



COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND NIGERIANS' DIGITAL LIFE IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES

¹Targema, Tordue Simon & ²Obun-Andy, Maria Kisugu

Department of Mass Communication

¹Taraba State University, Jalingo

²Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, Ogun State

¹torduesimon@gmail.com

²maria76kisugu@gmail.com

07082484495

Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 has significantly altered individual patterns of interaction across the globe. The impediment on physical contact and emphasis on social distancing as a way of curbing its spread have given rise to new forms of interactions among individuals. In the ensuing new normal, digital life has taken centre stage, anchoring interactions of individuals in both public and private spheres. This study appraised the adoption of digital life in Nigeria during this period. Hinged on the Technological Determinism Theory, the study examined the sudden digital migration in Nigeria with the view to identifying the factors that facilitate the process and the obstacles that inhibit it. Using secondary data from books, official websites, and media reports, the study has established that although the Nigerian society adopts digital life as alternative to face-to-face interactions out of expedience, a combination of systemic, structural, social and environmental factors has constrained the process with grave consequences on the overall impact on the socio-economic advancement of the nation. It was concluded that effective digitization in the country requires a holistic approach towards addressing germane issues that retard socio-economic development in the country to create an enabling environment for productive digitization in both public and private spheres.

Key words: The New Normal: COVID-19, Digital Life, Public and Private Spheres.

Introduction

Since its outbreak in December 2019, COVID-19 has emerged as the most dreadful enemy of the world's public health. With hundreds of thousands of lives lost so far to the pandemic, millions of confirmed positive cases and the absence of either vaccine or cure at the moment, the virus pose great threats to global public health (Poonam & Rathi, 2020). The havoc which it unleashes overwhelms the health sector with rippling effects on other sectors such as politics, the economy, socialization and tourism among others (Ozili & Arun, 2020). The restriction on physical contact and emphasis on social distancing as strategies of mitigating its spread and the consequent lockdown of public and private ventures to effectively contend it have resulted in new forms of interaction that could facilitate business and administrative activities within safety limits (Quadri, 2020). In what appears to be the new normal the world over, digital life has taken centre stage in individuals' public and private lives, as Ladipo and Adebore (2020 para.3) note, that: 'to cushion the effects of the pandemic, the world is embracing technological innovations. Virtual interactions are increasingly adopted to replace face-to-face engagements and limit the total disruption to many sectors.'

To developed societies that had already incorporated digital life substantially into their daily routines prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, the digital switchover is not an issue, and hence, it took them no serious effort to adjust to the new normal in both public and private spheres. The situation in developing societies grappling with the challenge of serious technological backwardness is entirely different, as the digital switchover presents new challenges that are hinged on underlying technological deficits, facilitated by poor infrastructural development that could support a robust digital switchover. Ozili and Arun, (2020) pointed out that before the outbreak of COVID-19, Nigeria had a weak and largely underdeveloped digital economy, with hardly any university or school that offered a full educational curriculum online from start to finish. Most businesses, including banks and technological companies, operated using the traditional 'come-to-the office-to-work' model as opposed to the 'working-from-home' model.

With this analogue economic and administrative model, the sudden but mandatory digital switchover has introduced a challenging operational environment for individuals in both private and public spheres. The basic question which needs to be addressed is: does this sudden digital switchover portend any hope for a long-term move towards a more advanced digital economy, or it is simply an interim measure to mitigate the effects of COVID-19? This study investigates this concern deeply, taking cognizance of the underlying structural and systemic factors that both facilitate and constrain the digital switchover within the Nigerian socio-economic milieu, and suggests measures that must be adopted to consolidate on the gains which this development portends for Nigeria's socio-economic advancement both in the interim and post- COVID-19 era.

Technological Determinism Theory: A Framework for Adaptation to Digital Life

Technological determinism theory presents a framework for understanding the relationship between information and communication technology and the key features of society at any given period of time (Paragas & Lin, 2016). The theory explains the linkage between breakthroughs in communication technology and the factors that propel them to effectively drive social change in society. Sharma (2018) states that 'at the heart of the discussion on the theory of technological determinism lies the premise that technology is the basis for shaping society and any important event in society is based on the result of some innovation.' Adler (2006) emphasised the need to interrogate other variables as well in examining how technology impacts generations. Such variables according to him include economics, culture, geography, biology, and language. Adler notes that any exemption of these variables in the conceptualisation of the theory makes it deficient, as they have critical roles to play in the overall impact of technology in a given society.

