

Representation of COVID-19 Pandemic by Select Nigerian Online Newspapers

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Abstract

Media representation of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) disease has implications for citizens' perception of and attitudes to, the pandemic. Existing media studies on the pandemic have not extensively investigated how Nigerian news media have represented the disease. Therefore, this study was designed to examine how the Nigerian online newspapers represented the pandemic. This was to explicate the implications of such representation for the audience's perception of the disease. The social representation theory was employed as the framework, while the sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design was used. COVID-19-related news stories from the websites of three leading Nigerian newspapers (*Punch*, *Vanguard* and *ThisDay*) were purposively selected and content analysed. The findings reveal that the select newspapers used representational strategies such as naming, emotional anchoring, metaphoric anchoring, emotional objectification and personification to report the coronavirus pandemic as a global health crisis. *The Punch*, more than the other two newspapers, mostly used naming (50%), emotional anchoring (55.0%), metaphoric anchoring (52.0%) and emotional objectification (52.0%) to represent COVID-19. Exposure to the foregoing pattern of media representation of the COVID-19 pandemic could influence how the media audiences perceive and react to the disease. It was, therefore, recommended that the Nigerian media should be more euphemistic as much as possible, in their reportage of unpleasant social realities such as the COVID-19 pandemic in a way that eases social tension, mitigates mental or emotional stress and equips the public with the right knowledge and feelings to navigate such phenomena.

Keywords: Anchoring and Objectifying, COVID-19 Pandemic, Media Representation of Social Realities, Nigerian Online Newspapers, Web 2.0 Technologies

Introduction

Towards the end of 2019, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic struck the world by surprise when the first case of the virus was confirmed in Wuhan which is the capital of Hubei Province in China (Gates, 2020; Guarner, 2020 & Berkeley, 2020). The aftermaths of this were fear and fright in the general populace world over about their susceptibility to the virus, deaths from the virus, a decline in economic strengths of nations occasioned by job losses and increased crime rates, rise in cases of domestic violence (WHO, 2020) and other related effects such as rape cases during the lockdown (Tade, 2020). The first case of COVID-19 to be officially recorded in Nigeria, according to Kalu (2020), was on February 27, 2020. According to the COVID-19 situation reports released by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), as at 29 November 2020, reported laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases were 67,412, total recoveries were 63,055 while total deaths were 1,173 (NCDC, 2020). Meanwhile, Wuhan, which was believed to be the source of the virus, got negative global attention as the virus was labelled 'Wuhan virus.' According to Yang *et al* (2020), the death toll resulting from the virus in Wuhan alone as of February 25, 2020, amounted to 47,441.

Outbreaks of diseases with a large mortality rate and easy susceptibility bring about anxiety and fear and people tend to rely heavily on information from the news media to navigate such circumstances. Holmes, Henrich, Hancock & Lestou (2009) posit that how the media present a health crisis could largely influence how the public perceives and react to such a health crisis. During the outbreak of COVID-19, the media, through their presentation and representation of the pandemic, influenced the perception and eventual attitudinal disposition of the public towards the virus. Korstanje & George (2016) expatiate that the role of the media is important during public health crises. Meanwhile, the digital space provided by Web 2.0 has further enhanced the role of the media in this aspect as citizens now have free access to media content available in the virtual community. Accordingly, Mboera & Rumisha (2004) say emergent infectious diseases and the technological advancement in communication have reshaped how outbreaks of diseases are reported and how such information is utilised by people. As matter of fact, prompt communication of relevant information about health crises is required for ensuring effective control of such health crises.

The current trend whereby mass media, especially online media, are always eager to report disease outbreaks without adequate investigation to provide accurate information about such outbreaks has always caused unnecessary public anxiety and confusion. Obi-Ani, Anikwenze & Isiani (2020) for example, say at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, there were misleading media reports about the virus which people continued to share ignorantly. Wen *et al.* (2020) have called for caution and professionalism in how mass media report public health crises. To this, Mboera *et al* (2004) say mass media must research and get accurate epidemiological information if they are to correctly inform the public.

However, given the novelty of the disease, existing Nigerian studies on the COVID-19 pandemic have not explored how online newspapers represent the

pandemic. Although Nwakpu, Ezema & Ogbodo (2020) examined Nigerian media framing of coronavirus pandemic and audience response, the study did not employ the socio-cognitive communicative mechanisms such as *anchoring* and *objectifying* that generate social representations (Höijer, 2011). Given that there has not been adequate empirical evidence to show how the Nigerian media used language to construct and represent COVID-19 in such a manner that could enhance citizens' knowledge and change their attitudes towards the virus, this study was, therefore, designed to report the examination of Nigerian media representations of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Question

The following research question was designed to guide the study:

1. What specific social representation strategies did the select Nigerian print media use to project the COVID-19 pandemic?

