), or through visual media (television, photographs). Verbal, written, and visual media are three examples of possible communication channels used to transmit messages between senders and receivers. Other transmission channels include touch, gestures, clothing, and physical distances between sender and receiver (proxemics)” (Bass, 1998, p.1) .These models are also used for politics, advertisement, trade, commerce, announcements of wedding death childbirth etc. Dramatic arts also do have roles to play in communication, for instance, man in some of their interactions and communications can be said to be more dramatic.

The role of dramatic arts as communication

Drama is an aspect of literature which emanated from the Greek word which means to do. Esslin in his *An Anatomy of Drama* corroborates with the above by describing drama to mean action, an action in imitation or a representation of human behavior (1976:14). It is important to understand that for drama to be drama there must be an imitation of action in line with real life situation accompanied with dialogue, song and dance and must take place within a given space before an audience. Drama is also described here as a mode of fictional representation through dialogue and performance because it's type of play is written for the theatre, television, radio and film but the theatre is seen as a more conventional place for drama to take place and this is what makes drama a unique genre of literature. Literary Devices Editors, (2013) .What then is the role of dramatic arts as instrument of communication? Drama apart from being a literary work of arts also functions as a communication tool every member of our society is exposed to daily through the mass media. It serves as an instrument by which society

communicates its codes of behavior to its members. The communication functions in a dual manner as it encourages imitation and presents examples of behavior to be avoided or accepted. He goes further to give a scenario where a gang star movie created to discourage crime but may even expose a potential gangster how to go about being a gangster (Esslin 1976). From the above postulation, it is evident that while drama serves as corrective measure to some, it is the inverse concerning others. Although there are many sources of communication and dramatic arts have come to joining them in recent days, the aspect of social media small plays (SMSP) for communication is very rare, and that is why the present paper focuses on it.

Social media small plays

One of the characteristics of a full length drama is its duration which is between one hour thirty minutes, two hours or as the case may be. It is also possible for an excerpt to be drawn from a full length play which should also not go beyond a few minutes. In the dramatic genres, small dramatic clips are also known as short stories, playlets or skits. The nature of small dramatic clips depicts a brief fictional prose narrative that is shorter than a novel and deals with only a few characters. According to Hanson, "The short story is usually concerned with a single effect conveyed in only one or a few significant episodes or scenes. The form encourages economy of setting, concise narrative, and the omission of a complete plot; character is disclosed in action and dramatic encounter but is seldom fully developed. Despite its relatively limited scope, though a short story is often judged by its ability to provide a "complete" or satisfying treatment of its characters and subject". (Hansen 1999.) These form of drama or small plays are commonly used as communication of vital issues such as public enlightenment campaigns, advertisement or generally to sell an idea. Although this form of drama originated from the theatre and now climaxed through social media; this research has necessitated the coinage of the name 'Social Media Small Plays' (SMSP) which is the purpose of this research. Social Media Small Plays are characterized by a high level of unconventionality. Productions can be done at make-do locations, unedited storylines, technical knowhow are rarely required, and producers upload these plays almost for free while they smile to the banks as every viewer are usually charged for it.

Social media

Social media has fast become an essential part of people's life to the extent of almost becoming an addiction for some as well. Social media has evolved over the years and cuts across all ages and gender worldwide. According to a researcher "Social media is the term often used to refer to new forms of media that involve interactive participation" (Manning, 2014, p.1158). It is necessary also to give a brief history of how social media emerged. Hendricks (2013) explained that, friends and families who lived across long distances had it difficult in communicating between themselves for a long period of time and communication seems to solidify the relationship of man being social animals. The earliest mode of interaction was by written correspondence across distances, although postal services (in the year 550- a primitive delivery system), telegraph and telephone emerged in 1890 and radio in 1891 respectively to aid communication. As time went on, digital and mobile technology became on the rise as communication became easier for individuals more than ever. Hendrick (2013) posits that by 2006, the major sites that people used all over the world were Facebook and Twitter and they remained the most popular social networks on the internet. This definitely points out that there are also other social media sites on regular use by members of the society, some of them are, Bebo, MySpace, Friendster, hi5, Bharatstudents, YouTube, Snapchat, Skype, Instagram and WhatsApp among others. Centre to this research is Facebook and WhatsApp.

