Social media and the Covid-19 pandemic: Observations from Nigeria

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Abstract: Social Media is an invaluable means of disseminating information to the citizenry; hence it is a powerful tool of propaganda. In lieu of the Nigerian situation, it acts as a two-edged sword as it allows citizens to be privy to information without impediments. However, this same tool has been used to misinform the populace and to circulate unverifiable and deceptive messages to citizens. As regards this, the basic question becomes: what are the advantages and disadvantages of the roles of social media in misinforming the general public about pandemics such as Covid-19? This qualitative study would explore social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, blogs, online newspapers, and YouTube where the contestations about the pandemic are most pronounced. Considering that these are the major mainstream forums used by the populace outside the World Health Organisations (WHO), Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and State institutions, the most pervasive messages from these forums have been selected for analysis. The paper therefore interrogates the roles which social media play in either curtailing or aiding the spread of the news on the pandemic across the country. The paper concludes that the significance of Social Media outlets cannot be overemphasized with recourse to information dissemination. It also purports that these platforms have been abused as people hide under its anonymity to spread fake messages and instigate panic amongst members of the general public.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT 
Social Media is an invaluable means of disseminating information, hence it has become a powerful tool of propaganda. In Nigeria, it acts as a two-edged sword as it allows citizens to be privy to information without impediments. However, this same tool has been abused as people hide under its anonymity to spread fake messages and instigate panic amongst members of the general public. The onset of Covid-19 pandemic, saw the different media outlets awash with different messages in which the writers keep encouraging people to share among friends and relations. This paper therefore interrogates the roles which social media play in either curtailing or aiding the spread of the news on the pandemic across the country. The paper concludes that the significance of Social Media outlets cannot be overemphasized with recourse to information dissemination.
Subjects: Mass Communication; Information Technology; History

Keywords: social media; Nigeria; Covid-19; pandemic; propaganda

1. Introduction
Over the years, social media has become an active technological tool in Nigeria; as well as a news and communication channel for the citizenry of Nigeria. Access to mobile telephony especially among the technologically savvy youths has made dissemination of information easy with a snap of the finger. In recent times, as the pandemic encroaches on and emasculates world activities, social media platforms have been utilized as an information outlet to citizens. Its significance has gained more recognition owing especially to the fact that the government implemented a lockdown policy to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Thus, it has become an active tool for engagement and communication for the dissemination of plausible information as well as incredulous (mis)information.

There is a growing body of literature on social media. A critical analysis shows change and continuity in communication and information technology. Let’s examine below some of the issues. Social Media is an offshoot of the Internet and according to DiMaggio et al. (2001, p. 307), the Internet refers to the electronic network or networks that link(s) people and information through computers and other digital devices; thereby allowing for person-to-person communication and information retrieval. The Internet is a major tool that emerged for the purpose of information dissemination; thus, the media acts as an information hegemon in terms of determining what information is made available to people as well as the impression people have on issues (Savrum & Leon, 2015). Largely, Social Media is the collection of websites and web-based systems that allow for mass interaction, conversation and sharing among members of a network (Murphy, 2013, p. 3). These diverse media outlets and communication networks played an important role in facilitating uprisings such as the Arab spring (AlSayyad & Guvenc, 2015, p. 2025). Its power lies in live pictures conveyed by video recording of events as it unfolds. The international livestreaming of events is capable of mobilizing a huge population of citizenry for positive or negative end. More so, it has played an important role in crippling dictatorial regimes. Unfortunately, these various outlets have been abused as unscrupulous people hide under its anonymity to defraud or relay false information. As the importance of social media is not lost on the general public for information engagement, its abuse in Nigeria especially during this emergency period is neither lost on any keen observer. Consequently, its advantages and disadvantages are highlighted in this paper.

The Coronavirus (Covid-19) is an infectious disease causes respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe respiratory difficulties. It originated from the Hunan seafood market at Wuhan, China where live bats, snakes, raccoon dogs, wild animals among others were sold in December 2019 (Shereen et al., 2020, pp. 91–98) and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020 (WHO, 2020). Since its identification, the virus is said to have accounted for about 512,311 deaths globally out of a swooping statistic of 10,514,028 positive cases which sadly increases exponentially daily (WHO, 2020). The first victim of the virus in Nigeria was an Italian man who arrived in the country on the 25 February 2020. He was admitted to an Isolation Centre in Yaba Lagos after showing symptoms of the virus (NCDC 2020). Subsequently, the cases increased and, as at the time of this paper, almost 28,711 positive cases and 11,665 recuperated persons have been identified (NCDC, 2020).

