



Opinion Leaders and Rural Communication: An Assessment of COVID-19 Vaccination and Lassa fever Prevention Campaigns in Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study assesses the influence of opinion leaders on rural communication during the COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention campaigns in Benue State. The study was anchored on the Two Step Flow theory. The survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study comprised the entire rural dwellers in Benue State. Multistage sampling technique was used to draw 24 participants for the study. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was used to elicit information from participants using Focus Group Discussion Guide. Data for the study were analyzed using inductive thematic approach. Findings have shown that, majority of rural dwellers got information about COVID-19 Vaccination and Lassa fever prevention from opinion leaders, such as church leaders, teachers and traditional rulers. It was also found that, opinion leaders had influence on rural dwellers' compliance and participation in COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention campaigns, despite some perceived resistance and hesitancy. Most rural dwellers were influenced by opinion leaders to improve their personal hygiene and food safety habits, but were not certain whether to refrain from eating bush rats or not. The study also found that opinion leaders are effective in rural communication campaigns in Benue State, irrespective of their message exaggerations and lack of credibility. The study concludes that opinion leaders are influential in rural communication for development campaigns in Benue State. The study recommends among others that development experts, government and private development partners should engage opinion leaders in development communication campaigns, especially those targeted at rural communities, as they complement mass media channels in achieving significant goals of social change.

Keywords: Opinion leaders, Rural communication, COVID-19, Lassa fever.

1. Background to the Study

Communication is central to human existence. It is a prime factor in fostering change and sustainable development in human societies. Without communication human society would remain static, grounded on instinctive behaviour, not so much different from the societies of other animals (Atim, 2010). This justifies why citizens of every society depend on knowledge and information in order to successfully respond to the opportunities and challenges of social, economic, cultural, political and technological changes.

However, for knowledge and information to be useful in the development process, they must be effectively communicated to the targeted populations (Odoom, 2020). This implies that the developmental fortunes of every society depend to a large extent on how effective communication is deployed for people to embrace and make adjustments to their behaviours and attitudes that would be of benefit to them and their communities (Akinleye, 2002). Schaeffer (2020) avers that, every society has its peculiar characteristics, one of which is ingrained in their communication

forms. Of course, there are various complex media forms and approaches of communication through which intended messages are disseminated to meet the needs and desires of people in every social setting.

However, making appropriate choices on media forms and approaches of communication that may influence human behaviour towards achieving meaningful social development has been a herculean task to most development communication experts and organizations over the years due to their varied nature and likely complexities in most social settings. In rural settings for instance, most development communication campaigns are often designed without considering the peculiar media characteristics and needs of rural dwellers for whom such campaigns are targeted.

There is no doubt the mass media are viable tools of engendering effective communication for development because of their strengths to reach the targeted population with development news, information and messages within a short time span. Despite these endearing traits of the mass media, they are not ultimate tools to

always deploy in the communication of social change and development campaigns in rural communities (Akinleye, 2002). This scholar's observation is a distance away from the case in rural communication and development campaigns of Nigeria's government agencies, whose persistent use of contemporary media channels in rural communication has not been eliciting much desired results due to poor conception and negligence in appropriate choice of media forms and approaches.

In Nigeria, about 50% or more of the country's population dwell in rural communities (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Rural dwellers in Nigeria are marginalized and deprived of the benefits of modern society. They are plagued by illiteracy, poverty, and usually have less or no access to mass media channels; even where they do, they experience epileptic electricity supply to power them (Abamene, Nwasum, Chima, Elechi & Uduma, 2021).

The foregoing depicts a vulnerable setting that is prone to social misfortunes and bizarre occurrences such as outbreaks of diseases and other health or social phenomenon that can be a threat to the inhabitants, as was the case in the recent outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and Lassa fever diseases. Therefore, developing a communication campaign that would significantly influence social change and achieve meaningful and all inclusive development in such social setting requires focus on the main objective of message, taking distinct approaches that are ingrained with the peculiarities of its varying social settings such as rural or urban (Moemeka, 2018). In a similar contention, Soola (2002, p. 20) has reasoned that:

People-oriented development can only realize its full potential if rural people are involved and motivated and if information and knowledge is shared. Communication caters for the human dimensions of development: it establishes a dialogue with rural people, involves them in the planning of their own development, provides information as a basis for social change and conveys the knowledge and skills required to improve the quality of their life.

