

Digital Nigeria, political (dis)trust and framing of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Background:

Studies on trust in government have emphasized policies, ideology or moral appropriateness of politicians keeping their promises as the predominant conceptualization of official trust. This study extends this conversation by investigating the narratives of Nigerian social media users during the COVID-19 pandemic based their political trust or distrust of government.

Methods:

Using framing theory, a mixed method triangulation of digital ethnography and quantitative content analysis was employed. During a three-month (May 2 to August 3, 2020) digital ethnographic participant-observation, a total of 153 manually purposive samples from social media were quantitatively content analysed. Only media items in the public domain were employed. Similarly, the details of the social media users were anonymised

Results:

Twenty-two frames and the narratives behind the frames showed that Nigerian digital media users provided factual information, as against government denials, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings also showed that Nigerians did not trust their government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The reported results are only generalizable to the studied sample.

Conclusion:

This study advanced the conceptualization of government trust as the confidence of citizens on the professional competence of heads of agencies. This is at variance with Western-centric conceptualizations of government trust that hinges on policy, ideological cost or institutional structures of governance.

Keywords:

framing, government trust, Nigerian digital media users, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

Trust is a vague concept due to its many contradictory definitions,¹ which have different meanings across disciplines like nursing, medicine, psychology, sociology or politics.² This lack of conceptual clarity may be a result of numerous value systems, and globalization that has widened human communication. Trust is linked to risk and expectations, especially in interpersonal relationships where the one trusting, is taking a risk based on the belief that the recipient of the trust will look after his/her interests.³ Therefore, trust involves vulnerability, with the hope of reciprocity by the recipient. Similarly, trust in government draws from this praxis of risk, expectation, legitimate confidence and/or political fidelity to promises made.⁴ Trust is further exacerbated with the limited amount of power that governments can muster these days, in more established democracies.³

Reviewed scholarship equally ties citizen's trust in government trust to policy, ideological and institutional factors. Trust in government was described as a simple tenant, whereby a citizen decides if they want their government to get involved in policy area or otherwise.⁵ Trust can also be considered as the readiness to accept all costs – material and ideological, proximate and remote – that come with government action.⁶ Hence, citizens are taking a risk on the government with the hope that their trust will be reciprocated by corresponding action that favours them.⁷ Citizens expect their elected leaders would do the right thing, based on the knowledge or lack of it that they possess.⁸ Hence, lack of accountability or corruption inhibits trust in government institutions.⁹

But in Nigeria, corruption is not the only reason for government mistrust.^{10,11,12} Successive governments, have consistently broken the promises made to their citizens,¹³ thereby creating an integrity deficit.¹⁴ The net effect is cynical distrust of government and their officials, at all levels.¹⁵ Also, the inability of governments to mitigate election violence, terrorism and police brutality has resulted in a widespread distrust of Nigerian governments.¹⁶

This scholar admits a rise of doubts about government without operationalizing trust.¹⁷ This lack of clarity persists in these studies that focused exclusively on risk¹⁸ or race.¹⁹ Others proposed models of e-government trust for citizens,^{20,21,22} which falls outside the scope of this study.

Consequently, the dominant conceptualisations of trust in the Global North have understandably focused on policies, ideologies or morality of government keeping their promises. Therefore, this study extends this conversation by investigating the narratives of Nigerian social media users during the COVID-19 pandemic with a view of understanding their political trust or distrust of government.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nigeria's response to COVID-19

Nigeria's first COVID-19 case was announced on February 27, 2020 by minister of health Dr Osagie Ehanire. The patient was an Italian expatriate. Consequently, the ministry of health and the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) set up a Coronavirus Preparedness Group to mitigate the rate of the virus spread, especially in Lagos State.²³