Noticably, Nigeria is trying to curb the rapid spread of Covid-19 through immediate lockdown of the major epicenters of Lagos, Ogun, and Abuja: commercial and administrative hubs of the country; where there have been spike of coronavirus cases. Some state governors have also taken proactive actions by closing their “borders” in a bid to curtail the spread of the virus. Other measures include prohibition of mass gathering of people at churches, sports arenas and burials while schools were closed nationwide. The achievement of these feats can be attributed
not just to proper healthcare facilities but also to the impacts of social media in the country. Its platforms: WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have become varying means of communication and engagement by not just the government but by the general populace. Contrarily, social media is also utilized as a means of propaganda in disclosing news and information, which at most are based on assumptions and speculations. On this note, this paper intends to interrogate the use of social media as a tool for the good, the bad and the ugly.

2. Review of related works

The world has experienced varying pandemics in the past from the Antonine plague (165 AD), the Black death (1346–1354), the Spanish flu (1918–1920), the Asian Flu (1956–1958) among others. The Covid-19 pandemic is a recent phenomenon and its study is still limited. To this end, the literatures used in the analysis of this research are largely materials conducted on other pandemics which have affected the world. In the light of the above, research conducted on the above pandemics have been used to draw parallels with the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, works on social media and its influence as a tool of information dissemination are similarly reviewed.

Elmahdawy et al. (2017, pp. 67–70) investigated the experiences of the victims of Ebola virus as it pertained to health systems and the effects this virus had on economies of African countries. The authors canvassed for the revamping of the healthcare systems of Third World countries, militated against by inadequate information sharing systems and the need to involve donor agencies to curb the virus spread in case of a relapse occurs. Unfortunately, Africa was still gasping from Ebola virus when the Coronavirus pandemic once more exposed further several deficiencies in Africa’s primary health care systems; which had been razing from poor funding by narrow-minded leaders who prefer medical tourism abroad to fixing basic primary health care infrastructure in the continent. Additionally, Oleribe et al. (2015, pp. 54–57) emphasized that African countries were unprepared to tackle the outbreak of Ebola virus just as with the case of Covid-19. In Nigeria, there was no preemptive closure of borders until the index Italian case forces panic stringent lockdown of the major epicenters of Lagos and Abuja. This led to the shutdown of educational institutions and prompted delays in programs such as the National Youth Service Corps. Consequently, there was a massive mobilization, awareness creation and sensitization of the citizenry to the dangers symptoms and signs of the virus. The unintended outcome of coronavirus pandemic was the special emphasis on hygiene and sanitization. In their own research endeavor, Cenciarelli et al. (2015) analyzed the wide spread of the Ebola Virus disease in the different West African countries. They attributed the spread of the virus to the reactions of several communities to the virus due to the mistaken beliefs about the origin of the disease and how it could be contained as a result of wrong information which increased the mortality rates during the pandemic (Cenciarelli et al., 2015). In Nigeria, where a good number of citizens believe that the virus is a hoax created by the government to corruptly enrich few State officials. This belief is difficult to erase from the minds of many people, thus making almost impossible to adhere to personal hygiene instructions issued by both the WHO and the Nigeria Centre for Diseases Control (NCDC).

Furthermore, Brandt et al. (2011) writing on “The Impact of the 2009 Influenza A (H1N1) Pandemic on attitudes of Healthcare workers toward seasonal Influenza vaccination 2010/2011,” assert that the risk in communication is a challenge in the attempt to curtail the spread of infectious diseases. The people, at the time, rejected the vaccination required of them to prevent the spread of the flu due to ignorance and hysteria. As such, it becomes imperative to provide the public and healthcare workers with relevant information capable of banishing any ambiguities and aiding in the prevention of the infectious diseases so as to decrease panic. Humphrey (2018) in her study of the influenza identified the social behaviors of cities that had lower risks of infections which had enforced the isolation of sick persons, the quarantine of their contacts, school closures and bans on public gatherings. In addition, the spread of the virus affected those who were victims of bacterial infections, malnutrition and malaria. Some communities compulsorily imposed the wearing of face masks. It was also discovered that several persons misused the facemask as some were improperly made. This is self-evident with the Covid-19 preventive measures as regards the use of facemasks. In Nigeria, the urban poor and
those living in rural areas use only one face mask day in day out on the claims that they washed it daily (Eze pers. Comm. 2020). Garett (2007) outlines further that, in some cities with lower mortality rates, the pandemic was curtailed by shutting down public places, closing down schools, churches, and limiting commercial activities. An important point he expresses in his research is the role the media plays. As such, even as far back as 1918, there were articles with dubious remedies on how to cure the influenza, and articles on churches, schools, and theater closings with lesser news on how the influenza affected the economy (Garett, 2007). Garett further argued that any future pandemic would prove to be more severe in its reach because of the increased population in the world and would therefore be more detrimental. Unfortunately, his assertions are the realities of the Covid-19 pandemic, as there remains an unimproved health sector by virtue of which those living in urban areas have better access to health care while the rural poor are in most cases neglected in Africa.