In this context where rural setting is the focus, and easy access to mass media is not always guaranteed, utilization of interpersonal forms of communication is quite inevitable to achieve success in any development communication campaign. This, according to Daramola (2008) is because interpersonal channels of communication allow a two-way instantaneous exchange of information so that immediate clarification and additional information can be sought and obtained. The scholar further reiterates that, interpersonal communication of opinion leaders enable people to make decisions about an innovation or non-adoption of an innovation. With opinion leaders in rural communication, there is conscious effort to change attitudes through persuasion for the attainment of development goals.

Opinion leaders more often than not, serve to reinforce the opinion of their followers by emphasizing favourable facts and using their influence to discredit unfavourable information (Daramola, 2008). Through their interpersonal conversations with rural dwellers, opinion leaders provide their followers the opportunity to put up an argument, refute a fact or ask questions that seek clarity. Their ability to give an immediate response to a question or react immediately helps to reinforce messages.

In Benue State for instance, several development campaigns have adopted opinion leaders as communication links and motivation instrument to rural dwellers. The introduction of COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention campaign as means of preventing the spread of the epidemics in Benue State has been a proactive development initiative. However, in a society where there is lack of trust in government policies, illiteracy and poor access to information and communication facilities, members of the society especially rural dwellers needed adequate information through their rural-oriented channels to embrace and accept the campaign. According to Daramola (2008, p.79), this becomes necessary because "interpersonal communication and influence are more important than mass communication at a stage in the adoption process when the adopter evaluates in his mind whether or not to try an innovation."

In an effort to ensure effective communication of COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention campaign messages in the rural communities of Benue State, opinion leaders were co-opted into the rural communication mix by the government to help in interpreting media messages about the campaign and putting such messages into context for compliance by their followers. Their objectives were to encourage rural dwellers to embrace COVID-19 vaccination exercise, change their attitudes towards the vaccine, as well as encourage compliance to the prevention, by taking at least the first Jab, comply with practices against Lassa fever, especially in communities where consumption of meats, especially bush rats is on the increase, and which has been suspected to be the host for the Lassa fever virus. However, the terrain in which the opinion leaders found themselves made it difficult for them to operate optimally. This was amidst the threatening challenges of the contagious diseases that orchestrated financial poverty, lack of mobility and access to information communication facilities.

Despite inability of the government to provide adequate modalities to guarantee the safety and effective operation of opinion leaders in their routine demonstrative interface with rural residents, their rural communication efforts in COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention programmes were still executed in the rural communities of Benue State. However, the extent and how such rural communication activities of opinion leaders have contributed to behavioural change of rural dwellers in Benue State remain unknown and cannot be hastily generalized. This study therefore, sets out to investigate the influence and effectiveness of opinion leaders in complementing rural communication during the COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever campaigns in Benue State.

1.1 Research Questions

Key questions this study seeks to answer are as follows:

- i. How knowledgeable are rural dwellers of opinion leaders' existence in their communities?
- ii. What are the available communication channels through which rural dwellers got COVID-19 Vaccination and Lassa fever prevention messages in Benue State?
- iii. What influence did opinion leaders have on rural dwellers' compliance and participation in COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention campaigns in Benue State?
- iv. How effective are opinion leaders in rural communication campaigns of Benue State?

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Opinion Leaders: A Conceptual Clarification

Opinion leaders according to Valente and Pumpuang (2007) are people who influence opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations and behaviours of others. Opinion leaders can also be seen as those individuals (e.g. church leaders, teachers, traditional rulers, union leaders, and even enlightened farmers) who are active voices in their communities, whose opinions are sought and respected by members of the community (Kombol, 2005).

For Trepte and Scherer (2010) opinion leaders are people who are more influential within their social networks than others. They consider themselves experts in a specific area of interest and are asked for advice in that area. Opinion leaders can therefore, be defined as individuals who are respected, skilled and knowledgeable about a particular subject and whose opinions are sought by those who look up to them to make decision on societal issues. There are different types of opinion leaders: those who know a lot; those who influence others and are asked for advice; and opinion leaders with comparatively low levels of information, but good communicative skills to compensate for their lack of knowledge (Kelly, 2009).

