

Social Interactions and Relationships: Covid-19 Pandemic and the Emergence of the New Normal During the Lockdown in Universities in Nigeria

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Abstract

It is well known that as a reaction to the pandemic, governments initiated restrictions of movements and imposed a lockdown within every home in the world as a necessary step towards controlling the infection rate. This action of separation of people from one another, known as social distancing has had far-reaching repercussions for the social life of Nigerians as it was regarded as a strange intrusion into social interactions and relationships.

This research examines students' feelings on the forced distancing measures and online/offline relationships under the lockdown. It generates data from questionnaires. Simple percentage was used to analyse the data while Pearson Chi-Square was used to test a hypothesis.

The study revealed that a majority of the students (60.7%) were not satisfied with the lockdown while some of them (47.7%) were not satisfied with the online relationships. However, the absolute majority of respondents (80.1%) considered online relationships the best form of social interactions. The results show that COVID-19 lockdown is not a significant predictor of online relationship satisfaction.

Keywords: Social interaction, Lockdown, Online/Offline, Sign language, Nigeria, COVID-19.

Introduction

The lockdown initiated as a result of the coronavirus pandemic has been described as the most debilitating crisis since the World War II. It created upheavals in the social and economic lives of the people and had a huge impact on education. Social

isolation came into being preventing people from social interactions, including any contact with family, friends, spiritual mentors, teachers, colleagues, and neighbours, unless they lived in one adobe. By implication, people were isolated from the entire spectrum of physical interactions, thereby negatively affecting universally accepted normal human behaviour.

Studies have shown that the culture of developed nations encourages individualism (Ball, 2001). However, research from developing countries show that they live often in extended families and have a sense of community demonstrating close interactions with family members, friends and neighbours within small communities (Omonijo, et al., 2017). In some cultures, such as that of the Ogbaru Igbo people of Nigeria, an extended family includes the even daughters married out who continue to be present and exert influence in their parental homes (Maduagwu, 2012). The pandemic has been particularly hard on these closely-knit communities having to follow the rules of physical distancing in the interest of the preservation of lives of the other people.

Before lock-down, there was freedom for people to choose the mode of interaction between offline/physical or online/virtual interactions. However, it is assumed that with the lockdown and the forced enforcement of physical distancing rules, the communication dynamics will change. This may provide knowledge about new approaches to support the youth in their relationships. Youth in the context of this work refer to students within the age bracket from 15 to 24 years.



Fig. 1: Roadblock on Lagos-Ibadan Expressway at Berger, Lagos
Source: Punch, 2020

Further, the situation arising from the pandemic may have far-reaching impact on mental health arising from the enforced isolation. It is therefore imperative to examine the experiences of the young population to understand the ways in which the pandemic may have affected the quality of their relationships in the present situation. It is on this premise that the study aims to examine the quality of online/offline relationships of undergraduate youth under the Covid-19 lockdown in Nigeria. Hence, the study objectives are:

1. To identify the feelings of the youth about the lockdown and online relationships;
2. To identify the best form of relationship between online relationship and offline relationship in terms of social and academic affairs; and
3. To identify whether lockdown will significantly predict online relationship satisfaction.

Theoretical Framework

The emergence of COVID-19 was announced by the World Health Organization (2020) as a pandemic on 11th of March 2020. Alarmingly, one million cases were

reported globally on April 4, 2020, out of which fifty-five thousand persons were reported dead; and barely two hundred thousand survived the deadly disease. Studies have shown that the specific drug and vaccine for COVID-19 is yet to be invented (Cunningham, Goh & Koh, 2020). Although management of patients who were critically ill usually involved the use of ventilators, oxygen and IV fluids but Gao et al. (2020) argue that an old anti-malaria drug chloroquine was found to be useful in reducing the complications of COVID-19. Other interventions to stem the tide of mortality rates continued across the world through the use of Western orthodox medicines from developed nations and herbal medications from developing countries such as Nigeria.

