

## **“CORONAVIRUS – FAKE OR REAL?” ATTITUDINAL CHANGE COMMUNICATION: GREGORY UNIVERSITY UTURU, NIGERIA THEATRE IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT EXPERIMENT**

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### **Abstract**

Despite the evident global index rate of coronavirus cases and resulting deaths, evidence abounds that many people still did not come to terms with its reality. This is a sheer demonstration of negation that only reinforces entrenched misguided perceptions and the fact that people actually live what they believe, irrespective of the aftermath. Hence, the information at a people’s disposal, negative or positive, goes a long way to shape their perception of life, issues and incidents that take place around them as well as how they respond to them. “Coronavirus – Fake or Real?” Attitudinal Change Communication is an interventionist attitudinal reorientation initiative of the Department of Theatre and Media Studies, Gregory University Uturu, Nigeria aimed at redirecting such misguided perceptions and responses/attitudes of its target audience to the colossal health and socio-economic challenge and danger which Covid-19 pandemic portended. The experiment was premised on the recognition of the invaluable role of theatre as a highly dynamic and powerful conscientisation medium with the capacity to reorient and realign the audience’s misguided perceptions that had continued to entrench their negation of evident realities of the ravaging incidents of the coronavirus pandemic and their indifferent reactions towards the development. The study, therefore, in highlighting the validity of theatre’s instrumentality in serving the conscientisation need of the time, also attempted to assess the extent to which the experiment was able to guide the attitudes and actions of its target audience in responding to the prevailing situation in which they found themselves.

**Keywords:** attitudinal change communication, coronavirus pandemic, theatre intervention, Tfd

### **Introduction**

The fact that the outbreak of coronavirus pandemic was unprecedented cannot be overemphasised; neither are its associated health and socio-economic implications, as activities in virtually every segment of life was brought to an unprecedented standstill (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2022). According to records, the first official case of the virus in Nigeria was announced on 27 February 2020 of an Italian citizen, who worked in Nigeria and had arrived in Lagos from Milan, Italy (Coronavirus: Nigeria confirms first case in sub-Saharan Africa, 2020; Kalu, 2020; Nigeria Centre for Disease Control and Prevention [NCDC], 2020). On 9 March 2020, a second case was further reported in Ewekoro, Ogun state, this time by a Nigeria citizen who was discovered to have been in contact with the first Italian victim (Nigeria records second case of Coronavirus, 9 March, 2020; Owoseye, 2020).

Typically, these incidents triggered off a whole lot of “infodemic” [which World Health Organisation describes as an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – occurring during an epidemic which makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it] and reactions; both positive and negative, as various forms of ‘news’ or information began to spread concerning the virus. Coupled with this excessive amount of information already in circulation, was the accompanying widespread of misinformation [false and inaccurate information, especially deliberately intended to deceive]; such that both infodemic and misinformation intermingle to fuel and refuel each other in a vicious circle as various dimensions of inaccurate and false information about the virus, ranging from how it originated, its cause, its treatment, and its mechanism of spread filled the news space (Pan American Health Organization, 2020); all, without any background or quality checking.

Unfortunately too, most people across the length and breadth of the nation had formed their attitudes and reactions to issues relating to the virus based on such infodemic and misinformation; and such misguided opinions, perceptions and beliefs became so entrenched therefore.

It was the foregoing development undoubtedly reinforced the need for Rapid Public Health Enlightenment (RPHE) to inform, educate, enlighten, and empower the generality of Nigerians on issues regarding the virus and how best to stay safe in such time (Akinmayowa & Amzat, 2020). The federal government of Nigeria's consciousness and sensitivity about the need for appropriate intervention was, indeed, demonstrated through the establishment of the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19 on 9 March 2020. The task force had as its mandate, the coordination and overseeing of Nigeria's multi-sectoral inter-governmental efforts to contain the spread and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, as well as enabling the delivery of national and state-level outbreak control priorities which include sensitisation and awareness campaigns for the general public on prevention measures and response activities (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2020).