More so, DiMaggio (2011) admits that the Internet changes society and this is supported by Bowd (2016) who posits that the advent of social media came with opportunities for news outlets to engage more people thereby leading to an increased spread of information to a wider audience. Meanwhile the research conducted by Oginni and Motui (2015) analyzes the engagements of Africans with the social media. These scholars assert that the engagement of Africans with social media is relatively low and that authors did not fully explore the impacts of social media usage for civic engagements in individual countries or subregions of the African continent. To this end, the pandemic has made Africans, specifically Nigerians to be more active in social media in order to keep up with the global sphere.

In a nutshell, while the patterns as to what caused the spread of previous pandemics are still being fully underscored, the measures adopted by the government and by the populace to curtail the pandemic and its challenges were identified by the above researchers, but little attention have been given to the role of social media vis-à-vis global pandemics. In the Nigerian context, social media is a means of keeping up with occurrences all over the globe and is used to shed light as regards the Nigerian situation. The penetration of social media is quite extensive in Nigeria particularly since the advent of cheap android smartphones telephony. What is worrisome is how to sieve authentic information from an avalanche of half-truths and false information available on social media networks. In lieu of this, this paper focuses on some observations on the usage and influences of social media in Nigeria especially within this epoch of global health emergency.

This research examines the role of the social media from the context of disseminating information. It further explores the misinterpretation of the social media by several citizens across various social media platforms, with instances cited to buttress the assertions as the notions are shared by most because it came from the social media. This research depicts this in line of the fact that social media have begun to serve wrong purposes which has been induced by the populace and suggestions are made on how to curb the menace that the wrong usage is gradually instigating.

The Covid-19 and the lockdown policies introduced by the government made people to be solely dependent on the media, thus the influence the media had during this period have not been attained in any other pandemic. The populace has not fully understood the extent to which they are influenced by the news spread by the social media, which happens mostly unconsciously. It is this reason that this paper intends to make an exposé on the role which social media plays, most especially in inducing fear among the citizenry. It is this “panic button” being promoted by social media that this research attempts to highlight in the light of coronavirus pandemic.

2.1. Research questions
The research questions raised in this study interrogates the effects of social media on the recent coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria. It also examines the responses from the populace in regard to the different versions of messages on Covid-19 in Nigeria. Other questions culled from the research problems include:
(1) What led to the social polarization on Covid-19 in Nigeria?
(2) What were the government or nongovernmental organizations responses to these social media messages in Nigeria?
(3) Through what means have these messages been communicated to the general public?

2.2. Research hypotheses
(1) Religious practices do not significantly influence social polarization of Covid-19 in Nigeria.
(2) Government policies do not significantly influence citizens social interactions on Covid-19.
(3) Technological innovation does not significantly influence the spread of Covid-19 messages to the general public.

2.3. Research methodology, data collection, and design
The study investigates the pros and cons of social media towards curtailing the coronavirus pandemic disease in Nigeria. It documents the misinformation on the spread of the virus, its consequences and preventive measures. The research makes use of field survey methodology by obtaining views and responses of the general public through examining the messages on Covid-19 disease. Field survey is defined as collection and gathering of information at the local level by conducting primary survey. These are an essential component of geographic enquiry and are carried out through observations, interviews, sketching, measurement, etc. (www.r2v.com/fsurveys.php, 2020). The field survey design used in the research is to accommodate the different positions of the respondents view and their reactions to the messages received on coronavirus pandemic.

The data for this research were collected through primary and secondary sources. The primary information for this research was collected through personal communication, telephone conservations, and online personal messages. The respondents were free to express their opinions without intimidation, molestation, or harassment. The researchers and respondents adhered strictly to the 2-meter social distancing and wearing of nose masks as directed by the WHO. In addition, one hundred (100) participants were used for which all were accepted for validation.

The secondary sources of this research were collected through, newspapers, journal articles, and online materials. Data obtained from this study were analyzed using content and descriptive techniques such as frequencies and percentages with the use of Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) tool. The research design used include case study derived through qualitative techniques of the independent variables.