Much as the theory explains the role of technology within the society, critics argue that it has the tendency of exaggerating the potentials of technology. Sharma (2018) used the egg-chicken analogy to explain this controversy. According to him, while appraising the role of technology in the society, it is pertinent to ask: did society feel the need for new technology or was new technology first presented to society and thereafter utilised? Adler (2006) noted that technology itself is socially determined: 'technology and social structures co-evolve in a non-deterministic, emergent process, the effects of any given technology depend mainly on how it is implemented which is in turn socially determined.' This suggests that the role of technology in the overall development of society is best appreciated within the context of use, implying that societies have varying capacities to use technologies, which at the end results in variations in the overall impact of such technology in different socio-economic or cultural contexts. Paragas and Lin (2016) explained this further by introducing two dimensions -the hard and soft determinisms- to the conceptualisation of technological determinism theory. According to them, hard determinism ascribes technology with omnipotence in shaping society, while soft determinism locates the power of technology with respect to other social and cultural factors present in the society.

While information and communication technologies have done appreciably well in facilitating the socio-economic advancement of nations, Nigeria- like many developing nations- lacks behind in this regard (Ozili, 2020). This worsens the impact of COVID-19 on the economy that relied heavily on face-to-face interactions. Ozili (2020) stressed that a robust and well-developed digital economy would have played a major role in driving speedy recovery from the economic crisis ignited by the pandemic; sadly, this is lacking at the moment. He argues that elsewhere, digital technology helped many businesses in developed countries to survive the effect of the pandemic. This scenario brings to the fore, the imperatives of a robust digital economy that could facilitate a more dynamic business environment.

From this prism, this study appraises the nature of the digital life which COVID-19 forces on Nigerians as a coping strategy in both private and public spheres. The argument is that although the Nigerian society is still at its low ebb in the transition to digital life, the exigencies of the day occasioned by COVID-19 have necessitated a sudden migration to digital life which, hitherto, was a long destination ahead. The subsequent sections offer an appraisal of this unexpected new normal on the Nigerian society. A multi-sectorial appraisal is undertaken to determine how the Nigerian society fares in its adoption of digital life in private and public spheres.

Outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria: Highlights of Major Developments

Nigeria recorded her index COVID-19 case on the 27th of February, 2020 (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control, 2020). The index case is an Italian traveller who tested positive for the virus in Lagos, the commercial hub and most populated city in the country (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control, 2020). According to Amzat, Aminu, Kolo, Akinyele, Ogundairo and Danjibo (2020), upon detection of the index case, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) activated a multi-sectorial National Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) to oversee the national response to the pandemic. Subsequently, the Presidential Task Force (PTF) for COVID-19 control was inaugurated on March 9, 2020. Following the increasing number of positive cases in the country, the Federal government on the 29th of March, 2020 declared a lockdown in the three endemic states of Lagos (the epicentre of the disease in the country), Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) and Ogun state to contain the spread of the virus (Onyeji, 2020). Several state governors also declared lockdown in their respective states following a spike of cases across the country (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control, 2020).

Inter-state travel ban was later imposed to prevent the movement of persons across states of the federation except for the supply of essential goods and services. Mobile courts were constituted across the states and the FCT to prosecute defaulters. Notwithstanding these proactive steps, the number of positive cases continued to increase in the country. By the 4th of May 2020, the federal government announced a gradual ease of the lockdown following the devastating effect it was exerting on the economy (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control, 2020; Adebowale, 2020). By this time, the country had recorded over a thousand cases already. With the lockdown relaxed, the number of positive cases skyrocketed at an unprecedented rate from just about a thousand cases at the end of April to over 41,000 cases by the end of July 2020 (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control, 2020). Coincidentally, the period of relaxed lockdown also heightened the calls for full re-opening of the economic activities, educational institutions, religious places of worship, the aviation sector, tourism and inter-state commuting. The absence of a robust digital economy to support this move raises yet another question of the safety of individuals in the country in the event that normalcy fully returns. In the following section, we'll appraise the nature of digital engagements that took place in Nigeria during the period of the lockdown.

