

A narrative inquiry on the role of the internet and social media in mediating anxiety among undergraduates during peak of the Coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria

Eze Ogbonnia Eze

Department of Psychology and Sociological Studies
Ebonyi State University Abakaliki
Email: ezeogbonnia@gmail.com

Oselebe Chisom Cherish

Department of Psychology and Sociological Studies
Ebonyi State University Abakaliki
Email: cherishoselebe@gmail.com

Abstract

The social media and other internet related sources of unverified and unregulated information contributed adversely to heightened anxiety experienced by many Nigerians during the peak of the Coronavirus pandemic in the country. This research is a qualitative narrative inquiry into the impact of the internet and social media on anxiety among Ebonyi State University students during the peak of the Coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria. 50 undergraduates of Ebonyi State University were selected through snowball sampling. Using narrative interviewing the study collected qualitative evidence regarding how the participants were affected by the information they received from the internet and social media about the Coronavirus disease. Narrative analysis suggests that the internet and social media peddled unregulated information and gory images which instilled and mediated fear, panic and anxiety in the lives of the participants. Such evidence resonate the growing concern about the undue influence of the social media and internet in mediating negative tendencies around the world when they are wrongly used. The study concludes that the mental health and psychological wellbeing of the participants were threatened by the kind of information they consumed from the internet and social media platforms such as Facebook, Whatsapp, twitter, Instagram and others. These social media platforms disseminated unfounded scary and gory images, videos and texts messages during the peak of the pandemic in Nigeria which negatively affected and distorted wellbeing and mental health of many individuals. We recommend that perilous periods as those of pandemics require calm, constructive and regulated information dissemination pathways.

Keywords: Coronavirus. Internet, social media, anxiety, narrative

Introduction

The novel Coronavirus disease that started in Wuhan, China in December 2019 infected millions of persons with many deaths globally (Lee, 2020). On January 30th, 2020 the world health organization declared the Covid-19 virus outbreak as a global emergency (WHO, 2020). As the virus continued to spread exponentially beyond China, the World Health Organization further declared the virus a pandemic on the 11th of March, 2020 as about 114 countries were already affected (WHO, 2020).

The pandemic incapacitated the global economy and ravaged the world over with multiple economic, social, psychological and physical damages which will take time to repair and heal. As Karabad (2020) pointed out, every aspects of human life was affected and threatened with instability, uncertainty and danger. Thus, all areas of human existence received the ripple effects of the corona virus disease. The restrictions and suspensions of free mobility through lock down orders and ban on travels, social distancing and the stay at home instructions simply changed human interactions and the way people live around the world. Meanwhile the justification for the restrictions was because human interaction was seen as a rapid transmission route of the virus (Zimmermann, Karabulut, Belgin and Docker, 2020). Consequently, this novel virus killed many people around the world and triggered the invention of new but sometimes uncomfortable ways of living now called the ‘new normal’.

In Nigeria, the first case of the corona virus diseases was reported on the 28th day of February, 2020 (NCDC, 2020), thereafter the virus spread across the various states of the country. Ebonyi state recorded the first index case of the virus on the 26th day of April, 2020 (Eze, 2020). The number of infected persons continued to increase since the first case leading to loss of lives and hampering of academic activities among others in the state. Due to the Coronavirus outbreak, the National Universities Commission on the 23rd of March 2020, ordered universities across the country to shutdown just as other institutions were closed.

Social Media/Internet use and Anxiety

The social media undoubtedly is a popular and useful platform for sharing information on developing and trending issues across the world. It is worthy to note that while the internet and social media can be central and beneficial to the lives of many, the need to illuminate the negative implication is also sacrosanct. As research has shown (Vannucci, Flannery and Ohannesian, 2017), spending more time daily on social media has a significant relationship with greater symptoms of anxiety disorders especially dispositional anxiety. The reason is because there are litanies of unverified facts and hearsay that are being dumped on the social media for public consumptions. As people spend their time consuming these junks, majority of this information are anxiety provoking and as Ariel et al (2018) has observed constant exposure and use of the social media may have differential association with mental health outcomes.