3. Social media as an information outlet
Nigeria, an amalgam of over 250 ethnic groups, has experienced many years of military dictatorship. Since her independence in 1960, she has been ruled by military leaders for the greater part of her existence as an independent entity. A new dawn arrived in 1999 when the military turned civilian leader, General Olusegun Obasanjo won the election that ushered Nigeria into the fourth republic. Unfortunately, the country’s economy, owing to her human rights abuses under the late dictator General Sani Abacha, remained in shambles due to the sanction imposed on her by the international community. Obasanjo used his first tenure in office to redeem the image of Nigeria abroad as well as negotiate the Paris debt relief. Another of his famous achievement was the introduction of mobile network provision to the country. In 1999, after his inauguration, Obasanjo introduced a telecommunication policy which empowered the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC) to reorganize, auction and issue fresh license to successful companies who could provide Nigerians an efficient and affordable telephone system (iProject, 2020). This was to eradicate the problems of land-lines which could only be afforded by the rich. Nigeria Telecommunication Plc, (NITEL), MTN Nigeria and Econet wireless were granted Digital Mobile license on 23 March 2001 with a 90 days deadline to start operation. Initially, the cost of buying SIM cards cost over 30,000 naira ($77–$78) which was beyond the reach of an average Nigerian. By 30 September 2010, there were 63 million Global System of Mobile
Communication (GSM) subscribers in Nigeria (iProject, 2020). This was as a result of the influx of affordable smartphones as well as the competition among the various service providers.

Social media as a tool of communication provides huge information outlets to Nigerians during this pandemic. The announcement of the first Coronavirus victim was made through various social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and various websites. Since a good number of Nigerians have access to these platforms, it was easy to spread this information. Subsequently, Health Care Agencies such as the NCDC updated the masses on the number of cases that have are positive, fatal or have recovered in Nigeria through these social media platforms. This gave Nigerian citizens a better chance to be fully prepared for Covid-19; as opposed to the period of the Influenza pandemic in which there was limited news on the virus when it came to Nigeria. At the time of the Influenza, the colonial government of Nigeria was only able to curtail it in parts of Lagos by disinfecting houses; however, limitations in the spread of information prompted the faster spread of the disease to other parts of the country (Adebowale, 2020).

NCDC is the country’s national public health institute with the mandate to lead the preparedness, detection and response to infectious diseases outbreak. The agency was formally signed into law in November 2018 by the president of Nigeria, Muhammmad Buhari. The mission of the agency is to protect the health of Nigerians through evidence based prevention, integrated diseases surveillance and response activities and they serve as a body that disseminates information to the citizens (NCDC, 2020). However, in this period of Covid-19 pandemic, it is through the media that the government passes across updates on the state of the country’s state of health as regards the spread of the flu. Accordingly, NCDC platforms on Twitter and Facebook are updated from time to time. Also, service providers such as MTN have provided free Internet access to the websites of Health Organizations such as the NCDC, Federal Ministry of Health, World Health Organization and the Presidential Task Force. The NCDC also sends daily updates to the people through SMS so that citizens would be properly equipped with whatever information they might need to combat the virus. However, the acquisition of android phones and data had caused a number of damages to the country as people hide under its anonymity to commit varying crimes. This prompted the government to make SIM card registration by the different network providers compulsory all over the country. This was done in order to enable the tracing of fraudsters in the country. Even with all these measures, fraudsters with intent to defraud, spread falsehood, half-truths, panic still predominate the social media. This has made decent members of the Nigerian society to be wary of information popping up on social media platforms.

3.1. Presentations of data analysis
The research was carried out in order to examine the positive and negative effects of social media in preventing the widespread coronavirus in Nigeria. Three hypotheses were generated and tested for the validation of the findings in the research. The result of these findings is organized in a tabular form to show the frequencies derived from the 100 questionnaires shared in different online platforms and personal contact.

4. Results
From table 1 above it is observed that the religious practices in Nigeria obtained the mean of 1.30 and standard deviation of 1.292. Government policies in Nigeria obtained the mean of 1.99 and standard deviation of 1.307. New technological innovations in Nigeria also obtained the mean of 1.38 and standard deviation of 1.505. Nevertheless, the 100 participants which was interviewed for or against the advantages and disadvantages of the social media on coronavirus messages in Nigeria obtained the mean of 1.50 and standard deviation of 0.928. To note, from the foregoing analysis, a result is accepted when it is more than 0.5 and rejected when it is less than 0.5.

From table 2 three independent variables and one dependent variable was tested in order to get the significant relationship between citizens and social media in Nigeria. The above table will be discussed in the findings below.
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

|                | Mean | Std. Deviation | N  |
|----------------|------|----------------|----|
| Religion       | 1.30 | 1.292          | 100|
| Government     | 1.99 | 1.307          | 100|
| Technology     | 1.38 | 1.505          | 100|
| Media          | 1.50 | .928           | 100|

Table 2. Correlations

|                | Religion | Government | Technology | Media |
|----------------|----------|------------|------------|-------|
| Religion       | 1        | .286**     | -.212      | -.153 |
| Sig. (two-tailed) | .010       | .059      | .031     |
| N              | 100      | 100        | 100       | 100   |
| Government     | .286**   | 1          | .074      | -.173 |
| Sig. (two-tailed) | .020        | .315      | .125     |
| N              | 100      | 100        | 100       | 100   |
| Technology     | -.212    | .074       | 1         | .057  |
| Sig. (two-tailed) | .059      | .515      |          |       |
| N              | 100      | 100        | 100       | 100   |
| Media          | -.153    | -.173      | .057      | 1     |
| Sig. (two-tailed) | .031        | .025      | .043     |
| N              | 100      | 100        | 100       | 100   |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

4.1. Discussion of findings

Whenever the table value is less than the calculated value in statistical analysis, the hypotheses is to be rejected but when it is greater the hypotheses is to be accepted. It is obvious to know that findings of this research work were upheld as the first was rejected, the second hypotheses were accepted while the third hypotheses were rejected.

