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Social Media Use, Disbelief and (Mis)information During a Pandemic: An Examination of Young Adult Nigerians' Interactions with COVID-19 Public Health Messaging

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Abstract
This study contributes to transdisciplinary understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic through an examination of perceptions of public health messages as consumed primarily through social media by a purposively enlisted set of young adult Nigerians. The research used focus group discussions and in-depth interviews to elicit the views of 11 young adults, aged 21 to 24, resident in Ajegunle, a low-income community in Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital. The study identifies the centrality of social media platforms to the respondents' processes of meaning-making, and draws on Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model in order to bring to the fore their oppositional interpretations of public health messages. The study also identifies respondents' varying levels of disbelief about the realities of COVID-19, their mistrust of the government officials conveying and enforcing decisions to combat the pandemic, and the propensity for the social media messages they consume and propagate to serve as channels of misinformation.

Keywords
COVID-19, pandemic, public health, social media, media messages, codes, encoding, decoding, disbelief, misinformation, young adults, Nigeria, Lagos, Ajegunle

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1. Introduction and context

The COVID-19 pandemic and its dangers are now public knowledge around the world. As of late June 2021, there were more than 180 million confirmed cases and more than 3.2 million deaths, spread across over 150 countries (WHO, n.d.). In order to contribute to the understanding of the varying responses to the pandemic across different communities and cultures, this study adopts a cultural and media studies perspective. The study focuses on the perceptions and understandings of young adults in a low-income community in Lagos, Nigeria's most populous city and the nation's commercial, financial, and industrial nerve centre (Statista, 2020).

Several social and behavioural researchers have argued that during pandemics and disasters, there must be consistent and targeted efforts aimed at gleaning how different demographics make sense of such episodes (see, for example, Flaherty, 2020; Holmes et al., 2020; Oksanen et al., 2020). It has also been argued that, in addition to making contributions to theorisations and postulations about the social impact of pandemics, understanding the lived experiences of individuals in specific cultures and age groups is useful in mitigating the conspiracy theories, misinformation, and mistrust that can contribute to the community transmission of a virus (Oksanen et al., 2020; Recchi et al., 2020).

This study examined perceptions of COVID-19 among a purposively enlisted set of 11 Nigerians aged 21 to 24 and resident in an urban low-income settlement in Lagos, with the aim of teasing out their perceptions of the pandemic information and the news reports they consume. This study was motivated by the need to provide insights into the actions, reactions, and nuances that underlie the reception of public health messages about the outbreak of COVID-19 on the African continent—in the context of various conspiracy theories and misleading rumours about the pandemic, and the pessimism expressed by stakeholders about the capacity and sincerity of politicians and government officials to mitigate and curb community transmission of the virus (see, for example, Amukele & Barbhuiya, 2020; Friedman, 2020; Harvey, 2020; Velavan & Meyer, 2020). More specifically, this study also sought to examine, within the context of the lived experiences of enlisted participants, the role of the mass media, including relatively recent forms of social media, in their self-understandings about COVID-19. This hinges on assertions in the extant literature (for example, Nicholas & O'Malley, 2013; Williams, 2013) which speak to the centrality of media to communication, perceptions, cultural beliefs, and understandings, and how the media has contributed, over the years, to the rapid spread of panic and misinformation during pandemic episodes and times of civil unrest.

Furthermore, the sampling of young Nigerians from amongst the residents in an urban low-income community stems from the steady increase, across several countries, in the numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases amongst young adults, despite the original belief that they stand a better chance of not contracting COVID-19 (Grey,

2020; WHO, 2020). The tendency for young people to disobey the expected control measure of physical distancing as they perceive themselves to be at a lower risk of developing severe cases of COVID-19 (Andrews et al., 2020; Cummins, 2020; Lapin, 2020) thus proffers motivation for the purposive selection of the participants enlisted for this study. Young Nigerians were drawn from a low-income community (the community widely known as Ajegunle in Lagos) because physical distancing, personal hygiene, and other COVID-19 control measures have been a challenge in such communities, as alluded to by researchers, policy decision-makers, and other stakeholders in their efforts to mitigate the community transmission of COVID-19 (Hamann, 2020; Stringer et al., 2020).