The NCDC, Nigeria's infectious disease agency, had amassed experience in the management of polio and Ebola virus. In 2019, under Dr Chikwe Ihekweazu's leadership, NCDC hired more scientists for their molecular biology laboratories, in anticipation of any epidemic breakout.²⁴ With this enhanced diagnostic and surveillance capacity, NCDC sequenced COVID-19 and established a national reference repository.²⁵ This likely reduced the rate of transmission, while buying time to implement a national wide testing and treatment capacity for the pandemic.²⁶ NCDC's work under Ihekweazu's leadership led to his appointment as World Health Organization's (WHO) assistant director-general of Health Emergency Intelligence on September 1, 2021.²⁷

But NCDC's competence was not replicated by other Nigerian institutions during that period. President Muhammadu Buhari kept an undignified silence in face of the panic associated with the pandemic, while his spokespersons scolded legislators for demanding a presidential address.²⁸ Although a national COVID-19 lockdown began on March 29, 2020, political elites like Abba Kyari (former presidential chief of staff), Seyi Makinde (Oyo State Governor) and Garba Shehu (presidential spokesman), defied the law on different occasions.²⁹ Kyari tested positive for COVID-19 on March 24, 2020 after a trip to Germany and Egypt, died from coronavirus barely a month later.³⁰ This was the context in which social media became the only platform where citizens could express themselves.

Framing Nigeria's digital media users' COVID-19 discourse

The framing theory looks at how people think about the news or develop a specific idea about issue(s) in the news.³¹ News frames distill complex debates into simpler constituent parts by either identifying the problems or proposing a course of action.³²

Frames emerge from a communication context made up of communicator(s), the text, receiver(s) and the prevailing cultural milieu.³³ Extant digital media framing scholarship emphasizes the news source, the context from which the frames are built and the framing of the online and/or offline discourse.^{34,35}

Nigerians spent 3.03 to 3.42 hours daily on social media between 2017 and 2020.³⁶ Nigerian digital communities have been on the forefront of advocacy, mobilization and political participation.^{37,38} News are broken and discussed on digital platforms before they are reported in mainstream media.³⁹ This digital discourse often amplifies disinformation.^{40,41}

A significant part of literature investigated the framing of digital media-inspired Nigerian movements like the #OccupyNigeria protest, the #BringBackOurGirls and the #EndSARS movements.^{42,43,44,45,46} Some reviewed studies focused on the COVID-19 pandemic framing by Nigeria's print media.^{47,48} Other reviewed studies showed that lack of confidence in government's COVID-19 response by religious leaders,⁴⁹ resulted in distrust of public pandemic safety measures.⁵⁰ In deeply religious Nigeria,^{51,52,53} faith leaders significantly shape public opinion.⁵⁴ In addition, distrust of Nigerian government distrust led to COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy and face mask noncompliance.^{55,56,57,58} This was due to the infodemic about the safety of the vaccine^{59,60} and government corruption.⁶¹ While government distrust undermined compliance of COVID-19 protocols,¹⁰ Nigerians trusted the NCDC's handling of the pandemic.⁶² Nonetheless, none of the reviewed literature investigated government distrust based on the COVID-19 discourse of Nigerian digital media users.

This study investigated how Nigerian social media discourse framed the COVID-19 pandemic, with a view of fostering a better understanding of digital media users and/or their milieu. In this study, we proceeded with the assumption that diverse and wide-ranging discourse of Nigerian social media users about the pandemic was a reflection of the prevailing trust or mistrust of government policies or actions during the crisis. Consequently, this study investigated the frames employed by Nigerian digital media users in their discourse of the COVID-19 pandemic through three research questions: 1) what were the three predominant frames of the COVID-19 narrative of Nigerian social media users? 2) How did the frames of the COVID-19 narrative of Nigerian social media users emerge within a biweekly timeline? 3) How was the three predominant frames contextually expressed in the COVID-19 narrative of Nigerian social media users?

