

## Influence of newspaper coverage of covid-19 on the health behavior of southeast residents of Nigeria

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### Abstract

One of the fundamental functions of the mass media is the dissemination of information that affects the lives of their audience. Coronavirus as one of these issues has paralyzed many aspects of the human population that even highly developed countries are battling to contain the pandemic. Consequently, this study assessed the influence of newspaper coverage of Covid-19 on the health behavior of southeast residents of Nigeria. The study used a survey research method while the questionnaire was the instrument of data collection. The sample size was 400 obtained through Taro Yamane while media dependency theory was used to explain the study. Results from the study show that the majority of the respondents use Daily Sun to read about coronavirus while their level of knowledge is high. It was also discovered that exposure to newspaper coverage of covid-19 helped the respondents to adopt positive health behaviors in the face of the pandemic. The paper recommends among other things that further studies should be done in other regions in the country so that we can have a holistic understanding of newspaper influence on the readers regarding the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Influence, newspaper, Covid-19, Southeast, pandemic, coverage

### Introduction

The novel Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has become a serious health crisis attacking the whole world with various health and financial implications. The infection happened first in Wuhan, China in late 2019 and from that point forward has spread to practically entire continents on the globe (Omaka-Amari *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[20]</sup>. As portrayed by the World Health Organization (2020) <sup>[22]</sup>, COVID-19 is a viral infection that causes respiratory illness. The disease is transmitted from person to person through contact with a droplet of an infected person. Although most people can easily recover from the illness without specialized treatment, people who are older and those with existing medical conditions such as cancer, chronic respiratory infections, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases are more likely to experience severe illness and death due to COVID-19 (WHO, 2020) <sup>[28]</sup>.

The virus, SARS Cov2 is the main causative organism of COVID-19, with shortness of breath, dry cough, and fever as its most common symptoms. COVID-19 is ordinarily difficult to prevent and control, thus, the best way of thwarting it is by adopting measures that will reduce exposure to the virus that causes the disease (CDC, 2020) <sup>[17]</sup>. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, numerous preventive and control measures have been applied globally to contain the disease. The deadliness of the disease is underscored by its potential to infect, cause hospitalization, and death of so many persons within the shortest time frame (Omaka-Amari *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[20]</sup>. Worse still, some measures targeted at preventing the disease in emergency cases such as the lockdown procedure could cripple the economy and thus increase the poverty level of the affected community.

It is for these reasons that the World Health Organization declared COVID-19-a public health emergency of international concern. As of 25<sup>th</sup> November 2020, no cure or

vaccine has been found and the disease keeps spreading unchecked with the USA, India, Brazil, Russia, France, UK, and Germany being the most affected. The pandemic has led to severe global socioeconomic disruption, the postponement or cancellation of sporting including the Tokyo Olympics, religious, political, and cultural events (The New York Times, 2020), and widespread shortages of supplies exacerbated by panic buying (CNBC, 2020). Schools, colleges, and universities have closed either on a nationwide or local basis in more than 200 countries, affecting approximately 91% of the world's student population (UNESCO, 2020).

In Nigeria, the index case of COVID-19 occurred on 27<sup>th</sup> February 2020 through an Italian businessman who visited the country (NCDC, 2020) <sup>[17]</sup>. The declaration of this index case spurred the Nigeria Government, with the support of relevant health agencies to embark on measures targeted at curtailing the spread of the disease (Omaka-Amari *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[20]</sup>. This confirmation led to the swift activation of the country's National Coronavirus Emergency Operation Centre (EOC). Despite all preventive and control measures of the Nigerian government following the first episode, the infection as of 21<sup>st</sup> November 2020 had spread to 36 states including Abuja with 65982 confirmed cases, 61782 discharged cases, and 1165 deaths. Controlling this surge in Coronavirus in the nation was very difficult because of the limited standard hospital centers that can help fight the infection.

