



## Covid-19 Pandemic and Newspapers' Readers in South-East, Nigeria: Views and Perspectives

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### Abstract

*The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about a significant impact on all aspects of life, including the media industry. This work focused on South-East Nigeria newspapers' readers' perception of the Covid-19 pandemic, based on the coverage by The Guardian, Vanguard, and The Sun newspapers. The period under study in the research was from January 2020 to September 2020. The main objective was to find out how readers of newspapers in South-East, Nigeria perceived the news and the effects of the virus. A wide range of conceptual and empirical literature was reviewed with the social cognitive theory and media framing theory used as anchorage to the study. The survey research design was used. The population of the study was 667, 500 while the sample size was 384. The study revealed the high rate of respondents' frequency of exposure to Covid-19 reports in the selected newspapers. The result also showed that the newspapers' readers had a generally high level of understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, it was discovered that the extent newspapers reported the pandemic helped inform the readers about the disease and how to prevent its spread. Amongst others, it was recommended that the Nigerian government and media organisations should intensify their efforts towards educating the public on the pandemic, its prevention, and management.*

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Framing, Newspapers, Pandemic, Perception, South-East

### Introduction

The World Health Organization's (WHO) constitution defines health as a condition of whole physical, mental, and social well-being. Donev, Kovacic and Laaser (2013) emphasise that healthcare is a collaborative effort involving all stakeholders, and define it as any effort, organized or not, public or private, aimed at promoting, financing, providing, and ensuring health. These measures include maintaining and improving the health of individuals, detecting and treating diseases, and preventing injuries and disorders.

The SARS-CoV-2 virus-driven Covid-19 pandemic has spread around the world and is affecting many facets of human life. Nigeria, like other countries in the world, has been severely affected by this pandemic. As of March 2023, Nigeria has recorded over 9,000 deaths and more than 600,000 confirmed cases of Covid-19 (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic was widely publicized by the mainstream media, according to Nwakpu, Ezemu, and Ogbodo (2020), which was vital

in raising awareness and halting its spread. People were regularly exposed to information about the disease thanks to the pandemic's extensive media coverage, which elevated it to the status of a major news story in both traditional and social media.

The media have played a crucial role in disseminating information about the pandemic to the public. In Nigeria, newspapers are a significant source of information for many people, especially those who live in rural areas with limited access to the internet and other sources of information. Despite the widespread recognition of the mass media's positive impact in mitigating the spread of the Covid-19 virus, some scholars have criticized the media for disseminating false information and spreading panic during the pandemic (Hartley & Khuong, 2020; Tanim, Hossain & Mazumder, 2020). These scholars have argued that the media have propagated myths and misinformation, leading to the dissemination of fake news that contributed to a sense of panic about the pandemic.

Given that print medium is the oldest and most readily available medium of mass communication, its coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic is crucially important (Muoemeka, 1990, as cited in Ezebuenyi, Nwedo-Nzeribe & Okoye, 2020). This is especially true in Nigeria, where there has been a growing interest in the different perspectives and interpretations provided by the media about the pandemic, and how these perspectives have influenced public perceptions of the virus. The news media, especially print media, is a potent tool for communication and information, and it has a significant impact on how people perceive and react to global events. The manner in which information is conveyed is subject to the goals and agenda of the source providing the information (Ezebuenyi, Ekwunife & Nweke, 2020).

While the mass media have been lauded for their positive role in controlling the spread of the virus, there have been criticisms of their negative impact on the pandemic, particularly through the spread of false information and panic. The need for careful and responsible journalism, particularly in the print media, cannot be overstated, as they play a vital role in shaping public perception and response to events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, that impact society at large.