2. Literature review

This study is grounded in conceptions of media consumption that emphasise the role of active audiences. Such audiences are not passive consumers of information about occurrences around them. They actively engage in a variety of ways with such information.

Media and audiences during epidemics and pandemics

Epidemics and pandemics are a recurring feature in human existence (Cunha, 2004; Hays, 2005; Lattanzi, 2008; Morganstein et al., 2017; Velavan & Meyer, 2020). Also, a recurring feature is the reality that the media shapes the perceptions and self-understandings of people during these episodes. During epidemic and pandemic episodes, the media play a central role in setting the public agenda and the tone of public discourse. The media also becomes the main source of information and knowledge relied on by residents in communities, cities, and countries where such severe outbreaks are recorded (Clarke & Everest, 2006; Riaz, 2008). Through media platforms, journalists in their various categories create awareness about pertinent issues in society and foster understanding of such issues through their disseminated messages—with the messages having the potential to create, shape, and maintain pictures of reality that are implicated in the actions, inactions, and overall behavioural patterns of the consumers of such messages (Croteau & Hoynes, 2014; McCombs, 2002).

A major aspect and component of the news stories and messages that shape public perceptions during epidemics and pandemics are the anxieties and fears embedded in the media messages that characterise these episodes, alongside other accompanying psychological stressors and behavioural responses. This is evidenced in studies that continuously point to the significant role that the media play as the main "conduit" through which ideas, news, and information that trigger these psychological stressors and behavioural responses flow (Akingbade, 2018; Croteau & Hoynes, 2014; Williams, 2013). This has seen the media in several countries described as being in the business of irrational fear-mongering through the dissemination of sensationalised headlines, news stories, and messages which have been proffered as the major source

of misinformation during pandemic episodes (Cantor, 2002; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2011; Hoekstra et al., 1999; Seale, 2002). The quick spread of misinformation, attributed to the media, which paves way for fears during the early stages of disease outbreaks has been suggested to result from the lack of immediate access by journalists and other communication executives to confirmed facts and scientific information from peer-reviewed literature, as these mostly lag behind during epidemic and pandemic episodes (Akingbade, 2017; Allgaier & Svalastog, 2015; Bursztyn et al., 2020).

Fears and other emotional responses that emanate from the continuous dissemination of misinformation during pandemics has the propensity to not only shape the self-understandings of the consumers of such messages but also to adversely affect their health as one's health status at any point in time is an outcome of complex interactions and interplays that operate over time (Akingbade, 2018; Seale, 2002). It is within such complex interactions and interplays that the media plays a crucial role during epidemics and pandemics, as residents who live through such outbreaks rely mainly on disseminated messages for information and knowledge. This was exemplified during the outbreak of Ebola, where sensationalised and exaggerated reporting created fears and widespread panic among consumers of such news stories in the affected West African states (Akingbade, 2017; Chan, 2014).

The implementation of physical distancing measures and various levels of lockdown around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic is also significantly enhancing and giving credence to the crucial role of the media as a means for individuals living through the pandemic to remain informed and educated about what is happening—and also as a means to reduce boredom and frustration.

At the same time, the various, and largely unregulated, social media platforms have been implicated in misinformation that circulates and shapes people's perceptions during epidemic and pandemic episodes. While misinformation predates the era of social media, these platforms create particularly significant complications during pandemics as they facilitate massive flows of exaggerated, manipulated, and conflicting stories that are widely viewed, liked, downloaded, and shared (Ciampaglia, 2018; Depoux et al., 2020; Farrell et al., 2020; Larson, 2018; Madrid-Morales et al., 2021). The lack of editorial gatekeeping (in comparison to traditional media) and the ability for users to generate and publicise content of their preference both enhance the viral nature of misinformation on social media platforms—phenomena that have been referred to as "digital pandemics" (Seymour et al., 2015). Additionally, social media platforms on smartphones, which create a confluence of interactivity, immediacy, and intimacy, transform users into active audiences (Larson, 2018; Willems, 2020) and immerse those who use these social media platforms in a deluge of opinions and stories during pandemics in ways that not only address boredom during lockdown, as alluded to earlier, but also aid and amplify the consumption and spread of misinformation. These and other similar dimensions have been examined in recent research

projects, such as the special issue edited by Ferrara et al. (2020), and this study adds to this body of knowledge.

Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model of communication

There is a wide range of scholarship grounded in the assertion that while information disseminated through media is implicated in the behavioural patterns and self-understandings of recipients, the information serves as reference points that recipients actively use in evaluating their own lives. The recipients are not merely passive dupes who wholly consume and act on the received information (Kim, 2008; Takahashi, 2009). As researchers who draw on this theorising assert, media texts and information do not represent a set of explicit meanings but are polysemic, and the recipients of these texts and information critically interpret and "make sense" of these messages based on their social experiences, which are mostly contingent on the prevailing socio-economic and cultural factors within which these experiences are embedded (Barker & Jane, 2016; Hall, 1980).

This study draws on Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which describes the audience/recipients of media messages and information as active meaning-makers who are capable of providing hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional readings to these messages encoded according to the power structures and the professional and dominant ideologies of the message producers. Focused on the moments of *encoding* (production) and *decoding* (reception), the model conceptualises the process of communication as a complex circulation circuit. This model thereby posits that "meanings are open to wider ideological discourses" (Hall, 1980, p. 133) than assumed in the linear—sender, message, receiver—process that had been widely accepted up until the time of Hall's work (Schroder et al., 2003).

A hegemonic decoding/reading of an encoded media message—conceptualised in Hall's (1980) model as the "preferred" meaning that the producers of the disseminated message want the recipients and message consumers to decode and uphold—is considered as the dominant meaning as it offers patterns that reinforce the prevailing descriptions and ideological order encoded in the message. Recipients of media messages whose worldview aligns with the hegemonic reading will fully decode these messages in their entirety in the exact way they were intended by the producers. An oppositional decoding/reading, on the other hand, occurs when recipients of the encoded media message understand the intended and inherent substance of the message, but reject the hegemonic/preferred meaning in support of alternative readings. Although the audiences who adopt this oppositional reading can comprehend the hegemonic, dominant reading of the disseminated messages, they draw on their lived experiences in order to adopt an oppositional reading.

Negotiated reading of disseminated media messages, as theorised by Hall (1980), allows for recipients to both acknowledge the preferred meaning and, at the same time,

adapt and differently situate/decode the meaning to suit their personal preferences, circumstances, and contexts. While the recipients of media messages who operate within this position acknowledge the grand significations encoded in these messages, they "negotiate" their own meanings rather than fully accepting the hegemonic meaning. Although the encoding/decoding model has been critiqued by theorists (see, for example, Fiske, 1987; Murdock, 2017), it has remained relevant and useful in research projects on media consumption, youth subcultures, and audience reception studies, that require nuanced analyses of how the meanings of media messages are received, negotiated, and acted upon by recipients in the course of their everyday lives.

3. Research design

The research followed a qualitative design grounded in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)—an approach that explores the lived experiences of research participants and emphasises that all human beings are in a "continual process of constructing, interpreting and making sense of their world" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, pp. 28–29). The 11 young Nigerians enlisted for the study were born and brought up in the low-income community of Ajegunle. Their levels of education ranged from a high school certificate to a college diploma. They stated, at the time they were being enlisted for the study, that they had some form of paid employment that was inadequate to meet their basic needs. The deliberate focus on a small sample size stems from the IPA approach, whereby "small, purposively-selected and carefully situated samples" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29) are focused on within a specific context with the aim of producing an in-depth examination of certain phenomena.

The data generated for this study emanated from semi-structured focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews. Two focus group discussions were held in March 2020, which was after the first index case of COVID-19 in Nigeria had been announced, but prior to the commencement of the lockdown. The first focus group (FG1) had five participants (three males and two females), and the second (FG2) had six participants (four females and two males). In accordance with the position of qualitative research scholars (for example, Hansen et al., 1998; Krueger & Casey, 2014) who assert that focus group sessions are ideally best held in natural settings that are public spaces and not in a laboratory or artificial setting, the two focus group discussions were held in a local eatery that the participants were familiar with and had agreed was a convenient venue. FG1 lasted for 55 minutes, while FG2 lasted for about 64 minutes.