Table 1 COVID-19 situation update in Nigeria as at July 29, 2020

States Affected	Confirmed Cases	Cases on Admission	No. of Discharged	No. of Deaths
Lagos	14,848	12,527	2,129	192
FCT	3,560	2,442	1,077	41
Oyo	2,668	1,454	1,187	27
Edo	2,212	549	1,584	79
Rivers	1,691	266	1,373	52
Kano	1,566	247	1,266	53
Delta	1,483	184	1,257	42
Kaduna	1,390	310	1,068	12
Ogun	1,326	235	1,068	23
Ondo	1,108	538	548	22
Plateau	1,016	528	469	19
Ebonyi	776	156	596	24
Enugu	769	326	425	18
Kwara	749	522	211	16
Katsina	742	262	457	23
Borno	612	16	561	35
Gombe	607	63	521	23
Abia	545	114	426	5

Bauchi	539	8	518	13
Osun	500	269	220	11
Imo	466	340	117	9
Benue	346	282	58	6
Bayelsa	327	42	264	21
Jigawa	322	3	308	11
Nasarawa	310	79	223	8
Niger	224	79	133	12
Akwa Ibom	221	93	121	7
Sokoto	153	0	137	16
Adamawa	140	46	85	9
Anambra	132	45	75	12
Ekiti	124	67	55	2
Kebbi	90	4	79	7
Zamfara	77	1	71	5
Yobe	66	4	54	8
Taraba	54	43	11	0
Cross River	40	28	9	3
Kogi	5	0	3	2
Total	41,808	22,172	18,764	868

Source: NCDC, 29th July, 2020

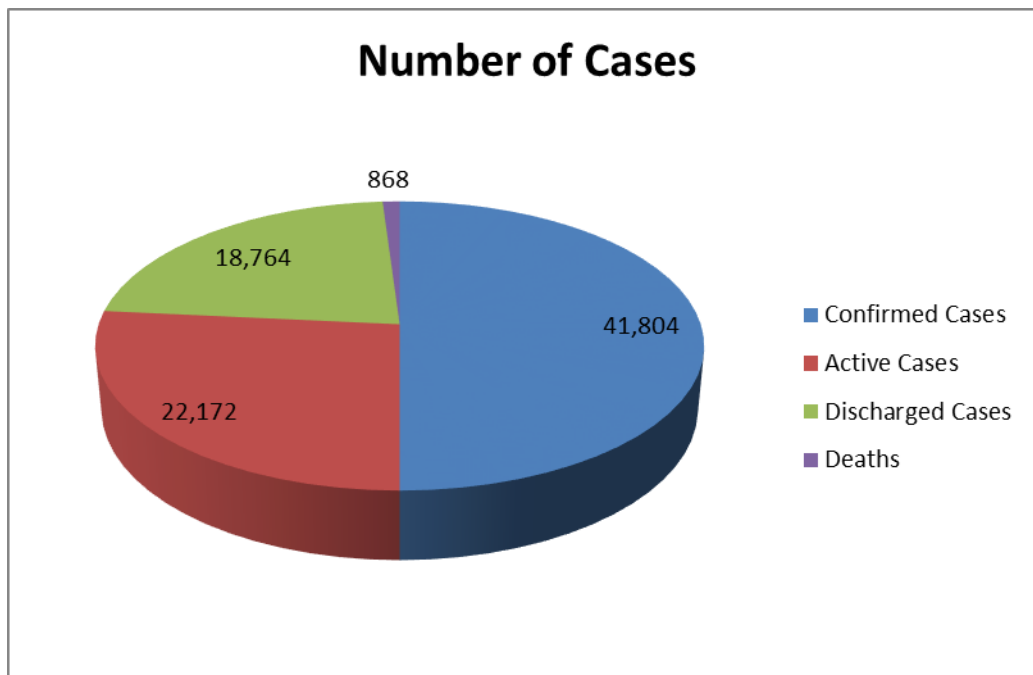


Figure 1 Summary of COVID-19 cases in Nigeria as of July 29, 2020.