August & Rook (2013) view social relationships as the links that exist between persons who have frequent interactions which the actors in the relationship consider meaningful. This perception clarifies the relationship between members of the family, neighbours, friends, co-workers and other associates and ignores social contacts or networks that are transitory or incidental. This shows that social relationships exist in degrees of existence. While some are ephemeral, some last for a long time. The former could be used to illustrate the relationship people have with their co-workers or service providers, commuters' etc., while the latter could be used to explain the relationships between family members and friends.

As evident in the Social Network (2013), there are two major types of relationships: formal and informal. The former is more predominant in developed nations that encourages individualism while the latter is more representative of interaction dynamics in the developing countries, where communalism is entrenched as the ideal form of social relationships. Communalism is an altruistic philosophy, which incorporates collective possession and is found in extremely localized autonomous populations. In contrast, formal relationship is the ideal relationship in work settings where strict policies control social interactions and human behaviour. It has a strong link with developed societies and was introduced to developing countries that had until then had until then practiced informal relationships in their various communities. Prior to the introduction of the formal systems, there has been nothing like work organizations where strict rules and regulations or policies applied. Every family was responsible for its sustenance via subsistent agriculture and other commercial activities.

It is known that culture defines people's identity. To Utomo, Andayani & Anindyarini (2023), language, art, ethnography and ethics are part of culture. Social life of people in traditional societies was anchored on bonds that reinforced social solidarity and support in times of bereavement, marriage, naming, burial ceremonies etc. (Adetola, et al., 2019), and was conducted mainly through physical relationships. This goes to corroborate the popular proverbs in Yoruba land, Southwest Nigeria which says "Eniyanlasomi" meaning "humans are my clothing". Indeed, it manifests through physical relationships and not online interactions. Offline relationships could be viewed as the interaction of people with one another through physical contacts.

However, it could also be regarded as the face-to-face interactions while the online version is the engagement of people in social interactions via the internet (Smith, 2017). This could be deceptive, according to Shao-Kang, Ai-Yun & Yu-Ping (2013). They argue that it encourages the manipulation of personal data with an intention of causing harm. Although studies have shown that deception is an all-pervading social problem within daily interpersonal interactions (Shao-Kang et al., 2013), it is more prevalent when it comes to online interactions. This is because the communication that

goes with such interactions is void of face to face or one-on-one contacts (Hancock & Toma, 2010).

Thus, the real identity of the person engaging in online interactions may never be known until the aim of the interaction is achieved. The online relationship is mainly a Western mode until developing countries came in contact with the West. Afterwards the advancement in science and technology has greatly influenced its engagement for social and academic interactions.

Education is the best service any government can give to its citizens. Habib Naseem, et al. (2022) assert that education is the main thing in the Arab village Sugihwaras. Given this, in order not to disrupt teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nigerian government has introduced online or virtual education. It is therefore reflective of our ideals as a culture that believes in communalism, to seek the opinion of the young students about the lockdown and social distancing, offline and online social, as well as academic relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In academic literature, theories are considered systems of thoughts that are properly articulated and verified to illustrate and predict specific phenomenon. Most of them are based on common knowledge that are independent of the elucidated phenomenon (Omonijo et al., 2017). Social theories are different from theories in natural sciences and are defined as statements of “why” and “how” some facts that are hinged on social activities are interrelated or explained for proper understanding (Ben-David, 1973). Symbolic interactionism is one of such theories in social and behavioural sciences. The paradigm emerged from the works of many (Cooley, 1902; Parks, 1915; Dewey, 1930) all cited in Aksan, et al., (2009), as well as Herbert Mead, cited in Griffin, Ledbetter & Sparks (2015). Moreover, other eminent scholars such as Blumer (1973) and Thomas, cited in Reynolds, (1993) have also contributed immensely to its development.

According to the idea of symbolic interactionism, people dwell in both the natural and symbolic environments. Symbolic interaction therefore is considered a process that enlivens the mutual meanings and values with the help of symbols input in human minds, while meanings represent the reciprocity of interactions between individual actors. Objects according to the authors who subscribed to this theory do not have any meaning outside the intention of the social actors that engage objects in social interactions. Thus, symbolic interactions could be described as the process of interpreting several actions of actors in a social relationship.