2.2 Role of Opinion Leaders in Rural Communication for Development

Social and behavioural change efforts work better through the efforts of opinion leaders who can sway public opinion in favour of the desired change. This is why governments at all levels have recognized the importance of these influencers and in most cases, incorporate them into government efforts at bringing about development and successful policy implementation (Akpore & Uyeri, 2019). This is because opinion leaders are important information and communication agents through which development messages are widely spread in rural communities. According to Imoh (2007), most development messages reach to people in villages not through the mass media, but through interpersonal contacts by opinion leaders who reside in the villages or districts. Through their interpersonal and persuasive approach, opinion leaders are able to inform, convince and motivate potential adopters of an innovation or behaviour, even in the face of resistance and hesitation.

Many rural dwellers are vulnerable and eluded of modern means of accessing information. In this context, opinion leaders have become the rural dwellers' "oracles" to consult and obtain credible and legitimate rural information. Tsimitri, Michailidis, Partalidou and Kountios (2015) note that before making any decision concerning development, rural dwellers fortify their choice through assenting acceptance from some community members that have influence on them. Rural people depend on the judgment of opinion leaders to take decisions that concern their community, while others require explanation or approval from them to determine what would be the right action to take (Akpore and Uyeri, 2019).

Rural dwellers need accurate information that will enable them to live and appreciate the activities of the government around them. Opinion leaders, therefore, serve as linkages or mediators in the information transfer process (Kombol, 2005), between the government, programme designers and their communities. Opinion leaders are important conduits in rural communication messages because they determine to a large extent whether the messages will

be accepted and acted upon, or treated with suspicion and discarded.

According to Rogers, adopters of innovations become knowledgeable of new ideas most frequently through the mass media. But at a stage in the adoption process, when the adopter evaluates in his mind whether to try the innovation or discard it, he makes recourse to personal sources of information in preference over mass media (Daramola, 2008). This, as the scholar reiterated is due to the fact that, interpersonal communication gives room for a two-way instantaneous exchange of information so that instant clarification and additional information can be sought.

Hence, personal sources of information are also likely to be considered by potential adopter as more credible and more trustworthy than mass media because personal sources are usually better known and are sought out for consultation. Therefore, interpersonal communication is usually laced by the flow of personal influence from opinion leaders (Daramola, 2008). This combination of interpersonal exchange of information and of influence seems to play a vital role in rural dwellers' acceptance and participation in a development programme or not.

Opinion leaders are indispensable to rural communication because during the information transfer process, opinion leaders are readily available to take development messages to the rural dwellers in remote areas where the mass media have failed to reach. And where there is doubt in the development campaign message, they are there with the people to render interpretations and clarification to eliminate uncertainties. Opinion leaders have broken the walls of illiteracy and language barriers in rural communication, as they have the potentials to convert ignorance to knowledge and hesitancy to compliance.

Because of their strong influence on the rural communication system, opinion leaders are effective in promoting emerging trends such as the COVID-19 vaccination. They act as role models and encourage behavioural change towards trial and adoption of innovations. They have strong interpersonal networks, which is indicative of a concern for others and the need to maintain healthy social relationships.

Opinion leaders have several functions and responsibilities critical for implementation of successful community based development efforts. First, they provide entrée and authentication to external change agents. Secondly, they provide communication from communities back to the agencies that implement campaigns. Thirdly, they act as role models to behaviour change within the community. Fourth, they can be conveyors of health messages. Finally, they may act as the "capita" left after the agency has withdrawn from the community, thus, institutionalizing campaign goals (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007).

But most importantly, opinion leaders do not function in isolation to bring about the desired rural communication outcomes for development. Instead, they liaise with relevant bodies to carry out appreciable rural development campaign as they relate to development communication and rural transformation.