Although before the arrival of COVID-19 into Nigeria, the government had put in place strategic interventions to help in combating the disease through its foremost public health institute, Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) (Adepoju, 2020) <sup>[2]</sup>. These measures include; sending information on personal hygiene and cough etiquette to the populace, setting up a network of state and public health

emergency network centers within the country, training skilled manpower on contact tracing and treatment amongst others (Adepoju, 2020) <sup>[2]</sup>. Significantly, the capacities of African countries and specifically Nigeria had been boosted on risk communication, healthcare preparedness, and strengthening of surveillance at points of entry by the Africa CDC, which is taking the leading position in the response to COVID-19 outbreak in Africa (Adepoju, 2020) <sup>[2]</sup>. Before the index case, Nigeria relied on temperature screenings at air terminals, traveler's travel history, and the advancement of self-isolation for people entering Nigeria from nations with high confirmed cases of Coronavirus.

As new confirmed cases of COVID-19 rise, governments at all levels across the African continent brace up for imminent challenges. In Nigeria, multi-sectoral national emergency operations center (EOC) activated at level 3, continues to coordinate the national response activities to the coronavirus pandemic. Also, 2 more functional testing laboratories had been established in April in two major cities in the country bringing the total number to seven (7), while the setting up of additional laboratories across the country had been completed by November, this is required to increase the testing capacities for more suspected cases.

Amongst the various public health measures rolled out by the Nigeria government includes; the guidelines for self-isolation and mass gatherings, expansion of national case definitions, deployment of rapid response teams to support states, and the newly revised "The Quarantine Act (CAP Q2 LFN 2004)" which now contain the COVID-19 Regulations 2020. The major highlight of this regulation is the cessation and restriction of human movements across states in Nigeria. This is highly necessary to curb the further spread and local transmission of the disease among the populace. So far, there have been records of high effectiveness in the various interventions been rolled out and implemented by the government.

In health crises, for example, Coronavirus pandemic, the level of information flow is high and this requires additional care to help curtail the health emergency (Ogbodo *et al*, 2020) <sup>[19]</sup>. Thus, it is important to report the pandemic in a way that helps to douse the risk of the crisis rather than increase it (Vos & Buckner, 2016) <sup>[27]</sup>. Literature has increasingly enriched the best practices about communicating health crises, although gaps are admitted (Vos & Buckner, 2016) <sup>[27]</sup>. The function of the mass media including TV, radio, print, and as of late online media has remained irreplaceable in mobilizing and eradicating pandemics (Smith, Smith & Ajayi, 2020) <sup>[24]</sup>. Information on positive public health practices such as social distancing, handwashing, respiratory hygiene, and government policies in tackling outbreaks has often been disseminated via these media (Collinson *et al*, 2015) <sup>[9]</sup>.

Vibrant Nigeria's Mass Media which comprises over 200 radio stations, 150 television channels, and about 350 print (newspapers) outlets have remained a force to be reckoned with and has been faithful to its social responsibilities as the fourth estate of the realm. According to www.fmnic.gov.ng, the official website of the Ministry of Information and Culture, the Nigerian media was commended by Nigeria's Minister of Information, for bringing messages of the COVID-19 pandemic to Nigerians, through their media contributions in the advocacy, sensitization, and social responsibilities functions. In this world of internet and social media, there are different forms of media and approaches to

conveying and spreading news though reliability and trust are not always useful in the case of all media.

It is believed that print media is still the most reliable and valued source of information for the public. Print media continues to shape the public opinion of the country and plays a vital role in taking the information to the mass (Kuppuswamy, 2017). In the case of COVID-19, the Nigerian mass media most especially the print media has churned out tons of reportage since the disease was first reported in Nigeria and the Nigerian Union of journalist applauded its members for their efforts in reporting the pandemic in the face of challenges such as lack of sufficient and inadequate protection equipment coupled with remuneration being owed some of their members by some employers (APA, 2020; Ripples Nigeria, 2020) <sup>[4, 24]</sup>. However, this study will examine the influence of newspaper coverage of covid-19 on the health behavior of southeast residents of Nigeria.