METHODS

A mixed method of digital ethnography and quantitative content analysis was adopted. Digital ethnography employs the researcher's contextual knowledge^{63,64} about a topic in an online community.⁶⁵ This digital immersion through participant-observation generates rich contextual insights about phenomena and experiences. Quantitative content analysis studies media content, even in virtual communities^{66,67} by de-emphasizing the personal authority of the researcher.⁶⁸ Both digital ethnography and quantitative content analysis were simultaneously employed in this study, as they complement each other.⁶⁹

A total of 153 manually purposive samples (Twitter: 72; YouTube: 14; Facebook: 67) were analyzed (May 2-August 3, 2020). The unit of analysis were mostly texts from a search corpus on Twitter feed and CrowdTangle (Facebook posts and YouTube links posted on Facebook) using keywords like "COVID-19", "coronavirus" or "coro" + "Nigeria". CrowdTangle collates public content from Facebook Pages for researchers. Consistency and validity of the content categories was guaranteed by an intercoder reliability test of 0.8.^{70,71} The content categories emerged inductively from the corpus of the analysed items, while the coding took place on Airtable (a database application). Similarly, ethnographic notes made for the analysis of each media item includes: URL, screenshot of the item, name and social media handle, location, date, brief description and how the item was found, theme, item's contextual information, a description of any significant information omitted in the item, popularity (social media likes, shares or comments) and an evaluation of the creator's value (consistency or otherwise with other posts shared, analyzing the profile bio). These notes were employed in constructing the context behind each dominant frame. This descriptive narrative provided a holistic picture of the story behind each frame.⁷²

The first justification for the three month participant-observation was that the study was limited to the framing of the narratives of Nigerian social media users at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (from lockdown to reopening of the country). The second was that the emic perspective of COVID-19 storytelling by Nigerians can be best attained by an experienced ethnographer that is immersed in the study area.^{73,74} With the researchers over ten years' immersion in Nigeria's digital space, three months was sufficient time for conducting this study. Ethical considerations on privacy, anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by the employing media items already in the public domain; while the details of the social media users were anonymised .

RESULTS

Table 1: Frames from the COVID-19 narrative of Nigerian social media users

S/No.	Frames	N	%
1	Governments cannot be trusted to manage the response to COVID-19	47	20
2	Strong state capacity is essential to manage COVID-19 response	38	16
3	COVID-19 is here to stay, we need to adapt	31	13
4	Religious groups and believes undermine pandemic response	21	9
5	Be fearful about COVID-19	19	8
6	Citizens are too stupid or selfish to follow the social isolation measures	15	6
7	Government support measures for citizen recovery are insufficient	10	4
8	COVID-19 spread is being expedited by wealthy, privileged elites and their movement and travel	9	4
9	Hunger is the real "pandemic"	9	4
10	The return of expertise and rationalism and the value of science and public health are essential	5	2
11	A national government's competence has led to a strong response to COVID-19	4	2
12	States are taking advantage of the pandemic to gain advantage over their adversaries	4	2
13	Expertise, rationalism, and science are tools of the leftist elite to take or keep power	3	1
14	Governments are exaggerating the gravity of the pandemic in order to consolidate power	3	1
15	Poor countries and regions can't afford to lock down	3	1
16	There is no way to stop the virus, the apocalypse is coming	3	1
17	Civil society is more effective than the government	2	1
18	Governments are under-reporting the virus to accelerate the re-opening of economies	2	1
19	Individuals and organizations are cashing in on the panic and the fear created by the pandemic	2	1
20	Key COVID-19 prevention measures are options available only to the privileged	2	1
21	Migrants, refugees and displaced people are transmitters of disease	2	1
22	Natural and traditional medicine is more effective than Western medicine	2	1
	Total	236	100

Table 1 answers research question one by showing that the three dominant frames are “Governments cannot be trusted to manage the response to COVID-19” (20%), “Strong state capacity is essential to manage COVID-19 response” (16%), and “COVID-19 is here to stay, we need to adapt” (13%).

Table 2: Timeline of the biweekly evolution of the framing of COVID-19 by Nigerian social media users (May 4, to July 28, 2020)

S/No	Date	Frames
1.	May 4-19, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong state capacity is essential to manage COVID-19. • Governments cannot be trusted to manage the response to COVID-19. • Religious groups undermine pandemic response. • Government support measures for citizen recovery are insufficient.
2.	May 20 to June 2, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID-19 is here to stay, we need to adapt.
3.	June 3 to June 16, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The return of expertise and rationalism and the value of science and public health are essential.
4.	June 17 to June 30, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments cannot be trusted to manage the response to COVID-19. • Vaccines, testing and other prevention and diagnostic measures.
5.	July 1 to July 14, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The virus is a war to be won. • Be fearful about COVID-19.
6.	July 15-30, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hunger is the real pandemic. • Civil society is more effective than government.