Coronavirus, social media and anxiety

The need to strengthen proper channels of communication with several sources of information dissemination pathways during crisis periods as those of the pandemics is worthwhile. The idea is to ensure maximum communication of safety measures that will help to reduce the intensity of the situation. Brailoskaia et al (2021) in their study with Spanish sample found that government officials made use of the social media and other platforms such as newspapers (print and online), official government sites through the internet and television to keep their citizens updated about the Coronavirus situation. Such sources of information were targeted at increasing awareness of the covid-19 pandemic. While it was almost the case in majority of the countries of the world, the social media was seen as one information source that gave the users opportunities of modifying content of information and freely sharing with other users (Brailovskaia et al, 2021). This unguarded information sharing and social interaction made the social media a tensed social space with regards to Covid-19 anxiety.

Although Srivastava et al, (2020) noted that mental health is among the most neglected areas of health but medical or physical complications from the Coronavirus pandemic accounted for deaths of many lives across the world. Thus, it is pertinent to point out that death tolls from psychological sources also abound. For instance, Lee, Jobe, Mathis and Gibbons (2020) in a study found that the covid-19 fear or anxiety which is newly termed “coronaphobia” by Asmundson and Taylor (2020) has continued to play a role in the overall psychological wellbeing of individuals across the world. Lee et al, (2020) informed that anxiety medications were constantly administered in the United States as measure to manage the Coronavirus pandemic. This has led to the development of Coronavirus Anxiety Scale (CAS) as created by Sherman A. Lee, PhD (2002). Items in the scale help identify a physiological-based fear or anxiety reactions to Coronavirus related thoughts or information (Lee et al, 2020). The information and thoughts that generates the anxiety are sometimes prompted from unverified, unfiltered misinformation shared on the internet and social media.

It is on record that at a time of mass tragedy especially those of infectious disease, there is always a trigger of anxiety and heightened fear which are responsible for disturbing the psychological wellbeing of many people (Balaratnasingam and Janca, 2006). In the case of the Coronavirus as research has shown (Arslan, Yildirin and Zangeneh, 2021), anxiety related to the Coronavirus was seen as among the commonly experienced distress people are confronted with during pandemic. The anxiety experienced by people during the peak of the Coronavirus

pandemic has an overarching implication for affecting their normal functioning although the sources (social media and internet) of the anxiety has not been duly examined. Some disruptions in psychological functioning as caused by Coronavirus anxiety can become worse to the point where people experience suicide ideation, functional impairment and coping hopelessness as Lee et al (2020) research has shown.

The peak of the Coronavirus pandemic was characterized by fake news and over exaggerated information sharing on social media platforms and other internet sources such as blogs which on their own were full of tensed information about deaths and dying related episodes. All of these gave rise to heightened emotions among the consumers of those social media and internet fake news. As Garfin, Holman and Silver (2015) has already noted, consuming such unfiltered information contributes to emotional contagion that is anxiety provoking. The consequences of these emotional disturbances ensued by exposure to social media false information has tendencies of not just affecting the individual but the entire society.

Given the foregoing, this research aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how information shared on the social media and internet about Coronavirus disease affected the lives of Ebonyi State University undergraduates. This to enable us understand whether there are elements of anxiety in the experiences of the narrators based on circulating information on social media and internet about the Coronavirus disease.

Method

The study adopted the qualitative research approach based on an interpretive paradigm to gain an in-depth knowledge about the ways that the covid-19 broadcasts from social media and internet sources mediated anxiety among students. This information was gathered from a qualitative approach perspective since majority of other such studies would have approached them quantitatively. The use of qualitative narrative approach is to come close to the participants so as to capture the human side of their experiences which quantitative methods suppress. The narrative interviews in this study are based on the participants' points of view and how they made sense of their lived experiences of anxiety from information they received through the social media and internet sources about the Coronavirus disease.

Participants

The study is a qualitative narrative inquiry into the experiences of anxiety orchestrated by exposure to broadcasts on social media and internet about covid-19 disease. 50 undergraduate students (35 females and 15 males) of Psychology department in Ebonyi State University participated in the study. They were sampled using snowball technique and they were within the age range of 19-25 years. They were all included on the basis that they owned a smart phone and were using the internet and social media within the peak period of the covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Issues of who experienced anxiety are more private to individual and this was the rationale why the snowball sampling approach was adopted. The snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method that enables researchers to get to hard-to-reach or hidden population as snowball sampling had become a standard technique in qualitative research (Heckathorn, 2011). We had a class discussion with students and we realized that some of them mentioned haven't experienced anxiety related episodes from the information they got from social media about the ravaging Coronavirus disease. Students who also knew others that have experienced anxiety related illness orchestrated by the information shared on social media and internet about covid-19 disease were recruited. They were of course our initial subjects who provided referrals since snowball sampling begins with a convenience sample of initial subject (Heckathorn, 2011).