Gever and Ezeah (2020) assert that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the role of Nigeria's mass media cannot be overemphasised. In managing the crisis, the media played a crucial role in providing access to information about the pandemic to the public. According to Smith and Fay Cortez (2020), the Nigerian media functioned as a vehicle for the government and health officials to disseminate information targeted at halting the disease's spread. These messages emphasized taking precautions such as using face masks, washing hands, keeping a safe distance from others, maintaining good personal hygiene, reporting suspected cases of the illness to designated hospitals, refraining from handshakes, and adhering to all other pandemic-related regulations. Hence, Kanki and Adeyi (2006, as cited in Ezebuenyi, 2018) emphasise that, to ensure that the set goals are achieved, several sectors, including Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), private sectors, newspaper agencies, and others, must take part in disseminating health information

It is essential to evaluate newspapers coverage of the pandemic and its impact on the public's perception of the virus. The media, particularly print media, play a vital role in providing valuable information to the public, which influences their perception and response to the pandemic. The media's influence is significant as it frames the information provided to the public to meet the source's goals (Ezebuenyi, Ekwunife & Nweke, 2020). Therefore, understanding how readers perceive the pandemic and how it impacts their behavior is crucial in combating the spread of the virus.

This study aimed to evaluate the perception of coronavirus by readers, based on the coverage by *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, and *The Sun* newspapers. The study's focus was on newspaper readers in Nigeria's five South-East states, which include the states of Abia, Imo, Anambra, Ebonyi, and Enugu. The study was conducted in the capital cities of three out of the five states of the South-East, selected through probabilistic sampling, specifically Anambra (Awka), Ebony (Abakiliki), and Imo (Owerri).

## Statement of the Problem

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on all facets of human life, including the media sector. The media, particularly newspapers, play a crucial role in informing the public about the

pandemic, including its causes, symptoms, and preventive measures. In Nigeria, newspapers are a major source of information for many people, especially those who live in rural areas. However, there is limited research on the South-East Nigeria newspapers' readers' perception of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study aimed to address this research gap by examining the South-East Nigeria newspapers' readers' perception of the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study seeks to assess respondents' frequency of exposure to Covid-19 reports in *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, and *The Sun* newspapers from January 2020 to September 2020, understand the readers' level of knowledge and understanding of the pandemic, and investigate the extent newspapers' coverage of the pandemic helped inform the readers about the disease and how to prevent its spread. These newspapers were selected because they have high readership level in the area of study, and their circulation is wide.

## Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study was to examine the South-East Nigeria newspapers' readers' perception of the Covid-19 pandemic. The specific objectives are, to:

1. assess respondents' frequency of exposure to Covid-19 reports in select newspapers;
2. ascertain the degree of awareness of the Covid-19 pandemic among South-East Nigerian newspaper readers, and,
3. To investigate the extent newspapers' coverage of the pandemic helped inform the readers about the disease and how to prevent its spread.

## Theoretical Dependence

Communication theory provides a framework for understanding how communication processes work and how people interact through communication. This study was based on the social cognitive theory and the media framing theory. The social cognitive theory emphasises the role of learning, observation, and modeling in shaping human behavior (Bandura, 1986). According to the theory, people learn new behaviors and attitudes through observation and modeling of others' behavior. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the theory suggests that the media influences people's perception of the pandemic and their willingness to implement preventive measures such as wearing face masks, social distancing, and hand washing.

By providing information about the pandemic's causes, symptoms, and preventative measures, the media, particularly newspapers, play a significant role in shaping the public's perception of it. The theory suggests that people are more likely to adopt preventive behaviours if they perceive the information as accurate, credible, and relevant to their lives (Bandura, 1986). Thus, the study seeks to understand how readers perceive the accuracy and reliability of the information provided by the newspapers and their opinion on the effectiveness of the preventive measures recommended by the newspapers.

The social cognitive theory provides a framework for understanding how people learn and adopt new behaviours and attitudes through observation and modeling. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the theory suggests that people's perception of the pandemic and their willingness to adopt preventive measures

are influenced by the information they receive from the media, particularly newspapers.

The media framing theory was postulated by an anthropologist, Gregory Bateson, postulated the in 1955 to underline how perceptions are generally organised and contexts are determined (Bateson, 1955/1972). It can be claimed that the prior domain of the agenda-setting theory served as the theoretical foundation for the theory (Rodelo, 2020). As a result, scholars typically view the framing theory and the agenda-setting theory as either "competing theories or complementary ones." One school of thought holds that the framing theory should be nothing more than a division of the agenda-setting theory, while another holds that the framing theory merits standing alone as a separate theory.