2.3 Influence of Opinion Leaders on Rural Dwellers' Compliance to Development Campaigns

A number of rural health promotional efforts have engaged opinion leaders as part of their strategies over the years. Kelly et al. (1992)

who carried out a study on the influence of opinion leaders on their HIV prevention have found that, people often serve as vital network hubs in homosexual communities and thus assisted with the endorsement and spread of prevention skills and risk information. By identifying and working directly with opinion leaders rather than only mass media messages, their study concluded that, interpersonal communication can be an important tool for rural campaign delivery and positive attitude formation (Southwell & Yzer, 2007).

Studies have also shown that the use of opinion leaders in prevention education has enhanced reduction in Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) infections. Opinion leaders have also influenced breast cancer screenings in minority populations, decreased cesarean delivery rate and enhancements in infection control compliance (Southwell & Yzer, 2007).

The interactive nature of interpersonal communication in the rural setting is necessary to motivate people to actually modify their behaviour. This is best suited to mobilize people's actions and help them maintain helpful behaviour changes. Besides, providing rural dwellers the opportunity for discussion and interaction on a health topic leads to an increase in their communication, which gives more room for information exchange and social support. These social processes can shape how members of the community perceive a health related behaviour (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

Opinion leaders such as pastors, Imams, priests and many others are often the most respected figures in rural communities. They play important role in shaping attitudes, opinions and behaviours of their followers because of the trust they have in them. They exert their social influence to convince and change attitudes, behaviours and practices of their followers that are not compatible with community health and safety.

By going into rural communities and speaking with them through trusted media and community leaders, sharing factual information and taking time to allay fears while remaining open and honest, government and health workers can build trust and use this to change the perception of rural dwellers towards COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention protocols. This would make communication to be wide spread and interactive, so that every rural dweller would receive every important detail in equal proportion, and is able to clarify their understanding of the health campaign. In the COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention campaigns, this has become imperative based on the fact that, not only are audiences fragmented and difficult to reach but they are also increasingly distrustful of both news and advertising, preferring instead recommendations from trusted sources in their communities.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Two Step Flow of information theory. The two step flow of information theory was formulated by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet in 1940 based on a survey (The People's Choice) of voters' decision making process during the presidential Campaign pitting Franklin Delano Roosevelt against Republican Wendell Willkie (Baran & Davis, 2009). The theorists sought to find empirical evidence to support the fact that mass media had direct influence on decision making process of voters. However, the study revealed surprisingly that, other interpersonal informal sources and channels of information were more successful at influencing the behaviour, attitudes and

choices that voters made than information obtained from mass media. (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

The theory proposes that information from the media flows in two distinct stages. First, it states that there are individuals who pay close attention to mass media messages from where they receive first hand information. These individuals are called opinion leaders. Secondly, opinion leaders add their own interpretations to the information and relay the information to other members through informal, interpersonal communication (Kombol, 2005; Chiakaan & Ahmad, 2011).

The relevance of the two step flow theory of information to this study is reckoned on its ability to explain the dynamics involved in the complementary influence of interpersonal channels to mass media in achieving effective rural message delivery. Thus, deployment of opinion leaders by the Benue State Government in Covid-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention Programmes indicates the strategic recognition and appreciation of interpersonal interaction in rural communication as held in tenets of the two step flow of Information theory, suggesting that use of traditional mass media alone, is sometimes not enough to meet the information needs of rural residents, thereby re-echoing the role of opinion leaders in complementing rural development communication programmes.

As assumed in this theory, findings of this study will prove whether opinion leaders' efforts in personal dissemination of information on covid-19, Lassa Fever and other diseases have significantly influenced Benue rural dwellers towards compliance with health practices/programmes of various diseases being campaigned against, so as to revalidate its value in complementing mass media of communication or otherwise.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

The research design adopted for this study was the survey method. The choice of this research method became necessary as it was easier to sample opinions, attitudes, and behaviour of rural dwellers concerning campaign messages of opinion leaders on COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention in the study area. Qualitative data for the study was generated through field survey using a 7- item Focus Group Discussion Guide as instrument. The generated data was to enable the researchers to answer the salient research questions posed by the study.

3.2 Population of the Study

The population for this study comprised of rural dwellers in Benue State. For this study, rural dwellers are considered to be individuals who reside in rural communities, and do not have the basic necessities to have decent living standard. The projected population of Benue State according to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023) is 6,141,300 people. The population of this study is therefore, 6,141,300 people.