In the following month, April 2020, during the lockdown, follow-up individual in-depth interviews were conducted with all 11 participants through video calls on Facebook and WhatsApp. This approach was based on assertions in the literature

(for example, Drabble et al., 2016; Janghorban et al., 2014) which establish the usefulness of online interviews as a means of gathering data despite constraints in physical mobility. Although the researcher was back in South Africa when the follow-up interviews were conducted, the familiarity, rapport, and trust that the researcher had established with the participants during the focus group discussions mitigated the inhibition that comes with online interviews. The average duration of the interviews was 32 minutes.

During the focus group discussions, data were elicited from participants' conversations about their thoughts on COVID-19, where and how they got updates and news stories about the pandemic, with whom they shared and discussed the updates and news stories, alongside their thoughts about the function of government agencies in mitigating the spread of the pandemic. The individual interviews complemented the focus group sessions, as these provided clarity and further insights into the themes discussed during the focus group sessions—and also provided useful data on participants' experiences during the lockdown. The guiding questions for both the focus group discussions and the individual in-depth interviews are provided in the Appendix.

Research and ethics approval processes were completed at Lagos state's ministry of health, Ikeja. Written and verbal consent was obtained from each respondent before data collection began. Before this consent was sought, participants were provided with detailed information about the research project and informed of their right to withdraw from the project if at any point they felt uncomfortable or unwilling to continue.

4. Findings and analysis

The study results and discussion presented in the sub-sections below are based on thematic coding of the transcripts of the audio recordings from the focus group discussions and individual interviews. Pseudonyms are employed in the presentation of the data, because participants were guaranteed anonymity in order to allow them to speak as freely as possible and provide detailed narratives.

Centrality of social media

All the young adults enlisted for this study referred to social media platforms, specifically Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, as being their primary sources for getting updated information about COVID-19 prior to the recording of the index case in Lagos state and also during the lockdown. This is evidenced in these excerpts from the focus group discussions and interview data:

> I get updates on all the happening stuffs on Facebook so there's nothing about COVID that I don't know […]. (Musa, in FG1)

> The only thing that gets me through this boring waste of time and propaganda called lockdown is the Facebook app on my Samsung where I get to catch up as usual on stuffs from my phone about every latest gist out there, including the lies we are being fed about this coro sickness […]. (Musa, interview)

> I follow *Vanguard* reports and other news agencies via my Facebook even before this coro thing started. See, I can bring out my phone and show you many stuff about coro on my WhatsApp and even on Facebook. (Adams, interview)

The data also show that social media had been an integral part of the everyday actions and activities of the participants prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. Thus, it was not out of character for this set of young Nigerians to turn to these platforms to make sense of the pandemic. These findings are consistent with those from studies indicating that youths are more active than other demographics in their participation in, and consumption of, social media (see Järvinen et al., 2012; Kannan & Hongshuang, 2017). The qualitative insight offered in this paper further exemplifies how young Africans engage daily with the world around them through social media, despite obvious constraints in internet access (such as expensive networks and internet subscription plans) in most states in sub-Saharan Africa. This also speaks to how the use of social media platforms has become a norm for this study's participants despite their low-income backgrounds.

It was found that eight of the 11 participants had maintained their paid access to internet despite losing their (low-paying) jobs during the mandated COVID-19 lockdown. These participants stated that they prioritise being able to reach out, and to receive communication, at all times through their social media accounts. All of the participants indicated that most of their social media engagements occurred through their smartphones, and that they would always prioritise owning a smartphone over owning cheaper models that could not access social media. This sentiment was strongly held even while the participants also complained of financial challenges, low-paying jobs, and—for the participants who had lost their jobs—unemployment. Study participants' narratives about how useful their smartphones have been, especially during the lockdown, which Musa, as cited above, refers to as a "boring waste of time and propaganda", speak to the theorising on the affordances of social media on smartphones and how it has the propensity to transform users into active audiences. This is useful in understanding the desire of this set of young Nigerians to always own a smartphone and to stay active on social media.