Instrument

As Polkinghorne (1988) opined, it is difficult to find human beings without narratives because they do not exist. The study being a qualitative narrative inquiry used semi-structured questions that opened the narrative storytelling discussions from the participants. Since data for the study is solely from the participants' point of view, narrative guides were developed to capture the lived experiences of anxiety during the Coronavirus pandemic peak period in Nigeria.

Procedure

The researchers explained the purpose of study to each of the participants and obtained an oral consent before the narrative sessions began. Participants in this study were interviewed separately as individuals. There was an introductory session which was meant to relax the participants and create an atmosphere of trust and friendship-like scenario such that they can narrate their stories without any fear or further anxiety. The preparatory session served as a refresher as they were further reassured that their identities will be kept confidential. With the permission of the participants, the narrative interview sessions began with each narrative session lasting between 20-45 minutes. Their narratives were recorded with an audio tape

recorder. Narrative interviewing does not rely on question and answer. Thus, the researchers started tapping into their experiences with an open ended statement such as “tell me your experience of the Coronavirus pandemic with regards to the information you got about it from the social media and other internet sources”. The participants were given the opportunity to start and end their stories without any form of interruption. This is because, as Bates (2004, p. 16) has said, during the narrative process, interviewees or narrators are encouraged to “describe an event(s) as they saw it, in their own language, using their own terms of reference, and emphasizing actions or participants which they regard as being significant”. Participants were encouraged to use English language or the popular ‘Pidgin’ English that is commonly used during conversations in Nigeria so as to ensure that they are able to tell their stories from their own lenses and terms without barriers. Each participant was interviewed in a quiet office and their recorded narratives were transcribed immediately to avoid data loss and to familiarize with the stories.

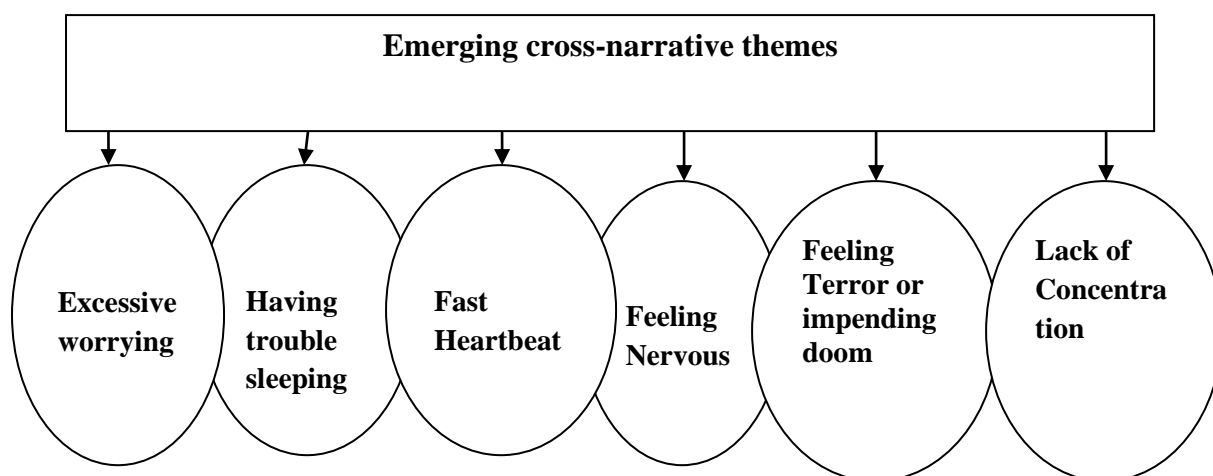
Authenticity and Trustworthiness in the study

In qualitative research, focus is more on authenticity and trustworthiness as opposed to reliability and validity which is of major concern in quantitative studies. In this study, our participants were encouraged to tell true stories about their experience of Coronavirus anxiety from information they received on social media and other internet sources. This is because as Holloway and Jefferson (2000) said, in qualitative narrative research, it is democratic to believe what participants tell us because these stories are experienced by them, and not the researchers. In this research, the trustworthiness and authenticity of the information is established in a way which will beneficially inform practice, rather than focusing on the validity, reliability and objectivity of the information. Another way we attempted to achieve trustworthiness, was through member checking as we had to read the stories narrated by the narrators to them while they confirmed that it represented their experiences. This is as William and Morrow (2009) also note, that in qualitative research, the researcher can ask the participants to give feedback at multiple points along the research process. This process is what Guba and Lincoln (1994) have referred to as ‘member checking’. The researchers sent out the transcribed transcripts to each of the participants for validation. This was to enable them authenticate what is reported as what they storied and that findings of the study represents their true experiences.

Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis in this study targeted converting field texts to research texts to give constructive meaning while retaining the voices of the participants who have lived these experiences. Riessman (1993, p. 70) notes that narrative analysis “allows for a systematic study of personal experience and meaning: how events have been constructed by active subjects”. In this study, individually transcribed narratives are analyzed textually as a discourse while cross-thematic narrative themes are presented as results from the overall narrative analysis that are interpreted. This method as Smith and Sparkes (2009) noted attempts to attend to the messiness of human actions and responses that clean methods suppress. It is important to note that narrative researchers can undertake the analysis of their data in different ways (Mishler, 1986). Such different ways are not like conventional methods of quantitative studies with standardized procedures. However, we employed the textual thematic narrative analysis since Mishler (1986) have noted that standardized procedures do not attend to the diversities in what the participants say, how they say it and what it means to them. To avoid imposition of personal meaning to the stories we have made effort to use the narrators actual words in the analysis by retelling their stories is a discourse and conversational patterns to make meaning to the reading audience.

After the analysis of the individual narratives, themes emerging from them were used for cross-thematic narrative analysis. Their individual stories are compared and weaving themes were extracted which serves as our findings. The following themes emerged during the individual narrative analysis and are presented as evidence which is further subjected to cross-narrative thematic analysis.



Excessive worrying

The participants in this study made sense of their experiences of information they received from the social media and other internet sources about the Coronavirus disease as one that made them worry excessively. They storied having difficulty in controlling worry as their thoughts were occupied with the negative thought of death or contacting the virus.

The feeling of worrying excessively weaved through the entire stories of all the narrators. See some corresponding vignettes below.

“.....every time I open my phone, all I will see is messages and pictures that makes me to think too much about life and fear of contacting that disease” [Participant 4]. “...I have never been so worried in my life like that corona period because every message you will get is warning about people dying here and there” [Participant 48], “...I was so worried oo, everyday was fear of contacting the virus and opening my phone and watching how people are being rushed to hospital even made it worse for me”[Participant 5], “...sometimes I will just off my phone because once I enter facebook or whatsapp you just seeing dead people that this virus has killed and that will make me to think and think too much” [Participant 22], “...every minutes of the day during that Coronavirus period, whatsapp will send something that will make me to worry too much and because of that I was afraid most time to open my whatsapp self” [Participant 34], “...I was not able to control my worrying because it was too much and my mind was always flying after going to facebook because of what I will see there” [Participant 1]

As seen in the vignettes above, the entire story of the participants were weaved with experiences of excessive worry and fear of death orchestrated by the type of messages and broadcasts that was shared with the participants from different social media and internet sources. This made some of the participants to dread opening social media platforms in their phones as seen in their narratives because it was a major mediator of excessive worry from the type of news and unregulated information that were shared through these outlets. All the narrators had worried excessively about contacting the Coronavirus disease and these worries were worsens by what they read and watched from facebook, whatsapp, instagram, google and the rest.

Having trouble sleeping

Our individual and cross-narrative evidence reveals that inability to sleep because of fear and panic also occupied the lived experiences of the participants during the peak period of the Coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria. As the themes from their stories suggest, the participants were memorizing the gory images of death from covid-19 and its related complications which they watched and read from social media and other internet sources. This affected their sleep patterns as they storied having trouble sleeping at night due to occupied thoughts of the Coronavirus deadly disease. Some vignettes that resonates these experiences are shown below.

