

The facemask: A tool for protection or an instrument for the transmission of COVID-19 in Nigeria?

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has destabilised the normal affairs of the world as countries have experienced millions of infections and thousands of deaths. This has led countries including Nigeria to adopt preventive measures such as the use of facemasks, hand washing, and hand sanitizer to help curb the spread of the virus. However, the use of facemasks as a preventive measure may aid in the spread of the virus if misused. This study was aimed at exploring some concerns about the use of facemasks in Nigeria as a coronavirus preventive measure. Thematic analysis of cases using narratives of events showing abuse and misuse of facemasks by Nigerians revealed how the use of facemasks can aid transmission of the virus because of indiscriminate transfer of the masks and indiscretions involved in the channel of distribution, from production to purchasing by consumers. The study highlighted the role of social workers in educating the public using diverse media options on the appropriated use of the mask and dangers of the abuse and misuse. This will aid in combating some of the false information arising during this pandemic.

Keyword: COVID-19, pandemic, infection prevention, facemasks, education

Introduction

The excitement of starting a new year and decade was soon cut short for many when in February of 2020, the world realised we were on the brink of warring with a pandemic. In March, true to the fears, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic. According to the WHO (2020), COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus linked to the same family of viruses as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some types of the common cold. The 'CO' stands for corona, 'VI' for virus, and 'D' for disease (Lu, et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). Also known as SAR-COV-2, the novel coronavirus is transmitted through contact with respiratory droplets of infected persons with its primary reproduction number estimated to be between 1.4 to 2.5, which implies that an infected person could infect between 1.4 to 2.5 people (Stewart, Connelly & Robinson 2020; WHO, 2020).

By June 17, 2020, there were about 8,265,174 confirmed cases and 446,149 recorded deaths globally with Nigeria recording the second-highest number of cases and death in Africa, with 17,148 confirmed cases and 455 deaths (Worldometer, 2020). The novelty and spread of the virus have forced the imposition of anti-infection measures, such as nationwide lockdowns, social distancing rules, and the use of facemasks and hand sanitizers, which have led to significant lifestyle changes for many people around

the globe (Pandey, 2020; Singla, 2020). In April 2020, as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, the president announced mandatory wearing of facemasks in public (NCDC, 2020) and state governors in Nigeria started implementing the compulsory use of facemasks in various states in line with protection recommendations from the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control [NCDC] (NCDC, 2020).

Despite the polarising positions on the effectiveness of facemasks in preventing infection (WHO, 2020), the use of facemasks has become one of the most prominent ways for citizens, especially those in densely populated regions of the world, to protect themselves and others from transmission (NCDC, 2020). However, the new facemasks policy has led to abuse and widespread misuse in Nigeria (Umeha, 2020; Salao, 2020). Observations on the streets of Nigeria and in the media show members of the general public and government officials covering only their mouths while some wear facemasks on their jaws and neck regions (Umeha, 2020). Some who wear the masks currently would occasionally pull it down to talk or cough. While women are seen rewashing disposable medical masks (Mathew, 2020) others share masks and try multiple fittings when purchasing masks from vendors (Oyeyemi, 2020).

The use of facemasks is effective in preventing the spread of COVID-19 when used appropriately and other preventive measures observed (Chan & Yuen 2020; WHO, 2020; Zhong, et al., 2020). However, the appropriate use of facemasks has the potential to create new challenges for the Nigerian government as the masks may give citizens a poor sense of protection while assisting in the spread of COVID-19. There have been a few studies on awareness, knowledge, and impact of COVID-19 in Nigeria (Kalu, 2020; Olapegba, et al. 2020; Ogoina, 2020) This paper is aimed at adding to the existing literature on the use of facemasks in Nigeria by using case narratives to show some situations where facemasks have been abused and misused, the implications for the spread of COVID-19 and the role of social workers as professionals with a significant role to play in creating awareness combating COVID-19.

Materials and Methods

Design

We adopted a qualitative case study design in our study. A qualitative case study is a research design in which an issue is studied through one or more cases (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Baxter and Jack (2008) noted that different forms of qualitative case studies exist. The descriptive approach to the case study was chosen for this study and it is an approach used to describe an intervention or event and the lived context within which it occurred (Yin, 2003). A case according to Yin (2014) may be a real entity such as an individual, a group, a partnership or an organisation, or a less concrete entity such as a community, a relationship, a specific project, or a decision-making process. Our study incorporated an individual case study of four individuals to illustrate different perspectives of the existence of our study problem. This approach enabled us to explore people's thoughts and experiences on the use of facemasks within the context of the coronavirus pandemic, using different data sources.