Vygotsky (1962) champions the interactionist viewpoint of language acquisition. According to him, social interaction plays a vital role in learning. Indeed, he proposes the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where learners learning construct the new language through socially mediated interactions (cited in Bruner, 1983). However, during the 20th century, scholars such as George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer developed symbolic interactionism, a synthesis of intellectual thought and rational methods with realistic actions. According to Mead (1934), the development of the self and language are thoroughly tied to one. Social interactionists, such as Alison Gopnik, Andrew Meltzoff, Anat Ninio, Roy Pea, Catherine Snow, and Ernest Moerk theorize that interactions with adults play an important part in children's language acquisition. Gestures become important symbols when they awaken in the individual making them the same responses which they explicitly arouse, or are supposed to arouse, in other individuals. Mead (1934) argues that people's selves are social products, but that these selves are also purposive and creative (cited in Griffin, Ledbetter & Sparks, 2015).

In contrast, Blumer (1969) provides three propositions: (i) people act toward things based on the meanings they ascribe to those things. (ii) Meanings of such things are derived from, or arises from the social interactions that one has with others and society. (iii) these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters. According to the interactionists, human beings are sensible actors who recurrently ought to regulate their actions to the other actor's actions. The adjustment can only come through when they can be well interpreted. Cooley's work on connecting society and individuals influenced Mead's further workings. Through his concept of the "looking-glass self", Cooley (1902) submits that society and individuals could only be understood in relationship to each other.

Goffman is known for his theory of social stigma. Goffman (1963) describes a stigma as an attribute, behavior, or reputation that is socially dishonouring in a particular way. It is a special kind of gap between virtual social identity and actual social identity. The society establishes the ways of classifying people. According to Macionis, symbolic interactionism is a framework for building a theory that sees society as the product of everyday interactions of individuals (cited in West & Turner, 2017).

Previous studies have shown that symbolic interactionism, which considered people as social entities have lost its dynamism in the early 1970s when a new paradigm, different and more synthetic than that of Mead and Blumer, known as Post-Blumerist emerged (Aksan et al., 2009). However, with COVID-19, a new order of symbolic interactionism may likely emerge in the academia. This is because with the COVID-19 pandemic, it appears that a new form of social interaction with symbols yet to be established in the literature has emerged while all other prevailing symbols in academia may lose relevance to serve the human quest for safety and survival. Such symbols include sign language (communication via gestures), greeting with the elbow or legs, sitting at a distance of at least six feet, wearing facemasks, washing hands and using sanitizers after physical contact with people, things or materials etc. With these actively in use during the COVID-19, the old order of hugging, shaking of hands, kissing, embracing, and eating together in public in groups etc. suddenly became a taboo that should be strictly avoided at all costs. The outcome of these in social interactions could be summarized as follows.

- It has brought to the fore the expediency of social ostracism that was strictly applied to lepers in traditional and modern societies. Thus, the same way people used to avoid lepers is the same way they avoid one another under COVID-19.
- The present new symbols of social interactions may likely become a sub-culture which may be very difficult to eradicate in human society.
- The applicability of social ostracism during COVID-19 may begin to impact negatively on people socially, psychological, economically and academically.

However, just like other theories in social sciences and humanities, symbolic interactionism has been subjected to several criticisms. One of these criticisms according to Slattery (2007 cited in Aksan et al., 2009) is that the theory fails to put forward a convincing argument due to the fact that authors who subscribe to it only describe society as a thing that exists in the minds of the people. In spite of this however, the new form of social interaction (i.e. the new normal) which humanity has begun to experience under COVID-19 is better explained with this paradigm.

Literature Review

Farayibi & Asongu (2020) adopt an aggregate supply and aggregate demand (AS-AD) mode in a study and reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic has insignificant negative impacts on basic macro-economic variables in Nigeria such as employment, GDP growth, inflation, and exchange rate. The way forward, they argue, is a deliberate policy action to stabilize the fluctuations in the Nigerian economy and enhance the performance of the basic economic variables. Amusan & Agunyai (2021) reveal that the lockdown stimulates not only the households and negative coping habits but also low purchasing power. Thus, Amusan & Agunyai (2021) recommend that equitable and transparent distribution of palliatives is a good strategy capable of tackling household hunger during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria.