### Problem Statement

The novel Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), first identified in Wuhan China in December 2019, has rapidly spread to every region of the world. The disease is caused by a new and severe type of Coronavirus known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The infection has no immediate treatment and vaccine, and it has according to the World Health Organization (2020) <sup>[22]</sup> become a worldwide pandemic causing significant morbidity and mortality. To prevent further spread of the virus, governments and countries embarked on enlightenment campaigns for good hygiene and social distancing.

One of the institutions that are responsible for the campaigns is the mass media. As an institution saddled with the responsibility of disseminating information, mass media wields a strong influence in shaping public opinion and decision making. Indeed, Schram (2010) <sup>[23]</sup> argues that "news exists in the minds of men. It is not an event; it is something perceived after the event... it is an attempt to reconstruct the essential framework of the event which is calculated to make the event meaningful to the reader"

There have been notable studies to showcase the role of newspapers during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Smith, Smith, and Ajayi (2020) <sup>[24]</sup> analyzed mass media reportage on coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) in Nigeria from six widely circulated Nigerian newspapers. Ogbodo *et al* (2020) <sup>[19]</sup> examined the global media framing of COVID-19. Msughter and Phillips (2020) <sup>[16]</sup> also looked at the Media Framing of Covid-19 Pandemic with a particular interest in *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* Newspapers in Nigeria. All these studies portray the functions of newspapers during the health crisis. What is missing is the influence of media coverage on the audience. This gap in literature formed the basis of this present study which seeks to unravel the influence of newspaper coverage of Covid-19 on the health behavior of southeast residents of Nigeria.

### Objectives

1. Find out the newspaper mostly used to read about covid-19 pandemic;
2. Find out the awareness level of southeast residents about the covid-19 pandemic;
3. Ascertain the extent of knowledge about covid-19 pandemic among residents; and

4. Find out if newspaper coverage of Covid-19 influence the health behavior of South-East residents.

## Literature Review

### Media and Coronavirus Pandemic

The media's inclusion or exclusion (inadvertently or otherwise) of certain words in its coverage of the pandemic can be questioned and regularly misjudged (Ogbodo *et al*, 2020) <sup>[19]</sup>. According to Mebane, Temin, and Parvanta (2003) <sup>[15]</sup> research acknowledges that even when the media role fails to confound the story, the reportage of issues such as public health crisis regularly stimulates blames for over-reporting, inadequate or inaccurate coverage. This has been the case for different coverage of health crises such as Anthrax. Up until this point, the global media coverage of COVID-19 has not shown any exception. Nonetheless, the shortcomings in the reportage of the evolving COVID-19 pandemic could potentially trigger more global health concerns. For instance, the nature of media coverage of the pandemic may have accentuated the public's fear or lack of it as it was in 2001 when the Anthrax health crisis was reported (Mebane, Temin, and Parvanta, 2003 in Ogbodo *et al*, 2020) <sup>[19]</sup>.

Similarly, Ogbodo *et al* (2020) <sup>[19]</sup> posits that when President Trump tweeted that chloroquine and other related malaria drugs were useful for treating COVID-19, its interpretation in the media engineered panic buying of the drug in different countries. According to them, the Punch reported that hospitals in Nigeria recorded increased cases of chloroquine overdose as a result of Trump's endorsement. The World Health Organization frowned at this and urged the media to feed the public with only the reports that have medical/scientific evidence. It issued a statement saying that "Hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine are under investigation in clinical trials for pre-exposure or post-exposure prophylaxis of SARS-CoV-2 infection, and treatment of patients with mild, moderate, and severe COVID-19" This shows that important information illuminating or addressing the COVID-19 health crisis may have long term implications for public health.