The first hypotheses which states that “religious practices do not significantly influence social polarization of Covid-19 in Nigeria” was rejected because the results show that the significant level was .031 which is less than .05 (.031 > .05). This shows that religious practices in Nigeria significantly influence the spread of false preventive measures of the coronavirus disease. Religion rarely teach its congregation on the cause, consequences and measures for curtailing the spread of the virus. This shows that spread of virus in Nigeria is as a result of majority of religious practices in the country.

The second hypotheses which states that ‘government policies do not significantly influence citizens social interactions on Covid-19’ was accepted because the result shows that the significant level was .125 which is greater than .05 (.125 < .05). This shows that the government of Nigeria pays less attention to the social media interaction among the citizens. There is (are) no laws on messages or posts on social media. The citizens freely send out messages of coronavirus to their friends and love ones without restrictions.

The third hypotheses which states that “technological innovation does not significantly influence the spread of Covid-19 messages to the general public” was rejected because the result shows
that the significant level was .043 which is greater than .05 (.043 > .05). This shows that there is a relationship between new technological innovations and the spread of information. The new technological gadgets have no doubt assisted the populace in communicating with a wide audience even outside their comfort zones. There is need to instill regulations on the use of social media through these technologies.

5. Social media in the Covid-19 pandemic

In retrospect, social media has not only been a platform for news and information dissemination, but has proved also a means of spreading panic, fear and confusion by the people to the people despite having been warned by the NCDC not to indulge in social media abuse through spreading misinformation (NCDC, 2020). This is largely because the use of social media is permissible to all and sundry, hence unverified and fake news can be passed on without fear or favor. Savrum and Leon (2015) explain it thus, “The media provide a freedom of choice and individuals are free to choose which broadcast best represents their interest.” They further posit that the media exacerbates social issues thereby heightening negative impressions on these situations (Savrum & Leon, 2015, p. 14). AlSayyad and Guvenc (2015, p. 2030) in their analysis of the role of social media to the success of the Arab Spring revolution interviewed Gigi Ibrahim, an Egyptian tweeter, who said that:

Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook are very important. They can spread mass amounts of information ... communication is key here. But at the end of the day, if people don't decide to go to the streets ... nothing will happen.

In Yemeni, when government banned Al Jazeera from covering events in the country, social media became an easy outlet used for several activities (AlSayyad & Guvenc, 2015, p. 2027). The Arab Spring uprising introduced social media to Yemen as online meetings were organized in close Facebook groups and news spread through blog and YouTube channels (AlSayyad & Guvenc, 2015, p. 2027). In view of the above assertions, the advantages of social media cannot be too stressed as it crippled unpopular regimes and opened spaces for people to express their grievances albeit via virtual public spaces. However, when social media is negatively deployed, the uninformed easily fall prey to misinformation which at times brings mishap and confusion to the populace.

Prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic, the Ebola Virus in 2014 majorly affected the citizens of West Africa. Nigerians at the time used social media for the circulation of fake and unreliable news. The period saw several broadcasts made all over WhatsApp, Facebook, and the likes with unverified medical information such as bathing with salt water, bitter cola and antibiotics in a bid to prevent contagious diseases (Adebimpe et al., 2015, p. 3). Some citizens also went as far as drinking salt water as preventive measures against the Ebola disease. Unfortunately, this turned out to be deleterious to people who engaged in this as some met untimely demise.

As of late, the same trend as experienced during the Ebola period is evident in the Coronavirus pandemic; as social media users are asked to forward reoccurring broadcast messages. DiMaggio et al., 2001, p. 320) note that the re-broadcasting of news prompts and engages the public in terms of the economic and psychological effect that comes with such messages, and that this serves as an antidote to anomic mass communication. It also induces a wider reaction or engagement with the people than the old-fashioned means of communication, albeit to their disadvantage, as such, people readily forward the messages in a bid to spread awareness. Below is an excerpt from a broadcast message on WhatsApp sent on the 25th of March 2020 on ways to curtail Covid-19.

“How do you know if you have Corona Virus?”

1. Itching in the throat
2. Dry throat
3. Dry Cough
So, if you notice any of these three things, quickly take hot water and drink plus garlic. Note that it takes like two weeks for this virus to penetrate your whole body, with this initial remedy of garlic and hot water kills it. Do not keep this information to yourself pass on to all your family and friends. God bless you (WhatsApp Communication, 2020).