Table 2 answers the second research question by revealing that four themes emerged on the first week while two themes were evident on the fourth, fifth and sixth weeks respectively. Week two and three had only one theme, respectively.

The narratives behind the frames

The explanation of the narratives behind the frames (Table 1 & 2) was represented using the social media items in Table 3.

Table 3: Social media items used in the narrative behind the framing of COVID-19 by Nigerian social media users

Ite m	S M *	Handle	Popularit y**	Date/Ti me	Link
1	F	University College Hospital, Ibadan	207 L, 101 C, 111 S	June 24, 2020/8. 25 AM	https://www.facebook.com/327556170050/posts/10163976408905051
2	T	FisayoSoyombo	566 RT, 543 L	Jul 28, 2020/1 2:06 PM	https://twitter.com/fisayosoyombo/status/1288068343380029441

3	F	Ripples Nigeria	5.3K L, 35 C, 108 S	July 24, 2020/	https://web.facebook.com/759901690763957/posts/3137046669716102?_rdc=1&_rdr
4	F	Fisayo Soyombo	210 L, 31 C, 44 S.	Apr 30, 2020/9: 51 PM	https://www.facebook.com/fisayo.soyombo/posts/10217050802284119
5	T	iNabmahmoud	3.8K R, 6.4K L	Apr 25, 2020/6: 37 PM	https://twitter.com/iNabmahmoud/status/1254102316124377089
6	F	Badero Olusola	13K V, 127 L, 342 C	Apr 21, 2020/4. 48 PM	https://www.facebook.com/101302497944975/videos/658749268297991/
7	T	DrOlufunmilayo	185 R, 662 L	June 14, 2020, 2020/5. 38 PM	https://twitter.com/DrOlufunmilayo/status/1272206844099002368
8	T	DrJoeAbah	5.5K RT, 13.8K L	Jun 14, 2020/1 1:27 AM	https://twitter.com/DrJoeAbah/status/1272113478229164032
9	T	obisingledigit	25R, 17 L	Jun 2, 2020/4 AM	https://twitter.com/obisingledigit/status/1267652397809258496
10	T	<u>Sephoru</u>	1R	Jun 1, 2020/6. 09 PM	https://twitter.com/sephoru/status/1267503432446992389
11	T	Kelvin Odanz	4.1K R, 6.8K L	Jun 6, 2020/6: 11 PM	https://twitter.com/MrOdan/status/1267504071608610816
12	F	News Break Nigeria	15K L, 202 C, 86 S	Jul 24, 2020/5: 40 PM	https://www.facebook.com/678532055574090/posts/3132868756807062

SM*: Social Media = F (Facebook), T (Twitter), Y (YouTube).

Popularity**: C (Comments), L (Likes), D (Dislikes), RT (Retweets), S (Shares), V (Views), S (Subscribers)

Making use of Table 3, this section will explain the contextual narratives of each of the three dominant frames. The contextual explanations come from the ethnographic observations and/or notes made from the analysed social media items.

Frame 1: Governments cannot be trusted to manage the response to COVID-19

Nigerian public officials stole COVID-19 funds as evident in three incidents (item 1, 2 and 3). The first was Oyo State Government's 118 million naira (\$304,000 USD) donation to the University College Hospital (UCH) Ibadan, COVID-19 fund. The UCH authorities publicly denied receiving any donation (item 1). Oyo State insisted that UCH's Department of Virology received the donation, which was later confirmed by the virology department. The second incident was the looting of COVID-19 funds donation by some Nigerian government agencies (Item 2). The third case, Item 3 showed the misappropriation of "COVID-19 palliatives" – relief packages with foodstuffs – by Enugu State government officials.