Furthermore, Nwakpu, Ezema, and Ogbodo (2020) <sup>[19]</sup> assert that events of public concern such as health issues attract media attention. This can take the form of print, electronic, internet, or social media attention; in most cases, a combination of all. Whichever form it takes, what matters most is the level of impact of media intervention in a health crisis, especially a disease outbreak. Mass media cannot cure the virus but can cure its spread (Adelakun & Adnan, 2016). This statement explicitly underscores the role of mass media in health reporting, especially in curbing the spread of infectious disease outbreaks. Scholars have argued that the mass media have the potential to influence health-related behaviors and perceptions (Leask, Hooker, & King, 2010) <sup>[12]</sup>. In Nigeria, the mass media are used independently or complementarily in health promotion activities to achieve positive lifestyle changes (Nwakpu, Ezema, & Ogbodo, 2020) <sup>[19]</sup>. Therefore, the role of mass media in health promotion and intervention goes beyond just creating awareness on a particular health issue or disease outbreak; it also entails emphasizing the angle or direction of reportage of such issue or outbreak. These media angles of presenting health issues take the form of media coverage to influence public perception and induce

an attitudinal response, leading to positive behavioral changes.

However, research shows that what always raises dust regarding media roles in health issues is the degree of success or failure recorded by mass media in a particular health outbreak or health challenges compared to the risks. Explaining further on the issue, Tabbaa (2010) asserts that good communication through the media is pertinent when an outbreak is unique in public health with confusion and sense of urgency as the media in no small measure work along with health professional in creating awareness. Placing a priority on novel diseases can be useful because rare and dramatic occurrences are sometimes sentinel events (McCloskey, & Heymann, 2020) <sup>[14]</sup>. Therefore, working with the journalists and the media to help them understand the science and epidemiology, particularly in a fast and moving event, will improve risk communication to the public and reduce inappropriate concerns and panic (McCloskey, & Heymann, 2020) <sup>[14]</sup>.

Few studies have examined the nature of newspaper coverage of Covid-19. Smith, Smith, and Ajayi (2020) <sup>[24]</sup> in their study analyzed mass media reportage in newspapers in Nigeria with the view to highlighting its' role in combating the pandemic. Using content analysis, publications on COVID-19 between January 2020 and May 2020 of six widely read national newspapers in Nigeria were analyzed. Results revealed that news report on the COVID-19 pandemic was high (55.3%) followed by front-page news of 6.1%. Between January and March 2020, the Punch newspaper had a larger chunk (25%) of publication on the pandemic. Sixteen story formats were common amongst the different newspapers and they include news, front page, opinion, and features to mention a few. The study indicates that the media has played a great role in the reportage of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria with 14,585 publications, the highest so far reported in a disease outbreak.

Ogbodo *et al* (2020) <sup>[19]</sup> examined the global media framing of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) to understand the dominant frames and how the choice of words compares in the media. The study utilized content analysis. Data were sourced from the LexisNexis database and two websites that yielded 6145 items used for the analysis. Nine predetermined frames were used for the coding. Human Interest and fear/scaremongering frames dominated the global media coverage of the pandemic. They aligned their finding with the constructionist frame perspective which assumes that the media as information processors creates 'interpretative packages' to both reflect and add to the 'issue culture' because frames that paradigmatically dominate event coverage also dominate audience response. The language of the coverage of COVID-19 combines gloom, hope, precaution, and frustration at varied proportions.

Msughter and Phillips (2020) sought to determine the types of frames, the tones of the frames, the dominant frames in the coverage of covid-19. Considering the selected newspapers are based on the two ends of the geographical cardinal points of the country (North and South). The paper was limited to only newspaper frames and not the audience's perspective of the issues of framing. The paper examined the ways *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* framed Covid-19 and the implication of the frames on government interest. The paper further looked at the possible implication of the frames on government interest in respect of the virus. Through content analysis, a census of a dataset of articles,

representing the coverage of Covid-19 is used for the study. The paper is anchored on the theoretical lens of Framing Theory which hinged on the premise of philosophical postulation that explains which news content is typically shaped and contextualized by the media outlet.