On the contrary, Egielewa, et al. (2022) report that 1134 Nigerian students of higher institution have indicated that they are dissatisfied with virtual learning during the COVID-19 lockdown due to poor internet infrastructure and lack of electricity. As such, they prefer the traditional classroom setting to the online teaching technology. Oyovwe-Tinuoye & Atomi (2022) have carried out a descriptive survey study on COVID-19 lockdown in Delta State of Nigeria and have found out that the most used platform for online teaching by schools was WhatsApp. According to a study on students' perceptions of online course quality, Yang & Durrington (2010) reveal that group discussion, criticisms from lecturers, scheme of course work and support from fellow students were the deciding features that have led to the students' conclusion of dissatisfaction with online learning.

Interestingly, Hayatuddin, et al. (2020) have investigated COVID-19 lockdown impact on the Nigerian economy in four regions: Northwest, North-Central, South-South and Southeast. The findings have revealed that job losses, increase of social vices, rise in poverty levels, falls in economic activities, as well as falls in the level of GDP faced by individuals were not a result of the lockdown. The study recommends that lifting of lockdown would be the best action for the government to take for socio-economic resilience. Ugochukwu-Ibe & Ibeke (2021) have adopted quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (interview) methods and have revealed that lack of the requirements needed for remote education during the worldwide lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has impeded teaching and learning. Lack of stable electricity, poor internet network coverage, high cost of data tariff, technical issues with digital devices, and lack of IT skills are the major challenges to teaching technical courses in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

The findings from the study on COVID-19 and e-learning in Nigeria conducted by Mayowa-Adebara & Ekwueme (2020) have revealed that universities in Nigeria use online platforms such as Google Classroom, Google Meet, Google Hangout, WhatsApp, Moodle, Telegram, Edmodo, Office 365, Teams, Learning Management systems and Zoom in teaching, lecturing and assessing the students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has also been revealed that poor internet connectivity, little or low skills and knowledge about virtual platforms, irregular power supply, lack of smartphones, and high cost of browsing data are some of the challenges faced during the pandemic. They have therefore recommended that the federal government of Nigeria should endeavor to put in place infrastructure that will help universities to easily migrate from the traditional classrooms to the electronic or virtual environments.

Adeoye, Adanikin & Adanikin (2020) reveal that the adoption of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a lot of lapses and gaps in the Nigerian

educational system, especially in the public universities. They point out that challenges of e-learning in Nigeria range from irregular power supply, high internet subscription costs and poor internet access among other factors. The opportunities associated with embracing e-learning include convenience to the lecturers/learners, exposure, and cost benefits. They recommend that the government needs to be more firm in its handling of public university administration and help prepare them for the adoption of ICT and e-learning in Nigerian institutions.

Osamudiamen, et al. (2021) reveal that out of a total of 703 students and 60 teachers from five different local universities, 50% had difficulties with Internet connection. 67% of the Students as well as 59% of the teachers agree that they have had limited interactions with one another and this has negatively influenced student satisfaction. In fact, 40% were concerned about the number of assignments given. Most teachers (84%) believe that there is an increase in tendency for examination malpractices when assessment is conducted virtually. Students had significantly ($p < 0.05$) higher marks in all the courses during online assessment compared to previous sessions involving face-to-face teaching. About 83% of teachers admitted it was difficult to explain complex scientific concepts.

In a study on Tertiary students from the South-West part of Nigeria carried out by Adetona, Ogunyemi & Oduntan (2021), it has been revealed that e-learning has been employed for various aspects of learning including lectures (87.7%), quizzes (37.8%), assignments (69.6%), practical classes (15.2%) and examinations (17.4). A total of 88% of the respondents have indicated understanding of the concept of e-learning while only 12% have indicated outright that they did not understand the concept. Only 9.2% of the respondents have had 100% concentration during the online classes. Over 70% of the whole sample was apathetic to online learning while only 9.3% have preferred it to traditional teaching. The study has revealed that educational stakeholders should improve upon and extend the gains of e-learning to take fuller effect post-COVID-19.

