

COVID-19 and Social Responsibility Reportage in Selected Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a significant challenge to nations of the world as different sectors were affected by the pandemic. Social responsibility is an integral part of an organisation's activities that show their commitment to society. During the pandemic, social responsibility was an essential aspect organisations leveraged to sympathise with victims, communicate with individuals in the society and show commitment to the welfare of the communities they exist. This study, adopting the mixed research method, aims to shed light on the crucial role of media in fulfilling social responsibility during the pandemic, particularly in the context of selected Nigerian Newspapers. The qualitative research method included a researcher-designed coding sheet used to code social responsibility themes, and the quantitative method included the manual counting of the coded data. The research found that different governmental and non-governmental organisations performed different social responsibility functions, as recorded in the newspapers during the period studied, and several individuals and groups were recipients of the social responsibility initiatives.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Government, Media, Nigerian Newspapers, Social Responsibility.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic posed unparalleled challenges to worldwide health, economy, and civilisations. The epidemic in Nigeria placed further pressure on the country's healthcare system and worsened pre-existing social and economic vulnerabilities. Nigeria, ranking fourth in terms of impact among African countries, documented many cases and deaths, resulting in profound repercussions for its population (1). Amidst the situation, the media played a vital role in spreading knowledge, increasing consciousness, and advocating for public health solutions. Nigerian newspapers have played a leading role in reporting the epidemic, with daily updates, analysis, and comments (2). Although the media has attempted to report COVID-19, experts in the study contend that it needs to be clarified if the media has effectively fulfilled its societal obligation to cover the epidemic (3). Uncertainties persist over the media's priorities: Have they preferred sensationalism over journalism grounded on factual information? Have they magnified the voices and concerns of marginalised groups or reinforced detrimental stereotypes and

stigmatisation? Have they ensured that people in positions of authority have been held responsible for their actions and choices throughout the pandemic? This research aims to examine these inquiries and evaluate the media's effectiveness in fulfilling their social obligation during the COVID-19 crisis in Nigeria. Effective communication is crucial in managing disease outbreaks, particularly for diseases without a vaccine or cure. Consistent, accurate, and timely communication is essential in controlling the spread of diseases (4). With its critical role in health communication, the media plays a vital part in achieving desired health outcomes during disease outbreaks, as highlighted by various researchers (5). By disseminating accurate information, the media not only influences public behaviour, reduces anxiety, and promotes preventive measures but also reassures the public and instils confidence in the containment of disease outbreaks. Therefore, the media's role in health communication is not only critical but also reassuring and confidence-building, and its impact can significantly mitigate the spread of diseases.

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While disseminating effective communication via the various media channels, social responsibility is a critical aspect that organisations cannot afford to play with. With social responsibility, organisations during the COVID pandemic played a massive part in communicating with individuals, groups, and communities while sympathising with them and ensuring that issues during the pandemic were adequately discussed.

This research analyzes the reportage of COVID-19 in selected Nigerian newspapers, focusing on Social Responsibility (SR). The study will examine the prominence of social responsibility and similar genres in news reportage and interrogate the various demonstrations of social responsibility in the selected Nigerian newspapers- by whom and to whom.

Social Responsibility

Social responsibility, a term that carries significant weight, refers to the duty of organisations, institutions, and people to behave in a way that promotes the welfare of society and demonstrates consideration for the welfare of others. This entails taking responsibility for one's activities and their consequences on the environment, stakeholders, and the broader community. In the media realm, social responsibility is not just important; it is of utmost importance. It entails engaging in precise and impartial journalism, being attuned to other viewpoints and opinions, and refraining from causing hurt or offence. Additionally, it entails practising transparency and accountability, fostering public comprehension and knowledge, and promoting informed deliberation and discourse. The gravity and significance of social responsibility in the media cannot be overstated.