The above is only an instance to many other messages sent all over the WhatsApp messenger application. The writer proffers garlic and hot water as a remedy and enjoins the receiver to endeavor to pass on the messages.

Since the gullible citizenry can easily access such messages, they take it all in and even introduce their families to follow suit as a preventive measure against the virus. Another instance of such broadcast messages from Facebook goes thus: “Coronavirus before it reaches the lungs remains in the throat for four days and at this time, the person begins to cough and have throat pains. If he drinks water a lot and gargles with warm water and salt or vinegar, he eliminates the virus” (Somuah, “Profile Picture,” Facebook, 2020). In this excerpt, the writer instructs the general public to apply this solution, then further advises other Facebook friends to pass on the messages to their family and friends; whereas health agencies in the country did not endorse or verify such information. Those who swallow this titbits like hungry dogs often do not live to tell the story. Thus, there is the need to take information on social media with a pinch of salt. While some information on social media are ennobling, most are debasing, mischievous and outright falsehood.

On the other hand, some Nigerians do not believe that the virus exists in Nigeria. Many are skeptical of government’s intentions and see measures aimed at controlling the pandemic by the federal government and by state governors as another means to fleece money from the federation account. More so, some are in doubt of the presence of the virus in the country because they claim that Nigeria is in the tropical region and as such the virus cannot thrive, while others claim that the BCG vaccine has a preventive measure against the Covid-19 pandemic.

BCG vaccination from ages ago “may possibly” reduce susceptibility to COVID-19. If you have that big vaccination scar on your upper left arm, then it’s likely you have had BCG vaccination as most Nigerian children used to have. If the conclusion drawn from this paper is correct, it may explain why Nigeria is currently not being ravaged by COVID-19.

This is how good science is reported—the facts and the findings plus the doubts are laid out. Those who love praying, this is the time to pray that these researchers got it right (WhatsApp Communication, 2020).

The BCG stands for Bacille Calmette-Guerin: a vaccine which is used as a prophylactic measure against Tuberculosis. The WHO has debunked the fact that the above vaccine protects the people; hence they do not recommend that the populace takes the vaccination since there is no scientific evidence supporting these claims especially considering the fact that they have conducted research to study the effects of the BCG which reveals that the vaccination aids in Tuberculosis as opposed to the Covid-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020).

Furthermore, as soon as president Trump mentioned that Chloroquine antimalaria drugs may be helpful in treating Covid-19 victims, many Nigerians consumed an overdose of Chloroquine in Lagos and were hospitalized (Goodman & Giles, 2020; Ogundipe, 2020). Some even went as far as buying a whole lot of this drug to stockpile in their homes. It is recorded that the massive consumption of chloroquine to fight the coronavirus was caused by the circulation of unverified information. Finnish Oreoluwa (Senior Special Assistant on Health to Commissioner for Health Lagos State) tweeted that “There is a lot of unverified information in circulation about the pandemic, and it is important for people to be sure of
their facts before taking any medication” (Babatunde, 2020). As a result, hospitals in Lagos were nearly overwhelmed with patients with chloroquine overdoses even before the virus became widespread in Lagos.

Nigerians are very religious people and because of the difficult situations in the country, where the common man lacks the essential basics of life, they find succor in the Bible and in the teachings of their pastors. They revere their “men of God” whose words are consumed without critical reasoning. Any contrary view to what the “men of God” say becomes tantamount to blasphemy. Some people manipulate the sensibilities of Nigerians by defrauding and spreading fake news in the name of these “men of God,” especially the prominent ones among them. In the Southeastern part of the country a revered Catholic priest—Rev. Fr. Ejike Mbaka was credited to have encouraged people to check for a strand of hair in their Bible and use it to bath or wash their face as a solution to the Covid-19 pandemic. Like the Ebola salt saga, people frantically searched their bibles for a strand of hair while concerned relatives started calling their loved ones to adhere to the message. The revered priest announced in most Nigerian national dailies and radio stations that these messages were fake. He further encouraged people to adhere strictly to WHO instructions (Ede, 2020; Olowolagba, 2020). When the Reverend Priest debunked this information, people turned around and credited the information to the Pope in order to garner legitimacy. To this end, social media platforms have become a front in the spread of information about the virus from the religious perspective. The virus has not only been ascribed to a lot of views but also the correlation between the virus and several other phenomena have been made. Some churches have also devised conspiracy theories about the state, the world and the church, suddenly marking out the pandemic as a fight against the church; a clear instance being the attribution of the virus to the recent technological advancement, 5 G network.