Research Methodology

This study engaged exposit study design. This is because the data used was collected from students who practically experienced lockdown in the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic. The technique according to Akinlua (2019) is economical and does not waste time.

The population of the study consisted of university students who observed the six months industrial training at the Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria. The choice is hinged on their constant interactions with members of staff and industry-based supervisors socially and academically in the course of COVID-19. The population is two hundred and sixty. Out of this figure, a sample of one hundred and fifty was selected through a sample selection formula developed by Krejcie & Morgan (1970), which says:

$$X^2NP(1-P)/d^2 (N-1) + X^2P(1-P)$$

X^2 = the table value of chi-square for 1 degree of freedom at the desired confidence level (3.841).

N = the population size.

P = the population proportion (assumed to be .50 since this would provide the maximum sample size).

d = the degree of accuracy expressed as a proportion (.05). No calculations are needed to use.

A well-structured questionnaire was used to collect data for this study. The questionnaire was developed through Google forms and was sent to the students in their respective locations through email. Data collected were analysed through descriptive statistics. This involves the use of frequency, percentage etc. In addition to that, Pearson Chi-Square was used to test the hypothesis.

For the reliability and validity of instrument, the general rule of thumb is that a Cronbach's alpha of .70 and above is good, .80 and above is better, and .90 and above is best. However, for the analysis of the relationship between online and offline forms of social life among the youth, the result of .947 is indicated below.

Table 1: Case Processing Summary

Source: Author, 2023

		N	%
Cases	Valid	116	74.4
	Excluded ^a	40	25.6
	Total	156	100.0

- a. List wise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics

Source: Author, 2023

Cronbach's Alpha	No of Items
.947	16

Data Analysis

Table 3: Bio Demographics

Source: Author, 2020

Characteristics	Field Survey 2020	
	Frequency	Percentage
Dependent Variables	N-156	%
Sex		
Female	65	41.7
Male	91	58.3
Total	156	100
Age		
16-18	20	12.8
19-21	129	82.7
22-24	7	4.5
Total	156	100

Table 3 above offers a descriptive analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Starting from gender, majority (58.3%) of the respondents were females, while the remaining 41.7% were males. In terms of age, respondents within the ages 19-21 occupy the largest (82.7%) percentage and are followed by those within ages 15-28 (12.8%). This means that more than three (3) of every four (4) respondents sampled are between ages 19-21 while the respondents within the ages 22-24 occupy the least (4.5%) percentage.

Analysis of the Objectives

To respond to the objective one, respondents were asked the following questions, and their responses were as follows:

Table 4: Bio Respondents feeling about the lockdown and online relationship

Source: Author, 2020

SN	Questions	Options	F	%
1	How do you feel about the lockdown	Happy	39	25
		Not happy	95	60.9
		Not very happy	18	11.5
		Very happy	4	2.6
		Total		156
2	How do you feel about the online relationship?	Happy	71	45.5
		Not happy	74	47.4
		Not very happy	7	4.5
		Very happy	4	2.6
		Total		156

In the Table 4, 60.7% of respondents reported that they were not happy with the lockdown while 25% said they were happy. Respondents who were not very happy and very happy represent 11.5% and 2.6% respectively. Dwelling on this response, it could be deduced that the majority of students were not happy with the lockdown. Probably, it prevented them from having physical contact with their friends. Concerning the feelings of the students on online relationships, 47.4% students in the sample were not happy while 45.5% were happy. Those who were not very happy and very happy represent 4.5% and 2.6% respectively. However, it should be noted that the difference between students who were happy with online relationships and those who were happy was not significant.

In addressing the objective 2, respondents were asked the following questions and their responses were as follows.

Table 5: The best form of Social and Academic Relationships during COVID-19

Source: Author, 2020

SN	Questions	Options	F	%
1	Which form of relationship do you think is the best for social life during COVID-19?	Offline	31	19.9
		Online	125	80.1
		Total		156
2	Which form of relationship do you think is the best for academic life during COVID-19?	Offline	45	28.8
		Online	111	71.2
		Total		156

As indicated in the Table 5, respondents who thought online relationship was better than offline relationship during COVID-19 represented 80.1% while those who considered offline relationship as the best represented 19.9%. Concerning student academic life, 71.2% of the respondents considered online relationships as the best option while just 28.8% considered offline relationships as the best.