3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

Sample size is a number of participants or subjects involved in a study. A sample size of twenty four (24) participants was drawn for this study. The selection of the participants was based on their knowledge of opinion leaders and involvement in the activities of their communities' social groups.

Multi-stage sampling technique was used for the study. This sampling technique was used because it provided the researchers the flexibility to break down the population as often as necessary to arrive at a manageable sample. Thus, at the various stages of the sampling process, the stratified, convenience and hat and draw sampling techniques were used. The stratified sampling was used to divide Benue State into three senatorial districts namely: Benue North East, Benue North West and Benue South for research convenience. The convenience sampling was used to select three (3) local government areas for the study namely: Vandeikya, Gwer West and Obi local government areas. The selection of the local government was based on their remote and abysmal lack of development facilities.

The hat and draw sampling technique was used to select two (2) participants each from the four social groups and organizations in the selected local government areas: namely market women group, motorcycle union group, religious group and farmers group. Thus, a total of eight (8) participants were drawn from the three local government areas totaling up to twenty four (24) participants. The four (4) social groups were selected from the various existing social groups in those communities which include market women group, road transport workers, motorcycle unions, farmers, students and religious groups, business group among others.

3.4 Method of Data Collection

Primary data for the study was generated through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) using a 7- item Focus Group Discussion Guide with the following questions: (i) Are you aware of the existence of people in your community who are motivating and encouraging people to accept and participate in COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention (ii) What are the channels through which you get COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention

messages in your community? (iii) Who are the people that mostly encourage people in your community to accept Covid-19 Vaccination and Lassa fever prevention? (iv) Have you taken COVID-19 jab? (v) What motivated or discouraged you from taking the COVID-19 jab? (vi) What are the measures you take to prevent you from contracting Lassa fever virus? (vii) Are the messages from opinion leaders relevant to you?

Information from participants during the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was collected through tape recording, while notes were also taken to back up the audio records. The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions were conducted in local dialects (Tiv and Igbo) with the aid of research assistants at designated venues and later translated into English Language by the researcher with the assistance of language experts. To ensure confidentiality and protect the identities of the discussants, each discussant was given a coded number that was used during the Focus Group Discussion sessions. Each discussion session lasted for one hour.

3.5 Method of Data Analysis

The primary data generated from the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. This method of data analysis involves identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Castberry & Nolen, 2018). Put differently, it is a method for analyzing qualitative data that involves reading through a set of data and looking for patterns in the meaning of the data to find themes. The analysis was done using the six (6) steps of qualitative data analysis by Braun and Clark (2006) namely: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes and producing the report. Using analytic narratives and extracts from the transcripts, the results were presented with quotes to demonstrate the essence of a point.

4. Results

Table 1: Discussants' Demographic Characteristics (n=24)

Discussants ID	Age	Gender	Level of Education	Social group	Area of residence	Awareness
001	44	F	Primary	Women	Rural	Aware
002	27	M	Tertiary	Motor cyclist	Rural	Aware
003	35	F	Primary	Religious	Rural	Aware
004	47	F	Primary	Women	Rural	Aware
005	23	F	Secondary	Women	Rural	Aware
006	62	M	None	Farming	Rural	Aware
007	36	M	Primary	Motor cyclist	Rural	Aware
008	42	F	Primary	Women	Rural	Aware
009	46	M	Primary	Farming	Rural	Aware
010	52	M	None	Motor cyclist	Rural	Aware
011	33	F	Secondary	Religious	Rural	Aware
012	49	M	Secondary	Farming	Rural	Aware
013	27	M	Secondary	Religious	Rural	Aware
014	20	M	Secondary	Motor cyclist	Rural	Aware

015	24	M	Tertiary	Motor cyclist	Rural	Aware
016	48	M	Primary	Farming	Rural	Aware
017	26	F	Secondary	Religious	Rural	Aware
018	22	M	Secondary	Religious	Rural	Aware
019	42	F	None	Religious	Rural	Aware
020	35	M	Secondary	Motor cyclist	Rural	Aware
021	29	F	Tertiary	Women	Rural	Aware
022	44	F	Primary	Women	Rural	Aware
023	37	F	Tertiary	Religious	Rural	Aware
024	38	F	Primary	Farming	Rural	Aware