Framing is related to meta-communication, which is typically referred to as communication about communication, according to Bateson (1955, as cited in Cassiatiore, Diefram, & Iyengar, 2016). In both situations, what is at risk is looking beyond the current exchange in order to pose more profound queries about what is taking place, and how it is being perceived. The two are employed to provide details regarding a message. Participants' understanding of something is framed by frames, whereas meta-communication describes the behaviours used specifically to frame that understanding. Erving Goffman, however, broadened the framing analysis in 1974 from Bateson's initial focus on animal interaction to social interaction among humans (McQuail, 2016), proposing that people utilise frames to aid them in responding to the fundamental question of a certain situation.

Some academics (Scheufele, 1999; De Vreese, 2004) use the phrases "frame-building" and "frame-setting," which are comparable to the words "agenda-building" and "agenda-setting," to describe framing as an interdependent process. The concept of frame-building proves that the way in which news is framed by the media does not take place in a vacuum. Journalists and the media are influenced by both internal and external variables when shaping news items. A media organisation's news routines and procedures, organisational policies and ownership models, individual journalists' and other media professionals' worldviews, and the news's sources are some of these considerations (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). According to Bruggemann (2014, as cited in Eneome, 2022), journalists typically frame news stories in accordance with their individual interpretations of the issues they perceive; however, occasionally, they merely repeat the frames put out by the public actors who serve as the news stories' sources.

Contrarily, frame-setting illustrates how viewers often adopt the media's frames in their comprehension, perception, and assessment of problems and events (De Vreese, 2004). According to De Vreese (2004), media framing can have an impact on both individuals and society. At the individual level, exposure to particular frames may change one's views towards a problem, while at the societal level, frames may help shape processes like political socialisation, decision-making, and group activities. However, media frames must form against a cultural backdrop in order to have an impact on both individuals and society. Culture, according to Entman, Matthes, and Pellicano (2009 as cited in Eneome, 2022), is "a stock of schemas commonly found in the minds of a society's individuals... and these common schemas are the ones that form the basis for most individuals' reaction to framing communications" (p.27). As a result, media audience are

more likely to be persuaded by images that are consistent with their cultural orientation.

Guanah (2022b) emphasises the significance of this theory in health communication because the language journalists use to describe illnesses and risk factors, the tone of the report, and the inclusion or omission of discussion of causes, preventions, and treatments can all significantly influence readers' perceptions of a health issue. It is important to note that the framing of health issues in the media may differ from that of other news items, and the public perceptions and responses may not apply to both.

However, the media can play a crucial role in sensitising the public and influencing their behaviour in order to contain the virus's spread. Overall, understanding the complex relationship between media framing and public health during times of emergency is crucial for effective disease control and containment efforts, hence, this theory is relevant to this study.

## The Status of Coronavirus in Nigeria and the World

There has been extensive discussion and media coverage of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic's present situation in Nigeria and around the world. In December 2019, an epidemic of the virus began in Wuhan, China. Since then, it has spread to become a pandemic affecting every country in the world. Thousands of deaths across nations have been reported as a result of the pandemic, which has had severe impacts on world health. The burden on healthcare systems has been overwhelming, with hospitals struggling to cope with the large number of severely ill patients requiring intensive care, including the use of ventilators. In addition, the pandemic has had significant economic effects, with the World Bank and IMF declaring the global economy to be in recession. The situation has been described as potentially leading to the worst depression in decades (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control, 2020).

On February 27, 2020, Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital and most populated city, announced the first case of Covid-19. The case involved an individual who arrived from Milan, Italy, which at the time was one of the countries with a high incidence of the virus. The individual went on to spread the virus to others, including high-ranking politicians and senior government officials who had not adhered to public health guidelines such as social distancing and self-isolation for recent travelers.

According to the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), as of May 11, 2020, Nigeria had reported 4,641 confirmed cases and 150 deaths from Covid-19. These figures, meanwhile, are thought to be inaccurate because of the country's limited testing capability and some residents' unwillingness to cooperate. NCDC reports that 1000 or more tests per day are the target, up from the present testing volume of 500 per day (World Health Organisation, 2020).

Globally, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented number of deaths, which is comparable only to the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, which claimed millions of lives worldwide. However, modern medicine and intensive care practices have improved significantly since then. The United States had the highest number of confirmed cases as of April 12, 2020, with over 500,000 cases and over 23,000 fatalities. Other countries such as Italy, Spain, France, and China have also reported significant



numbers of cases and deaths (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control, 2020).