Participants and setting

Participants for the study were recruited from within Enugu, Enugu State, Nigeria. We focused on Enugu city due to the state government's enforcement of the use of facemasks. Purposive sampling was applied in the recruitment of participants. Four participants were recruited based on their observations, their experiences with the use of facemasks, and their willingness to share such experiences. The data was collected through in-depth interviews conducted in the English language. The four participants were made up of two females and two males who were above 30 years of age

Data analysis

Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed in form of case narratives. The narrative analysis is a family of approaches to diverse kinds of texts, which have in common a storied form (Riesman, 1993). Events are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated meaningfully to portray the sequence and consequences of actions. The narrative theme analysis was conducted in two stages. We first conducted a within-case analysis for each case, followed by a cross-case analysis for all cases. The emphasis of this analysis is on the context of the text "what" is said more than "how" it is said, the "told rather than the "telling" (Riesman, 1993). Williams (1984) and Cain (1991), were early scholars who exposed in their studies how the narratives organised by themes are well suited for case studies or vignettes providing illustrations. The narrative thematic approach is useful for theorising across several cases, finding common thematic elements across research participants and the events they report.

Ethical consideration

Before the commencement of the interviews, participants were duly informed that the data to be collected was solely for research purposes. Hence, voluntary informed consent was verbally obtained from each respondent before the data collection. They were also assured of the anonymity of their demographic data.

Results

Indiscriminate transfer of facemasks

The results of this study show some narratives which paint a clear picture of the grand misuse and abuse of facemasks in Enugu state. Many people use it to avoid being embarrassed or arrested by law enforcement agents or to gain access to banks, shopping malls, and other public places. This has led to citizens borrowing and wearing facemasks from strangers who have more than one facemask without prior knowledge about the safety of the facemask. Motorists carry extra facemasks for their passengers who may not have facemasks in order to avoid being accosted by the police. They pass the facemasks from one passenger to another, giving them to passengers who need facemasks but have none, without proper cleaning or sanitization after each use. A male respondent described his experience thus;

We were going to Ugwuaji on a Keke [tricycle] on this sunny afternoon. Three of the four passengers and the driver all had facemasks, but one passenger didn't have a facemask. Getting towards a T junction, we saw a police checkpoint some metres ahead of us. The passenger who didn't have a facemask started panicking because he didn't want to be arrested or harassed by the police. The driver told him not to worry, that he got him covered. As we drew closer to the police checkpoint, the driver opened the glove compartment of his Keke, brought out a facemask, and gave it to the passenger

who didn't have a facemask. Surprisingly, the passenger collected the facemask, thanked the driver, and wore it. Immediately we passed the police checkpoint, he removed it and gave it back to the driver with appreciation. The driver collected the facemask and put it back where he got it, confidently stating that this was the main reason why he kept those extra facemasks (Case 1).

The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting Nigerians in different ways. For example, visiting the banks before the pandemic was not always very smooth, with people getting frustrated waiting in queues to make transactions when they go to the bank. The pandemic made this worse as some banks shut down some of their branches putting more pressure on the branches that are in operation. Such bank branches make customers wait outside the banking hall and admit them in batches of 6 persons at a time to maintain social distance. Every person is required to wear facemasks. This has led to masks' vendors positioning themselves in front of the banks to sell to people who need to make transactions there. In some cases, people borrow facemasks from their friends, relatives, and anyone willing to give to them to have access to the banks. Here is a story told by a female bank customer;

We were waiting with the numbers we picked when we arrived at the bank, then one of the bank security personnel came to usher our batch in when the numbering got to our turn. As we were walking in, he spotted a young girl in the batch who was not wearing a facemask and told her that she won't be let into the banking hall without the facemask. He suggested that the young lady buy one from one of the vendors in front of the bank but the young lady said she didn't have money to buy one. At this point, an older woman, who might be in her early sixties put her hand in her purse, brought out a facemask and handed it over to the young lady staying in Igbo "nwa m nee nke a were, nkea bu nke gbakwara ofuu" [My daughter, take this one, this is now the new normal]. The young lady collected it, thanked the woman, wore it immediately, and entered the banking hall with us. I know she will give it back to her after her transaction in the bank (Case 2).

Testing the masks

For some people, the new COVID-19 protection laws have presented business opportunities for them. Tailors use left-over Ankara fabrics to mass-produce facemasks and many stores and street vendors/hawkers now sell the masks to make money. However, this may also be creating more problems as tailors use any available clothing fabrics – even inappropriate ones – to make these facemasks because no existing regulations are guiding the production of facemasks. Thus, the facemasks may be substandard and unable to protect people from COVID-19. Additionally, the vendors of these masks expose them to different environmental hazards and also allow prospective buyers test different masks before buying their preferred choice. The vendors go on to sell the facemasks already tested by other people to new buyers without washing, sanitising or disinfecting the masks. A female respondent narrated her experience;

You know that for you to buy any form of clothing or shoes in Nigeria you have to test it to see if it fits. Since the announcement by the Nigerian government that wearing of facemasks in public places is now compulsory, it

has become a business venture for many Nigerians. So last week, I went to the shopping mall and forgot my mask at home and was forced to buy from the vendor. On getting there, a young man was also there with the intent of buying one too. To my greatest surprised, he was testing the mask one after the other, using the screen of his mobile phone as a mirror to see the one the fits him better. He did this with at least four masks before he finally decided to buy one. I was just standing there watching and thinking to myself that this mask vendor will go ahead and sell those ones that this young man has tested and returned to other innocent Nigerians. There and then, I decided to buy the surgical mask which is more expensive but comes in a sealed nylon bag. I felt really bad but I couldn't say anything to avoid being insulted by anyone (case 3).