“...when I want to sleep, I will be awake thinking about how I saw people in the oxygen struggling to live and the sleep will disappear” [Participant 50], “...that time ehh I cannot sleep

because of fear as in messages will still be entering my phone about how many people that have contacted the virus [Participants 46], *“..one day my friend just tagged me on facebook to tell me that over 100 people have died from the virus and that was how I worried and could not even sleep”* [Participants 10], *“..every day you enter facebook or instagram, ticktok you just be hearing corona corona, oxygen and other issues, to tell you I was so scared even to sleep was not easy”* [Participant 32], *“ I was scared oo and to sleep na wahala because this our social media hyped the disease and everybody was afraid to die”*[Participant 23]

As seen in the above stories, the peak of the Coronavirus pandemic was a time of tribulation for many because the popular social media served as an agent of fear as it took away sleep from people’s eyes with sometimes false and unverified information about the disease. As the participants narratives has shown, the social media and other internet sources continuously displayed troubling images and videos about covid-19 related deaths and complication. Such images and vides remained stuck in the minds and thoughts of the narrators and affected their sleep patterns as they had difficulties falling asleep. While majority of the narrators believed what they were exposed to on social media and internet, some believed that the social media was hyping the virus but were still unsure and unable to sleep due to worry and fear of the disease. Either of these suggests that their welling were affected by the self-defeating broadcasts from the social media and internet.

Fast heat beat

There was a common theme of experiencing fast heartbeats in the stories of the narrators in this study whenever they saw or read about the Coronavirus disease on social media during its peak period in Nigeria. Their narratives evidenced a condition of panic and fear leading to palpitation, trembling and a fast heartbeat. See some vignettes below about their experiences of fast heartbeat.

“...my heart will just be beating faster whenever I read news on my whatsapp groups of how deadly this Coronavirus is. I will just be asking myself whether it is time to die” [Participant 37], *“...every time I read those corona broadcast they use to share on facebook and whatsapp about corona disease, my chest will be heating fast fast”* [Participants 8]. *“...I sometimes I just wished I never opened my facebook that period because you will just see something that will make you to have fast gasp for breath”* [participant 45]. *“..like you know the whole internet was just sharing the Coronavirus update, so me I will just hide the news because my heat will be pounding after reading it”* [Participant 25]. *“..my chest will be painful sometimes and I will say oh God is this how the world want to end and the social media was not helping matters at all”* [participant 12]. *“...you know that kind of situation when you just read one news on facebook and your heart will be jumping, that was the kind of thing that was happening to me because we heard that there was no cure for the virus and it kills very fast”* [Participant 34].

The kind of messages that were sent out through the social media about the Coronavirus disease during its peak period in Nigeria was one that affected the heartbeat of the participants as they storied conditions of panting and fast breath. Such conditions made them to ponder over life as some were viewing life as one that will be ebbd out of them due to the rate of deaths as

announced on the social media and internet platforms. Some made sense of their experiences of fast heartbeat as unavoidable as long as they used the social media which was why some of them tend to avoid opening such platforms if they could.

Feeling Nervous

A common theme of feeling of nervousness occupied the stories of the participants' experiences of covid-19 pandemic as orchestrated by social media and internet publications about the virus. All the participants had experienced tensions and nervousness within the peak period of the Coronavirus in Nigeria. See some supporting vignettes below where the narrators reported feeling so nervousness.

"...they said we can contact the virus from handshake or even staying close to each other and the internet sources even said that the virus is inside the money and that was the height of tension for me since I don't know how not to touch money" [Participants 12]. "...every day the facebook will be reporting that so so so number of people died in Italy in new cases is increasing and that alone normally make me nervous" [Participant 45]. "...each time I go online and see people wearing face mask, I feel nervous because I know that there is trouble everywhere" [Participant 43]. "...I was so scared of the virus. I saw people hospitalized in youtube videos and snapchats and they were looking for air and my fear increased because I think I was going to die too" [Participant 34]. "...so because the news was everywhere even on net and twitter that movement has been restricted for people, we were stagnant and afraid indoors"[Participant 5]. "...Some were even sharing messages on whatsapp that the virus is in the air we breath and that was the point where the fear and nervousness was high" [Participant 23]. "...that virus really put fear in my body oo because since I was born, I have never seen or even heard about a thing like this and the way people were just sharing the news online made it worse because there were too much lies about the disease" [Participant 2].

