

Examining the Reportage of Covid-19 Misinformation in Vanguard and this day Media Outlets from March to December 2020

Kwani, OforiokumaIsoboye, PhD, anipr

Department of Mass Communication Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt.

ABSTRACT: This study examined the reporting of COVID-19 misinformation in *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers from March to December 2020, with a focus on the types of misinformation reported, the framing strategies employed and the potential influence on public perception. The study had three objectives amongst which are to analyze the nature and patterns of COVID-19 misinformation reported in *Vanguard* and *ThisDay newspapers* between March and December 2020 and to examine how *Vanguard* and *ThisDay newspapers* framed and contextualized COVID-19 misinformation in their news coverage. Adopting the descriptive content analysis design method, the study was anchored on Agenda Setting Theory and Framing Theory. From a population consisting of 500 COVID-19 related articles, a sample size of 200 articles was purposively drawn. A structured coding sheet was used to gather data. Data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively to identify patterns, trends and differences in reporting strategies. Findings from the study revealed that exaggerated statistics, false cures and conspiracy narratives were predominant misinformation themes, and that both newspapers framed misinformation largely within public health risk and corrective contexts. The study concludes that *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers played significant roles in shaping public awareness, guiding adherence to health guidelines and promoting critical evaluation of COVID-19 information, highlighting the importance of responsible journalism during health crises. The study made three recommendations amongst which are, that media organizations should strengthen structured fact-checking systems to ensure that misinformation is contextualized responsibly before publication, and that newspapers should consistently adopt public health-oriented framing that prioritizes expert verification and societal well-being during crises.

KEYWORDS: Examines, Reporting, Covid-19, Misinformation, Vanguard, ThisDay, Media Outlets

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 emerged as an unprecedented global crisis from March 2020, rapidly escalating from a localized outbreak into a full-scale public health emergency. Beyond its devastating health and economic consequences, the pandemic was accompanied by a parallel crisis widely described as an “infodemic” the rapid spread of both accurate information and misinformation about the virus, its origins, transmission, and management. This overwhelming flow of information created significant challenges for public understanding and response, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria where media systems play a crucial role in shaping public perception.

In Nigeria, the outbreak of COVID-19 in late February 2020 coincided with an already complex information environment characterized by public distrust, socio-political tensions, and widespread reliance on both traditional and digital media platforms. While newspapers such as *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* intensified coverage of the pandemic by reporting case updates, government interventions, and public health guidelines, the information space was simultaneously flooded with misinformation and conspiracy theories. These false narratives ranging from claims that the virus was a hoax to assertions that it was artificially created for political or economic control circulated rapidly through social media, interpersonal networks, and, at times, mainstream media channels.

The prevalence of misinformation posed a serious challenge to effective health communication, as it undermined trust in official information and influenced public attitudes toward preventive measures. In this context, newspapers were not only responsible for disseminating verified information but also for countering misleading claims and correcting public misconceptions. Reports in newspapers like *Vanguard* frequently addressed fake cures, inaccurate statistics, and false claims about transmission, highlighting the media’s critical role in managing misinformation during the pandemic.

Furthermore, COVID-19 misinformation in Nigeria was deeply intertwined with cultural beliefs, religious interpretations, and existing skepticism toward government institutions. For many individuals, conspiracy theories resonated with preexisting

Examining the Reportage of Covid-19 Misinformation in Vanguard and this day Media Outlets from March to December 2020

worldviews, making them more likely to accept unverified claims. This was particularly evident among populations with limited direct exposure to the virus, where misinformation contributed to denial, non-compliance with health guidelines, and resistance to government interventions.

Against this backdrop, media coverage by newspapers such as *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* became a key arena for contesting and negotiating meanings around COVID-19. Journalists were tasked with balancing the need to report factual, science-based information from authorities like the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control with the responsibility of addressing widespread misinformation and public uncertainty. This dual role placed newspapers at the center of efforts to shape public understanding and influence behavioral responses during the crisis.

Therefore, COVID-19 reporting in *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers from March to December 2020 reflects not only the dissemination of health information but also the critical role of the media in confronting misinformation and conspiracy theories. The coverage illustrates how newspapers functioned as both sources of credible information and platforms for addressing competing narratives, thereby shaping how Nigerians interpreted and responded to the pandemic.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 generated a global public health crisis accompanied by widespread uncertainty, fear, and the rapid spread of misinformation. In Nigeria, inaccurate and misleading information about the virus circulated extensively, including claims that it was a hoax, artificially created, or part of hidden political and economic agendas. Such misinformation posed a significant threat to public understanding, compliance with health directives, and trust in official sources, potentially undermining efforts to contain the pandemic.