Source: NCDC, 29th July, 2020

The Adoption of Digital Life in Nigeria's Public and Private Spheres

Digital life is a brainchild of necessity occasioned by the consequences of COVID-19 on the people's public and private lives in Nigeria. Though abrupt and impromptu, the restriction on movement and emphasis on social distancing to mitigate the spread of the virus saw the country suddenly adopting digital life as a last resort. Digital life which is the new normal in line with COVID-19's safety protocol is adopted worldwide to keep the spread of the pandemic at bay and at the same time yield to the basic necessities of life. What leads to variations in the degree of efficiency across countries and regions of the world is the age-long digital divide question, i.e. the level of technological advancement and sophistication of individual nations, the structures on ground that would facilitate a digital life, and the orientation of individuals and institutions in each country towards an ICT-driven life. This section appraises the adoption of digital life in Nigeria as experienced in the following sectors:

The political and administrative scenes

With the declaration of lockdown in Nigeria, full administrative activities migrated to the internet, except where it was absolutely necessary for physical meetings which were usually held in strict compliance with the WHO/NCDC safety protocol for the pandemic. Senior Special Assistant to President Muhammadu Buhari in a series of tweets he issued after he and other people working in the Villa were denied access after attending the burial of the late Chief of Staff to the President, Abba Kyari said:

There is nothing extraordinary about those of us who attend Abba Kyari's funeral being advised to distance ourselves from the Villa... For the most part, the Villa has operated digitally in the last few weeks so there is really nothing new to this (Iroanusi, 2020 para. 7 and 9).

Indeed, most of the activities of the Villa were carried out through online interactions throughout the period of the lockdown. During the period of the lockdown, the PTF would hold daily briefings that were widely broadcast on national TV stations across the country to keep citizens abreast with latest developments about the virus. On May 13th, 2020, President Muhammadu Buhari presided over the first virtual National Executive Council meeting (Premium Times 13th May, 2020). Other crucial administrative engagements with both domestic and foreign audience were done via virtual meetings. Indeed, the period of the national lockdown- and beyond- has been eventful politically, necessitating substantial incorporation of digital or e-governance across the country. The federal government and its arms as well as state governments engaged with national and international agencies virtually in search for support and collaborations in the fight against the pandemic.

Governance migrated to the virtual world while the lockdown lasted. Most of the state governors and top government officials announced their positive statuses on their social media handles. Governor Nasir El-Rufai of Kaduna State and Mr Geoffrey Onyeama (Foreign Affairs Minister) are typical examples. All through his ordeals with the pandemic, Governor El-Rufai issued regular updates on his twitter handle which were widely shared on social media platforms by his fans. During this period too, he issued periodic instructions to his lieutenants and subjects in the state via his social media handles. Other governors too courted the new media to link up with their aids and the masses while they went into self-isolation as they battled with the virus.

The economic sector

The business world has embraced ICTs long before the outbreak of COVID-19 (Folayan and Obun-Andy, 2020; Roztockí, Soja & Weistroffer, 2019). This is not unconnected to the tremendous benefits which they offer towards enhancing transactions, promotions and advertisements of business ventures. The saturation of online shopping stalls in Nigeria in recent years lends credence to this. Folayan and Obun-Andy (2020:86) noted that: 'the country's e-commerce space is growing as companies such as *Yudala*, *Jumia*, *Konga* and *Jiji* to mention just a few, are online malls recording huge patronage by online customers.' Buying and selling takes place in Nigeria substantially on the virtual world. Today, people buy goods online and get them delivered to them at their doorsteps. Services such as visa and flight tickets, train tickets, hotels reservations etc. are booked online with great efficiency. Several companies and organizations in the country have online outfits that offer the same services to online customers the same way they do to offline customers.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has accelerated this trend. During the period of the lockdown, many ventures migrated completely to e-marketing. The social media world was agog with advertisements of all sorts-consumables, cosmetics, automobiles, electronic gadgets, fabrics, airtime and internet services etc. from suppliers competing for customers on the online space. An average social media user was simply bombarded with advertisements on a wide array of products and services. How effective this strategy was to business ventures that were hitherto, basically offline, is a different issue altogether. One thing that cannot be contested is the fact that suppliers and consumers were in touch despite the lockdown. One question again that is pertinent to ask is whether this online obsession will continue after the lockdown. As we shall discuss in the subsequent sections, several obstacles inhibit this trend, with the capacity of limiting the magnitude of impact on the business community in the country.