As of April 9, 2020, only 12,368 confirmed cases of Covid-19 had been reported across 52 countries in Africa (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control, 2020), representing only 0.8% of the global total. Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic has had significant and far-reaching impacts on global health and the economy, and its effects are likely to be felt for years to come.

Based on recent statistics, it has been estimated that the Covid-19 mortality rate in Africa stands at 632 deaths, representing approximately 0.7% of the global total of coronavirus-related fatalities within the same time frame. The majority of confirmed cases—1,934—have been found in South Africa, where 11 related fatalities have also been reported. Notably, half of the continent's total Covid-19 cases have been reported in the African nations that are closest to Europe and the Middle East. In addition, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia have reported a total of 4,482 cases and 506 fatalities. This indicated that these four nations accounted for 80% of the total number of Covid-19-related fatalities in Africa.

However, the lack of preparedness to prevent the early importation of Covid-19 into the country was identified as a major factor contributing to the virus's spread in Africa. Since the Chinese outbreak was reported in January, the country could have contained the spread of the virus by instituting effective quarantine measures for travelers entering the country, particularly at international airports. The United States, United Kingdom, South Korea, Switzerland, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Netherlands, Norway, Japan, and Iran. The ban on all international flights to and from Nigeria did not take effect until March 23, 2020.

Due to the fact that many returnees had already assimilated into the communities when this unplanned strategy was implemented, the risk of community transmission was increased. In the light of these developments, it is apparent that one of the most effective ways of keeping up with our contemporary world is through the media. Making decisions about the pandemic require being current on the most recent Covid-19 news and developments.

### Knowledge and Coronavirus Disease

Knowledge plays a significant role in the prevention and management of the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak of the virus has caused a lot of fear and anxiety, and the more knowledge people have about the virus, the better prepared they are to take necessary precautions. According to a report by Richards (2017), the number of Ebola cases rapidly decreased in the middle of 2015 as a result of the general public becoming more aware of how to reduce their risk of getting the virus. Covid-19 is a respiratory ailment that arises from the new coronavirus, and its transmission occurs through the dispersion of droplets resulting from coughs and sneezes, as well as close proximity to individuals who are affected, and contact with contaminated surfaces. The viral infection exhibits an incubation period ranging from one to fourteen days, during which individuals may experience symptoms like cough, fever, and respiratory distress. While certain individuals who have contracted the virus may only exhibit minor symptoms, others may face more serious respiratory complications, particularly among the elderly and individuals with pre-existing chronic conditions. (Sauer, 2020).

Individuals need to be knowledgeable about the virus and the various precautions they can take to control its spread. Some of the crucial precautions people may take to lower the risk of infection are routine hand washing, wearing face masks, social isolation when ill, and social distancing (Leppin & Aro, 2009). According to research (Brug, Aro, Oenema, de Zwart, Richardus, & Bishop, 2004; Choi & Yang, 2010; Hussain, Hussain & Hussain, 2012), A person's level of knowledge about an infectious disease can have a significant effect on how they conduct to prevent infection.

However, because of superstitions and a lack of understanding of the science underlying the virus, some people in Nigeria are hesitant to take these important safeguards. Some people would rather rely only on rituals, prayers, talismans, herbs, and anointing oils to stop the virus from spreading. (Abati, 2020). Others utilize social media channels to drive panic buying, propagate phony remedies, project fake news, encourage bias against China, disseminate fear, and undermine medical advice (Hassan, 2020).

Given the significance of knowledge in preventing the spread of infectious diseases, it is essential to investigate the health knowledge of the population during this pandemic. This can help to identify knowledge gaps and provide insights into how best to communicate with the public to improve knowledge and encourage the adoption of appropriate precautionary measures.

### Media Framing and Reportage of Covid-19 Pandemic

The media play an important role in shaping people's understanding of the world beyond their immediate surroundings. However, the media's portrayal of events can be influenced by various factors, including editorial interests and ownership philosophies. This influence can lead to media framing, where news stories are presented in a particular way to promote certain ideas or agendas. This is achieved by highlighting specific angles and making reference to similar occurrences in the past.