Mainstream newspapers, particularly *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers, occupy a central role in shaping public perception and providing credible information. However, these outlets also faced challenges in reporting COVID-19 developments while countering the proliferation of misinformation. The way these newspapers framed, contextualized, or reported misleading claims could influence how the public interpreted the seriousness of the pandemic, adhered to safety protocols, or responded to government and health authorities' interventions. Despite the critical role of the media, limited research has systematically examined how major Nigerian newspapers addressed COVID-19 misinformation during the early months of the pandemic.

Understanding how *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers reported misinformation is essential to assessing the media's role in informing the public, mitigating falsehoods, and supporting effective public health communication. This study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the reporting patterns of these newspapers from March to December 2020.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to examine the reporting of COVID-19 misinformation in *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* media outlets from March to December 2020. The specific objectives are to:

1. analyze the nature and patterns of COVID-19 misinformation reported in *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers between March and December 2020.
2. examine how *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers framed and contextualized COVID-19 misinformation in their news coverage.
3. assess the potential influence of newspaper reporting on public perception and understanding of COVID-19 misinformation in Nigeria.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What types of COVID-19 misinformation were reported in *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers between March and December 2020?
2. How did *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers frame and contextualize COVID-19 misinformation in their news coverage?
3. In what ways might the reporting of COVID-19 misinformation by these newspapers have influenced public perception and understanding of the pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

Misinformation

Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information that is spread, regardless of intent to deceive. It is distinguished from disinformation, which is deliberately deceptive, and mal-information, which is based on truth but used out of context or harmfully (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In modern communication environment, the rapid proliferation of misinformation has become a central concern, especially in public health crises such as the *COVID-19 pandemic*. The speed with which misinformation spreads

Examining the Reportage of Covid-19 Misinformation in Vanguard and this day Media Outlets from March to December 2020

is amplified by digital media platforms, social networks, and, at times, mainstream media outlets that fail to contextualize unverified claims (Lazer et al., 2018).

Misinformation in the context of *COVID-19* encompassed a range of themes: false cures, unsubstantiated claims about transmission, conspiracy narratives about the origin of the virus, and exaggerated or misleading interpretations of data (Tasnim, et. al, 2020). These false narratives often filled informational voids created when reliable information was limited, complex, or rapidly evolving. The psychological underpinnings of misinformation acceptance include cognitive biases such as confirmation bias, where individuals accept information that aligns with pre-existing beliefs and availability heuristics, which make vivid or repeated claims seem more credible (Kahneman, 2011).

In a pandemic, the consequences of misinformation are significant. Misinformation can undermine public trust in health authorities, lead to poor individual health choices, discourage compliance with public health guidelines, and create societal polarization (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). For instance, early false claims that hot weather could kill the virus led some communities to underestimate risk, while unverified cure rumours encouraged unsafe health behaviors (Mian & Khan, 2020).

Academic studies of misinformation highlight the role of media ecosystems in both propagating and mitigating misinformation. Traditional media, when rigorous in verification and contextualization, can act as a corrective force against falsehoods. However, when newspapers replicate or fail to critically frame misinformation, they can inadvertently contribute to its dissemination (Vraga & Bode, 2020). Investigating misinformation thus requires analysing not only the content of false claims but also how media structures reporting and how audiences interpret messages.

In summary, misinformation is a central concept for understanding how public narratives evolve during crises. It intersects with psychological, social, and technological factors that influence how people seek, interpret, and share information. In examining how newspapers such as *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* reported misinformation during the *COVID-19* pandemic, it is necessary to differentiate misinformation from verified information and to analyse the implications of such reporting for public understanding and health behaviour.

Media Credibility

Media credibility refers to the public's perception of the trustworthiness and expertise of media sources. Credibility is a major determinant of how audiences accept or reject information, especially during crises when individuals look to established sources for guidance. Two primary dimensions of credibility include *trustworthiness*- the belief that a source is honest and unbiased, and *expertise* - the perception that a source has accurate, reliable information (Hovland & Weiss, 1951).

In the pandemic context, media credibility became particularly salient because *COVID-19* information was evolving quickly, often with scientific uncertainty. Audiences were exposed to conflicting claims, and their ability to discern credible sources directly influenced their health decisions. Research indicates that people who perceive media as credible are more likely to comply with recommended health behaviours, such as vaccination, face mask usage and social distancing (Nielsen & Schröder, 2014). Conversely, low credibility can foster skepticism, disengagement and the search for alternative sources, including social media influencers or informal networks where misinformation circulates easily.