Frame 2: Strong state capacity is essential to manage COVID-19 response

The Kano death (items 4, 5, & 6) and Naira Marley concert (item 7 & 8) showed how weak state capacity derailed Nigeria's COVID-19 response.

A series of "mysterious" deaths in Kano (item 6) showed that over 150 people were buried from April 17 to 19, 2020. The Kano State government denied this news but social media users countered the denials. The causes of the deaths are systematically presented in item 4: 1) Three laboratory scientists in the Aminu Kano Teaching Hospital Kano got infected with the virus. 2) The Rapid Response Team which ferried infected patients to the hospital also contracted the virus. 3) Some members of the Kano State COVID-19 Task Force also got infected.

On June 12, 2020, Naira Marley, a Nigerian singer, flew from Lagos to Abuja for a concert, violating a ban on interstate travel and social distancing measures. Marley's show on June 13, 2020 (initially a drive-in event, morphed into an open-air concert) from 4 pm to 9 pm in Abuja's Jubi Mall attracted many people. This drew public ire from Nigerians with Twitter users (Item 6 & 7) demanding punishment for the organizers of the Abuja musical concert.

Frame 3: COVID-19 is here to stay, we need to adapt

Some Nigerians stated that the reopening of the country was unplanned (Item 9) and without detailed guidelines (Item 10), just to imitate other countries (Item 11). Items 9 and 10 had little popularity because the authors are not well-known. However, these items were documented to illustrate social media debate about the reopening of the country after the COVID-19 lockdown. Citizens inferred that Nigerian politicians, being tired of the movement restrictions, may be in a hurry to reopen. But the Big

Brother Nigeria show (item 12) and the decision to reopen schools,⁷⁵ signaled that– COVID-19 is here to stay.

DISCUSSION

The results were discussed in line with Firestone’s third model of generalisation entitled case-to-case translation or transferability.⁷⁶ This model resolves the apparent paradox of quantitative research (using purposive sampling) and qualitative research employs particular studies to emphasise general and/or theoretical abstraction.^{77,78} The first finding was the frame “governments cannot be trusted to manage the response to COVID-19”. Nigerians have never trusted their governments.^{14,15} The disobedience of movement restrictions and misappropriation of COVID-19 funds by government officials widened this mistrust.²⁸ Similarly, the second frame “strong state capacity is essential to manage COVID-19 response” showed that Nigerians were skeptical that the government will do the right thing.⁸ The mystery deaths in Kano (Table 3, Items 4, 5 & 6) and the Abuja musical concert during COVID-19 interstate travel restrictions (Table 3, Items 7, 8 & 9), was due to official incompetence. Social media narrative exposed both incidents.

Secondly, all the frames reflected of how Nigerians perceived the coronavirus news, distilled the complex debate surrounding it and/or proposed a course of action. The discourse emerged from the media context of digitally connected Nigerians.^{34,35} Hence, validating framing theory literature, that news makers – despite the media used – can indeed influence how people can think about a news topic.^{31,32}

Thirdly, this study debunked the stereotypical notion that narratives from digital platforms are not to be trusted.^{79,80,40} Nigerians social media users framed public opinion and called out officialdom’s failures. This suggests that social media can also be a force for good. The video of overwhelmed grave diggers in Kano provided real-time information while countering government denials. This suggests that social media users do not only amplify mis/disinformation, even though false information spreads faster than truth.⁸¹ This affirms that digital users are more likely to amplify factual information than peddle disinformation, during a health crisis like COVID-19.⁸²

Implications for Trust in Government

On October 20, 2004, the World Health Organisation declared Nigeria Ebola free. The NCDC success in curtailing the Ebola outbreak was praised by the WHO as a model for other countries to emulate.⁸³ Leveraging on these gains, NCDC began anticipatory preparation for the next epidemic by expanding material and human capacity. Hence, NCDC was not caught off guard by COVID-19.²⁴ NCDC curtailed transmission, ramped up surveillance, testing and nation-wide treatment capacity for COVID-19^{25,26} under the leadership of Dr Chikwe Ihekweazu.²⁷