In the quotation above from the interview with Adams, in which he speaks of following reports from *Vanguard*, a daily newspaper, via its Facebook postings, we see social media serving as a conduit for content from traditional media outlets. Other study participants also referenced the social media channels of traditional media (print and

broadcast) as sources for some of the information they continuously access through their social media accounts. This is in consonance with the theorising, earlier highlighted, on how both traditional media and newer forms of social media do not only uphold the function of setting the public agenda and the tone of public discourse, but are main sources of information and knowledge. More specifically, this brings to the fore the unique and central position held by social media as the platforms through which this function is realised in the contemporary world.

Decodings of COVID-19 messages

During the two focus groups held in March 2020 before lockdown, all 11 participants rejected the reality of COVID-19. The detailed narratives they provided during the discussions indicated their disbelief as they asserted that the viral disease did not exist and was a mere distraction intended to create chaos. The study participants, throughout the duration of the focus group sessions, insisted that irrespective of the various news and reports about the viral disease that they had engaged with, COVID-19 precautionary measures were unnecessary since the disease was simply "propaganda".

In rejecting the reality of COVID-19, participants, during these focus group discussions, regarded it as something that should not be allowed to undermine their daily needs and activities. The words of Pam, a participant in FG2, were typical of the perspectives of the 11 participants:

> I was still saying it on one of the WhatsApp group chats this morning that we cannot allow ourselves to be fed and scammed with this distraction carefully packaged and labelled as "corona from China" and sent to us. The propaganda will get a lot of people but definitely not me. I just got a job as a receptionist and office assistant after almost three years of completing my diploma, so this job plus my other daily hustling is what I am concerned with. […] all-round poverty cannot be staring you in the face every day and you will still be believing some funny charade rather than focusing on your hustle […]. (Pam, in FG2)

Drawing on Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, the stance of this set of young adults indicates their refusal to accept the preferred and dominant meaning encoded in COVID-19 messages—despite their ability to fully grasp and decode the dominant and intended information inherent in the messages. They dismiss the hegemonic decoding/readings as "distraction". This is consistent with the theorising on active audiences, as these young Nigerians refuse to passively receive reportage on COVID-19. Instead, they draw on the COVID-19 messages as reference points as they evaluate their lives, and have decided that an undivided focus on their "daily hustling" is more worthy of their attention than the "distraction carefully packaged and labelled as 'corona from China'".

This disposition of these young adults during the focus group discussions aligns with the view that active audiences make sense of the messages they receive within the context of their social experiences, which mostly hinge on the prevailing socio-economic and cultural factors within which these experiences are embedded. The young adults who participated in this study were raised and presently live in Ajegunle, a community regarded as crime-ridden and one of the most disadvantaged in Lagos state. Accordingly, they interpret the reports about COVID-19 within the context of their everyday socio-economic challenges—summarised by Pam, in the quotation above, as "all round poverty". In the words of a FG1 participant, Lizzy:

> There's no need to listen to the plenty fake stories about this corona thing while I have so many disturbing things I need to sort out in my life and in this ghetto. Adding their silly propaganda to the list will be a senseless thing for me to do. […] I've already shared my opinion and stand about this Chinese *wahala*[1] on my WhatsApp stories yesterday, and I also did that while sharing, on my Facebook timeline, one of the corona stories on *Tribune*'s [*Nigerian Tribune* newspaper's] Facebook page. (Lizzy, in FG1)

However, during the individual interviews conducted during the lockdown in April 2020, seven of the participants somewhat accepted the possibility of the existence of COVID-19, while at the same time expressing their scepticism. Even though these seven participants acknowledged the existence of COVID-19, unlike the other four who insisted that the viral disease was a myth and upheld their disbelief, their scepticism was evident in how they downplayed the seriousness attached to the pandemic by the various news, media reports, and relevant government authorities. Despite the shift in COVID-19 perceptions of these seven young Nigerians who now stated that the viral disease does exist—in Lagos state, the epicentre of the pandemic in Nigeria, as well as in other parts of the country and in other countries in the world—they asserted that it was really nothing to be afraid of and regarded the lockdown as an exaggerated response. One of the seven, Eddi, drew comparisons to malaria and Ebola:

> Yes, I now accept that this China corona is real, but then it's not rocket science […]. Locking us all down because of something just like malaria that those of us in this 'hood are so, so used to does not make sense to me. Check social media or your TV, you'll see the debates on chloroquine, a malaria drug, being used in some isolation centres, [so] isn't that malaria? We defeated Ebola without locking up everywhere, so why must we foolishly copy other nations and lock everywhere down because of this overhyped propaganda? (Eddi, interview)

Eddi's mention of Ebola is a reference to the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Lagos. Lockdown was not enforced during this outbreak, and the epidemic was combated.