Table 1 above represents the demographic characteristics of the 24 discussants sampled for the study. The table has shown that all the 24 discussants are aware of the existence of opinion leaders in their communities, their ages ranged from 20-62 years and their mean age was 36.9 years. 12 out of the 24 discussants (50%) were males and twelve were females (see table 1.) out of the 24 discussants 4 (17%) had tertiary education, 8(33.3 %) had secondary education and 3 (13%) had no education attainment. All the discussants involved in the Focus Group Discussion (FDG) were rural residents.

Table 2: Result of the Thematic Analysis

Themes	Initial Codes	Sub themes
Channels of Rural communication	- We get public messages through radio - We get public messages through religious leaders. - We get public messages through traditional rulers. - We do not get public messages through local prints.	Means of Rural Communication
Influence of Opinion leaders	- We received covid-19 jab through persuasion from traditional rulers. - We received covid-19 jab through persuasion from religious leaders. - We received covid-19 jab through encouragement from teachers. - We are willing to take the remaining dosage of covid-19. - We are not willing to take covid-19 jab. - We have been storing grains in rodent-proof containers. - We have been keeping our homes clean. - We have been keeping cats. - We have been disposing garbage far away from home. - We have stopped cooking and eating of bush rats.	Trust from opinion leaders messages
Effectiveness of opinion leaders messages	- We have changed our attitudes and beliefs towards covid-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention protocols. - We are no longer scared of covid-19 vaccination. - We are sure of living longer. - Bush rats are no longer our favourite delicacy.	Impact of opinion leaders messages

Theme 1: Channels of Rural Communication

Results further revealed majority 19(79.2%) of discussants got information about COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention in their communities mostly from (interpersonal sources) opinion leaders, such as priests, pastors, teachers and traditional rulers. However, 5(20.8%) discussants from Obi Local Government area affirmed that they got information about COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention campaigns from Joy FM

Radio Station, Otukpo. None of the discussants agreed that they got COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention messages from local prints as well as television and internet sources.

Theme 2: Influence of Opinion Leaders

The results also indicated that, 9(37.5%) discussants admitted being influenced by opinion leaders such as traditional rulers, religious leaders and teachers to comply and participate in COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention campaign and were

willing to take the remaining dosage. However, out of the twenty four (24) discussants, 3(12.5%) admitted to have taken their first dose of COVID-19 jab but were not certain whether they will go for the remaining dosage, while 12(20.8%) discussants were not willing to take COVID-19 jab. However, on Lassa fever prevention, 15(62.5%) discussants admitted to have improved on their personal hygiene and food safety (proper covering of food) but were not certain whether to refrain from eating of bush rats.

Theme 3: Effectiveness of Opinion Leaders' Messages

Results have also shown that messages from opinion leaders on COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention were effective as evidenced in the majority views of 20(83.3%) discussants. The result further revealed that 4(16.7%) discussants expressed their displeasure at the nature of messages they received from some of the opinion leaders in their communities on development campaigns. They revealed that most of the messages were sometimes exaggerated and not credible.

5. Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the study in relation to the four research questions posed.

5.1 Research Question One: How knowledgeable are rural dwellers of opinion leaders' existence in their communities?

This research question sought to find out whether rural dwellers are aware of the existence of opinion leaders in their communities. The findings of the study revealed that rural dwellers in Benue State are fully knowledgeable of the existence of opinion leaders in their communities. This finding agrees with the view of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) who note that in every community, there are individuals whom others depend on to help them form opinions on societal issues.

5.2 Research Question Two: What are the available communication channels through which rural dwellers got COVID-19 Vaccination and Lassa fever prevention messages in Benue State?

This research question sought find out the available communication channels through which rural dwellers got COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention messages in their communities. The findings confirmed that 19(79.2%) of rural dwellers in Benue State got messages on COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention mostly from interpersonal sources by opinion leaders such as priests, pastors, teachers and traditional rulers. However, 5(20.8%) rural dwellers were able to access messages on COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention from radio which could be as a result of their being within the wave length of Joy FM Radio station Otukpo.