Picking up a facemask on the roadside

In addition to the lack of care or caution in purchasing these facemasks, many Nigerians are not concerned about the source of the facemasks they use. Any opportunity to secure free facemasks is accepted by many people. A respondent narrated how he saw a stranger pick a facemask from the roadside and happily wore it.

I was waiting for my parents in front of the bank. They could not let me in because of social distancing. There was no place for me to sit and wait and there was no shade to protect me from the scorching sun. Then I thought to myself that it might be best if I just go back inside our car to wait for them. As I was going back to the car, I didn't know that my facemask had fallen off since I had it in one ear. On getting to the car, I realised I no longer have it and got out to search for it. To my greatest shock, I saw a man walking past with his friend who bent, picked up the mask, dusted it, and wore it immediately, and continued walking. I just stood there watching since I could not ask him to give me back the facemask he already wore (Case 4).

The four case scenarios presented above shows that there are many problems associated with the use of facemasks in Nigeria, starting from production to use. First, poor design of the facemasks can expose users to coronavirus while giving them a false sense of protection. Secondly, the inappropriate transfer of facemasks from one person to another and the testing of different facemasks by buyers can aid in the transmission of COVID-19, as asymptomatic people who may already have the virus might wear a facemask and transfer the same facemask to uninfected persons who would wear it without proper sanitization thus exposing themselves to the virus.

Furthermore, analysis of the events presented in the data shows poor education and awareness of the risks involved in the abuse or misuse of facemasks as a protective measure. Many people do not understand how the virus is transmitted through aerosol droplets and might assume that just having facemasks is enough to keep them safe.

Discussion

This paper was aimed at exploring the issues associated with the use of facemasks as a preventive measure against COVID-19. The findings in this paper corroborated what was reported by Ogoina (2020) who revealed that many Nigerians abuse and misuse facemasks. Many Nigerians do not use the masks appropriately to cover their mouths

and nose (Umaha, 2020). We also reported that people try different facemasks on before deciding on which one to buy, which greatly aids the transmission of COVID-19. This is also corroborated by Oyeyemi (2020). We also reported that people were also observed transferring their used facemasks to others without properly sanitizing the masks while others reuse disposable facemasks multiple times (Mathew, 2020).

The issues associated with the use of facemasks may be linked to some skepticisms about COVID-19 among Nigerians. Many Nigerians get their information about coronavirus from social media (GeoPoll, 2020; Tsanni, 2020) and pay little attention to reliable media outlets (Effiong et al., 2020). This has created a battle between reliable information about COVID-19 and a plethora of false information. The culture of corruption has also led many Nigerians to opine that there is no need for facemasks because coronavirus is not in Nigeria. Some believe that the Nigerian government is only using it as an opportunity to obtain money from international organisations like the WHO and to loot from the economy (Sobowale & Royale, 2020). Many others believe they are immune to the virus and that ‘children of God’ cannot contact the virus (BBC, 2020; Onyeji & Adebowale, 2020). According to Kalu (2020), Nigerians are busy trying to feed themselves and do not have the luxury of fully observing the COVID-19 protection measures. This may be part of the reasons Nigerians see the use of facemasks as a mere formality to avoid being accosted by law enforcement officers and to gain access to public places.

The pandemic situation has created new vulnerabilities and societal gaps which social workers have the responsibility to respond to. In addition to being at the forefront of providing psychosocial care and support to people disproportionately affected by the pandemic, workers have a crucial role in public education and awareness creation. Misinformation about the virus and how to act to prevent or manage transmission can create a huge burden, not just on individuals, but on society in general. Social learning theory by Bandura (1977) can help provide an understanding of the interaction between an individual’s knowledge, experiences, the environment in which the individual operates, and the individual’s behaviour. According to the theory, an individual’s behaviour is the result of a learning process that is dependent in part on what is happening in the immediate environment of the individual and the society as a whole. Therefore, many Nigerians are not using the face mask properly because they do not understand the implications of the wrong usage rather they are more concerned about the punishment for non-usage.

Social workers can use both traditional and modern media of information transmission to educate citizens about the right measures to adopt in preventing transmission of the virus and adjusting to living in a time of the pandemic. The poor and illiterate in Nigeria and many other societies are those most ignorant about the right measures and are thus most vulnerable, hence, social workers should use creative grassroots-level means to engage with these groups and educate them about appropriate measures for protection against the COVID-19 pandemic. This may require collaboration with local government authorities, organisations committed to community development work, religious structures, and community stakeholders.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the use of facemasks as a preventive measure against COVID-19 might create more challenges than solutions for Nigeria in her fight to contain the novel coronavirus. Therefore, there is a need for the proper education of the populace on the use of facemasks and to have proper regulations regarding masks' production or distribution.

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