The 5 G network is the fifth generation of mobile technology of wireless communication technology supporting cellular data networks with increased performance and a wide range of applications including the strengthening of e-Health, telemedicine, remote surveillance, tele-surgery among others. Meanwhile, the WHO has debunked the theory that the 5 G technological advancement has anything to do with the virus. They revealed that, following their research, the virus cannot travel on radio waves or mobile networks (WHO, 2020). Some of the proponents of these messages include some religious leaders, for instance, an influential religious leader of the Believers Love World Ministry, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome claims that the virus is used as a ploy to install the 5 G network. He claims that the government installed the lockdown policy so as to implement the 5 G which he attributes as being Anti-Christ and a front to decimate the population of Nigerians (Adelaku, 2020a) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZQ20gnqjUs) . Due to the fact that Nigerians are highly religious, they easily imbibe what is being preached by their religious leaders, even going as far as introducing the hashtag #IStandWithPastorChris#, on Twitter and Instagram platforms in support of the argument the General Overseer made even without verifying the authenticity and plausibility of his claims. Other Christian religious leaders are also not left out. The following is a summary of the message on the Covid-19 pandemic by Apostle Johnson Suleiman, the Overseer of Omega Fire Ministries. He highlights that Covid-19 is an experiment and that China is now rejoicing because they have shaken the world. His message goes thus:

In 2022, something worse than COVID-19 will also originate from China. The Pope and other world leaders are coming together to unify the world’s religions. They are targeting America but President Trump is their obstacle. They are trying to make a CERTAIN female as the US president who will then help facilitate the new world order.

COVID-19 is a chemical weapon and many people contracted it through testing. The vaccine that is coming carries the actual diseases. It will contain signals that control the human being and connects it to the power base of these world leaders. The vaccine will inform them of whether or not we are virus free.
The pope sacrificed Italy and that is why they saw many deaths. They are targeting our body, have tried this and it has worked. By June to August, different agenda to unify the world will begin. Kuwait, Malaysia, Egypt, Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand, Madagascar, Saudi Arabia and America need special prayers ... (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XlpmKs6EPI&feature=youtu.be).

The above claims from the revered Apostle Suleiman Johnson is not only preposterous but bizarre. Nigerians picked it up and started forwarding to every social media outlet. These religious leaders with thousands of followers teach unscientifically proved assertions thereby instilling fears and panic amongst their followers. However, a priest of the Catholic Church from Maiduguri Diocese (WhatsApp communication, 2020) gave a rebuttal to what Apostle Suleiman sold as propaganda to his followers. Also, Adelaku (2020a) in Punch Newspaper Opinion column debunked the prophecy saying thus that: “The so-called prophecy was a plagiarized retelling of a sermon by one Sandy Armstrong of Soldiers for Christ Community Church, LA, California, and USA that was live-streamed on 15 March 2020”. She concluded that, “a comparison of both sermons will indicate which flesh and blood spoke to our dear Apostle” (Adelaku 2020a). On 17 March, Apostle Suleiman took to online teaching on YouTube to espouse the above messages misinforming his gullible followers. As such, these Christian fanatics have used the pandemic as a means of spreading news tilting to rapture and the end of the world as revealed in the book of Revelation. Similarly, they have drawn a parallel between the virus and a supposed vaccine to authenticate the news on the end of the world due to the rate, according to them, the virus is spreading across the globe. An example of such messages is this:

I address you today as the globe is shaking, the kings and rulers of the earth have now known that they are but mere men.

A mere virus has emptied the streets of proud cities. National and international Airlines have been grounded, schools closed, entertainment events closed, even friendly handshakes are now avoided to elbow shakes.

Have you paused and wondered what is really happening. Why is there so much global panic now?

The thing is, GOD is trying to get the attention of the world. It looks like a final warning from the office of the CEO of the UNIVERSE.

It is a signal that a very big event is about to take place in the globe.

God never does anything without first giving out warnings to alert humanity.

JESUS CHRIST is COMING SOON from the SKIES and all GLOBAL TV networks will carry it live with commentaries of the event. Revelation 1:7 Matthew 24:29-31

The world will be divided into three groups of people:

*Those who made the rapture and left the earth to be with Jesus Christ in the sky.

*Those who are carnal believers and did not make the rapture because they were not prepared for it.

*Those who never believed in Jesus Christ before the rapture and they cannot be saved again because the Holy Spirit will not be there to convert them to repentance and be saved.

Now, come to think of it, just a mere virus and the whole Earth is in a panic mode. Just a virus and businesses are shutting down while streets of cities like London are empty. Just a virus and citizens of nations cannot move around the way they wish to, and all flights from Europe to America are shut down. Just a virus, and the nations we look to as developed nations are being threatened without bombs. Just a virus, educational institutions and entertainment centers are closed. Just a virus and religious sites are closed as churches announce that there will be no services till further notice.