Dr Ihekweazu's competence boasted citizen's trust in NCDC, a government agency.⁶² This is the norm in Nigeria. Professor Dora Akunyili, as boss of National Agency of Food, Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) was almost assassinated for not yielding to fake medicine manufacturers.⁸⁴ The head of the World Trade Organization Ngozi Okonjo-Iwella, as Nigeria's finance minister, implemented transparent financial policies, including a debt relief from the Paris Club. But Okonjo-Iwella experienced firsthand, that "when you fight corruption, corruption fights back".⁸⁵ President of the African Development Bank, Dr Akin Adesina, as Nigeria's minister of agriculture eliminated corruption in fertilizer distribution.⁸⁶ Adesina, Akunyili, Ihekweazu and Okonjo-Iwella are few examples of Nigerian public officials whose competence ramped up trust in the government agencies they headed.

Nigerians cynical distrust of officialdom fades away, once a government agency has competent leadership. This is at variance from the Western-centric conceptualization of government trust based on policy, willingness to bear ideological costs and institutional governance.^{6,87,5} An existing government policy does not guarantee compliance in Nigeria. For instance, the COVID-19 protocols were defied by government officials.³⁰ Hence, expecting the Nigerian government to carry out a policy as the basis of citizen's trust is dead on arrival.

Equally related to this is Dunn's⁴ moral appropriateness of expecting fidelity of politicians to keep the promises they made, as a basis of trust. Nigerian politicians are only faithful to their personal interests, which includes corruption or ethnic or religious nepotism.^{88,89,90} This is totally at odds with Tomankova's⁶ stance that citizens' trust in government relies on that readiness to endure material and ideological costs. The whole concept of common good, the duty of government to provide for citizens wellbeing, is sadly non-existent in Nigeria. Politicians are expected to voluntarily honour promises made, as a property of all rational beings.⁹¹ Abba Kyari, Garba Shehu and Seyi Makinde broke COVID-19 protocols, thereby diminishing public trust in

government. On the other hand, Ihekweazu freely remained true to his convictions, providing competent leadership for NCDC and shoring up public trust in that government agency.

Nonetheless, the findings from this study validate the position of Morris & Klesner⁹ that lack of accountability diminishes trust of citizens in their government. Hence, the frame 1 and 2, with their corresponding narratives (Tables 1 & 3) show how corruption destroys trust. Nigerians cannot possibly trust their government to do the right thing (Cohen, 2021) during a life threatening pandemic. Nigerians watched as their government corruptly misappropriated the relief materials meant for the poor (Table 3, Items 3 & 4). Trust entails uncertainty may have been confirmed in this study.³ Nigerians took a great risk of trusting their government to mitigate the COVID-19. However, the government responded with incompetence during a perilous pandemic. A government that could not effectively fend off terrorists, quell herders-farmers conflict or police brutality,¹⁶ cannot diffuse uncertainty during a deadly pandemic.

Hence, the Western-centric conceptualization of trust in government needs to be expanded to reflect the realities in developing countries. Nigerians take risks, yet their governments hardly reciprocate their trust. Rather, the individual competence of Nigerians heading a government agency provided oasis of trust of citizens in some government institutions before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations/Further Research

First limitation was that media items were not classified based on their origin because they were not geo-tagged. Some items may have been excluded from this study. Secondly, though beyond the scope of this research, the (dis)trust of government in other countries, within and outside Africa were not analysed. This limitation is an area for future investigations.

Conclusion

This study has advanced the understanding of trust in government. This addition to the growing corpus of literature on government trust has shown that the Western-centric conceptualization of trust needs some inclusive adaptation to the realities of developing countries. In Nigeria, trust in governments is essentially non-existent. However, citizens trust government agencies based on the professional capabilities of the official leading it. Also, this study has broadened existing literature on framing

theory in Nigeria's democratic landscape by focusing on digital citizens during a health pandemic. The consequence of which is that digital media could also be relied upon to produce factual and verifiable information, which frames public discourse during crisis periods.

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