The findings of the study indicate that the media narratives within the study period tilted more on economic and political frames. The tones of the frames of both newspapers are more negative frames than positive and neutral on the Covid-19 pandemic. The study concludes that *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* newspaper framed the Covid-19 pandemic more of economic, political, and downplaying important frames such as health and safety and quality of life frames. However, no empirical study on the influence of newspaper coverage on the health behavior of citizens on the current coronavirus outbreak was found. The need to fill this lacuna in the existing literature of media studies on health crises necessitated this present study, and it is coming at a time when the COVID-19 outbreak is on the rapid increase all over the world.

### **Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic in Nigeria**

According to the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) in Amzat *et al* (2020), the training of the rapid response teams across the 36 states in Nigeria was concluded in December 2019. On January 28, the NCDC further revealed that a Coronavirus Group had been set up to activate its incident system to respond to any emergency. Additionally, the NCDC worked with 36 states and FCT in Nigeria to activate their emergency operations centers to manage and link up with the national incidence coordination centers (Ihekweazu, 2020). Although the government had strengthened the surveillance at the airport since January 2020, Nigeria recorded its COVID-19 index case that was imported from Italy, on February 27. This raised concerns about the effectiveness of airport surveillance and, by extension, the country's general preparedness. The index case (an Italian) had visited some other states of the federation before testing positive for COVID-19. The pre-COVID-19 preparedness was grossly inadequate. Nevertheless, the onset of COVID-19 sent waves of panic across Nigeria, like in every other country. Due to globalization, the health risk of communicable diseases could be pandemic (Tausch, 2015). Trade and travels facilitate the flow of people, who incidentally could move, carrying a health risk (in this case: the coronavirus).

From one imported index case, many countries (including Nigeria) face tremendous health challenges with multiple cases and deaths. Since the first index case in Nigeria, the number of cases has been increasing. Upon the detection of the index case, the NCDC activated a multi-sectorial National Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) to oversee the national response to COVID-19. Subsequently, the Presidential Task Force (PTF) for coronavirus control was inaugurated on March 9, 2020. The PTF announced that travelers from 13 COVID-19 high-risk countries had been restricted from entering the country. The Port Health Services and NCDC monitor the self-isolation of returnees from the affected countries from then onward. The concern from several quarters was that the ban on high-risk countries would have taken immediate effect. By the time the ban took effect, the nation had recorded more imported cases. Unfortunately, most of those who arrived in the country did

not comply with the 14days self-isolation recommended by the NCDC.

Within the first 30 days, the NCDC observed that 70.0% of the individuals tested positive for COVID-19 were male, and 30.0% were female. Their ages ranged between 30 and 60 years. People aged 31-50 years were the most affected (39.0%). About 44.0% of the cases were imported, some 41.0% had incomplete epidemiological information; the sources of their infections were unknown. Thirty-five (15.0%) patients were known contacts of positive cases (NCDC, 2020)-suggesting community transmission or cross-infection. Lagos State accounted for over 50% of the cases in Nigeria, followed by Abuja (20.3%) and Osun State (8.6%). Common characteristics of Abuja and Lagos include being the sites of major international airports and hubs of commercial and administrative activities in the country. Similarly, Ejigbo, the epicenter of the infection in Osun State, has many of its indigenous people working in Cote d'Ivoire and other neighboring countries that are already battling with hundreds of COVID-19 cases. When COVID-19 forced some of them to return to Nigeria, many returned positive for COVID-19.

From the first index and other imported cases, there has been a continuous spread across other states through inter-state travels. During the first 30 days of COVID-19 in Nigeria, the disease distribution was elitist. The majority of those who tested positive were returnees from abroad (NCDC, 2020). Air travel is predominantly elitist in Nigeria because of the high rate of poverty. The political elite also bore the early brunt of COVID-19 with three state Governors and some political appointees testing positive for COVID-19. Due to the (initial) trend, the initial perception was that COVID-19 was a disease of the elite, who returned from international travels or had contact with the political bourgeoisie. Sooner than expected, there was evidence of community transmission as COVID-19 broke the class boundary. It then became the responsibility of every Nigerian to take preventive responsibility.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Media Dependency**

Firstly, media systems dependency theory considers that media offer content to audiences in various forms, to meet their needs for information, entertainment, or social activities, etc. Likewise, individuals tend to depend on the media to fulfill their needs and wants (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989) <sup>[10]</sup>. Studies reveal that people show more dependence or reliance on the mass media for information under some conditions or motivational factors like when facing a certain crisis or threat. Such media dependence has been found to predict changes in people's attitudes and behaviors (Lowrey, 2004) <sup>[13]</sup>. The media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976) <sup>[6]</sup> postulates that intrinsic and extrinsic factors influence media users' behaviors in some ways; they are intrinsic factors (attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavior control) and extrinsic factors (media use and dependency).