1 A Yoruba word meaning "trouble" or "problem".

In the words of another interviewee, Shai:

> Even though we are told it is real and I'm now in agreement with that, the truth is that I do not bother myself to use the face mask because I know that this coro thingy is not for people like us who almost never leave this 'hood, not to talk of travelling outside *naija* [Nigeria]. Go check your social media and see those infected. They're the rich people who are always on the move. […] have you seen any struggling person from this place have it? I don't know of a single person from this area that has tested positive […]. So you see what I'm saying. It is these rich people and politicians that are at risk and they're saying we should stay at home when they know that lockdown and social distancing cannot work in an overpopulated place like this where over 30 people are sharing bathroom and toilet with no regular water […]. (Shai, interview)

These quotations provide examples from the data which usefully show the perceptions of the young adults who have come to accept the reality of COVID-19, but still hold on to their doubts about the scope of the pandemic which, contrary to their assertions, is not similar to malaria and is not bound to the confines of a specific demographic group or societal classification. These statements indicate how recipients of information about a pandemic can negotiate their own meanings by situating and then adapting the decoded meaning to suit their personal preferences, biases, experiences, and contexts. This phenomenon was also evident in other statements shared by the young adults during the interviews, including narratives pointing out that hunger is deadlier than COVID-19 and that they have been exposed to severe hunger as a result of the lockdown—due to their monthly wages being reduced by their employers, due to losing their jobs, and due to them not being able to pursue other "daily hustling" which ordinarily serves as a source of income.

The interview respondents were apparently engaged in a process where they continually "make sense" of the pandemic and the messages they were being exposed to—in consonance with assertions that disseminated texts and information do not have explicit meanings but are polysemic and can therefore be interpreted in different ways.

Misinformation

Statements from study participants, in both the focus groups and the individual interviews, also demonstrate their consumption of, and participation in the spread of, misinformation about COVID-19—and the degree to which social media channels are often implicated in these patterns. Othering COVID-19 on social media as "Chinese *wahala*" or as a "distraction carefully packaged and labelled as 'corona from China'" reveals a propensity to shift the attention of those they interact with online—towards misinformation, and away from pertinent compliance measures that should be practised and upheld to mitigate the spread of the viral disease.

We saw above the false assertions that COVID-19 is similar to malaria, that chloroquine is an effective treatment for the disease, and that the disease does not spread among the poor. Such misinformation spreads rapidly when virtual friends and followers pass along the oppositional stance through their respective social media platforms. This underscores how the circulation of misinformation during outbreaks of viral diseases is amplified through the varying forms of user-generated content on social media. Such content, according to Murdock (2017), has repositioned audiences as productive agents engaged in a continuous process of interpreting and responding to messages, goods, and services by circulating their own materials and resources, which can range from simple "likes" or "shares" to uploading videos, posting photos, posting comments, and other forms of social media engagement or behaviour.

The more this set of young adults, or others with similar worldviews, hold on to their disbelief about COVID-19 and discuss it amongst themselves, in-person and virtually, the more the tendency for these perceptions to engender the spread of misinformation which, as stated above, is further complicated by social media. The more the seeming logic in the arguments presented by these young Nigerians in support of their scepticism is raised and discussed amongst their peers, the more there is the tendency for this misinformation to encourage them to neglect and abandon the measures intended to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

State illegitimacy

Participants frequently referred to the COVID-19 outbreak as "propaganda"—an assertion that was further qualified, at times, with the claim that the government's response was "silly", "overhyped", or a "silly charade". Here we see evidence of respondents' mistrust of those in power, at various levels of governance in Nigeria, who are leading the efforts to combat the pandemic. This perception was sharply exemplified in the claim by one of the participants who, in reacting to the information about the outbreak of COVID-19, asserted that he and his peers "are all being scammed by these politicians", thereby resulting in his refusal to wear a face mask or obey physical distancing rules. This assertion, and others like it in the data, proffers insight into how study participants' lack of trust in the intentions of their democratically elected leaders feeds into their reluctance to wholly embrace the reality of COVID-19.