Education

Education is one of the areas that quickly embraced virtual interaction as alternative in the wake of the pandemic. The reason for this quick courtship is not farfetched. Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, the process of sharing and acquiring knowledge was carried out substantially online; hence, it is not a surprise that several universities across the globe migrated completely online when the situation eventually presented itself. Several universities that were not able to round up their semesters or academic sessions before the lockdown considered moving online as an interim measure (BBC, 2020). There are serious issues in the process though, as experts argue that virtual interactions cannot effectively substitute for face-to-face method of teaching and learning.

Although e-learning presented a convenient alternative in the developed world, the Nigerian case is entirely a different one. As we shall highlight shortly, structural issues such as gross technological deficits, the age-long digital divide question, endemic poverty, gender and structural inequality constitute serious stumbling blocks in this regard (Adeoye, Adanikin and Adanikin, 2020; Adedigba, 2020). Under this circumstance, e-learning was not an option in Nigeria. Moreover, certain immediate courses served to halt the move towards e-learning in the country. First, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) - a trade union of teaching staff in government-owned universities in Nigeria had embarked on an indefinite strike prior to the national lockdown to press home their age-long demands. These demands include among others the revitalization of public universities in the country, increased funding of universities for more effective teaching and learning, improvement in staff welfare and payment of earned academic allowances as well as to express their stiff resistance to the federal government's Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS) among other demands (Aluko, 2020). With this strike in place, academic staff of government-owned universities were vehemently opposed the move towards e-learning, and insisted that even after the lockdown, their demands must be met before government universities in the countries will reopen (Kabir, 2020).

Apart from the ragging ASUU strike, the poor state of infrastructure in intuitions of learning across the country served as a big stumbling block to e-learning. Regrettably, the state of infrastructure in schools across the country from nursery schools up to universities is too poor for effective e-learning (Adeoye, Adanikin and Adanikin, 2020). Coupled with this are inherent socio-economic actors that serve as impediments to e-learning such as endemic poverty, poor electricity supply, poor internet connectivity especially in rural areas, high data charges and the digital divide between the rich and the poor in the country among others (Hussain, 2020; Adedigba, 2020).

Notwithstanding these, much has been achieved in the process of sharing and acquiring knowledge in Nigeria through the virtual means. A highlight of some key developments is given here to add to the broader picture of the digital life in Nigeria during the lockdown. During this period, many private universities and government universities that are not affiliated to ASUU have maintained contact with their students via the internet even though the scope of the interaction was limited. Other tertiary institutions in the country such as polytechnics and colleges that were better predisposed made frantic efforts to enhance online interactions between staff and students, as well as the enrichment of internet resources that students could access even at home. Activities such as research supervision were carried out between candidates and supervisors online. Some universities and



higher institutions have held virtual matriculation ceremonies in line with laid down guidelines. Examples of such universities include Osun State University and Chrisland University (Raheem, 2020).

Similarly, activities that hitherto required physical presence of candidates such as post Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) (the common tertiary institutions' entrance examination in the country) screening and aptitude test which used to hold at the premises of individual tertiary institutions to screen eligible and qualified applicants is now done online in several universities across the country in line with NCDC guidelines. Other essential services that usually demanded physical presence of candidates such as payment for and processing academic transcripts are carried out online across universities in the country.

One aspect of education that has benefited tremendously from the opportunities of the virtual community is the organization of academic conferences, workshops and meetings. With the ban on crowded gatherings, these revered academic practices have shifted online where scholars in the country engage actively among themselves and with colleagues across the globe to brainstorm on a wide array of issues. Virtual zoom meetings and webinars have become the in-thing with scholars actively participating and sharing knowledge among themselves. Although this does not truly represent or replace the conventional method of sharing experience among academics, it provides in the interim, a viable alternative that scholars are adopt as the pandemic rages on.