During the pandemic time, communities locked down and everyone had to stay at home and relied heavily on media for information; they shifted to traditional media use. Hence, it is plausible that communications via traditional media may have more impact on users' behavior toward the issue of personal protection. This research looks at the question, how does communication via traditional media

especially newspaper influence residents’ behavior towards personal protection.

Secondly, MDT dictates that media, audience, and social system are linked together in some ways. This means that these three parties have relationships with each other, which are affected by two main facets: (1) at the cognitive level: the audience’s consideration about how important to use media, and (2) at the affective level: the audience’s motivation and satisfaction caused by their emotion which is stimulated by the content of the media. With both cognitive and affective motivations, people are involved in the process of communication through media.

**Research Method**

Survey research design is the research method. A questionnaire is the instrument of data collection. The hard copy questionnaire was used to collect data from respondents. Potential respondents were purposively given the questionnaire to fill. A sample size of 400 respondents was used for the study from a population of 13,238,806 in three southeast states of Nigeria including Abia, Anambra, and Enugu. The sampling technique is Taro Yamane. The research instrument was self-administered by the researchers with the aid of three assistants trained by the researchers. Qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis were used to analyze the data generated. While the qualitative method was employed to give interpretation to the data generated, the quantitative method was used to

analyze the data using frequency distribution tables.

**Results**

The researchers sampled a total of 400 respondents but a total of 380 copies of the questionnaire were returned and the analysis was based on these returned copies.

**Table 1:** Newspapers mostly utilized

Newspapers	Frequency	Percentage
Daily Sun	90	24
The Punch	34	9
The Guardian	74	19
Vanguard	69	18
Daily Trust	21	6
The Nation	80	21
Others	12	3
Total	380	100%

From the table above, you will discover that *Daily Sun* is the newspapers that are mostly used by the respondents to obtain information about Coronavirus with 90 (24%), this is followed by *The Nation* newspaper with, 80 (21%), *The Guardian* 74 (19%), *Vanguard* 69 (18%).

Also, 34 respondents representing 9% indicated that they use *The Punch* newspaper to access information regarding Coronavirus in the country, 21 (6%) indicated *Daily Trust* while 12 (3%) posit that they use other newspapers not outlined in the list above.

**Table 2:** Awareness of covid19

(SA = Strongly Agreed, A= Agreed, D= Disagreed, SD = Strongly Disagreed)

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total
	You can contract the virus by airborne droplets via breathing, sneezing, or coughing	224 (59%)	95 (25%)	35 (9%)	26 (7%)	380 (100%)
	You can get infected by touching contaminated objects or surfaces	246 (65%)	91 (24%)	24 (7%)	19 (4%)	380 (100%)
	Symptoms include coughing, shortness of breath, sneezing, fever, and sore throat	278 (73%)	87 (23%)	15 (4%)	-	380 (100%)
	It was first reported in Wuhan, china	232 (61%)	91 (24%)	34 (9%)	23 (6%)	380 (100%)
	The virus has 2-14 days incubation period	135 (36%)	189 (50%)	43 (11%)	13 (3%)	380 (100%)
	Some people might have the virus and be asymptomatic	145 (38%)	165 (44%)	47 (12%)	23 (6%)	380 (100%)
	Physical distancing is one the ways of stopping the spread of the virus	221 (58%)	89 (24%)	39 (10%)	31 (8%)	380 (100%)

On the level of awareness about Covid-91 as a result of exposure to newspaper coverage, it was discovered that 224 representing 59% of the respondents strongly agree that you can contract the virus by airborne droplets via breathing, sneezing, or coughing, 65% of the respondents strongly agree that you can get infected by touching contaminated objects or surfaces while 278 (73%) of the respondents are aware that the symptoms include coughing, shortness of breath, sneezing, fever, and sore throat.