Hypothesis

Following hypotheses were formulated on the basis of this study.

H_0 : COVID-19 lockdown is not a significant predictor of online relationship satisfaction.

H_1 : COVID-19 lockdown is a significant predictor of online relationship satisfaction.

The above stated hypotheses were tested with Pearson Chi-Square as follows.

Table 6: Chi-Square Tests

Source: Author, 2020

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.663 ^a	3	0.3
Likelihood Ratio	3.549	3	0.314
N of Valid Cases	156		

X^2 = the table value of chi-square for 1 degree of freedom at the desired confidence level (3.841).

X^2 Cal = 3.663

The relationship between the covid-19 lockdown and online relationship satisfaction was tested to examine whether Covid-19 lockdown is a significant predictor of online relationship satisfaction. The result shows a significant bivariate Pearson chi square test at (0.000; $p < 0.05$). The decision rule states that if the calculated value is more than the table value, reject the null hypothesis (H_0), and accept the alternative hypothesis (H_1). But where the table value is greater than the calculated value, accept the null hypothesis (H_0). This accounted for the acceptance of the null hypothesis (H_0) and rejection of the alternate hypothesis (H_1) and then concludes that Covid-19 lockdown is not a significant predictor of online relationship satisfaction.

Discussion

In the above data analysis and testing of the hypotheses, majority of the respondents 60.7% expressed their dissatisfaction with the lockdown. As argued by Jones, Woods & Usher (2020), being engaged in social activities is being human and it encourages social interactions but when movements are restricted, people will not be happy, most especially the students who usually engage in movements from one place to another.

In respect of the findings on online relationships, one would have expected an absolute majority of respondents to express their satisfaction. However, surprisingly, the majority (47.4%) of them in the sample were dissatisfied with that form of relationship while 45.5% were satisfied. Considering the advancement in science and technology, which has been prompting many students to engage in online relationships, one would have suggested that COVID-19 would have made students to develop a preferences for online relationships but the reverse was the case. Probably the room for physical sexual interactions was not available for them because they were locked down in their respective homes.

Results in table 5, online relationship was better than offline relationship during COVID-19 with the total of 80.1% respondents which represented an absolute majority. However, in terms of academic life, 71.2% of the respondents considered online relationship as the best option. This may be attributed to the fact that students are

permitted to log on to classes via zoom anywhere they are and the stress of leaving the hostel on campus for lectures was not there.

From the hypothesis tested, Covid-19 lockdown is not a significant predictor of online relationship satisfaction at (0.000; $p < 0.05$). The response of the respondents on online social relationship at 80.1% and 71.2% on online academic activities could be used to support the result of the hypothesis.

Summary of the Findings

1. An absolute majority of the respondents (60.7%) were not satisfied with the lockdown.
2. Majority of the respondents (47.4%) but not absolute majority were not satisfied with the online relationship.
3. Absolute majority of the respondents (80.1%) thought online relationship was better than offline relationship during COVID-19 represent.
4. Absolute majority of the respondents (71.2%) considered online relationship for academic activities.
5. Covid-19 lockdown is not a significant predictor of online relationship satisfaction.

Conclusion

The lockdown during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria is a memorable one. The Nigerian government had to put preventive measures to minimize the spread of the virus. This distorted academic activities, amongst others in the country. Virtual teaching and learning were introduced to keep the educational system running and social interactions intact.

It is thus concluded that in terms of both teaching and learning, most teachers as well as the students were dissatisfied with the new measures. Equally, in terms of social relations too, most were dissatisfied with the new measures.

Recommendation

It is therefore recommended that a study of the dynamics emerging as a result of the “new normal” in social interactions be conducted with a view to documenting the effect of this on interpersonal relationships following the end of the lockdown in the future. Further, one interesting area for further research is the emergence of blended or hybrid academic and non-academic activities in Nigeria after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicting interests.

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