Facebook and WhatsApp

Facebook and WhatsApp are two most used websites on social media. Facebook a social networking service lunched as The Facebook on February 4, 2004 and was founded by Mark Zuckerberg with his college roommates (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>). This popular site is found to be used by majority all around the world and for several purposes; from entertainment, business, information dissemination, publicity, news and marketing platform. Others upload personal data, photographs and communicate with friends and families from any part of the world. While the WhatsApp according to Barhoumi (2015) means 'what New', he describes it as an instant messaging application meant for Smartphones. Although these social media platforms have negative and positive sides, yet they give users the opportunity for exchange of images, videos and audio, exchange of business transaction as well as written messages through the use of internet connection. The gains from using Facebook and WhatsApp cannot be overemphasized as it is convenient, you don't have to leave your home to be entertained. It also takes very little intellectual prowess to understand. Messages are usually short and brief therefore within few seconds messages would have been communicated. From the above, it is evident that the use of Facebook and WhatsApp on social media is multidimensional. Although it requires purchase of data to be able to access the internet; the use of social media is cheap and almost free. As glamorous, effective and functional as these social media sites may seem, they are likely to pose threats of insecurity to users and other members of the society as cases of impersonation, fraud, misinformation and all sorts of cyber related crimes are experienced. Allcot et al (2019) in a research to find out the trend of misinformation on social media came up with the conclusion that, social media is a potential threat to democracy and the broader society (6). In agreement with the above, Apuke and Omar declared that although, the Anti-fake news was put in place in check of fake news in Nigeria, yet the increase remains inexplicable (1).

Lagos is a very busy and moving society where social media is used by majority of the populace and elites. The city is referred to as 'Centre for Excellence' while others call it 'No Man's Land'. Filani (2012) puts that Lagos as a classic example of a modern City changed over time from a small farming and fishing village in the fifteenth century to a rich mega city in 2012, while its population rose to 10 million people. It is a city densely populated and its inhabitant multicultural but predominantly harbors the Yoruba tribes known as owners of the land while everybody is generally referred to as Lagosians.

Recently, most countries all over the world experienced a bio-chemical warfare popularly called Corona Virus (COVID-19). This infection is believed to have originated from Wuhan China in 2019. The World Health Organization-WHO (2020) states that the first human cases of COVID-19 disease was reported by the Chinese authorities precisely in December 2019 and became a pandemic as it gradually spreads like wild fire to other parts of the world like Italy, Spain, London, America and most parts of the African continent especially Nigeria. This disease according to the Hon Minister of Health, Dr Osagie Ehanire (2020) was first reported on the 27th of February 2020 but the first case in Nigeria was recorded in Lagos from an Italian citizen who returned from Italy to Lagos, Nigeria. Although, Lagos, Abuja and Ogun state recorded the index cases yet Lagos was named and still remains the 'Epicenter' since the outbreak of the dreaded disease, COVID-19. There have been records of confirmed cases on the increase within other states like, Bauchi, Ekiti, Rivers, Kaduna, Anambra and Kano, just to mention but few. Due to the increase of persons affected with COVID-19, the Nigerian government through the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) began to put in place proactive measures in order to control the spread; such as, Isolation centers, social distancing, Lockdown and curfew. "In a move to combat the spread of the

pandemic disease, President Muhammadu Buhari directed the cessation of all movements in Lagos and the FCT for an initial period of 14 days, which took effect from 11 pm on Monday, 30th March 2020” (Oyekanmi, 2020, p.8). Some of the strict measures put in place by the Lagos state government, according to Shaban 2020, are for workers and traders to remain at home while schools also remain closed. During this period the Lagos state governor, Mr Babajide Sanwolu also made available some intervention funds as palliatives to help the poor. However, information is key in to a society and important in a situation such as COVID-19 pandemic. This is so because it is the only way through which government can reach its people to consistently pass vital information across to every citizen in order to save lives. The Lagos state government therefore put in place public enlightenment campaigns through the regular media (radio, television and newspapers) to create awareness and educate the public on how to conduct themselves to avoid contact with the dreaded disease or what to do if contacted.

However, popular comedians, Television personalities and other social media users have found it worthy to upload small plays that are easy to view and consume less time. Un-trained directors and actors produce most of these social media small plays, packed with facts and figures about COVID-19, which are also readily accessible to users, whether on the road or at work.

Lagosians began to tilt towards skits makers and bloggers on social media for their updates on COVID-19. This development became quite worrisome owing to the reason that information on these platforms could be subject to verification. Lagosians especially began to shy away from the government as their primary and verified source of updates and rely on social media small plays for information. It is no news that the Nigerian government has been battling with the trend of fake and un-verified news; it warned the news and media outlets as well as the public to verify their sources regarding any information especially about COVID-19.