Media outlets must uphold privacy and dignity, refrain from sensationalism and stereotyping, and prioritise social responsibility. These practices are essential for establishing trust with viewers, facilitating well-informed public discussions, upholding democratic principles, fostering societal unity and comprehension, and promoting ethical journalistic standards. By engaging in these practices, media organisations contribute to developing a well-informed, active, and empathetic society (6,7). As an integral part of an organisation's activities, social responsibility is often looked out for by media outlets, to report and recognise, encouraging other organisations to follow suite and reveal the commitment of the

organisation in the communities they belong. Therefore, in this study, the Nigerian newspapers selected recognised organisation's social responsibility roles and reported them during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 and Social Responsibility

For instance, some companies provided free or discounted healthcare services, distributed free masks and sanitisers, and supported vulnerable communities with food and other essentials. These actions underscore the importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as companies navigate the crisis. The literature suggests that CSR initiatives have not only supported stakeholders such as employees, customers, and communities during this period but also significantly impacted corporate reputation, stakeholder attention, and even firm value, particularly in industries like hospitality (8-10).

Interestingly, while CSR has generally been seen as beneficial during the pandemic, the impact on long-term sustainability, especially in the financial sector, remains uncertain (11). Moreover, the effectiveness of CSR initiatives may vary by region and industry, as evidenced by the case of companies in Georgia adopting CSR as a strategic response to the pandemic (9). Additionally, the pandemic has led to a re-evaluation of CSR's role, with some firms using it to enhance their image and reputation amidst the crisis (12). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought CSR to the forefront as a critical business strategy. Companies have employed CSR to support their stakeholders and to navigate the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic. While the long-term impact of these initiatives is yet to be fully understood, the current evidence suggests that CSR has played a significant role in how companies have responded to the pandemic, with implications for corporate reputation, stakeholder engagement, and potentially firm value (9, 10, 12).

Nigerian Newspapers

Nigerian newspapers are instrumental in identifying and highlighting the country's critical developmental issues. These include infrastructure deficits, education challenges, healthcare access, poverty alleviation, corruption, governance, and environmental concerns. Many Nigerian newspapers use investigative journalism to uncover corruption, mismanagement, and other factors hindering development. In-depth

investigations can expose malpractices and encourage accountability. Newspapers often advocate for change by using their platform to raise awareness about critical developmental issues. This can lead to public pressure on policymakers and stakeholders to address these concerns (13).

Many newspapers support community development initiatives through their reporting. They highlight local challenges, successes, and opportunities, fostering a sense of community engagement. While Nigerian newspapers have a significant role in developmental reporting, they also face challenges. These include financial constraints, limited resources for investigative journalism, censorship, and threats to journalists' safety. Despite these challenges, technological advancements have opened up new avenues for impactful reporting, such as digital platforms, multimedia storytelling, and data journalism. Additionally, collaborations between media organisations, civil society, and international partners can amplify the impact of developmental reporting (14).

Between 2015 and 2019, the Nigerian media's performance during pandemics, particularly before COVID-19, demonstrated a proactive role in public health awareness and social responsibility. For example, during the Ebola outbreak, Nigerian newspapers actively disseminated information on the nature of the virus, preventive measures, and government interventions to control its spread (15). The media employed diverse formats, such as news reports, feature stories, and editorials, to ensure comprehensive coverage that educated the public and fostered an informed citizenry (16). Moreover, the media highlighted the social responsibility efforts of organisations, showcasing corporate contributions to public health campaigns and community support during the health crisis. This coverage emphasized the importance of collaborative action in addressing public health challenges and reinforced corporate social responsibility as a vital element in pandemic response (17). By framing health crises in a way that aligned with the social responsibility theory, which advocates for media to serve the public good, Nigerian media not only informed but also influenced public perception and behaviour during such pandemics (18). Through their diligent reporting and focus on organizational efforts, the

Nigerian media effectively fulfilled its role in educating the public and promoting collective action during health emergencies.