Just a virus and the world market is collapsing and nations are entering into recession with speed.
If an Ordinary virus could do all these, imagine what will be on this Earth, the day King Jesus Christ will return in the sky.... Please do it now and be saved.

❤️ Please SHARE urgently and save a soul from hell and free your hand from their blood 
For further prayers and help
Call 08094874218(WhatsApp communication, 2020).

These kinds of messages instill panic and fear to the gullible wherein “born-again” fanatics reject precautions as they believe that the rapture will soon take place and the Anti-Christ revealed.

Meanwhile, the government of Nigeria has embarked on a project to bring in a medical team from China. The government shed light on the reasons for their intervention due solely on how the pandemic was tackled effectively in China. In the words of Garba Abari, the Director-General of the National Orientation Agency: “Whatever information the Chinese medical team made available to the NCDC will be filtered and applied to address the peculiar challenges of the country in handling the Covid-19 scourge” (Premium Times, 2020). However, this sparked outrage from the Nigeria Medical Association especially the president of the organization who in his description regarded the action as a misplaced priority and a thing of embarrassment to the members of the association. These medical personnel also viewed it as a slap to their faces mostly because the government undermined their competency; thereby rejecting the reasons the government gave for the acceptance of Chinese personnel into the country (Press Release, NMA). Additionally, some Nigerians perceived the news on this government project from a very different perspective. Their conspiracies were typically on the possibility of the Chinese people utilization of the virus to decimate the population of Nigerians. Here is a typical example of a WhatsApp broadcast message by Nigerians on the presence of the Chinese in the country:

In Spain: over 640,000 #Covid19 testing kits from China didn't work ...
Czech: 150,000 kits from China tested positive.
Ukraine: 250,000 kits from China tested positive.
Turkey: 500,000 kits tested positive
Netherlands: 600,000 mask from China were returned.
China proudly killing the world ... .
Please my fellow Nigerians ...
Stay away from all the Corona Virus kits sent from China government through their agent called Jack Ma ... It already arrived MMIA since Monday through Ethiopian airline and I heard it was moved to Abuja for distribution ... Who knows the fact?
But please don’t get close to them in the name of God you serve. I beg all of you ...
Their mission is to reduce the population of Nigerians and still make money from it.
Those kits from China are the real Corona virus.
Thanks. China supplies 2 million masks for Africa.
The most suspicious is that the WHO says that Africa must prepare for the worst.
My advice is as follows: wherever you are (markets, hospitals, etc ...) if they distribute the masks, please do not take them.
These are infected brands.
Save lives.
Share to everyone. pls (WhatsApp communication, 2020).

The above message still trends on WhatsApp as till the time of the writing of this paper as the populace highly believe that the Chinese government is responsible for the increment of infected individuals in other countries; thus, have become bent on spreading the information to Nigerians to desist from accepting medications from the Chinese government or anything from the West in general. The
inclined to these kinds of broadcast is that some celebrities who have thousands of followers have similarly made a video and have urged people forward it to groups and individuals.

From the above, it is clear that the usage of social media platforms for (mis)information is evident amongst the populace. These information that are passed across are mostly assumptions cum speculations which are disseminated to spread panic to other members of the citizenry.

6. Conclusion
The significance of social media cannot be too stressed. From the above study, a reoccurring trend in messages analyzed is the mandate placed on active users to forward these messages to other people; and this of course occurs without delay. As a result, members of the public conclude that many of these false messages are authentic and reliable.

However, regardless of how much fake information has been passed across, one must not fail to realize the startling advantages which social media has provided for the Nigerian people. This is as opposed to other pandemics such as the Influenza of 1918 when social media was not in existence and it was virtually difficult, especially for the less privileged with no access, to keep up with the news. However, in recent times, social media platforms are prompt and efficient in keeping up with dialogues surrounding the pandemic and this is not restricted to Nigeria alone. Through the same media, information is rectified and verified by the right sources. It therefore becomes essential to actively debunk fake news and to enlighten people on the need to be circumspect in forwarding unverifiable news and in consuming every information they get from the internet as a blueprint for their reactions. People are also advised to conduct personal researches from verifiable sources and authentic online accounts such as the National Orientation Agency and NCDC; so as not to fail prey to disinformation on varying social media outlets. Also recommended is the need for some measures to be put in place by the government in order to sanction religious leaders or individuals, with huge followers, when they disseminate unverified teachings to the masses. Indeed, social media on the one hand is a good tool for dissemination of knowledge while on the other hand, it could be destructive, and divisive when it falls to the hands of mischief makers.

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Note
1. I remembered during the Ebola disease, my elder sister domiciled in Calabar, Cross River State of Nigeria, called me to wake up before 5 am in the morning and bath with salt water. My parents were instructed same which I believe they adhered. Unfortunately, too much consumption of the salt led to the demise of some Nigerians.

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