Media Representation of Infectious Diseases

Media representations of diseases help the public make sense of the confusion that trails the outbreak of diseases. Information overload and conflicting reports from different sources about the ravaging effect of diseases are usually rampant in the period when diseases break out. Therefore, the role of the media, in particular, in the aspect of media representation, becomes important.

Although the disease is entrenched in the social and historical system of society, people tend to see it from the lens provided through media representation. This consciousness that people are eager to know what is happening around them and always rely on news media for interpretation of social reality has always encouraged the journalists to report events, especially health-related issues, in manners that would compel the audience to believe the media. This is in line with the position of Blakely (2003) who asserts that journalists are eager to report health crises because of the inherent public interest in such health crises as presented by the media. Furthermore, Holmes *et al* (2009) say that mass media play crucial roles in the construction of, and communication about, health risks as a social reality. Besides, the authors argue that media representation of social reality is a crucial factor in determining the public reaction to a perceived health crisis.

Korstanje *et al* (2016) add that new media play significant roles in how disease outbreaks are socially constructed. This, according to the authors is because the picture that the news media narrative of the disease provides becomes the decision logic for prevention and recovery efforts. The foregoing assertions agree with the position maintained by Korstanje *et al* (2016) that media sources are often blamed for risk amplification or risk miscalculations because media coverage of hazards plays an important role in setting and reinforcing public perceptions of such hazards. The media, however, cannot be entirely blamed for this, as Holmes *et al* (2009) note that modern medicine, despite increases in scientific knowledge and improved health outcomes, is filled with uncertainties, which the news media only amplify. Other scholars who have examined media representation of different infectious diseases include Moeller (1999), Blakely (2003), Washer (2005) and Leblebicioglu (2012).

Theoretical Framework

The social representation theory is employed as the theoretical framework for this study. The theory is considered relevant because it provides a strong base for understanding the dynamics of media representation of social realities. In essence, the theory provides the analytical frames used to examine the media contents in terms of how the COVID-19 pandemic is represented by Nigerian online print newspapers.

According to Höijer (2011), the social representation theory emerged from the work of Serge Moscovici. The theory provides a new template for explaining how the media and citizens construct social realities in different contexts (Höijer, 2011, p.3). Explicating the intricacies of social representation theory, Heffernan, Misturelli & Thomson (2011) note that when a society is faced with a new social reality, the media often reproduce and construct such a social phenomenon through specific rhetoric and linguistic frames (set of familiar constructs) which help the people understand, interpret and explicate the social reality. Höijer (2011) explains the relevance of the social representation theory to media and communication research when the author states that the theory prescribes several communication strategies that explain how ideas are constructed and processed into what we perceive as common sense. Significantly, the theory, according to Höijer (2011), is founded on two basic socio-cognitive communicative mechanisms that generate social representations. These are anchoring and objectifying. The first mechanism (anchoring) makes the unknown known by reconstructing the unknown entity using familiar frames of social representations that are easy to compare and comprehend. The second mechanism (objectifying) simplifies the unknown by transforming it into something concrete that we may perceive and control. As highlighted by Höijer (2011), the following are the sub-constructs of anchoring: naming, emotional anchoring, thematic anchoring, metaphoric anchoring and anchoring in antinomies. On the other hand, objectification has emotional objectification and personification as its sub-constructs (see the methodology section for an explanation of the constructs). It is worthy to note that the conceptual elegance of the concepts of anchoring and objectification in the theory are effective tools for analysing hidden levels of the social construction of meanings (Hoijer, 2011). In summary, the Social Representation Theory provides rich analytical tools for a better understanding of media representation and the presentation of social realities and this would be useful in assessing media representation of the COVID-19 pandemic from the Nigerian perspective.