An Evolution Evaluation of the Nigerian Newspaper

Early newspapers in Nigeria were linked to the Christian churches that continued to emerge. Then, a more politically oriented press founded by Africans appeared in Lagos between 1880 and 1920, providing a forum for anti-colonialist and pan-Africanist opinions. Titles included *The Lagos Times*, *African Challenger*, *Lagos Observer* and *Lagos Echo*. The most radical was the *Lagos Weekly Record*, started in 1890 by John Payne Jackson, a trader from Liberia whose fiery editorials greatly irritated the colonial establishment (19). Colonial authorities, missionaries, and local elites typically established the earliest newspapers in Nigeria. These newspapers were tools for disseminating information, colonial propaganda, and promoting European values (14). Some notable newspapers during this period include "Lagos Weekly Record," "African Messenger," and "Nigerian Pioneer." They mainly catered to the colonial administration and the European expatriate community

With the advent of the internet and digital technologies, Nigerian newspapers underwent significant changes. Many newspapers established online platforms, reaching a wider audience and adapting to changing reading habits. This era saw the rise of online-only newspapers like "Premium Times," which focused on investigative reporting and in-depth analysis. Nigerian newspapers have faced challenges such as declining print circulation, financial difficulties, political pressures, and security threats to journalists (20). Despite these challenges, they continue to play a crucial role in shaping public discourse, especially in areas where internet access is limited. Social media platforms have also become essential tools for sharing news, and some newspapers have had to balance traditional reporting and digital engagement. The evolution of Nigerian newspapers showcases a dynamic journey from colonial communication tools to influential platforms for democracy, activism, and public discourse. The challenges and opportunities presented by technological advancements and societal changes have shaped their transformation,

allowing them to remain relevant in an ever-changing media landscape (3, 21).

Ethical considerations are paramount in Nigerian media reportage during pandemics, particularly concerning the avoidance of sensationalism and the assurance of accuracy in health reporting. Sensationalist journalism—characterized by exaggerated or alarmist content intended to captivate audiences—can exacerbate public fear and disseminate misinformation during health crises. Such practices are deemed unethical, as they may heighten public anxiety and mislead policymakers, thereby undermining effective health communication strategies (22). To mitigate these risks, it is recommended that Nigerian newspapers focus their reports on positive directions that allay fear and tension, rather than heightening it, by emphasizing news analysis, features, opinions, and editorials that mobilize proactive public engagement in containing the spread of viruses (23). Furthermore, the Nigerian government is advised to maintain an up-to-date communication platform for outbreak reporting, providing accurate information to the public, and to train media personnel prior to outbreaks to reduce distorted reporting (24). By adhering to these ethical standards, the Nigerian media can fulfil its responsibility to inform the public accurately and responsibly during pandemics, thereby supporting effective public health responses.

Methodology

The research adopted the mixed methods of qualitative and quantitative designs. Six newspapers- *Nation*, *Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Sun*, *Tribune* and *Guardian*- were gathered to collect data for this study. These newspapers are the most circulated newspapers in Nigeria, and thus, their

relevance and efficiency in providing data for this study. The newspapers were purposively collected, and the articles selected were based on their mention of COVID-19 and other things related to the pandemic. The data was collected over six months- March to August 2020, when the COVID pandemic hit nations of the world and countries, including Nigeria, had to be locked down. Newspapers during these months were collected, and the coding was done using inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles included in the coding were all articles that mentioned COVID-19. The researchers and research assistants qualitatively coded the data using a manually researcher-designed coding sheet. The articles were read, and the variables were identified and recorded in the coding sheet. The articles were coded using a researcher-designed coding sheet to ensure that all the variables required to answer the objectives were adequately captured. Inter-coder reliability was ensured by an independent researcher who cross-checked all the coded data before analysis. Using the quantitative method, the numbers of articles were counted, and the frequencies were collated, which were used to achieve the objectives. This paper was further streamlined to code articles that included information on social responsibility, government, economy, politics and palliatives. After the coding, the data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences and presented in descriptive tables.