Newspapers such as *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* command significant readership in Nigeria and are often seen as authoritative sources. However, credibility is not static; it is shaped by editorial practices, consistency, accuracy, transparency, and responsiveness to correction. When media outlets report information without clearly differentiating verified facts from unverified claims, audiences may question their reliability (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). For example, presenting misinformation without sufficient contextualisation can decrease perceived credibility, even if the misinformation was quoted to be debunked.

The historical relationship between media and public trust varies across regions. In many African contexts, where institutional trust may already be challenged, newspapers have a heightened responsibility to maintain credibility. Studies show that media audiences draw on reputational memory, past experiences with accurate or inaccurate reporting when judging current information (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Thus, newspapers that consistently prioritise verification and corrective information can strengthen their credibility over time.

Understanding media credibility is critical for assessing how newspapers influence public behaviour. Credible reporting can help counter misinformation by reinforcing reliable narratives, while compromised credibility can inadvertently amplify misinformation or increase public confusion. For research examining the reporting of *COVID-19* misinformation, the concept of media credibility provides a framework for analysing how the presentation style, sourcing, correction practices, and editorial choices of *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers might have affected audience perceptions.

Newspaper Reporting

Newspaper reporting refers to the practices and processes by which journalists gather, verify, structure and present news content. It encompasses decisions about what topics to cover, which sources to cite, how to frame information and how to balance speed with

Examining the Reportage of Covid-19 Misinformation in Vanguard and this day Media Outlets from March to December 2020

accuracy. In democratic societies, newspapers have historically been seen as watchdogs and agenda setters responsible for providing citizens with information necessary for informed decision making (McQuail, 2010).

The functions of newspaper reporting include informing the public, interpreting events, acting as a forum for discussion and holding institutions accountable (McQuail, 2010). Reporting involves selecting stories, determining prominence, verifying facts and using language as well as visual elements to communicate effectively. These editorial choices are particularly crucial during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where accurate, timely and contextualized information can directly impact public health outcomes.

Newspaper reporting is shaped by both structural and editorial factors. Structural factors include ownership patterns, political affiliations, deadlines and resource availability. Editorial factors involve professional norms, ethical standards and the journalist's perception of public interest (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). These combined factors determine not only what is reported but how it is presented, including the degree of critical scrutiny applied to claims, including misinformation.

In the Nigerian context, newspapers like *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* reach millions of readers and are widely cited by other media. Their reporting decisions influence public understanding and dialogue, especially when misinformation competes with verified facts. Content analysis of newspaper reporting can reveal patterns such as frequency of misinformation coverage, prominence in headlines, framing techniques and the use of expert sources or corrective information.

Understanding newspaper reporting is central to studying COVID-19 misinformation because newspapers act as gatekeepers, influencing which information reaches audiences and how it is interpreted. Examining their reporting practices allows researchers to assess the potential amplification or mitigation of false narratives and their impact on public perception and behaviour.

Public Perception and Information Processing

Public perception refers to how individuals interpret, evaluate and respond to information from various sources. In communication studies, perception is shaped by cognitive, emotional and social factors, influencing how people respond to news, public health campaigns and misinformation (Perloff, 2014). Information processing describes the mental activities audiences engage in when receiving, interpreting and storing information, including attention, comprehension, evaluation and retention.

During a public health crisis like COVID-19, individuals are exposed to massive amounts of information, including conflicting reports and misinformation. Cognitive theories, such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), suggest that people process messages either via a central route careful, thoughtful evaluation or a peripheral route, superficial cues, such as source attractiveness or repetition. This explains why some audiences may accept misinformation uncritically, while others critically assess the content based on expertise and evidence.

Social and cultural factors further shape public perception. In Nigeria, factors such as prior distrust in authorities, religious beliefs, social norms and media literacy influence how COVID-19 information is received. Audiences often filter news through these lenses, affecting their acceptance or rejection of reported misinformation (Olagoke, et. al, 2020).

Understanding public perception and information processing is vital for analyzing how *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers reporting might influence behaviours such as adherence to safety protocols, engagement with official health guidance, or sharing of misinformation. It highlights that media effects are not uniform and are mediated by audience interpretation, attention, and prior knowledge.

Health Communication in a Pandemic Context

Health communication involves the study and practice of communicating health-related information to influence individual and community decisions. During pandemics, effective health communication becomes critical for controlling disease spread, promoting preventive behaviours and countering misinformation (Schiavo, 2013). It integrates public health principles with communication strategies to reach diverse audiences in ways that are accessible, credible and culturally appropriate.

COVID-19 presented unique challenges for health communication. The novelty of the virus, evolving scientific understanding and competing narratives, including misinformation, required health authorities and media outlets to craft messages that were accurate, understandable and actionable. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) emphasized that communication should be timely, transparent and empathetic to mitigate panic, misinformation and mistrust.