Furthermore, 232 (61%) are aware that the pandemic was first reported in Wuhan, China, 165 (44%) are aware that people might have the virus and be asymptomatic and 221 (58%) are aware that physical distancing is one the ways of stopping the spread of the virus because of exposure to newspaper coverage of the pandemic.

**Table 3:** Level of Knowledge

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Very High	85	22
High	218	58
Low	54	14
Very Low	23	6
Total	380	100%

Details in the table above show that 218 of the respondents representing 58% indicated that their level of coronavirus knowledge is *high* as a result of exposure to newspaper coverage of the pandemic, 85 (22%) indicated *very high*, 54 (14%) choose *low* while 23 (6%) selected *very low*.

**Table 4:** Influence on Behaviour

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total
	Disinfecting surfaces regularly	215 (57%)	97 (26%)	47 (12%)	21 (5%)	380 (100%)
	I wash my hands on a regular interval	148 (39%)	175 (46%)	38 (10%)	19 (5%)	380 (100%)
	I wear facemask while in public places	232 (61%)	81 (21%)	42 (11%)	25 (7%)	380 (100%)
	I disinfect my hands with alcohol based hand sanitizer frequently	238 (62%)	90 (24%)	33 (9%)	19 (5%)	380 (100%)
	I maintain social distance in public places	131 (35%)	191 (50%)	43 (11%)	15 (4%)	380 (100%)
	I touch my face, nose, eye and mouth with clean hands	119 (31%)	209 (55%)	30 (8%)	22 (6%)	380 (100%)

From the table above, 215 (57%) of the respondents strongly agree that they disinfect surfaces in their homes and offices regularly as a result of reading about the procedure in newspapers so that they can help to curtail the spread of the virus. Out of the 380 respondents, 175 (46%) agree that they wash their hands regularly to stop the spread of the virus, 232 (61%) of the respondents strongly agree that they wear a facemask while in public places, 238 (62%) respondents strongly agree that they disinfect their hands with alcohol-based hand sanitizer frequently, 191 (50%) agree that they maintain social distance in public places while 209 (55%) of the respondents agree that they touch their face, nose, eye, and mouth with clean hands because of exposure to newspaper reports.

### Discussion

In the demographic data, it was found that female respondents were greater than male respondents in gender distribution. There was over 60% female while 40% of the respondents were male. This implies that the questionnaire was filled mainly by the female gender. Finding from the occupation of the respondents reveals that 45% of the respondents are students; this was followed by 32% who are civil servants while 23% are into business. On the educational qualification of the respondents, it was found that HND/BSc./BA respondents were greater. There were 51% of HND/BSc./BA respondents. Covid-19 has spread to more than two hundred territories across the globe with devastating impacts on its heels. This study set out to examine the influence of newspaper coverage on the health behavior of southeast residents of Nigeria.

Results from the study indicate that newspaper is one the means that the respondents obtain information about Covid-19. It was further discovered that the *Daily Sun* was the newspaper that was used by the majority of the respondents to read about Covid-19. This shows that the respondents found the newspaper worthy to brief them about the latest on the covid-19 situation in Nigeria and beyond. This finding is in contrast with the result of Apuke and Omar (2020) [5], they discovered that undergraduate students in Northern Nigeria prefer the *Daily Trust* newspaper. Newspaper is a mass medium which conveys timely information issue at regular interval of time. As a mass medium, newspapers are useful for education, information, recreation, relaxation, and entertainment. This explains why Ola and Ojo (2007) in Apuke and Omar (2020) [5] remark that newspapers are important because they carry current information and they keep the readers informed of events and happenings within and outside their immediate environments like stories about covid-19.