Therefore, in prompt response and commitment to the onerous task assigned to it, the Presidential Task Force decided to roll out a number of activities towards controlling the spread of the virus. It also engaged in several media briefings to sensitise Nigerians on daily basis, where various protocols that were required to fight and prevent the virus were often rolled out. Various conventional communication channels like radio, television and newspaper as well as other social media platforms were actively employed in disseminating information and updates on the virus. The complementary role of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) was also remarkable in providing regular updates on the outbreak with support from major telecommunication operators in the country. These were significant commendable efforts in combating the challenges occasioned by the outbreak of the pandemic.

However, despite the foregoing enlightenment efforts, the attitude of so many people regarding the pandemic and its implications still leaves much to be desired, especially when such people are considered literate enough to imbibe the tenets of the sensitisation efforts. The study highlights Theatre in Community Development experiment of the Department of Theatre and Media Studies, Gregory University, Uturu, Nigeria in response to this vital conscientisation need of the period.

### **Coronavirus – Fake or Real? Attitudinal Change Communication**

The attitudinal change theatre intervention initiative under study was held at Amaokwe university community, Achara Uturu, Abia State, Nigeria in the month of March 2021 under the coordination of Oluseyi Abiodun Ogungbesan and directed by Ruth Nwabata Eseka [one of the student participants]. It was the maiden effort of the Department of Theatre and Media Studies, Gregory University, Uturu at using the instrumentality of drama for 'community' conscientisation/engagement, amidst the ravaging incidents of the coronavirus pandemic.

The production was held at a time when the coronavirus pandemic was not just ravaging the whole world, having already claimed so many lives worldwide including here in Nigeria; it also held at a time when coronavirus as a concept was not shrouded in so many mysteries and misconceptions as revealed by the background research that preceded the production. Hence, the role of research (in its extensiveness) in bringing theatre for community engagement issues into proper perspective, and as yielding reliable data that is further subjected to critical analysis and then translated to scenario-building and further grounding through rehearsals before the actual performance, cannot be overemphasised; as such issues are usually best captured from the point of view of the target audience.

Amaokwe is the host community of Gregory University, Uturu, Nigeria. The university cum Amaokwe environment, in the ambience of its serene setting that insulates it from the conventional noisy atmosphere of metropolitan urban centres and predisposes it much conducive for excellent academic activities, is also where the scholars/students (who are fully resident on campus) and a good number of the staff are domiciled. The presence of Gregory University and Abia State University (two prominent universities in Abia State, Nigeria), as well as the Marist Brothers community including its educational establishments, in Uturu makes it a rather semi-urban city, especially with the nature of development usually attracted by such privileged presence. Apart from the presence of these prominent institutions, another factor that also contributed among others in predisposing Uturu as a semi-urban city is that it is host to one of the leading construction and engineering companies in Nigeria [CETRACO Engineering

and Construction Company] as well as a multi-billion naira MASTERS ENERGY Industrial City, among other mega private business concerns.

Therefore, with particular reference to the inflexible attitude of the audience in context, rife among the misconceptions, including several conspiracy theories, held about the coronavirus pandemic within this semi-urban setting was that it was a fabricated hoax by the government to embezzle public funds. The implication of this kind of fixed mindset is that coronavirus was not real; so, every other sermonisation about contracting it, its prevention, as well as cure, was also a big hoax. Another common misinformation/misconception that also surrounded the coronavirus pandemic was that it could not survive in hot environments. Some also held the view that it could not affect poor people, and that it only affected older people.

However, it is important to understand that the virus never discriminated, as health experts revealed. Anyone, irrespective of status, age, tribe or even nationality could be infected; although older people and people that already had underlying medical conditions were identified as more susceptible. Also, living in hot or cold places was no option in preventing the spread of the infection either, as hot water or heat had no confirmation as killers of the virus. Therefore, whatever one’s status in society, age, tribe or nationality, it was absolutely necessary that one protected him/herself and family from the virus. So, it was on the strength of the foregoing that the impetus for proper education and enlightenment among the people sprung especially the Amaokwe university community audience, particularly staff and scholars/students, as well as other sundry business operators within the environment.

