

Reactions to COVID-19 Media Awareness Campaigns: Insights from Gweru Urban High Density Suburbs

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Abstract

This study explored the public's reaction to COVID-19 awareness campaigns against a myriad of conspiracies towards the COVID-19 vaccines. These conspiracies are peddled in both the mainstream and social media platforms. It is this study's contention that some awareness messages were very convincing culminating in some sections of the public being vaccinated while on the other hand the messages were misconstrued leading to some sections of the public also rejecting to be vaccinated. In a quest to unravel the myths behind the conspiracies, this study through a mixed methods approach, interrogated 500 residents of Senga and Nehosho suburbs of Gweru of their opinions by Facebook and WhatsApp platforms. These platforms were used to avoid the spread of the pandemic through physical contact. Findings from the study indicated that the media played a crucial role in informing the public of the COVID-19 pandemic, culminating in some people getting vaccinated while on the other hand, some rightly rejected the vaccines. Those who got vaccinated indicated that the awareness messages were quite informative and thus convinced them to seek projection. On the other hand, those who rejected the vaccines did so due to ignorance, fear of the unknown, religious and political orientation among other reasons. The study therefore recommends that media messages be packaged with education so as to fully equip audiences with proper information in order for them to make informed decisions.

Keywords: vaccine, awareness campaigns, media, conspiracies, vaccination

1. Introduction

This study explored the public's reaction to vaccines against the COVID-19 pandemic. The disease- believed to have originated from bats and mutated to infect humans as a viral pneumonia illness (Sanz et al, 2020) was

discovered in China, in 2019. The pandemic was enormous that it engulfed the whole of China within a short period of time and spread beyond its borders to all the corners of the globe. When faced with a pandemic of this magnitude, scientists have come up with a number of strategies such as face masking, social distancing

and vaccination to curb the spreading of the virus. Vaccination is not something new as in the past it resulted in the elimination of measles, rubella, tetanus, diphtheria and other infectious diseases (UNESCO, 2020). The COVID-19 vaccination process came at the time in which people were dying en masse. Both the elite and ordinary people were dying at an alarming pace. This necessitated the government to source for the various WHO approved COVID 19 vaccines in a bid to save the nation. The first COVID 19 jab was from China which was distributed to different countries with the aim of protecting people so that they could fight against the disease and not necessarily prevent people from contracting it. The vaccine is meant for people who are 18 and above although the Government of Zimbabwe is contemplating persuading the 14 to 17 age group to be vaccinated as soon as they get the go ahead from the World Health Organisation (WHO).

In Africa, COVID-19 resulted in already strained health systems feeling the additional pressure which were characterized by poor health outcomes with high mortality rates linked to a triple burden of diseases (UNESCO, 2020). In an effort to control Covid-19 transmission, most African countries (Zimbabwe included) imposed movement restrictions and lock-down's (Dzinamara 2021). The initial delivery of the COVID-19 vaccines in Zimbabwe was on 15 February 2021 while the roll-out of the vaccine came three days later on 18 February 2021 (Dzamara, 2021). In March of the same year, there were donations of the vaccine from the Chinese government (275 000 doses) and the Zimbabwe government bought 600 000 doses from the Indian government thereby getting the vaccination process into full swing. Due to the increase of numbers of people dying from the corona virus, the media were awash with vaccination awareness messages. Audiences reacted differently to these messages which Dzinamara (2021) laments presented complications that resulted in different COVID-19 responses because of problems that included the economic impact of lockdown in regions, disruption of other health services and overwhelmed health systems. These challenges resulted in some people accepting the vaccine, others rejecting it whilst others remained unsure of what action to take. This is best described by Dzamara (2021) who avers that despite all the public health successes in reducing the spread of

infectious diseases through vaccines, vaccine hesitancy is noted where a large portion of the global population still express concern about the safety, efficacy and need for vaccines. According to the encoding-decoding model by Hall (1984), every media message invokes three possible reactions from audiences; these are preferred or hegemonic, oppositional or anti-hegemonic and negotiated. These readings together with Morley's (1988) aberrant reading are employed in this paper to explain how audiences that were purposively sampled reacted to the vaccine campaign messages. This paper explores the interpretations of mass mediated COVID 19 vaccine campaign messages by various audiences.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This paper is premised on the Two-step-flow and Spiral of silence theories as well as Hall's encoding-decoding model. The introduction of the vaccine after the virus' ravaging effects saw audiences looking up to their opinion leaders for guidance. Although almost everyone has access to the media messages, some audiences needed the interpretation and confirmation from trusted people on decision making regarding being vaccinated or not. Noel-Nueman's theory is also applicable as audiences make use of the people around them to make decisions about their lives. They tend to go along with what the majority say. These affected the decisions taken by audiences in reacting to campaign messages on COVID-19.