Theoretical Framework

The social influence theory explains the why and how persons through external forces get influenced in the society. Socio Psychologist Herbert Kelman, a major proponent of the social influence theory of 1958, states that the central focus of his work in social psychology had been on the nature and quality of changes in individuals’ action, attitude and beliefs invaded by influence from external source (Kelman 2016). Most scholars agree that, social change can be described as the behavior, opinions, and emotions that emanated from other people actions or feelings while others believe, each one in the society needs the influence of the other for social existence. This theory helps us to understand social influence amongst social media users as this case may be. Burger (2001) is of the view that this theory is deeply rooted on the way people distorts behaviors or attitudes of others. This can be attributed to a particular action, request or command that is in connection with the three categories of social influence; compliance, conformity and obedience.

For the purpose of this research, social influence is deemed appropriate as it best reflects and describes the actions of social media users conforming to the regular streaming of social media small plays (SMSP). According to Burger, conformity is referred to as changes in opinion or behavior which should also be in tandem with the obtainable (Burger 2015). Gass takes it further and states that “social influence involves intentional and non-intentional efforts to change another person’s belief, attitudes or

behaviors unlike persuasion which is typically intentional and requires some degree of awareness on the part of the target”(Gass 2015:1). It was observed that, social media small plays are produced by mostly nonprofessionals in the society and used by millions of subscribers who most times are not personally known by the producers, therefore, it can be said here that Facebook and WhatsApp users are not intentionally influenced nor persuaded by the producers of social media small plays. Research carried out showed that social media users get influenced and committed to viewing the social media small plays for purpose of news, comedy and information on COVID-19: it also comes in form of music and drama and it is consistent. Sometimes its entertainment nature makes it even more palatable to watch even though it is a matter of life and death.

The survey method was used for this study by selecting representative samples from a large population. These samples were closely scrutinized and the aggregate data from the multiple respondents yield the conclusion. The samples taken were males and females, adults between the ages of 18-51 years and above. Occupational status of the respondents were students, workers and entrepreneurs while sample areas covered were Ikeja, Ebuttemeta and Lekki Peninsula, all in Lagos State. Results showed that by the second week of April of the COVID-19 Lockdown in Lagos, 67 percent Lagosians had switched from the native media source of information about the pandemic to the social media small plays. Study also showed that by the end of the fourth week, the percentage rose to 71 percent. Majority of the respondents despite their status see social media especially the WhatsApp and Facebook as a medium readily available for information on COVID-19, especially through social media small plays. Reasons given by some respondents is that although the radio, television and newspaper medium should be the ideal source of information for them but due to the epileptic power supply, expensive and almost unaffordable newspaper materials, the social media becomes the option open to them while only a few who could afford the purchase of generator sets or power one relied on the conventional news medium. Another major reason is that respondents get motivated to viewing social media small plays for its entertainment value, information pact and are accessible on their mobile phones.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of data in the foregoing, it has been established that Social media small plays are usually found on social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitters and others. Comedians, musicians and other social media users upload popular occurrences in any aspect of life to confirm conclusion that social media small plays shall continue to be on the increase in Lagos. Most of these small plays are uploaded on the Youtube for social media users to subscribe and download. A few examples are ‘The Fear of Corona Virus’ produced by Laugh Pills Comedy, ‘Corona Virus’ produced by Fatboiz Comedy and others in form of musicals, educative, informative and entertaining. Results from this research shows that the social media platforms are used daily by majority in the society for either business, social or entertainment purposes. This is a global phenomenon experienced in Nigeria especially during the COVID-19 lockdown in Lagos.

Significantly, the roles of the social media in the society have permeated the conventional media outlets that now see the need to utilize the sites for news and other vital information dissemination. The survey questionnaire results indicates the popularity of social media as it cuts across almost all age groups but prominent more amongst the youths and provides enormous opportunities that make communication easy for users. Indeed, the use of drama as a veritable tool to communicate vital information to the society has been re-established after many years of scholarly attestation. The added knowledge here is that of all the dramatic arts that are used for communication, SSMP are now fast taking over the

conventional forms such as radio and television. As this research shows, many people in Lagos during the Covid 19 lockdown abandoned the use of television and newspapers due the extra cost of generator fueling and even outright purchase. They then switched to their telephone sets that serve their general communication purposes while providing information on Covid-19. Their dependence of the SSMP is time saving, convenient and can be recalled or viewed at discursions and times. They can also be easily re-disseminated. This relative potency that the SSMP portends shows that, it can also be used in negative forms too and achieves damaging results among the population. As this raises the need for the Nigerian government to put in place stiffer measures by way of establishing censorship board to monitor content being uploaded on social media by users. government on its own part can, in fact should as well adopt it in disseminating and managing critical information like that of Covid-19, instead of allowing uncoordinated and unofficial agents in jesters and bloggers to do it for the state.

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