Methodology

The sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design was employed to execute the study. According to Creswell & Stick (2006), sequential explanatory design implies the collection and analysis of quantitative data first and then qualitative data in two consecutive phases within one study. In this study, we first adopted quantitative content analysis to quantify the representation strategies employed by the select online newspapers to report COVID-19. Then, we used qualitative content (textual) analysis to further explain the representation. In essence, the pattern established through the

quantitative findings guided us to perform the qualitative analysis. The qualitative data were bigger than the quantitative data. As the data source for the study, three newspapers (*Punch*, *Vanguard* and *ThisDay*) were selected through the purposive sampling technique. According to Alexa Internet (2021), a worldwide rating site, the select newspapers are among the top ten national dailies in Nigeria. Nigerian newspapers in this category are considered the most influential because of their national reach and coverage. Out of 552 editions published by the select online newspapers at the peak period (between March and August 2020) of the pandemic in Nigeria, we purposively selected 10 COVID-19-related stories from each of the select newspapers making a total of 30 news stories that were content analysed. We specifically focused on only news stories that either anchored or objectified the COVID-19 pandemic.

The sub-constructs of the social representation theory (i.e. naming, emotional anchoring, thematic anchoring, metaphoric anchoring, anchoring in antinomies, emotional objectification and personification) were used as the content analytical categories for analysing the selected COVID-19-related news stories. The select sub-constructs were considered relevant to achieving the aim of this study because the constructs are socio-cognitive communicative mechanisms that are capable of unravelling the dynamics of the social representation of social phenomenon (Höijer, 2011) by the media. To realise the content categories, we used individual sentences in the paragraphs of the selected news stories as the unit of analysis. The content categories, as adapted from Höijer's (2011) explication of the social representation theory, are operationally explained as follows:

Naming: This is a tag of identity given to a foreign phenomenon so that the local audience can understand it within their local context.

Emotional Anchoring: This underlines media representations that invoke certain emotional responses from the audience/participants in their local/social setting. It informs the emotions of the media audience towards social reality.

Thematic Anchoring: This simply foregrounds the use of certain themes to represent the meaning of a social phenomenon and enhance a proximate interpretation of such reality within the audience's social milieu.

Metaphoric Anchoring: This is the use of cognate metaphors/metaphorical expressions to anchor a foreign phenomenon to make the audience understand or relate to it as a known phenomenon.

Anchoring in Antinomies: This is simply the media representation of an unfamiliar phenomenon through the juxtaposition of related ideas that are proximate to the audience's frame of reference or experiences.

Emotional Objectification: This is the process by which the media concretise an unknown social reality in a way that is capable of drawing certain emotional reactions from the audience.

Personification: This is a reality when the media gives an unknown phenomenon or idea of human qualities relative to the experience of the local people to make it more real to them.

Data Analysis

The 30 news stories selected were subsequently analysed based on the sub-constructs of the major constructs of social representation theory (anchoring and objectification). The analysis was done to establish how the select newspapers represented the COVID-19 pandemic. We used the extracts from the news stories selected to discuss and foreground the manifest categories of the social representation of the pandemic.

Findings

The findings showed that Nigerian print media deployed some key constructs of the social representation theory (naming, emotional anchoring, thematic anchoring, metaphoric anchoring, emotional objectification and personification) in their representation and presentation of the novel COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Total Number of Representation Strategies Found in the Analysed News Stories

Content Categories (Sub-Constructs of Social Representation Theory)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Naming	14	20.6%
Emotional anchoring	11	16.2%
Thematic anchoring	Nil	Nil
Metaphoric anchoring	21	30.9%
Anchoring in antinomies	Nil	Nil
Emotional objectification	12	17.6%
Personification	10	14.7%
Total	68	100%

As presented in table 1, metaphoric anchoring (30.9%) is the most employed representation strategy by the select newspapers. This is followed by naming (20.6%) and emotional objectification (17.6%), while the least employed strategy is personification (14.7%). Instances of anchoring in antinomies and thematic anchoring were not found in the analysed stories.

Table 2: Quantitative Presentation of the Representation Strategies Employed by the Select Online Newspapers

Content categories (sub-constructs of social representation theory)	Newspapers						Total
	<i>Punch</i>		<i>This Day</i>		<i>Vanguard</i>		
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Naming	7	50%	1	7%	6	43%	14(100%)
Emotional Anchoring	6	55%	2	18%	3	27%	11(100%)
Metaphoric Anchoring	11	52%	5	24%	5	24%	21(100%)
Emotional Objectification	10	83%	1	8.3%	1	8.3%	12(100%)
Personification	4	40%	2	20%	4	40%	10(100%)
Total	38	55.9%	11	16.2%	19	27.9%	68(100%)

As shown in table 2, more than the other two select newspapers, *Punch* mostly used naming (50%), emotional anchoring (55%), metaphoric anchoring (52%) and emotional objectification (52%) in representing COVID-19. However, both *Punch* and *Vanguard* employed personification equally with 40% apiece.