3. Methodology

Awareness messages from both the mainstream media and social media were analysed to try and examine how they were presented so as to conclude why audiences embraced or rejected them. Some messages were through music composed specifically to alert people on the importance of taking the vaccine. For example Enzo Ishal's song "Äsambeni" explains the benefits of getting vaccinated. His fans as well as music lovers got the messages from the lyrics. There were online music galas for example on Nash TV where musical sessions were hosted due to COVID-19 lockdowns. The musicians encouraged their fans not only to stay at home, keep social distance, sanitise and mask up but also to get vaccinated. Other messages were short messages sent via social media and yet others were on broadcast and print media.

Campaign messages were also given as news updates of COVID-19 deaths, new cases, recoveries, those who had received their second dose and those who had got the first dose. These statistics made people to examine themselves and take the right course of action. Some headlines like "Vaccine is safe: President" (*The Herald*, 19 February 2021), "VP Chiwenga receives his second jab" (*The Herald*, 18 March 2021) and "Retailers call on citizens to embrace vaccination" (*The Herald*, 25 March 2021) among others also encouraged the readers to get vaccinated. Purposely selected audiences were interviewed as well as questionnaires distributed online due to the prevalence of the virus.

4. Findings

The COVID-19 awareness campaigns brought about a lot of mixed emotions from different audiences.

4.1 Positive Reactions

Information is power and the way the COVID-19 wrecked havoc globally and in Zimbabwe in particular is why audiences welcomed the positive news of vaccines. The death toll in different countries like France, Italy, Brazil and America among many others that were broadcast made people to have the zeal to be vaccinated. A group of audiences understood the campaign messages and went on to get vaccinated. The death tolls made a huge impact on the vaccination process as many audiences turned out for vaccination.

Frontline and all essential workers who include government officials, health personnel and the security got the first privilege to receive the vaccine as it came in limited doses at first. They had to lead by example as leaders in communities. Other people followed suit on the availability of the vaccine and these included business people who were eager to resume normal business hours as patrons would be safer than those not vaccinated. The vaccination process was taken as way of normalising things after almost 2 years of interrupted activities. These were dominant readers of the vaccine messages who believed that it was a means of survival against the virus so it was a necessity. That is the major reason why most Zimbabwean and global audiences responded positively to the messages and went out to get vaccinated. This saw long queues at the only local clinic in Senga where residents wanted to get the vaccine

so as to protect their jobs, attend church services and go freely about their business among other activities.

4.2 Conspiracies Surrounding the COVID-19 Vaccines

Whereas a number of audiences embraced the vaccination process, some audiences felt cornered. During the first phase of the vaccination process, people were reluctant to get vaccinated. Audiences have been divided in their opinions after receiving the media messages about the vaccine. Messages on social media that those who had suffered from COVID-19 should not be vaccinated since they would no longer contract the virus, confused people as the awareness messages were not divulging this. Because the vaccines were imported from the Western countries, messages started circulating on social media that the vaccines were a biochemical weapon that was invented to wipe out the African people. Just as Hall (1984) posits, the culture of people greatly influenced their interpretation of these media messages.

Some audiences show anger at the awareness campaigns as they believe they are all lies. One respondent showed hostility towards the vaccine in that it neither stops nor prevents the corona virus. There is a group of audiences that never understood the awareness campaigns. These are the elderly who are failing to get enough education on the benefits of the vaccine and questioning why flu is now being taken as a deadly disease. Failure to have full information or getting the messages in English has led to these elderly people failing to decode the messages on the dangers of the pandemic and what the vaccine is for. One elderly interviewee had this to say:

Tanzwa nekupfeka izvo zvekuvhara kumeso nekuzorwa zvinonhuhwa mumaoko zvino topiwazve imwe punishment yekudyungwa? Kusi kufa ndekupi? Taneta isu! (We are tired of wearing face masks and using sanitisers now we get further punishment through receiving a vaccine? What is the difference? We are tired of this!)