The experiences shared by participants show that they are far from being oblivious to the inequalities and marginalisation that have long plagued Nigeria. They have seen the continued neglect of their community despite the low standard of living and the clear need for developmental intervention by the state. The violations of human rights, the corruption, and the continued abuse of other democratic principles and values by most political office holders in Nigeria have persistently undermined social solidarity, and have engraved mistrust for politicians in the subconscious of these young adults—and such profound disillusionment cannot suddenly be erased at the instance of an outbreak of a disease such as COVID-19. These young residents of Ajegunle understandably find it difficult to wholly accept that political office holders

are suddenly interested in their welfare and that a total lockdown that keeps them not just in their impoverished community for weeks but also in a state of hunger without palliative measures is in their best interest.

6. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated how a purposively enlisted set of young Nigerians relies on social media for public health information during a pandemic. The study has highlighted their interpretation of public health messages within the context of their socio-economic realities, and how they draw on these interpretations to reject the dominant meanings encoded in such messages and negotiate their own meanings. The study has also identified the propensity for people who feel a sense of socio-economic marginalisation to neglect, and/or refuse to participate in, efforts intended to combat a pandemic if the efforts are spearheaded by political leaders whom they do not trust.

Among other remedies, there is a need for consistent effort by relevant stakeholders to contribute to the maturation of democratic institutions in Nigeria, because the more democratic values are entrenched, the more trust can be established between citizens in various demographic groupings and political leaders. The more such trust exists, the more political leaders can rely on citizens, irrespective of their socio-economic status, to cooperate with measures aimed at mitigating the spread of a viral disease during a pandemic episode. In the case of young adults, it will also be advisable to incorporate, as stakeholders during pandemic episodes, local artistes who are active in social media spaces and whom young adults hold in high esteem. Such artistes can reach out to young people, through social media, and emphasise the need to comply with safety and preventive measures.

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Appendix: Focus group and interview protocols

The questions below guided the facilitation of the focus group discussions and the individual interviews. The themes discussed emanated from these guiding questions which, in no specific order, were adapted to suit each session.

Guiding questions for the semi-structured focus group discussions

1. Can you please share with me when, where and how you first learnt about COVID-19?
2. Please share with me your thoughts about COVID-19, in terms of what you think it is. Are there other people you have discussed these thoughts with?
3. Where specifically (in terms of media) do you get news or updates about COVID-19 or other events happening around here in the country and who do you discuss these with? Is there a reason for these choices? If yes, please share the reasons.
4. Looking at the large population in this neighbourhood and in Lagos state alongside COVID-19's mode of transmission, what are your thoughts?
5. Some countries have implemented lockdown measures to slow down the spread of COVID-19. Please share your thoughts about this especially with regard to the news of a similar lockdown in Nigeria. In more specific terms, are you in support of a lockdown in Nigeria or not? Please share the reason(s) for your response.
6. What are your thoughts about the role of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and other government agencies responsible for combating pandemics such as COVID-19?

Guiding questions for the semi-structured individual interviews

1. You expressed your disbelief about COVID-19 during the focus group session. What are your thoughts now that there are more cases of COVID-19 and lockdown regulations are in place?
2. Can you please share more about your experience so far since the commencement of the lockdown regulations?
3. During the focus group session, reference was made to social media platforms as a means of getting updates and also sharing and discussing your thoughts about COVID-19 and other issues. Is this still the case? If yes, when was the last time you did this, what were the updates you got, and what were the thoughts you shared and discussed?
4. Looking back again to the conversation we had during the focus group session, do you have a different opinion from what you shared about the role of the NCDC and other relevant government agencies in the country?