Research shows that media framing is pervasive and can be found in various types of media, including print, broadcast, and social media. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in late 2019 was a major global event that received extensive coverage in the media. Nigerian media, for instance, reported on the outbreak from different angles, and news outlets across the world gave it significant coverage.

Media framing of Covid-19 involved highlighting specific aspects of the outbreak and presenting them in a particular way to influence public perception and response. The media used various strategies to achieve this, such as giving reasons to believe or disbelieve, supporting or discouraging involvement, changing or persisting in behaviour, and influencing or discouraging action. These strategies were used to shape the public's interpretation of the outbreak and influence their behavior in response.

The Covid-19 pandemic was an important occurrence that demonstrated the power of the media to influence public opinion and behavior. By framing the outbreak in specific ways, the media were able to promote certain ideas and agendas and set modalities on how the public should think about and respond to the crisis. Overall, media framing is an important concept that plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse and understanding significant events such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

The way events are framed in the media plays a significant role in shaping public perception and responses, particularly during times of emergency health threats. The outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease in 2019 and its rapid spread across the globe, resulting in significant numbers of casualties, emphasizes the significance of comprehending how media framing and the prevalence of frames that produce matching effects are interrelated. (Olatunji, 2020).

According to research, how news is reported in the media can affect how well the public understands a problem and how effective a policy endeavor is (Smith, 2014). While previous studies have demonstrated the role of the media in public health campaigns and coverage (Atiq, 2011; Coombs, 2007; Ma, 2005; Niedermeir, 2012; Sobel, 2014; Thuesen, 2010), the effectiveness of media influence on disease control or containment is subject to many considerations beyond media impact.

## Media Roles towards Promotion of Public Health

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the media can affect public attitudes and decisions, particularly when it comes to health issues (Benefo, 2004; Bloch-Elkon, 2007; Brati, 2006; Catalán-Matamoros, 2011). This effect is largely dependent on how the media convey health-related news stories. The way news stories are presented can have a big impact on how the public sees the problem and whether they will act accordingly.

In the context of health emergencies, several studies (Cline & Haynes, 2001; Nutbeam, 2000) have investigated crisis or risk communication strategies and media message design. These studies have demonstrated that health communication through mass media can be an effective tool for promoting health issues, particularly during outbreaks of health hazards. According to the International Health Regulations (IHR), a country's emergency risk communication capacity is crucial for the prevention, detection, and control of infections. This is because effective communication and action require reaching out to communities at the local, national, and international levels. (Kandel et al., 2020).

The media's role in shaping public perception of health issues is closely intertwined with how they report on such issues. If the media sensationalizes health news or is perceived as untrustworthy, people may be less likely to implement suggested health and safety measures. (Gollust & Lantz, 2009). Furthermore, framing is a crucial technique for emphasizing vital information for the audience because people frequently base decisions on perceived threats rather than actual risk (Menashe, 1998).

Framing, a concept originating in psychology, enables journalists to influence the public's interpretation of an issue or event, such as by producing feelings about a health hazard (Entman, 1993). During a pandemic, when individuals have limited personal experience with the issue and are more likely to trust media content, framing becomes particularly essential. According to Kott et al. (2016), when a health danger is presented as serious and significant, the audience may get concerned and act in ways to deal with that anxiety, including purchasing hand sanitizer or avoiding crowded places.

In the early stages of an outbreak, exaggerated or sensationalized media depictions of health concerns can also lead to excessive anxiety or panic, which is followed by mistrust and a reluctance to pursue safe behaviors later on if the initial worry turned out to be

baseless (Kott et al., 2016). As was the case with the public exaggerating their likelihood of contracting H1N1 in 2009 or overreacting to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 as a result of regular media coverage, distorting scientific facts is another risk of sensationalism (Kott et al., 2016). It is essential to provide accurate and responsible reporting, and messages should be clear, consistent, repeated from multiple sources, and provide positive action steps individuals can take to reduce risk. (Kott et al., 2016).

In conclusion, research has demonstrated that the media play an important role in promoting public health by designing, packaging, and disseminating effective messages that inform, educate, and reshape the behavioral tendencies of the target audience toward controlling health hazards or confronting health-related challenges before they become unmanageable. Public health communication programmes have the power to influence people's attitudes, alter behaviours, and raise awareness when they are effectively designed, meticulously carried out, and sustained over time. Jong-wook Lee, a former director general of the WHO, said that communications are just as important for controlling outbreaks as epidemiology or laboratory findings.