Results and Discussion

Frequency percentage tables and charts were used to present the data collected for this study. The first objective was to examine the prominence attached to social responsibility in news reportage. Based on the data gathered and coded, prominence

Table 1: Prominence Attached to Genres Analysed

Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
Nation	161	14.9
Punch	164	15.1
Vanguard	220	20.3
Daily Sun	212	19.6
Tribune	144	13.3
Guardian	182	16.8
Total	1083	

was given to articles on COVID-19 that had to do with government, politics, economy, palliatives and social responsibility. The prominence given to these categories differed from newspaper to newspaper. In the months studied, as presented in Table 1, the most significant prominence given to these categories was in Vanguard newspaper, with 220 articles. Next to it was the Daily Sun with 212 articles, the Guardian with 182 articles, Punch with 164 articles, Nation with 161 articles and the least in the figures was the Tribune with 144 articles. A

total of 1083 articles placed prominence on these genres during the pandemic. Comparing these figures with other genres like health, preventive, protective equipment, community spread, lockdown, education, foreign, religion and COVID statistics, among others, the genres in the table above had the most prominence in the newspapers. Thus, the media covered and portrayed the importance of palliatives, social responsibility, politics, economics and government during the pandemic.

Table 2: Prominence of Genres Based on Newspapers and Months

Month	Nation	Punch	Vanguard	Daily Sun	Tribune	Guardian	Total
March	38	58	55	42	68	38	299
April	85	56	45	51	64	19	320
May	1	26	88	67	17	38	237
June	31	15	24	29	11	54	164
July	-	3	4	13	12	28	60
August	6	6	4	7	9	5	37

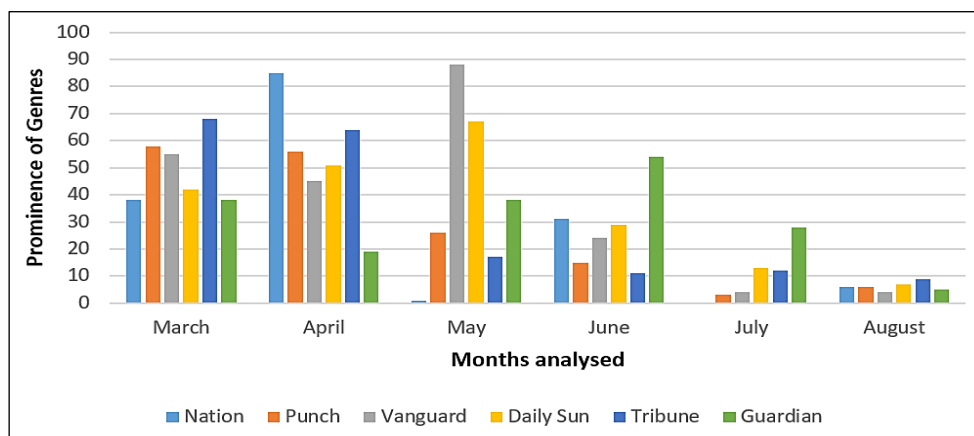


Figure 1: Prominence of genres based on Newspapers and months

Table 2 and Figure 1 show the prominence of the genres analysed based on newspapers. Prominence was placed on government, social responsibility, palliatives, politics and the economy in different proportions in the newspapers. In total, April had the highest article prominence, as that was when people were beginning to feel the impact of the pandemic seriously. The different genres analysed did different things and put measures in place, warning people about the pandemic, and these made the top articles in the newspapers. Next to April was March, which was the month following the announcement of the lockdown, and the media had to place prominence on articles in this genre as

people sought help, needed information and intervention and looked forward to social responsibility initiatives. After these two months, the prominence of the articles in these genres decreased from over 300 in April to less than 40 mentions in August. This must have resulted from other issues taking prominence and/or other genres relating to the pandemic taking the forefront in the media. Interestingly, Tribune was most prominent in these categories in March, Nation newspaper in April, Vanguard in May, Guardian newspaper in June and July, and Tribune again in August. Daily Sun and Punch newspapers did not have the most articles in the months studied.