Hence, the basic motivation for the production was to provide a more balanced perspective/perception of the coronavirus pandemic and the issues that surrounded it. The production was therefore targeted mainly at the presumably ‘semi-literate’ class – those even though they may not be strictly classified as illiterate in the real sense of ‘illiteracy’, but were not literate enough to come to terms with the reality of the coronavirus and its implications; since the majority of this class did not think there was anything like coronavirus, despite the media sensitisation efforts of the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on Covid-19 and the continuous update by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) on the rate of infection as well as deaths resulting from the virus.

## **Production Venue**

A strategic arena within the vicinity of one of the university’s main gates served as the production venue for this experiment. The university has two major gates that offer access to its two major campuses in Amaokwe. These gates flank each other. So, this particular arena was consciously chosen for audience presence/accessibility, since the presence of some other sundry business operators is also established within the environment, both within and outside the gate(s) axis. This is why the area was so predisposed to serving as a sort of rallying point, in its peculiarity also in accommodating a relaxation spot of a kind and very conducive too for both mobilised and prospective audiences.

## **Performance Analysis/Follow-up**

“Coronavirus: Fake or Real?” Attitudinal Change Communication experiment, as already noted, was targeted mainly at a presumably semi-literate audience within the university environment. These were people who though not illiterate in the real sense of ‘illiteracy’, were not enlightened enough to actually come to terms with the reality of coronavirus and its implications. The experiment was basically meant to reinforce the reality of the coronavirus pandemic, irrespective of the many/varied misinformation, misconceptions, rumours and point of view that surrounded it.

Hence, the production’s simplicity of actions and directness of message communication in highlighting issues regarding the virus and the various precautionary measures that people needed to take to safeguard themselves and others around them against it was very remarkable. The follow-up/interactive (question and answer) session later at the venue of the production was quite an opportunity to balance people’s views on what they thought about the production. It was also a period for more education and enlightenment on Covid-19 and its implications based on handy feedback. It was evident from the interactions and observations from the follow-up exercise that the production recorded a level

of success in making people see the need, both personal and collective, to be properly aware and therefore take measures to guard themselves against the dreaded virus.

## **Discussion**

A critical consideration of the major concern that the experiment had raised would reveal that it could only be best conceptualised from the standpoint of “poor attitudinal orientation”. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines attitude as the opinions and feelings one usually has about something, especially when this is shown in the person’s behaviour. Attitude, therefore, is an already settled way of thinking or feeling about something that one lives out in his/her actions. It primarily emphasises people’s predispositions towards events, conditions, situations and things among others, and can be either positive or negative.

However, the implication in the context of the study is that the attitude here is such a negative one that reinforces entrenched misguided and misconstrued perceptions, opinions or beliefs as reflected in a person’s actions. It is instructive to note that attitude operates at two different levels, the explicit and the implicit levels. While explicit attitudes are attitudes that are deliberately formed and operate at the conscious level, as well as easy to self-report; implicit attitudes are involuntarily formed, operate at the unconscious level, and are typically unknown to us.

The attitude that the experiment in context contends with is the explicit level of attitude, which negated the very reality of the coronavirus pandemic, despite the great havoc it kept causing as well as the various media sensitisation efforts of both governmental and non-governmental bodies. It is only obvious that such an attitude was so deliberately formed, and very consciously and rigidly held. Therefore, rife among the misinformation, misconceptions and perceptions of the uncompromising attitude of the target audience is that coronavirus was only a fabricated hoax by the government to embezzle public funds which perhaps explains the reason why Saidu (2021) has noted that “The Nigerian public has not believed the government’s information on the prevalence of COVID-19” (p. 2).