## Newspapers' Coverage of Covid-19 in Nigeria During the Pandemic

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes in the media landscape in Nigeria, particularly the newspaper industry. Nigerian newspapers have played a critical role in informing the public about the pandemic, including its causes, symptoms, and preventive measures. The newspapers have also provided updates on the number of cases, recoveries, and deaths, as well as information about government policies and interventions to combat the pandemic.

Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, Nigerian newspapers like *The Guardian*, *The Sun*, *Vanguard*, *The Punch* and others have continued to provide comprehensive coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic throughout the period of the pandemic. The newspapers have used various formats, including news reports, editorials, commentaries, and features, to provide accurate and up-to-date information about the pandemic. The newspapers have also employed various communication strategies, such as the use of infographics, charts, and tables, to make the information more accessible and understandable to readers.

However, the newspapers' coverage of the pandemic has not been without challenges. One of the main challenges has been the spread of misinformation and fake news by citizens through social media. The newspapers have had to deal with fake news stories about the pandemic, which often spread through various social media platforms. The newspapers have had to debunk such stories and provide accurate information to counter the misinformation.

Nigerian newspapers have played a vital role in informing the public about the Covid-19 pandemic. The newspapers have provided comprehensive and accurate coverage of the pandemic, using various formats and communication strategies. The newspapers have also employed local languages to reach a wider audience. The newspapers' coverage of the pandemic has been instrumental in educating the public about the pandemic and promoting preventive measures, despite the challenges posed by misinformation and false news.

## Concept of Perception

The concept of perception is the process of recognizing and interpreting the information we gather through our senses and reacting to a situation with a particular message. Psychology, the study of behavior and mental processes, is closely related to perception since it focuses on our behavior toward certain situations. Perception and sensation are often used interchangeably, but sensation is the process of re-evaluating information from the world into the brain (Alley, 2016). Light and our eyes play a crucial role in perception, but our minds ultimately decide how we perceive things. Our perceptual set, or psychological factors, determine how we perceive the environment, and it can be influenced by expectations, experiences, moods, and cultural norms.

Perceptions are characterised as the consumer's assessment of the performance of the service organisation in terms of customer satisfaction and service quality characteristics. Expectations of the service as well as the decency of the service received affect customer perceptions. A person's expectations might alter how they view the world. Individual perception begins with a three-step process of selection, organization, and interpretation.. Due to gender differences, cultural backgrounds, and the physical surroundings of the service venues, perceptions vary. Any service organisation that wants to study how customers perceive the quality of their services must have a thorough understanding of how perceptions are created. Customers have few concrete pre-choice cues, therefore evaluating a service's quality and performance must wait until after they have used or experienced it. Customer satisfaction or unhappiness can be largely predicted by the perceptions that are developed during this evaluation process.

Therefore, perception is not just about what we see or hear, but also about how we interpret and react to it. It is a complex and dynamic process that involves multiple factors, such as our senses, expectations, experiences, moods, and cultural background. Understanding how perception works is crucial for service businesses to improve their customer satisfaction and quality of service. Additionally, perception is a fundamental concept in intercultural communication, and recognizing and respecting different perceptions is essential for effective communication and building relationships.

## Perception of Readers on Newspapers' Reportage of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on people's lives and the media landscape in Nigeria. Newspapers have played a critical role in providing information about the pandemic, including its causes, symptoms, and preventive measures. However, the question is how do readers perceive the newspapers' reportage of the pandemic?

Studies have shown that readers' perception of the newspapers' reportage of the pandemic varies. Some readers perceive the newspapers' reportage as accurate and informative, while others perceive the reportage as biased and sensationalized. A study by Adediran, Adeleye, Akinola and Olawale (2020) found that readers perceived the newspapers' reportage of the pandemic as sensationalised and fear-mongering. The study also found that

readers were skeptical about the accuracy and reliability of the information provided by the newspapers.

Another study by Ajayi, Ojo and Fadare (2020) found that readers perceived the newspapers' reportage of the pandemic as informative and helpful. The study found that readers relied on the newspapers for accurate and up-to-date information about the pandemic. The study also found that readers perceived the newspapers' reportage as balanced and unbiased.