This sentiment shows how some audiences rejected the vaccine as to them it is another form of punishment. The word 'tired' indicates how strongly some audiences felt towards preventive measures recommended by WHO. Another respondent asked why the vaccine was necessary

yet people continue to sanitise, mask up and keep social distance even after receiving the two jabs of the vaccine.

Students at tertiary institutions who were interviewed showed that they are in denial of the vaccine because they are strong and active and can get rid of the COVID-19 symptoms easily through exercise. The students who got vaccinated claim it was a forced matter rather than willingness on their part. Some universities actually gave notices that students who do not have vaccination cards would not be allowed to visit the campus let alone write exams. For example a local university sent a notice which read: "..... is advising all students that only those vaccinated shall report for face to face lectures and end of semester examinations." It can be noted from this statement that students who wanted to proceed with their education had to comply. This forced the majority of them to get the vaccination so as to have access to the university premises and or write exams.

This paper established that fear is a key factor in audiences rejecting the COVID-19 vaccine. Social media and some scary messages played a critical role in instilling fear and beliefs as they circulated information that people will eventually die from the vaccine. The vaccine was considered as a death jab. There were speculations from the audiences that vaccination causes death after 2 years. This frightening myth led to some residents refusing to get the vaccination. Audiences believe that the vaccine shortens their life span. Some feared that the vaccine is a strategy to reduce the world population. One man wanted to know if he could still have children after being vaccinated. Such fear leads to false information being shared among peers resulting in people shunning vaccination. As much as people are engaging with the awareness messages, they seek interpretation elsewhere. For example, one respondent said, "Vaccination in Zimbabwe is a way being used by the Chinese to wipe us out". With this fear, vaccination met with resistance.

Some young women are refusing the jab because they believe it affects the menstruation cycle which would eventually affect their chances of conceiving in future or result in barrenness. All these are assumptions which are not based on facts. Although WHO is saying it is now safe to vaccinate pregnant women and nursing mothers, those interviewed are still sceptical as they believe the vaccine will mess up with their

unborn children leading to complications during birth or affect lactating children negatively.

From a religious perspective, it was concluded by some audiences that the vaccine is a sign of the beast. Audience interpretations included how they believe that the vaccination process is the biblical mark of the beast that indicates the end of times. Christians then reject the vaccine based on their faith. Some explained that the vaccines are linked to the issue of Satanism. One interviewee was quoted saying, "The vaccine is a way being used by Satanists to initiate people into Satanism" which is an indication that such audiences are oppositional readers to the vaccine messages based on their religious beliefs. It should be noted that religion is playing a part in the shunning of the campaign messages as some churches do not believe in medical help. They do not get treatment from hospitals as they believe God is the healer of all diseases thus there is no need to go to hospitals to be treated by people. This has resulted in some congregants ignoring the messages and not taking the COVID-19 vaccines.

Some religious leaders initially castigated the vaccine. The discouragement from religious leaders was because they had interpreted the vaccine as being used as a spiritual attack on Christians. They claimed that the vaccine was a ploy to co-opt people into Satanism. This led to a number of Christian believers not being vaccinated in fear of the wrong interpretations. For example, Prophet Makandiwa of the United Family International Church (UFIC) discouraged his church members from getting vaccinated. As an opinion leader, most people listened to him and rejected the vaccines. One congregant noted, "We as Mapostori don't go to hospital or clinic for treatment; rather we use prayer as our protection and health." This statement represented what most people belonging to church sects believed. Another congregant said:

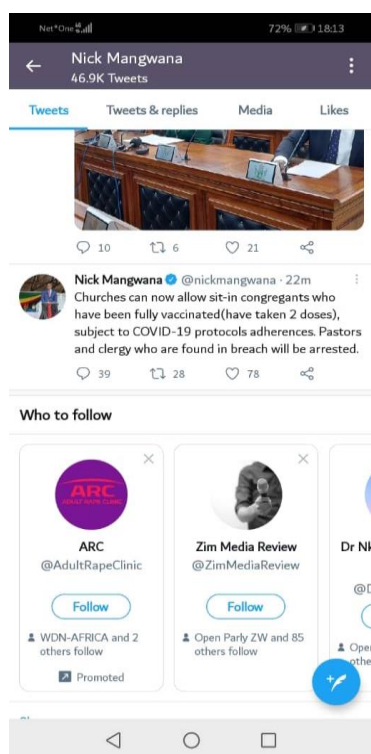
Uyu munembo unoporofitwa neBhaibheri unoratidza kuti kuguma kwasvika. Zvino isu mufundisi wedu akatitsananguririra kuti zvinoratidza anti-Kristu saka hatisi kuzobayiwa. Tagara isu topindira kumasowe saka ndiani mupurisa angauya kuzotisunga ikoko? (This is the mark of the beast as the Bible prophesied as a sign of the end of times. Our pastor explained to us that this denotes anti-Christ tendencies so we are not going to be vaccinated. We attend our services at the

shrine so which police officer would dare come there to arrest us?)

These types of audiences contradicted with the messages of vaccination. However, some later changed their minds after consulting their church leaders or family members on what they thought about the vaccine. Again, others only got vaccinated when the government imposed a policy that only those vaccinated would attend church services as shown in a tweet by the Ministry of Information:



The cabinet represents the government and what they say is law. At the bottom in small print is the statement that audiences felt the vaccination is forced on them. To buttress the same point, a government spokesperson also tweeted:



This policy that churches would only be open to the vaccinated showed that the audiences only got the jabs for the benefits that they would enjoy rather than protect themselves from the severity of the virus. The tweet came with a threat that those who failed to adhere would face the wrath of law. In a bid to be seen to be attending church with others, the audiences accepted the vaccine and did so without cheating as they did not want to put their leaders in trouble.

Some audiences view this vaccine as a political strategy meant to brainwash citizens. This group saw the coming of the vaccine as a political strategy by the government to win over the people and trick them into believing that it had saved them from the pandemic. Some respondents lamented the use of violence based on these campaign messages as they were coerced to get vaccination rather than make their own decisions. For example, the President was quoted saying “No vaccine, no job. No vaccine, no ZUPCO” ZUPCO is the only public transporter allowed to operate in the country. This forced some of them to make wrong interpretations on why they were threatened with job losses or permission to use public transport if they refused to be vaccinated. A wife to a pastor known as a co-pastor lamented:

Zvamboita zvekumanikidzwa zvadii? Ndokushandiswa newakaipa uko, chero ikanzi haisi number yechikara zvayo (why is the vaccine being forced? This is the work of the devil, even if it is not the mark of the beast) but this if from the pit of hell. Especially considering the people who are behind it.

Audiences regarded the messages as not encouragement but intimidation. This is why some audiences were suspicious of the actual intention of those pushing for the vaccine. Some audiences said they are more afraid of being killed by the vaccine than by the COVID-19 itself. For every awareness message, there are questions and various points of view causing disorder in the audiences.

Opposition political parties saw this period as an opportunity to influence the youth to rebel against the government which pushed citizens to get vaccinated. These youths were negotiated readers who agreed that vaccination may be a good idea but questioned why the government was forcing everyone above 18 to get vaccinated. A youth had this to say, “Is the government only

forcing us to get vaccinated to attain head immunity or it's for other alternate reasons?" The way the government was creating and interpreting the messages raised alarm and suspicion in audiences. The assumption was there were shenanigans that the government was hiding.

Americanisation of the world is the reason how some audiences interpreted the vaccine. Their argument is that the vaccine is an agenda by powerful countries to fight for supremacy.

5. Recommendations

From the above findings and conclusions, the following recommendations can be made;

- 1) There should be no sensationalising and politicisation of crucial health information. As such audiences with underlying conditions need serious education for them to understand and embrace the awareness campaigns.
- 2) Both mainstream and social media should convey factual information which help the public to make informed decisions particularly during the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

Audiences with underlying conditions need serious education for them to understand and embrace the campaigns.

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