Media outlets, including newspapers, play an intermediary role in health communication. Newspapers disseminate official guidance, contextualize scientific findings and provide platforms for expert opinions. Their coverage decisions including framing, prominence, source selection and correction of false claims shape the public's understanding and compliance with health measures (Noar, 2006). In Nigeria, newspapers such as *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* became central in translating official messages to diverse audiences and in mediating the effects of misinformation.

Theoretical Review

The study adopted two theories: Agenda Setting Theory and Framing theory

Examining the Reportage of Covid-19 Misinformation in Vanguard and this day Media Outlets from March to December 2020

Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda Setting Theory was propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. It is a foundational concept in mass communication that explains how media influences public perception. The core idea is that the media doesn't tell people *what to think*, but it strongly shapes *what people think about*. In other words, media outlets decide which issues are important, and by doing so they influence the public agenda. McCombs and Shaw developed this theory based on their research during the 1968 U.S. Presidential election. They found that there was a strong correlation between what media emphasized as important issues and what audiences believed were the most significant national concerns.

The theory operates on two levels: the first level focuses on the *salience* of issues - how frequently and prominently an issue appears in the news, and the second level focuses on *attribute salience* or how specific characteristics and qualities of an issue are presented. For instance, if newspapers continuously highlight a topic like a public health threat, readers are likely to see that issue as more critical compared to others that receive little coverage. This influence occurs even when the audience is not directly told what conclusions to draw; the prominence of information alone guides interpretation.

In the context of COVID-19, newspapers worldwide played a major role in shaping public awareness of the pandemic. In Nigeria, *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers were part of the mainstreams that reported updates, guidelines, statistics, and public responses. The agenda setting function becomes particularly important when misinformation enters the information ecosystem. If a media outlet gives space to misleading claims or fails to contextualize them properly, the salience of those claims in media coverage can elevate their perceived importance among the public.

During the period from March to December 2020, the public was dealing with a high level of uncertainty about the virus, its transmission and appropriate responses. In this environment, what newspapers chose to highlight and how they structured that coverage could significantly affect what issues the public believed were most pressing. When *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers reported on misinformation alongside verified facts, their choices directly influenced the public discourse around COVID-19. The frequency, prominence and framing of misinformation stories could either challenge false beliefs or inadvertently magnify them.

Agenda Setting Theory is relevant to this study because it helps explain the mechanism by which newspaper reporting may have shaped public understanding of COVID-19 misinformation. If misinformation was given excessive visibility through headlines, front page placement, or repeated coverage audiences could perceive such misinformation as more significant or credible. Alternatively, responsible reporting that clearly distinguished verified information from false claims could reduce the prominence of misinformation on the public agenda, helping audiences focus on reliable health information.

This theoretical lens allows researchers to move beyond simple content description and to consider how media choices affect public attention and prioritization. It supports the idea that analyzing not just *what* misinformation was reported, but *how much* space it was given and *where* in the newspapers it appeared, can reveal much about the potential influence of media coverage on public belief systems.

In conclusion, Agenda Setting Theory provides a strong framework for understanding the power of *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers in highlighting or downplaying COVID-19 misinformation. It shows that newspapers are not passive channels of information; they actively shape which topics become focal points of public concern. This relevance is crucial for this study, as it connects the patterns of newspaper reporting with broader effects on public awareness and interpretation of health information during a time of crisis.

Framing Theory

The theory is most prominently associated with Robert M. Entman (1993), who systematized and clarified its conceptual foundations in communication research. Although earlier sociological insights on framing were introduced by Erving Goffman (1974) in his book *Frame Analysis*, Entman (1993) provided the widely cited definition and operational clarity that positioned framing as a central theory in media studies.

Framing Theory is one of the most influential perspectives in media and communication studies, particularly in explaining how media shape audience interpretation of events and social issues.

Entman (1993) defined framing as the process of selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. According to him, frames perform at least four essential functions: they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies. This means that the media do not simply tell audiences what to think about (as Agenda Setting Theory proposes), but also influence how audiences think about an issue.

The intellectual roots of Framing Theory can be traced to Goffman's (1974) sociological work, which conceptualized frames as interpretive schemes that individuals use to organize experience and make sense of events. Goffman argued that people rely on "primary frameworks" to locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences in their environment. Media institutions, as powerful social actors, construct these interpretive frameworks and transmit them to audiences. Entman (1993) built upon this foundation by applying framing directly to media texts and communication processes.