This finding reflects what was found by Lydia et al (2022), that interpersonal influence of opinion leaders are more influential than mass media in decision making and adoption of innovations. Kete (2017) also notes that, because the rural dwellers depend on interpersonal form of communication, opinion leaders are valued for their persuasive and information dissemination role. Since opinion leaders are more accessible to rural dwellers, they became available channels through which COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention messages are disseminated to the people.

5.3 Research Question Three: What influence did opinion leaders have on rural dwellers' compliance and participation in COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention campaigns in Benue State?

Further revelations from the study indicated that opinion leaders have had influence on rural dwellers' compliance and participation in COVID-19 Vaccination and Lassa fever prevention programmes in Benue State. Some of the rural dwellers who took the first dosage of the COVID-19 vaccine were willing to go for the remaining dosage, while some of them were not certain of going for the remaining dosage. However, some rural dwellers were not willing at all to go for the COVID-19 vaccination. The findings have also revealed that some rural dweller had improved on their personal hygiene and food safety measures, but were not certain whether to refrain from eating bush rats or not. One of the discussants had this to say:

I don't know what is wrong with the government. How can they tell us not to eat bush rats? Do they know when we started eating bush rats in this community? This is why I don't believe in some of these their health campaigns sometimes. We would have been all dead in this community if bush rat is really the reservoir for the Lassa fever virus (D. 015).

This result has revalidates the view of Daramola (2008) who notes that individuals decide on what to do with information they receive about new ideas and the conviction whether the ideas are finally adopted or rejected and not just how information is received from the mass media by opinion leaders and passed on to those who look up to them for information. This shows that even though rural dwellers in Benue state were exposed to opinion leaders' COVID-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention messages, their reactions to adoption and compliance were varied.

5.4 Research Question Four: How effective are opinion leaders in rural communication campaigns in your communities?

The study also revealed that opinion leaders are effective channels through which rural communication programmes in Benue State are executed. This finding corroborates Zeng, Song and Zhang (2021) who found that, people are influenced by opinion leaders because of their firm believe that the messages released by opinion leaders are relatively objective.

The study further indicted opinion leaders of exaggeration and lack of credibility in some of their rural communication messages. While alluding to one of the disappointing outings of opinion leaders during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in her community, one of the discussants lamented how they were deceived into drinking salt and bathing with hot water by their village chief as a therapy to prevent them from the virus (D.008).

This finding corroborates the revelation of Kombol (2005) who notes that, opinion leaders during the information transfer process adulterate the real messages they receive from the mass media thereby distorting facts and credibility of the messages. Zeng, Song and Zhang (2021) have also added that, when people perceive that the messages released by opinion leaders deviate from their expectations, the reputation of opinion leaders collapses, and so also their control and influence on the people.

Conclusion

In accordance with the findings reached by this study, following conclusions were made:

- 1 Rural dwellers in Benue State are aware of the existence of opinion leaders on rural communication programmes.
- 2 Opinion leaders are viable channels of rural communication for Covid-19 and Lassa fever prevention programmes in Benue State.
- 3 Rural dwellers in Benue State were influenced by opinion leaders to comply and participate in Covid-19 vaccination and Lassa fever prevention programmes, despite some inherent perceived hesitancy.
- 4 Despite some perceived shortcomings of message exaggeration and lack of credibility in their messages, opinion leaders are effective and influential in rural communication programmes in Benue State.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing findings and conclusion reached, this study recommended in that:

1. Development experts, government and private development partners should engage opinion leaders in development communication programmes, especially those targeted at rural communities, as they complement mass media channels in achieving significant goals of social change.
2. Caution should be taken in the kind of opinion leaders that could be used by development communication experts, as not all such influencers have the capacity and pedigree to dispense social change messages devoid of distortions.
3. Government and rural development experts should always have training programmes to equip opinion leaders with the requisite tools and knowledge as well as the ethics of rural communication for optimal performance.
4. Further study should be carried out to ascertain the factors responsible for rural dwellers' resistance and hesitancy to opinion leaders' messages in rural communication programmes in Benue State.

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