The perception of the newspapers' reportage of the pandemic is influenced by several factors, including the readers' level of education, age, and exposure to the media. Readers with higher levels of education are more likely to perceive the newspapers' reportage as accurate and informative, while younger readers are more likely to perceive the reportage as sensationalized (Adediran et al., 2020). Exposure to the media also plays a role in shaping readers' perception of the newspapers' reportage of the pandemic. Readers who rely on social media for information about the pandemic are more likely to perceive the newspapers' reportage as biased and sensationalized (Ajayi et al., 2020).

Readers' perception of the newspapers' reportage of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria varies. While some readers perceive the reportage as accurate and informative, others perceive it as biased and sensationalized. The perception is influenced by several factors, including the readers' level of education, age, and exposure to the media.

## Methodology

A survey research design was used for this study. The essence of using a survey is that it lends itself to the application of samples as a way of studying very large populations (Nwodu, 2017; Owuamalam, 2012). This study is limited to the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo that comprise the South-East geopolitical zone serve as the study's setting.

The capital cities of three of the states were purposively selected to carry out the study. This is because of the high concentration of civil servants in the capital cities as well as the presence of tertiary institutions, thereby making them have higher number of newspaper readers. The capital cities selected were Owerri (Imo State), Awka (Anambra State) and Abakaliki (Ebony State). The occupations of the people in the study areas include farming, civil service, business, students, public servants, fishing and artisans.

Using the projection method (City Population, 2022), the population of this study, which comprises the population of the following State capitals, will be: Owerri Metropolis (Imo State- 174, 200); Awka Metropolis (Anambra State-270, 300), and Abakaliki Metropolis (Ebonyi State-223, 000). This makes the population of the study to be 667, 500. The sample size of the study was 384. It was derived through the use of Sample Size calculator of Calculator.net (2008) at a 95% level of acceptance (confidence level) and 5% confidence interval (margin of error), and a population proportion of 50%. The questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. In-person administration of the questionnaire was utilized. This was done to ensure that respondents had a firm grasp of the queries.

To determine the validity of the instrument, the pre-testing approach was used. 20 copies of a survey were distributed by the researchers to a select set of people in Onitsha. The post-testing

technique is used in this case. The first and second (before and post-testing) results were discovered to be comparable. This suggests that the measurement device was accurate. The pilot study approach was used for determining if the tool for data collection can post a similar result when used for the same research over time. The results that were obtained from the responses were evaluated on a split unit correlation method. The correlation coefficient formula (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011) was applied using the formula  $r = \frac{2ro_e}{1+ro_e}$  Where  $r$  = reliability  $o$  = odd number questions  $e$  = even number questions (as cited in Owuamalam, 2012). From the pre-testing, a weighted mean was obtained, indicating the reliability of the measuring instrument. Reliability is assured where the calculated value is expressed as positive (+) which is above 0.

### Presentation of Data

Out of the 384 copies of the questionnaire administered to respondents, 369 were filled, returned, and found useable for the study, yielding to 96.09% return rate while 15 were found unusable, yielding to 3.91% mortality rate.

**Table 1:** Assessment of respondents' frequency of exposure to Covid-19 reports

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Very frequently	122	33.06
Frequently	106	28.73
Sometimes	83	22.49
Rarely	37	10.03
Very rarely	21	5.69
<b>Total</b>	<b>369</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2022

**KEYS:** Very frequently- 90% - 100%; Frequently- 89% - 70%; Sometimes - 50% - 69%; Rarely- 40% - 49%; Very rarely- 1% - 39%.

The data from Table 1 demonstrated that the respondents were largely exposed to newspapers' reports on Covid-19 within the period under study. The implication of this is that the newspaper framing of this pandemic is due to impact on their perception of the virus.

**Table 2:** Level of understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic among newspapers' readers of South-East Nigeria newspapers

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Very high	133	36.04
High	92	24.94
Can't tell	9	2.44
Low	84	22.76
Very low	51	13.82
<b>Total</b>	<b>369</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2022

**KEYS:** Very high- 90% - 100%; High- 89% - 70%; Can't tell - 50% - 69%; Low- 40% - 49%; Very Low- 1% - 39%.

The data from Table 2 revealed that the level, of understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic, was quite high. It implies that the readers had a general understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Table 3:** The extent newspapers' coverage of the pandemic helped inform the readers about the disease and how to prevent its spread.