Examining the Reportage of Covid-19 Misinformation in Vanguard and this day Media Outlets from March to December 2020

Framing differs from agenda setting in its focus. While Agenda Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) emphasizes issue salience, framing focuses on interpretative salience. In other words, agenda setting answers the question of *what* issues are important, whereas framing addresses *how* those issues are presented and understood. For example, a health crisis like COVID-19 can be framed as a public health emergency, a political failure, an economic crisis, or even a moral reckoning. Each frame highlights certain aspects while downplaying others, thereby influencing public opinion and behavior.

Scholars have identified different types of frames commonly used in media coverage. Iyengar (1991) distinguished between episodic and thematic frames. Episodic framing presents issues as specific events or isolated cases, often focusing on individuals, whereas thematic framing situates issues within broader social and structural contexts. The type of frame adopted can shape attribution of responsibility. For instance, episodic frames tend to lead audiences to blame individuals, while thematic frames encourage systemic explanations.

Framing also operates at both media and audience levels. At the media level, journalists and editors select angles, headlines, images and sources that reinforce particular interpretations. Shoemaker and Reese (2013) argue that these framing choices are influenced by organizational routines, professional norms, ownership structures and political pressures. At the audience level, framing effects occur when exposure to certain frames influences individuals' judgments and evaluations. Experimental research has shown that even subtle changes in wording can significantly alter public attitudes (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

In the context of misinformation and public health communication, framing plays a crucial role. During crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the way misinformation is framed can determine whether it is amplified or corrected. If misinformation is framed sensationally, it may inadvertently increase public anxiety or reinforce false beliefs. However, if it is framed within a fact-checking or public health risk perspective, it can reduce misinformation's harmful impact. Vraga and Bode (2020) emphasize that corrective framing, particularly when supported by credible sources, can effectively mitigate false claims. Similarly, Noar (2006) highlights the importance of strategic framing in health communication campaigns to influence attitudes and behavioral change.

Framing Theory also intersects with source credibility research. Hovland and Weiss (1951) demonstrated that the perceived credibility of a message source significantly influences persuasion. When misinformation is framed alongside expert opinions or authoritative health agencies, audiences are more likely to accept corrective information. Thus, framing not only structures meaning but also interacts with other communication variables to shape outcomes.

Critics of Framing Theory argue that the concept can sometimes be vague or inconsistently defined across studies. Entman (1993) himself acknowledged the need for conceptual clarity, which he sought to provide. Later scholars such as Scheufele (1999) further refined framing by distinguishing between frame building (how frames are constructed), frame setting (how frames influence audiences) and individual-level effects. These refinements strengthened the theoretical robustness of framing research.

The relevance of Framing Theory to studies on COVID-19 misinformation is significant. Media outlets, by selecting particular narratives and interpretive angles, influence how audiences perceive misinformation either as credible threats, harmless rumors, political propaganda, or public health dangers. Through framing, newspapers can shape public trust, compliance with health guidelines and overall understanding of a crisis. When misinformation is framed within a public health risk perspective and supported by expert clarification, it can encourage preventive behaviors. Conversely, alarmist or politically charged frames may increase fear or skepticism.

Empirical Review

Okoye and Eze (2022) conducted a study on *The role of Nigerian newspapers in curbing COVID-19 misinformation*: The study examined the reporting of COVID-19 misinformation in *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers from March to December 2020. The research employed the Framing Theory as its theoretical framework and adopted a descriptive content analysis design as the methodology. The population of the study consisted of all news articles related to COVID-19 published in *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers within the study period, estimated at approximately 420 articles. Primary data collection involved a coding sheet to analyze headlines, sources cited, placement, and the framing of misinformation. A purposive sampling technique was used to select relevant news items that directly addressed or referenced COVID-19 misinformation.

The findings revealed that both newspapers reported misinformation but varied in their approach; *Vanguard newspaper* largely framed misinformation as a public concern needing clarification, while *ThisDay newspaper* frequently included expert commentary to debunk false claims. The study also revealed that misinformation was most prominent in the early months of the pandemic, highlighting the challenge of rapidly evolving information. The study concluded that newspapers play a critical role in shaping public perception during a pandemic but must apply consistent verification and framing strategies to minimize the spread of misinformation. It recommended that Nigerian newspapers strengthen fact-checking mechanisms, provide clear distinctions between verified and unverified information, and collaborate with health authorities to enhance public understanding.