Further, the finding indicates that a large portion of the respondents are aware that you can get infected with the virus through airborne droplets via breathing, sneezing, or coughing because they read it in the newspaper. They are also aware that you can get infected by touching contaminated objects or surfaces, they also indicate that the symptoms include coughing, shortness of breath, sneezing, fever, and sore throat. Furthermore, the respondents are aware that the pandemic was first reported in Wuhan, China, they strongly agree that people might have the virus and be asymptomatic and the respondents strongly agree that physical distancing is one the ways of stopping the spread of the virus because of exposure to newspaper coverage of the pandemic.

The above findings imply that the respondents are aware of the origin, mode of transmission, symptoms, and preventive measures regarding the virus because they read about it on the pages of newspapers. This shows that newspapers disseminate information about health issues in society in this case Covid-19. Newspaper coverage of Covid-19 serves as a source of health information and awareness to members of the public.

Further findings reveal that the level of knowledge about Covid-19 among the respondents is *high*. For example, many respondents strongly agree that some of WHO stipulated world practices like hand washing and social distancing, and disinfecting contaminated surfaces were key to preventing the spread of the virus is high. This shows that there is high knowledge regarding Covid-19 even though this is mixed with misconceptions. This high level of knowledge is a result of sustained coverage of the health crisis by the news channels most especially newspapers. Put in another way, newspaper coverage of Covid-19 helps to school the general public about the nature of this novel virus thereby leading to increased knowledge of the pandemic among the respondents.

Findings on the influence of exposure to newspaper coverage of Covid-19 on the health behavior of the respondents show that the majority of the respondents strongly agree that they disinfect surfaces in their homes and offices regularly as a result of reading about the procedure in newspapers. The majority agree that they wash their hands regularly to stop the spread of the virus, a high number of the respondents strongly agree that they wear a facemask while in public places, most of the respondents strongly agree that they disinfect their hands with alcohol-based hand sanitizer frequently, a high percentage of the respondents agree that they maintain social distance in public places while a greater number of the respondents agree that they touch their face, nose, eye, and mouth with clean hands because they read about it in newspapers.

These findings are in line with the findings of Choi and Yang (2010) [8]. They discovered that one's level of knowledge about an infectious disease can make one behave in ways that can prevent infection. Also, Richards (2017) [21] opined that knowledge among ordinary people about how to eliminate risks of contracting the Ebola virus led to a rapid drop in mid-2015 in the number of cases of infection. These findings indicate that exposure to newspaper coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic helps the respondents to adopt preventive measures against the virus. The influence of newspaper coverage on the health behavior of citizens cannot be overemphasized. This is because newspapers are seen to be highly reliable sources of information. This is the more reason why information-oriented newspapers have been noted for health promotion as they connect the public with relevant health information like the case of Covid-19 to change behavior.

### Conclusion

The study investigated the influence of newspaper coverage of Covid-19 on the health behavior of southeast residents of Nigeria. The study sought to find out if newspaper coverage of covid-19 influenced the health behavior of its readers in southeast Nigeria. We discovered that exposure to various newspaper reports on covid-19 helped to shape the behavior of the respondents. This means that the respondents were up to take precautionary measures that will help them not to

contract the virus and flatten the pandemic curve in our country.

### Recommendations

This study makes the following recommendations:

1. As a result of newspaper coverage of the covid-19 pandemic, citizens were able to adopt precautionary measures to stop the spread of the virus. We, therefore, recommend that newspapers should sustain the pattern of coverage to help flatten the virus curve.
2. The study was done on selected states in southeast Nigeria, further studies should be done in other regions in the country so that we can have a complete understanding of newspaper influence on the readers regarding the pandemic.
3. Also, empirical studies on the influence of other mass media channels on the health behavior of the audience should be done to generate holistic data about media influence.
4. In addition to the role of newspapers in sensitizing Nigerians about the dangers of the pandemic, it is recommended that all stakeholders should intensify their effort in sensitizing the general public to understand and comply with all precautionary measures to curb Covid-19.

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