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Very Large	118	31.98
Large Extent	98	26.56
Can't Tell	12	3.25
Little Extent	76	20.60
Very Little	65	17.61
<b>Total</b>	<b>369</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2022

**KEYS:** Very Large- 90% - 100%; Large Extent- 89% - 70%; Can't Tell- 50% - 69%; Little Extent- 40% - 49%; Very Little- 1% - 39%.

From Table 3, it can be deduced that, indeed, the extent of newspapers' coverage of the pandemic helped inform the readers about the disease and how to prevent its spread. The implication is that the knowledge about the virus acquired via the newspapers must have gone a long way in preventing most of the readers from contracting the virus.

### Discussion of findings

The first finding of this study revealed that the respondents were frequently exposed to Covid-19 reports through the selected newspapers (*The Guardian, Vanguard, and The Sun* newspapers). This buttresses the fact that the media have been instrumental in disseminating information on the pandemic, providing updates on the number of cases, deaths, and the status of vaccine development. In South-East Nigeria, newspapers have been a crucial source of information for residents, with 61.97% of respondents reporting a high frequency of exposure to Covid-19 reports, with 22.49% indicating that they are sometimes exposed to Covid-19 reports in the newspapers, and about 15.93% indicating rare exposure.

The finding is consistent with previous research that has highlighted the important role of the media in shaping public perception of health issues (Chen & Sparks, 2021; Mackert, Guadagno, & Lazard, 2021; Guanah, 2022a). According to Chen and Sparks (2021), the media play a critical role in shaping public perceptions of health issues, and the level of exposure to health-related news can influence individuals' health behaviors. Similarly, Mackert et al. (2021) found that the media were the most commonly used source of information on Covid-19 among the general public. Guanah (2022b) asserts that print media conduct health-awareness campaigns, particularly when it comes to informing individuals and segments of society about health risks and treatments.

Another finding also showed that newspaper readers in South-East Nigeria had a generally high level of understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic. This finding tallies with the outcome of other studies carried out by scholars like Chen and Sparks (2021), and Mackert, Guadagno and Lazard (2021). According to Chen and Sparks (2021), the media can influence individuals' knowledge, attitudes,



and behaviors toward health issues. Also, Mackert et al. (2021) found that social media can play a crucial role in promoting public health knowledge during the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, while these findings are encouraging, it is essential to note that misinformation and myths about Covid-19 have been circulating widely, leading to confusion and fear among the public (Wang, McKee, Torbica & Stuckler, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that the information provided by newspapers and other media outlets is accurate, reliable, and free from bias.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the majority of respondents have a solid understanding of the virus and its mode of transmission. The readers' perception confirms the reasons for commending the newspapers' efforts in the coverage of the virus which enjoys positive perception among the readers following the educative and informative nature of the contents.

They also believe that the pandemic is real and has impacted their lives in various ways. However, there is need for more awareness and education to address misinformation and myths surrounding the pandemic. The study emphasizes the significance of effective communication and education in the management of a public health emergency such as Covid-19.

## Recommendations

**Increase Covid-19 awareness campaigns:** The Nigerian government and media organisations should intensify their efforts towards educating the public on the pandemic, its prevention, and management, in case it happens again in the future, as cases of its variance are being reported in some European countries. This can be accomplished by disseminating accurate information, expanding awareness campaigns, and collaborating with community leaders to engage their adherents in Covid-19 awareness programmes. **Adequate resources to the health sector:** The government should provide adequate resources to the health sector to combat the pandemic effectively. This includes providing personal protective equipment for health workers, expanding testing and treatment centers, and providing financial support to individuals and businesses affected by the pandemic.

**Collaboration with community leaders:** The government and health authorities should collaborate with community leaders to engage their followers in Covid-19 awareness programmes. This will help to dispel myths and misinformation about the pandemic and promote compliance with guidelines and protocols. **Adherence to guidelines and protocols:** It is important for everyone to play their part in the fight against Covid-19 by adhering to the guidelines and protocols put in place by the government and health authorities. This involves wearing masks, practicing social distance, and routinely washing hands.

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