Table 3: Frequency Distribution of COVID-19 Social Responsibility Impact (SRI) in Selected Newspapers

	Guardian	Nation	Daily Sun	Tribune	Punch	Vanguard	Total
FR	8	13	4	26	31	6	88
CPM	16	7	6	14	23	20	86
HE	13	7	3	3	13	4	43
M	10	3	3	5	15	8	44
Total	47	30	16	48	82	38	261

Table 3 reveals the different dimensions of social responsibility impact by the government, individuals and organisations on communities, individuals and hospitals. These include Food Relief (FR), COVID Preventive Materials (CPM), Health Equipment (HE) and Money (M). The second objective was to interrogate the various demonstrations of social responsibility in the selected Nigerian newspapers- by whom and to whom. The findings of the analysed article reveal that a total of 261 articles mentioned the impact of

social responsibility in the six months studied in these newspapers. Food relief and COVID preventive materials had the most significant figures in the social responsibility impact categories, while health equipment and money had the least figures. Punch newspaper had the highest number of articles that mentioned the social responsibility impact categories, followed by Tribune and Guardian, which were a little more than half of Punch mentions, Vanguard, Nation and the least was Daily Sun.

Table 4: Frequency Distribution of COVID-19 SRI Doers and SRI Recipients

	C	I	G	H	Total
GOVT	47	9	26	11	93
NGO	21	4	8	8	41
CI	28	5	18	10	61
R	1	-	1	-	2
F	-	2	5	2	9
I	16	7	8	3	34
HOSP	-	1	2	3	6
REL	2	-	-	-	2
Total	116	28	69	37	250

Analysing the second part of the second objective, findings reveal, as presented in Table 4, that the Government (G), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Corporate Institutions (CI), Royalties (R), Foreign countries (F), Political parties (PP), Individuals (I), Hospitals and Religious organisations were the 'doers' of social responsibility during the pandemic. Thus, the newspapers studied identified these groups of people as those who, at different times, impacted others through social responsibility in the various streams, as identified in Table 3. The recipients of the impacts of social responsibility include

Communities (C), Individuals (I), Governments (G) and Hospitals (H). The government had the highest recorded social responsibility impact, followed by corporate institutions, non-governmental organisations, and individuals. Other groups hardly participated in social responsibility initiatives. Interestingly and as expected, communities received the most social responsibility initiatives, followed by the government. A few hospitals and individuals were recipients of social responsibility initiatives through the six months, as reported by the newspapers.

Conclusion

Social responsibility is essential to organisations, governments, and individuals' commitment to society's growth and development. It is often perceived as pleasant acts that help society improve in all areas. Analysing six newspapers over six months during the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings reveal a significant representation of social responsibility acts during the study period. Compared to other genres and categories identified in the articles, social responsibility, government, economics, palliatives, and politics had the highest frequencies while studying the prominence placed on articles. The newspapers, at different times, placed prominence on these categories in varying degrees in the months, albeit the prominence was higher in the few months after the announcement of the pandemic and lockdown in Nigeria compared to the months that followed. In differing numbers, the newspapers studied impacted different groups by giving food relief materials, COVID preventive materials, health equipment and money to those who needed them. Communities, individuals, and government were the recipients of the social responsibility initiatives, while the givers/doers of the social responsibility were mainly government, non-governmental organisations, corporate institutions, and individuals. Only a few political parties, individuals, religious organisations and foreign agencies/bodies were doers of social responsibility initiatives.

The study recommends that, whether or not a pandemic or national issue occurs, groups and individuals should make social responsibility initiatives essential to aid community growth, help societies, and project themselves positively. The study also recommends that media outlets in Nigeria and beyond should identify and project social responsibility, especially during a pandemic or crisis. This will encourage organisations to do more and serve as a guide for others to take examples from.

Abbreviation

Nil.

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All authors whose works were cited are duly listed in the references.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest among the authors.

Ethics Approval

Nil.

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