This is a demonstration of the level of people’s mistrust of leadership that is not exclusive to Nigeria on issues relating to the coronavirus pandemic. Perhaps also, part of the reasons why the above development seemed to have assumed more credence was the compounding case of the evolutionary nature of the virus’s constant discovery: “from its evolution from respiratory illnesses to broader health concerns, from the simple wearing of masks for medical personnel to all people...from not airborne to ... being airborne” (Saidu, p. 1), including its multiple strains trend among several others, which in all is a clear reflection of a whole lot of inconsistencies. Therefore, people did not only lack, but:

still lack confidence in the existence of the virus, the authenticity of the funds the government has spent on COVID19 intervention measures, the reasons behind the closure of religious institutions or schools, and the appropriate treatment of the virus...etc. (Saidu, p. 2)

However, the interventionist experiment contended with what one may unassumingly classify as an advantaged audience on account of their ‘enlightened’ or ‘presumably enlightened’ status (staff, students, and sundry business operators) and the environment in which they find themselves, but who rather chose to erroneously live in the negation of the reality of the time as a result of their fixed mindset/orientation on account of the kind of misinformation with which they had already fed their minds/consciousness. The concern, therefore, is that such a negative predisposition could really prove disastrous since it would not give the persons/people involved the opportunity to apply necessary precautionary measures to safeguard themselves against resulting dangers; and as such increase their risk of adopting harmful practices that were capable of leading to an even greater increase in coronavirus cases. It is, therefore, also on account of the foregoing that the conscientisation of this set of audience became most imperative as to appropriately redirect their consciousness (through a process of demystification) from the realm of misguided information or ‘already rooted’ misinformation unto a new realm of right or proper information, as evidently reflected in the experiment.

In assessing the impact of the experiment in guiding the actions of the target audience in navigating associated challenges of the period, therefore, the strength of the weaponry of the theatre as a powerful conscientisation medium against entrenched wrong beliefs/attitudes and as a catalyst for introspection

or self-interrogation on the part of the audience cannot be overemphasised. From a follow up on the performance venue sometime after the production date, as highlighted by Princewill Chukwuma Obakporo in personal communication, whose active role in the realisation of the experiment was also very significant, it was discovered that the wearing of face masks in and out of the university gates became mandatory, unlike before when people never saw the need for adherence.

It was also observed that there was a renewed effort at the maintenance of hand washing/sanitising facilities at strategic points in the university community, unlike before when the water would finish and will not be refilled. These observations from the follow-up exercise were clear affirmations that the production, indeed, brought an increased level of consciousness within the university community on issues relating to coronavirus, including necessary steps that were required to be taken in staying safe. In all, therefore, it was evident that the authorities of the university positively responded to the issues which the production had raised, such that the people were naturally guided to follow suit. Hence, conscientisation only leads to people organising themselves to take action so as to change their social realities, as a critical understanding of a situation naturally leads to critical action based on people’s awakened consciousness (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2012).

## Conclusion

The experiment reinforced the instrumentality of theatre as a veritable conscientisation instrument in human society, as explored through the Department of Theatre and Media Studies, Gregory University, Uturu, Nigeria theatre interventionist initiative in its conscientisation efforts within the university community/environment during the pandemic period. The experiment apparently contended with a presumably advantaged audience on account of their ‘enlightened’ or ‘presumably enlightened’ status and the environment in which they found themselves, but who rather chose to erroneously live in sheer negation of the reality of the time.

Major issues which the experiment addressed include: (i) audience’s wrong perceptions about coronavirus; (ii) their wrong attitude towards issues concerning coronavirus despite media sensitisation efforts; (iii) reinforcing the reality of coronavirus pandemic, irrespective of the many/varied misinformation, misconceptions, rumours and point of views surrounding it; (iv) balancing of perspectives/perceptions on coronavirus pandemic and issues that surrounded it; as well as (v) providing direction (precautionary measures) for people in safeguarding themselves and others around them against the dreaded virus.

In the final analysis, the audience was rather provided with a catalyst for introspection or self-interrogation on the rationale behind its entrenched wrong belief/attitude for proper (re)direction as highlighted in the follow-up report; thus reinforcing Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh’s assertion that theatre can rightly intervene in several areas of community education. It could be confidently asserted, therefore, that the experiment was worth it as it successfully served its purpose in rightly awakening the consciousness of its target audience towards a necessary modification of its misguided attitude on issues relating to coronavirus, and thus reinforced the validity of theatre in serving the vital conscientisation need of the period.

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