Representation Strategies Employed by the Select Newspapers

Nigerian news media labelled COVID-19 to make it familiar to the mass audience; anchored and objectified it through the use of requisite metaphors and personification that tended to invoke certain emotions from the audience. The emotions could inform the audience's perception of COVID-19 and influence their eventual attitudinal disposition towards the pandemic. The constructs deployed by the select Nigerian online newspapers to represent COVID-19 are further expounded with excerpts from the content-analysed COVID-19-related news stories extracted from the selected Nigerian online newspapers. The representation strategies are exemplified as follows:

Naming: The Nigerian media demystified the novelty and foreignness of COVID-19 by giving it a tag of identity which tends to get the local audience acquainted with the nature and epidemiological attributes of the virus. Samples 1-5 below underline some of the most common tags of identity the media used in labelling the disease:

Sample 1: A new normal; a pandemic having attained global expression; leveller of playing fields (May 22, *Punch*).

Sample 2: Rampaging pandemic, this monster-pandemic, an unknown virus, a virulent virus that stings quietly (March 20, *Punch*).

Sample 3: The ravaging COVID-19 pandemic (Mar. 24, *ThisDay*).

Sample 4: ...a highly contagious viral infection... (June 20, *Vanguard*).

Sample 5: The global health emergency... (July 27, *Vanguard*).

From the samples presented above, COVID-19 is labelled with meaning-laden tags. By using the foregoing tags in the context of news, the disease is first reduced to a viral infection that is proximate to people's frame of experience. Though it can be contracted unknowingly, the virus is deadly. It is framed as a monster-pandemic because of its trans-border devastating effects on human life. Also, the news media shrewdly presented the disease as one that compulsorily enacted the principle of equality (leveller of playing fields) of life among people of different statuses in society. This suggests that no one, regardless of their economic status, social placement or even political affiliation, is immune to the virus. Significantly, the virus is widely tagged as a new normal which underlines its permeating effects and attendant new order in doing things. As shown by Sample 5 above, COVID-19 is portrayed as a health challenge with a global standing and impact. These tags are capable of influencing the media audience to perceive COVID-19 as an infectious disease that spreads very fast and a killer disease that does not only affect many people but also engenders a new social order.

Emotional Anchoring: The media tends to anchor the audience's emotions via its representation of prevalent social realities. Emotional anchoring is present in samples 6-10 provided below:

Sample 6: This time of crisis is generating a lot of stress (March 31, *Punch*).

Sample 7: In these trying times of the novel Coronavirus pandemic... (April 15, *ThisDay*).

Sample 8: Covid-19 is capable of bringing tension into marital, familial and fraternal relationships if not well managed (March 31, *Punch*).

Sample 9: COVID-19 is still with us and will be for a long time (*Aug. 10, Vanguard*)

Sample 10: COVID-19 has affected the population in all ramifications, especially with the increase in maternal mortality (July 27, *Vanguard*).

As evident in excerpts 6-10, there is the preponderant portrayal of COVID-19 as an orchestrator of a health crisis that is capable of generating stress (e.g. this time of crisis is generating a lot of stress—Sample 6) and tension (e.g. COVID-19 is capable of bringing tension into...relationships—Sample 8) in families, societies, nations and the entire globe. Such portrayal of the pandemic by the media can only inform mental stress and even systemic breakdown in people because when the mental configuration of a man is stressed and made to accept hopelessness, the body is equally negatively affected.

Metaphoric Anchoring: Metaphoric anchoring is the most common of all the key strategies that the media employ to represent infectious diseases over time (Moeller,

1999; Blakely, 2003; Hanne *et al* 2007; Elizabeth *et al* 2012; Leblebicioglu, 2012). In our current study, examples of metaphorical anchoring are present in samples 11 - 18:

Sample 11: Their battles with the virus (June 19, *Punch*).

Sample 12: Coronavirus is spreading slowly but steadily (June 19, *Punch*).

Sample 13: COVID-19 engenders a thriving rat race to survive; the spread of the pandemic showed no discrimination between the rich and the poor (May 22, *Punch*).

Sample 14: This war against a fierce and ferocious enemy called coronavirus (March 20, *Punch*).

Sample 15: The COVID-19 saga is rearing its ugly head (April 15, *ThisDay*).