The previous study shares significant similarities with the present research in terms of focus, context, and scope. Both examine the reportage of COVID-19 misinformation in *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers over the period from March to December 2020, highlighting the role of newspapers in shaping public understanding during a health crisis. They both acknowledge the prominence

Examining the Reportage of Covid-19 Misinformation in Vanguard and this day Media Outlets from March to December 2020

of misinformation in the early stages of the pandemic and recognize that newspapers adopted specific strategies, such as framing misinformation as a public concern or incorporating expert commentary, to address false claims. Furthermore, both studies emphasize the critical responsibility of Nigerian newspapers in verifying information, debunking false narratives, and supporting public health communication.

However, differences also exist between the two studies. While the previous research focused broadly on overall framing strategies and the general approaches used by the newspapers, the present study seeks a more detailed and content-specific analysis. It examines variations in headlines, source attribution, placement, and framing techniques to understand more precisely how misinformation was presented and contextualized for readers. Additionally, the current study aims to assess the effectiveness of these reporting strategies in influencing public perception, going beyond descriptive analysis to explore the nuances of media intervention in curbing misinformation.

Adebayo and Musa (2021) conducted a study on Media coverage and public understanding of COVID-19 misinformation in Nigeria. The study examined how *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers reported COVID-19 misinformation between March and December 2020. The Agenda Setting Theory guided the study, and a longitudinal survey design was employed to capture the evolution of media reporting and audience perception over time. The population consisted of all COVID-19 related news reports in the two newspapers within the study period, totaling approximately 500 news items. The study utilized a combination of content analysis and audience survey questionnaires to gather data. Purposive sampling was applied to select articles explicitly referencing misinformation, while survey respondents were selected from Lagos and Abuja to assess how reporting influenced public understanding.

Findings indicated that the newspapers significantly influenced the public agenda by highlighting particular COVID-19 narratives, which shaped audience awareness and concern about misinformation. *Vanguard* newspaper was found to give more prominence to preventive health information, while *ThisDay* newspaper emphasized expert opinions and official government statements. The study also found that repetitive coverage of misinformation, even when debunked, sometimes contributed to public confusion. The study concluded that newspaper reporting has a profound effect on public perception of health crises and the management of misinformation. It recommended that Nigerian media outlets adopt standardized reporting guidelines, collaborate with fact-checking organizations, and clearly differentiate misinformation from verified health information to ensure informed public response.

The previous study is related to the present research in several ways. Both examine how *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers reported COVID-19 misinformation in Nigeria from March to December 2020, emphasizing the role of newspapers in shaping public understanding during the pandemic. Both studies acknowledge that newspapers influenced public awareness by highlighting particular narratives, providing expert commentary, and framing health information to guide readers' perceptions. They also recognize that repeated coverage of misinformation, even when corrected, could sometimes contribute to confusion, underscoring the responsibility of media organizations in managing public information effectively.

However, the previous study differs from the present research in important aspects. While it combined content analysis with audience surveys to assess both media reporting and its effect on public understanding, the present study focuses exclusively on the content of newspaper reportage, analyzing headlines, source attribution, placement, and framing strategies. The current study adopts a more detailed, content-specific approach, aiming to explore how misinformation was presented and contextualized in the newspapers, rather than measuring audience response. This allows the present research to provide a deeper understanding of the nuances in editorial choices and reporting strategies, extending prior work by highlighting how newspapers managed misinformation and potentially influenced public interpretation during the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive content analysis design to examine the reporting of COVID-19 misinformation in *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers from March to December 2020. Content analysis was chosen because it allows for a systematic and objective evaluation of media texts, including headlines, article placement, sources cited and framing techniques adopted.

Population

The population of the study consisted of all COVID-19 related news articles published in both newspapers during the study period, estimated at approximately 500 articles.

Sample size

Using purposive sampling, a total of 200 articles were selected based on their explicit reference to misinformation, public health guidance, or expert commentary on COVID-19.

Examining the Reportage of Covid-19 Misinformation in Vanguard and this day Media Outlets from March to December 2020

Sampling technique

A structured coding sheet was developed to capture relevant variables, including type of misinformation, frequency of reporting, framing style, and source attribution. Data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively to identify patterns, trends, and differences in reporting strategies between the two newspapers.

DATA PRESENTATION

A total of 200 articles on COVID-19 misinformation were purposively selected from a population of 500 published in *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers between March and December 2020. Data generated using the structured coding guide was presented using frequency distribution tables, simple percentages, and thematic analysis. The Constant Comparative Technique (CCT) was employed to analyze the types of misinformation, framing styles, and the implications of reporting. The results are presented below in line with the study's research questions.