The narrators used a feeling of fear and nervousness to make sense of their lived experiences of the Coronavirus disease experience. While they might have experienced these conditions as individuals, there was a common theme showing that the main source of the fear and nervousness was from internet and social media information which as they storied was an agent of fake information that heightened their emotions. The stories of the participants were weaved by an experience of intense fear, apprehension and nervousness as they believed that the worse has happened. All of these experiences were from reading and listening to stories about deaths and the impending dangers of the Coronavirus disease as recklessly shared on the various internet platforms.

Feeling Terror of Impending Doom

Cross-thematic narrative analysis of the narrator's stories showed that they experienced a condition of feeling that the worst is about to happen to them. These were increasing feelings of impending doom as the social media and internet sources have already heightened the mood with sometimes false information and statistics of death and multiple infections from covid-19 disease. See supporting vignettes below.

“...when I see all the people that the Coronavirus killed every day in the internet I was afraid that we will all die from this virus” [Participant 41]. “...so my health was affected because I thought the world was coming to an end because so many prophecies from the internet I watched even said that the disease will bring the end of the world” [Participant 3]. “...who knew that we will all survive it with the way the social media was carrying fake news that the virus was killing people in millions every seconds in the world” [Participant 29] “...the online news made me fear too much because when the death number are increasing we were very scared of contacting the virus” [Participant 31] “...at some point I said well if this is how we are going to all die let it happen because everybody was just sharing whatsapp and online number of people that cannot breath” [Participant 24]. “...the covid-19 era was very fearful because of the uncertainties and our country were also lying about the figures just to make money, like we were seeing in NCDC facebook page and on TV” [Participant 48]. “...during that time, I saw a picture on facebook of a man in the market buying things with waterproof covering all his body, it was funny but it really made me fear that the virus is everywhere and we may not all survive it” [Participant 3]. “...as the figures were going up online, our hopelessness was high too” [Participant 26]. “...it was a terrible time for everybody because if you on your tv you will hear corona killed 100, open facebook, twitter, instagram everywhere is just putting fear of surviving in our body” [Participant 30].

A common theme of terror and fear of an impending doom weaved the entire stories of the narrators in this study. They made sense of their experiences of the peak of the Coronavirus period in Nigeria with a feeling that something terrible was about to happen to them. This was because the social media and the entire internet continuously shared information and videos of multiple deaths, and possible infection of many as the virus was fast spreading across the world. As some of their personal stories have shown, many thought they were not going to survive the virus and others felt that the world has ended or was ending because the internet and social media gave them reasons to think in those directions.

Lack of Concentration

The peak period of the Coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria affected the psychological wellbeing of the participants in this study as their stories reveal. A common theme of feelings of lack of concentration orchestrated by excessive worry and fear from information from social media and internet about the deadly nature of the Coronavirus disease were seen in the narratives of the participants. Some of the vignettes capturing this are shown below.

“...all I could think was the virus and nothing else and the lockdown even made it worse because reports from every day browsing is that the virus is still moving” [Participant 15]. “I could not even read or even do anything for myself because I was always saying that it may reach my turn since there is no cure yet and you know it was all because we used the internet too much and listen to all the fake news they share there” [Participant 35]. “...we should not pray to see this kind of virus again as in we were just surfing the net for corona update, eating and sleeping without any work” [Participant 44]. “...everybody was just talking about the virus and the fear of contacting it, nothing else and the updates on internet was really fearing” [Participants 7]. “...one day I had a cough that period, I was afraid that the virus has catch

me because what I read online said that cough is one sign of the virus, I was so scared and could not do anything as my mind was just thinking about the virus” [Participant 6].

As the narrators have storied, they made sense of their lived experiences with a feeling of lack of concentration during the peak period of the Coronavirus in Nigeria as they were not able to undertake meaningful activities. Their experience of this was also because they continuously received updates about the virus from the social media and other internet sources on how unsafe human were on the planet at that period. This made them to focus only on the discussions that concern the virus as the fear of contracting it and the ways of keeping safe was more important at that moment than anything else. As their stories suggests, there were evidence of disconnections in their thought processes illuminating the overwhelming nature of the kind of condition these narrators were exposed to owing to unregulated and sometimes fake news on social media and internet sources about the Coronavirus.