Similarly, research activities have significantly migrated online. The new normal has birthed a situation where researchers consider research methods that would yield valid data without having to meet with respondents physically. Adom, Osei and Adu-Agyem (2020) enumerated some of these research methods to include telephone interviews, video conferencing interviews, text based/instant messaging interviews, electronic survey and the drive towards exploring the possibility of optimizing and utilizing secondary data for research. All these strategies and indeed many more are employed to conduct research by academics in the country.

Another trend which is worthy of acknowledgement here is the move towards mass-mediated learning to keep students and pupils at the elementary levels of education in the country abreast with educational materials during the lockdown. The federal and state governments have come up with the initiative termed 'school-on-ear' to broadcast educational contents that share semblance with classroom settings to viewing and listening students at home. Non-governmental organizations have also cashed into this initiative to ensure that the damage of COVID-19 on the educational pursuit of children in the country is mitigated. This initiative is, however, constrained by the same challenges mentioned earlier, especially at the grassroots where the capacity to receive television messages is low. Other constraints include gender barriers and the natural plights and vulnerability of people living with disabilities as well as those in IDPs camps (Nigerian Education in Emergency Working Group, 2020).

Religious practices and digital life in Nigeria

The period of lockdown in Nigeria saw religious activities migrating to the e-world. Incidentally, the period coincided with serious of events lined-up across faiths and religious denominations in the country. The Easter celebration and all activities leading to it held in low key and basically online. E-worship was, indeed, a global trend following the closure of churches in Italy, one of the worst-hit countries by the pandemic in its early days (Diseko, 2020), and later in Britain and other European countries. Sulkowski and Ignatowski (2020:7) for instance, confirmed in their research on the organization of religious behaviour in different Christian denominations in Poland that:

All Churches, from Catholic and Orthodox to Churches after the Reformation, use modern technologies in this regard. They have the ability to broadcast their services on public television and on the radio. Regardless, they use social media, such as YouTube or Facebook... The Methodist pointed out that 'his parish had set up an official website devoted to coronavirus'... All the clergy emphasized that sermons, catechetical materials, and services were regularly posted on the official websites of their parishes. According to the first pastor of the Adventist congregation, 'all services have been moved to the Internet... the faithful meet online.



This trend was wholly embraced by Churches in Nigeria. *Televangelism* (as it is often referred to in Nigerian parlance) dates back to the pre-COVID-19 era. Already, several Churches in the country have their media outfits cutting across conventional and social media. Typical examples include the Catholic Television, Emmanuel TV of the Synagogue Church of All Nations, Dunamis TV and many other gospel television stations in the country. Many clergymen have long embraced the practice of e-preaching, and utilize all the media options at their disposal- print, electronic and the new media- to reach out to their followers across the globe. Classical examples include Prophet T.B. Joshua, Pastor W.F. Kumuyi, Pastor David Oyedepo, Pastor Enoch Adeboye, Pastor Paul Eneche, Apostle Johnson Suleiman, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome among a litany of other house-hold names too numerous to mention.

Thus, it took Nigerian clergymen no time at all to key into the practice of digital evangelism during the period of the lockdown. Afolaranmi (2020) revealed some of the strategies which clergymen in the country adopted to keep in touch with their subjects during the lockdown to include the use of social media platforms such as Facebook/live streaming, Twitter handles, WhatsApp groups, use of telephone, zoom, YouTube, Text Messaging Service (SMS), online Sunday services, email, teleconference facilities, the use of broadcast media (radio and television), print media avenues- books, pamphlets and leaflets, online radio, webinars, video and audio recordings among a host of other practices. The application of these, however, depended largely on many variables such as familiarity with ICTs by clergymen and their subjects, availability of some of the facilities, financial strength of Churches, geographical factors and the operational mode or uniqueness of Churches and denominations. The study recommends that:

Pastors should embrace the use of the Internet and other technological tools in their pastoral ministry. While the traditional physical means of pastoral ministry should be continued as much as possible, Pastors should be thinking of how to make Internet ministry not only an alternative ministry, but also as supplementary to the traditional ways of pastoral ministry (Afolaranmi, 2020:169).