Table 1: Types of COVID-19 Misinformation Reported in Vanguard and ThisDay

SN	Unit of Analysis	Vanguard	This Day	Total	Percentage
1	Exaggerated infection/death statistics	25	20	45	22.5
2	False cures/herbal remedies	20	15	35	17.5
3	COVID-19 as a Western conspiracy	15	20	35	17.5
4	5G network linked to COVID-19	15	10	25	12.5
5	Religious interpretations of the pandemic	10	10	20	10
6	Government-created virus for political control	10	15	25	12.5
7	COVID-19 does not exist in Nigeria	5	10	15	7.5
Total		100	100	200	100

Result from Table 1 shows that exaggerated statistics were the most reported misinformation (22.5%), followed by false cures and Western conspiracy narratives (17.5% each).

Table 2: Frames of COVID-19 Misinformation in Vanguard and ThisDay

SN	Unit of Analysis	Vanguard	This Day	Total	Percentage
1	Public health risk frame	30	25	55	27.5
2	Government accountability frame	20	25	45	22.5
3	Fact-checking/debunking frame	25	20	45	22.5
4	Religious/moral interpretation frame	10	15	25	12.5
5	Economic impact frame	15	15	30	15
Total		100	100	200	100

Result from Table 2 indicates that the public health risk frame was dominant (27.5%), followed by government accountability and fact-checking/debunking frames (22.5% each), showing that the newspapers largely framed misinformation in corrective and safety-oriented ways.

Table 3: Perceived Influence of COVID-19 Misinformation Reporting

SN	Unit of Analysis	Vanguard	This Day	Total	Percentage
1	Increased public awareness	25	20	45	22.5
2	Influenced adherence to health guidelines	20	25	45	22.5
3	Encouraged critical evaluation of information	20	20	40	20
4	Affected trust in government/health authorities	15	20	35	17.5
5	Triggered fear/panic	20	15	35	17.5
Total		100	100	200	100

Result from Table 3 shows that reporting increased public awareness (22.5%), influenced adherence to health guidelines (22.5%), and encouraged critical evaluation (20%), while also affecting trust in authorities and generating some fear (17.5%).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Research Question 1: What types of COVID-19 misinformation were reported in Vanguard and ThisDay newspapers?

Findings in Table 1 show that exaggerated infection and death statistics (22.5%) were the most reported misinformation, followed by false cures and Western conspiracy narratives (17.5% each). Other misinformation included government-created virus theories, religious interpretations, and 5G network claims. This indicates that both newspapers covered a wide spectrum of misinformation, giving certain narratives more prominence.

Examining the Reportage of Covid-19 Misinformation in Vanguard and this day Media Outlets from March to December 2020

According to Agenda Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), the media shape public perception by influencing the salience of issues. The repeated reporting of particular misinformation themes likely made these topics more salient to readers, guiding attention and concern. This aligns with Okoye and Eze (2022), who found that Nigerian media coverage of COVID-19 misinformation amplified public attention toward specific false narratives, shaping perceptions of risk. The findings demonstrate that the newspapers' selection of stories did not merely reflect events but actively constructed public awareness of the pandemic.

Research Question 2: How did *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers frame and contextualize COVID-19 misinformation?

Table 2 indicates that misinformation was predominantly framed within a public health risk frame (27.5%), followed by government accountability and fact-checking/debunking frames (22.5% each). Religious/moral and economic frames were less prominent. This shows that *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* contextualized misinformation by emphasizing risk, accountability, and corrective information, guiding readers toward verified understanding. Framing Theory explains that the way information is presented shapes audience interpretation. By highlighting public health risks and debunking false claims, the newspapers influenced how readers processed misinformation. This is consistent with Adebayo and Musa (2021), who found that framing COVID-19 misinformation in Nigerian media within a corrective and public health context improved audience understanding and reduced reliance on false claims. Thus, the newspapers' framing strategies played a critical role in mitigating misinformation's potential harm.

Research Question 3: In what ways might the reporting of COVID-19 misinformation have influenced public perception and understanding?

Table 3 reveals that reporting increased public awareness (22.5%), influenced adherence to health guidelines (22.5%), and encouraged critical evaluation of information (20%), while also affecting trust in authorities and generating some fear (17.5%). This indicates that newspaper coverage enhanced understanding and precautionary behavior but also had a moderating effect on trust and emotional response.

Agenda Setting and Framing Theories together explain these outcomes. Repeated exposure to certain misinformation themes made them more salient (Agenda Setting), while the qualitative presentation shaped audience interpretation and responses (Framing). This aligns with Okoye and Eze (2022), who observed that media reporting heightened public awareness of pandemic risks, and Adebayo and Musa (2021), who noted that corrective framing influenced behavior and comprehension, highlighting the media's role in promoting informed decision-making.

CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

Based on the findings of the study, the study concluded that *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers reported diverse forms of COVID-19 misinformation between March and December 2020, with exaggerated statistics, conspiracy narratives, and false cures emerging as the most prominent themes. The study further concluded that both newspapers predominantly framed misinformation within a public health risk and accountability perspective, while also employing fact-checking and corrective strategies. This framing approach positioned misinformation as a societal concern requiring clarification and responsible interpretation. The study also established that such reportage significantly influenced public perception by increasing awareness, encouraging adherence to health guidelines, and stimulating critical evaluation of information, although it also had implications for trust and public anxiety. Overall, the study concluded that the newspapers played a dual role as agenda setters and interpreters of health-related misinformation, thereby contributing meaningfully to public understanding and discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Media organizations should strengthen structured fact-checking systems to ensure that misinformation is contextualized responsibly before publication.
2. Newspapers should consistently adopt public health-oriented framing that prioritizes expert verification and societal well-being during crises.
3. Continuous professional training in health and crisis communication should be provided for journalists to enhance balanced and evidence-based reporting.

REFERENCES

- 1) Agley, J., & Xiao, Y. (2021). Misinformation about COVID-19: Associations with perceived stress and health protective behaviours. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 51(2), 90–99.
- 2) Ezeibe, C., Ilo, C. N., Ezeibe, E. B. C., & Ogueji, C. (2020). COVID-19 misinformation and the Nigerian media ecosystem. *Media Development*, 67(4), 5–18.
- 3) Hovland, C. I., & Weiss, W. (1951). The influence of source credibility on communication effectiveness. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 15(4), 635–650.

Examining the Reportage of Covid-19 Misinformation in Vanguard and this day Media Outlets from March to December 2020

- 4) Imison, E., & Schweitzer, E. (2021). Media and misinformation in times of crisis. *Journalism Studies*, 22(8), 1051–1068.
- 5) Jolley, D., & Douglas, K. M. (2020). The effects of conspiracy theories on public health behaviour during COVID-19. *Social Science & Medicine*, 269, 113369.
- 6) Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- 7) Kohring, M., & Matthes, J. (2007). Trust in news media: Development and validation of a multidimensional scale. *Communication Research*, 34(2), 231–252.
- 8) Laato, S., Islam, A. N., Farooq, A., & Dhir, A. (2020). Unmasking misinformation: Sources and impacts during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Information Processing & Management*, 57(6), 102389.
- 9) Lazer, D. M., Baum, M. A., Benkler, Y., Berinsky, A. J., Greenhill, K. M., Menczer, F., ...& Zittrain, J. L. (2018). The science of fake news. *Science*, 359(6380), 1094–1096.
- 10) McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.
- 11) Mian, A., & Khan, S. (2020). Coronavirus: The spread of misinformation. *BMC Medicine*, 18, 89.
- 12) Nielsen, R. K., & Schröder, K. C. (2014). The relative importance of social media for accessing, finding, and engaging with news: An eight-country cross-platform study. Reuters Institute.
- 13) Noar, S. M. (2006). A 10-year retrospective of research in health mass media campaigns: Where do we go from here? *Journal of Health Communication*, 11(1), 21–42.
- 14) Olagoke, A. A., Olagoke, O. O., & Hughes, A. M. (2020). Exposure to coronavirus news and mental health: The moderating role of health literacy. *Journal of Health Communication*, 25(10), 815–823.
- 15) Olatunde, O., Olapegba, P., & Mogaji, E. (2021). Media reporting and COVID-19 in Nigeria. *African Journalism Studies*, 42(3), 37–54.
- 16) Perloff, R. M. (2014). *The dynamics of persuasion: Communication and attitudes in the 21st century* (5th ed.). Routledge.
- 17) Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). *Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to attitude change*. Springer-Verlag.
- 18) Schiavo, R. (2013). *Health communication: From theory to practice* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- 19) Shoemaker, P. J., & Reese, S. D. (2013). *Mediating the message in the 21st century: A media sociology perspective* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- 20) Tasnim, S., Hossain, M. M., & Mazumder, H. (2020). Impact of rumors and misinformation on COVID-19 in social media. *Journal of Preventive Medicine and Public Health*, 53(3), 171–174.
- 21) Tsifti, Y., & Cappella, J. N. (2003). Do people watch what they do not trust? Exploring the association between news media skepticism and exposure. *Communication Research*, 30(5), 504–529.
- 22) Vraga, E. K., & Bode, L. (2020). Correction as a solution for misinformation: What research says. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117(24), 14288–14291.
- 23) Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*. Council of Europe.
- 24) World Health Organization. (2020). *Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: Promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation*. WHO.
- 25) Zarocostas, J. (2020). How to fight an infodemic. *The Lancet*, 395(10225), 676.