Result

The result of the narrative analysis in this study have revealed some of the overwhelming emotional experiences that the narrators in this study has been exposed to due to the social media and internet sources of information about the Coronavirus disease. The result shows that information shared on social media about the Coronavirus negatively affected the lives and the psychological wellbeing of the students of Ebonyi State University studied in this research. It is further clear from the narrative analysis that there were elements of anxiety in the experiences of the participants as evident in their stories. Some of the elements of feeling of anxiety as the narrative analysis of their stories have shown include; excessive worrying, having trouble sleeping, fast heartbeat, feeling nervous, feeling of terror or impending doom and lack of concentration. It was further evident that the participants’ negative experiences affected their lives overwhelmingly. They had feelings that coincided with near death experiences as the thought of death also weaved through their narratives. We conclude that during the peak of the Coronavirus crisis and perilous period in Nigeria, the use of internet and social media to share information were not regulated at all levels and as such it impacted adversely of the lives of the respondents in this study. This is because as our findings have shown, the scary and gory images, videos and texts messages shared through the internet and social media platforms during the heat of the Coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria negatively affected the overall mental health and psychological wellbeing of many individuals.

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study have shown how Students of Ebonyi State University represented their lived experiences of the peak period of the Coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria using stories.

Their stories have revealed how narrators sometimes go forth and back into their lived experiences depending on the significance of these experiences and those they choose to tell.

The study had proposed to gain an in-depth understanding of how information shared on the social media and internet about Coronavirus disease affected the lives of Ebonyi State University students. From the result of the cross-narrative thematic analysis, it was found that their lives were negatively affected by the kind of information they were exposed to on social media and internet about Covid-19 disease. Thus, they had feeling that affected their overall psychological wellbeing. We have also targeted to understand whether there are elements of anxiety in the experiences of Ebonyi State University Students based on circulating information on social media and internet about the Coronavirus disease. Our findings also show that some elements of anxiety can be related to the experiences of the participants. Our findings suggest that the social media and other internet information they were exposed to were mediators of the anxiety feelings the participants experienced.

Anxiety about Covid-19 or ‘coronaphobia’ as Lee, Jobe, Mathis and Gibbons (2020) noted, has been seen as playing negative roles in people’s psychological wellbeing. This is of course so because narrators in this study have told of how negatively their lives have been affected by the Covid-19 anxiety. Furthermore, excessive worrying which occupied the experiences of the participants has been seen a major sign of anxiety as studies by Taylor (2019) have revealed.

The recent creation of Coronavirus Anxiety Scale (CAS) (Lee, 2020) is an indication that people may experience pandemic-related anxiety when exposed to anxiety related condition just as our participants have feelings coinciding with anxiety feeling during the Coronavirus Pandemic period in Nigeria. Anxiety feelings as findings from this study have shown devastated the overall psychological wellbeing of the participants as they had problems with sleeping, fast heartbeat and a continuous fear of impending doom. Their feelings may not be novel because Balaratnasingam & Janca (2006) also found that mass tragedies as those of infectious disease sometimes trigger heightened fear and anxiety that disrupts psychological wellbeing and behaviour. While we accept that this may occur, information from the social media and other internet sources was the major mediators of the anxiety felt by the participants which should have been regulated or controlled. As Arslan, Yildirin and Zangeneh (2021) have noted, the use of social media in times of health crisis like the current pandemic can be profoundly high. Such high usage was the reason why the participants in this study were

experiencing the Covid-19 anxiety due to their exposure to unfiltered junks of information circulating on the various social media platforms about the Coronavirus pandemic.

The result of this study has shown that social media exposure mediated Covid-19 anxiety among undergraduate students of Ebonyi State University. Anxiety and other mental health problems have long been related to prolonged exposure to social media as findings from a study by (Koc and Gulyagci 2013) on Turkish college students found that Facebook addiction had positive relationship with anxiety, severe depression and insomnia. The findings of that study resonates the current finding in this study as many of our narrators also confirmed that their constant exposure to Facebook posts during the peak period of the Coronavirus in Nigeria triggered fear, worry, insomnia, fast heartbeat and a feeling of impending doom or terror.

Recommendations

We recommend the finding of this qualitative narrative inquiry to social media and internet regulatory authorities in Nigeria. This will help them in regulating the kind information people share especially in times of pandemics as fake or unverified information can be a threat to the mental health and psychological wellbeing of people in the society. Thus, the insight gained from the findings of this study can help in modifying existing policies on use of social media and internet in Nigeria. This is because perilous periods as those of pandemics require calm, constructive and regulated information dissemination pathways. We also recommend proper social media usage education and psychological interventions during times of pandemic.

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