Sample 16: ... as COVID-19 war rages (May 10, *Vanguard*).

Sample 17: The battle with the pandemic; after defeating COVID-19 (Aug. 7, *Vanguard*).

Sample 18: The pandemic war (Aug. 15; *Vanguard*).

The use of battle (Samples 11 and 17), war (Samples 14, 16 and 18), fierce and ferocious enemy (Sample 14) to represent the efforts at containing the virus could evoke the feelings that coronavirus is an entity that must be strategically fought and defeated by Nigerians. Also, describing COVID-19 as a saga rearing its ugly head (Sample 15) projects the pandemic as an extremely difficult phenomenon that could persist for a long time.

Emotional Objectification: Like metaphoric anchoring, emotional objectification is used to concretise an abstract concept in the mind of the audience, but beyond this, emotional objectification is deployed by the media to draw certain emotions from the audience. The findings from this study show that the media objectified COVID-19 as a disease capable of holding people to ransom in different ways and this is present in samples 19-24:

Sample 19: The entire global business space, religious convocation and social touch-points have been shut down (May 11, *Punch*).

Sample 20: The world is presently under a siege (Mar. 20, *Punch*).

Sample 21: The ravaging COVID-19 pandemic, which has claimed thousands of lives worldwide, crippled businesses and caused massive disruption to daily living... (March 24, *ThisDay*).

Sample 22: No compassion at such a devastating time where families are in mourning and scared (March 25, *Punch*).

Sample 23: COVID -19 claims 3rd council boss in Lagos (August 12, *Vanguard*).

Sample 24: Nearly 5,000 people across the world have succumbed to the cold hands of death, so far (Mar. 20, *Punch*).

In samples 19-24 above, linguistic structures are used by the select newspapers to describe COVID-19 as having an emotional effect on the audience. For instance, the

world under a siege (sample 20); claimed thousands of lives, crippled businesses and caused massive disruption to daily living (sample 21); a devastating time where families are in mourning and scared (sample 22) and nearly 5,000 people across the world have succumbed to the cold hands of death (sample 24) concretise the virus in ways suggesting that it has devastating effects on human society. Such objectification elements are capable of appealing to readers' emotions.

Personification: This study has established that the media employed personification to underscore the grave implications of COVID-19 on humanity and other human activities. Examples of personification are evident in samples 25-32 where the media employed some terms that give common attributes of human beings to COVID-19.

Sample 25: The pandemic has threatened everything we hold dear... (May 22, *Punch*).

Sample 26: The coronavirus has brutally stripped bare the vulnerability of a country that has been sliding for years (August 10, *Punch*).

Sample 27: As COVID-19 crossed borders with community spread... (April 15, *ThisDay*).

Sample 28: The menace of coronavirus has spurred a ton of fear gripping everywhere (March 20, *Punch*).

Sample 29: ...after the virus crept into Africa (April 15, *Vanguard*).

Sample 30: COVID-19 has stampeded progress in the area of entrepreneurship (July 27, *Vanguard*).

Sample 31: COVID-19 cases crossing state boundaries (April 17, *Punch*).

Sample 32: ...as the country battles COVID-19 (April 14, *ThisDay*).

Lexical choices in samples 25-32 above contain cases of personifying elements in media discourse deployed to represent the COVID-19 pandemic as an entity that could act as a human being. For instance, human attributes such as threatened (sample 25), brutally stripped bare (sample 25), cross borders with community spread (sample 27), and crossing state boundaries (sample 31) present the pandemic as a human being. Analytically, the pandemic is portrayed as a human entity in possession of the capacity to “threaten,” “strip,” “stampede,” and “cross borders.”

Discussion of Findings

Feelings of fear, anxiety and hopelessness are likely to be invoked in the media audience if they are exposed to news stories that represent COVID-19 as a disease capable of bringing stress and tension. For instance, the emotional anchoring in Sample 9 (COVID-19 is still with us and will be for a long time) suggests that the virus has no cure yet, and this reality is likely to evoke the feeling of despair in the audience. Of course, the mode adopted by the media to report health-related information largely shapes risk perception of public health issues as noted by Hilton & Hunt (2011). Generally, news media are prone to inaccuracy, exaggeration and/or sensationalism (Humphries, 2015) which can mostly likely precipitate unnecessary tension in the mass

audience as with the case of media representation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Emotional anchoring as deployed by the Nigerian print media in representing coronavirus also finds bearing in the social representation theory as explicated by Heffernan *et al* (2011) that audience attitude cum emotional attachment towards a social reality are largely informed by the linguistic devices used in portraying such a phenomenon. Significantly, the findings of this study align with Kim's (2022) assertion that the practice of journalism during global health crises usually revolves around tensions and contradictions.

Besides, instances of metaphoric anchoring employed to represent the pandemic (see samples 11 - 18) are likely to encourage the media audience to develop precautionary and combative attitudes. This finding gives credence to the social representation theory which expounds that the deployment of metaphorical expressions or set of familiar constructs in the presentation of a novel social reality, such as COVID-19, is always aimed at making the mass audience to be better equipped against the disease (Heffernan, 2011; Eicher *et al* 2015). Also, metaphors are markers of social constructions of disease outbreaks because the hope or hopelessness that the narrative of the disease provides becomes the decision logic upon which efforts for prevention and recovery are centred (Korstanje *et al* 2016).

The use of emotional anchoring as a representation strategy as shown in samples 19-24 above is capable of invoking feelings of fear, self-pity and a sustained defeatist mentality from the mass audience towards the pandemic. Scholars (e.g. Blakely, 2003; Holmes *et al* 2009; Eicher *et al* 2015; Korstanje *et al* 2016; Roy, Moreau, Rousseau, Mercier, Wilson & Atlani-Duaul, 2020) have established the nexus between media portrayal of certain social phenomena and the informed emotions of the public through such representations. The findings of this study have also validated this position and provided a clear description and understanding of the core tenets of the social representation theory. However, as noted by Humphries (2015), media representations of social realities are not just neutral as they usually have social, political and economic undertones that tend to construct versions of real events, which have been informing an attitude of scepticism towards media messages from media audience.

Through personification, COVID-19 is framed as a furious monster that is let loose to strip bare inadequacies of man—underlining the mortality of man and laxities in the government of many nations and Nigeria in particular. The pandemic is also shown as having legs to traverse many borders (samples 27 and 31) and instill fears with its devastating effects. This invokes the picture of a foreign monster with a bad mission. Tactically, the use of cross borders further strengthens the conspiracy theories that COVID-19 is a novel virus exported from China (Berkeley, 2020; Guarner, 2020). This finding shows that the effect of COVID-19 is magnified in a way that is capable of inducing ambivalent feelings from the media audience. Importantly, what becomes public knowledge of a health crisis comes from the mass media (Holmes *et al.*, 2009) and if media owners and journalists are not circumspect in their reportage of such

health crises, they may be guilty of an accusation called ‘scaremongering’ (Fogarty *et al* 2011). Our study shows that the select Nigerian online newspapers, in their representation of the novel COVID-19 deployed largely some key constructs of social representation theory as highlighted and explicated by Höijer (2011). The preponderantly used constructs are metaphoric anchoring, naming, emotional objectification, emotional anchoring and personification. These markers of representation of social realities are used, whether knowingly or unknowingly, by the Nigerian journalists to make the audience aware of the reality of the pandemic in their local setting and to mentally stay alert to eschew the beckoning advances of the grim reaper via the contraction of the deadly coronavirus disease. But beyond this, the representation strategies could evoke some panic feelings in the media audience.

The Nigerian news media, through their constant use of certain images, tags and metaphors as representation strategies, could help the public have a good grasp of the nature and mode of operation of the coronavirus disease. Exposure to these media contents could greatly enhance the perception and attitudinal disposition of the media audience towards the disease and influence how news consumers select and share COVID-19-related stories with their social media followers (Ojebuyi, Mobolaji & Kolawole, 2022). Indeed, as argued by Nwakpu *et al* (2020), the Nigerian media are not spared from the malady of misinformation and fear-invoking frames in their representation of COVID-19.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study was designed to examine how Nigerian online newspapers represented COVID-19 as a global health crisis. The constructs of Serge Moscovici’s (1961) social representation theory, as expanded by Höijer (2011), were employed as the analytical framework. Findings showed that the select Nigerian online newspapers employed different representation strategies to project the pandemic in various ways. Such representations are fear-invoking and could generate in the media audience some panic feelings towards the disease. It is, therefore, recommended that the Nigerian media should be more euphemistic (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2018), as much as possible, in their reportage of unpleasant social realities such as the COVID-19 pandemic in a way that eases social tension, mitigates mental or emotional stress and equips the public with the right knowledge and feelings to navigate such phenomena.

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