The situation in the Nigerian Islamic world was not different either. The period of national coincided with the year's Holy month of Ramadan. Key events of the month such as Tafsir- the Islamic tradition of Quranic recitation, meditation and reflection during the Holy month- which usually attract crowds in one place were performed on the broadcast media and other online channels such as social media, live streaming, YouTube and zoom. Islamic TV stations in the country- such as Ibadah TV- and paid airtime on national and local television and radio stations were utilized to broadcast the Tafsir to receiving audience at home without physical gatherings in Mosques. These virtual means helped to ensure religious consciousness of people in the country during the lockdown.

Tourism, entertainment and socialization

The negative effect of COVID-19 is greatly felt in the tourism industry. The lockdown took its toll adversely on the industry, leading to abrupt cancellations of flights, hotel bookings, and venues/event centres' bookings (Oruonye and Ahmed, 2020). Tourism and entertainment are important sources of revenue in Nigeria, with Nollywood and the music industry engaged in massive production of cultural products such as films, comedy kits, music and reality shows etc. that are widely consumed across the country and massively exported to foreign audience. The abrupt lockdown crashed the industry's investments in no small measure. Tourism activities and entertainment migrated to the virtual world entirely, thanks to the earlier marriage between the art and ICTs. Live streaming of performances, comedy kits and music clips saturated the internet while the lockdown lasted. Producers courted virtual means as the major arena for disseminating their outputs.

Perhaps, one of the most significant events in the entertainment industry that took centre stage on the virtual world is the 2020 edition of the famous reality show- the BigBrother Naija (BBNija). As one would expect, all the processes leading to the show such as audition and screening of participants took place online. Augoye (2020: para.5) reports that: 'over 30,000 Nigerians participated in the online auditions. According to MultiChoice Nigeria (organizers of the show), this is the highest number of auditions they have ever received in the history of the show.' The eventual decision to flag-off the show was made known via a virtual press conference. All these developments portray the strong courtship between tourism and entertainment in the

country and ICTs. Indeed, the tourist industry leverages on the avenues of the virtual community significantly in putting up with the devastating effects of the pandemic.

Socialization is not left out. In the course of the lockdown, social lives of individuals were lived online! People maintained contact with one another via the various online platforms. Social networking was at its best. Most of the activities that were typically carried out in real life prior to the pandemic such as family meetings, cooperative societies' meetings, wedding committee of friends meetings and funeral meetings among others which form part and parcel of life and communal existence within the Nigerian society were moved to the virtual world. Meetings on these fronts were held and fruitful deliberations were made, with decisions taken online, backed by action in real life. GSM network providers weighed in to assist individuals effectively live their social life online with incentives such as bonus data. Popular service providers such as MTN and Airtel gave each user up to ten daily free SMSs for about two months during the lockdown to enhance their digital lives. Thus, within a very short period of time, individuals shifted their routine daily interactions online to maintain contact with one another within the safety protocols and stipulated guidelines for curbing the spread of the disease.

Contending Issues and Key Concerns

The preceding sections provide insights into the nature of digital lives which Nigerians adopted as a brainchild of necessity and circumstance to put up with the devastating effects of COVID-19. In this section, we give a run-down of the major challenges that constrain effective adaptation to digital life in the country. These challenges are:

- i. **Endemic poverty:** Poverty is one of the biggest problems which the Nigerian society is grappling with. The Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (2020:6) estimates that about 40.1 per cent of the Nigerian population is classified as poor. According to the report: an 'average 4 out of 10 individuals in Nigeria have a real per capita expenditure of below 137,430 Naira per year. This translates to over 82.9 million Nigerians who are considered poor by national standards.' With this endemic poverty, many citizens do not have the means to effectively adapt to digital life. This reality became glaring during the sudden digital migration that saw many people left behind in the new normal. Ladipo and Adoberi (2020) observed that a vast majority of students from poor families could not afford the basic requirements of e-learning during this. Lack of access to either radio or television, coupled with poor electricity supply, lack of internet access and educational technological resources etc. create a gap in their academic progress for as long as this pandemic persists. Summarily, poverty represents a major obstacle in the quest to adapt digital life by Nigerians during the period of the lockdown.
- ii. **Inequality and class differences:** The wide gap between the rich and poor in the country did not help matters either. Ladipo and Adoberi (2020:para.8) observed that: 'COVID-19 is magnifying the educational inequity in Nigeria as only those with access to digital learning resources will keep learning in the comfort of their homes while those without access (the majority) are left behind.' This effect is not felt in the educational sector alone, but indeed, in all other sectors. In the final analysis, therefore, digital interactions in the country are exclusively for the few who could afford them, with the vast majority wallowing in deprivation and neglect. The e-resources are too expensive for the majority, hence, exacerbating the already existing gaps between the rich and the poor in the country (Hussain, 2020).
- iii. **Poor computer and ICT skills among individuals:** computer literacy is key to effective adoption of digital life. The fact is that people are naturally inclined to go with what they are used to. Poor ICT skills inhibit people's willingness to adopt digital life. Much as the modern gadgets are easy to use, peoples phobia for technology in the country remains high with ICT literacy still low. This has the capacity of retarding effective digitization in the country.
- iv. **Gross underdevelopment and neglect of rural areas:** closely related to the above is the total neglect of rural areas in the country. World Bank (2020) estimates that about 98,156,651 million people in



Nigeria (49.66 % of the entire population) live in the rural areas. Unfortunately, Nigerian rural communities are deprived of the basic necessities of life such as access roads, electricity, healthcare facilities and portable water supply among other crucial social amenities. Several rural communities in the country do not have GSM network and internet access, as the broadcast media especially television are exclusively reserved for urban centres. The level of technology acceptance and penetration at the grassroots in the country is very low. This neglect and deplorable condition of rural areas accounts for the rural-urban drift in the country, as they are no longer attractive to the youths. Apparently, such an environment does not facilitate effective digitization. Thus, any engagement carried out via the virtual world during the lockdown is at the detriment of rural dwellers. To facilitate effective digital life in the country, frantic efforts must be made to fast-track infrastructural development at the grassroots so as to carry along people living in those areas. Until this is done, digitization remains a mirage in the country and will, at best, help to perpetuate the marginalization of the already disadvantaged rural communities.

- v. **Gender domination and marginalization vulnerable groups:** this is another constraint to effective digital life in the country. In a patriarchal society like Nigeria dominated by masculine values where women are considered inferior, their opportunities to actively participate in a digital economy are largely limited. Nigeria is a typical example of a society where women's use of ICTs depends largely on the whims and caprices of the men in their lives- husbands or parents as the case may be. Other vulnerable groups in the country such as the physically challenged, the downtrodden and street beggars, people living in Internally Displaced Peoples camps that are littered all over the place recently due to the growing insecurity in the country etc. also have very low access to ICTs, with concomitant implications on a productive and inclusive digital life.
- vi. **Poor electricity supply/GSM network service/internet service:** epileptic electricity supply in Nigeria portends grave consequences on the digital life of citizens. Electricity supply is largely unstable and unreliable in the country. The same applies to GSM network and internet services especially in rural areas. Compounding these are high electricity bill and high airtime/data charges. These frustrate the quest to adopt digital life in the country in no small measure, and have the potency of forestalling the overall impact that digitization portends.
- vii. **Digital safety and cyber security concerns:** another obstacle to digital life in the country is the issue of safety or security on the virtual world. Online fraudsters and scammers are at their best, always making frantic attempts to defraud unsuspecting victims on the various platforms- social media, e-mail, SMS, and weblogs etc. in the name of online businesses. Indeed, quite a number of people have fallen victims of their tactics, thereby heightening security and credibility concerns as people interact on the virtual world. As we strive towards digital life in the country, there is the need to increase online safety measures and awareness to mitigate the effect which this dangerous trend has on effective digitization.
- viii. **Poor postal services:** poor postal services do not help matters as people transact online. The inability of the Nigerian Postal Service (NIPOST) to effectively deliver as expected forces people to patronise private postal agents that charge exorbitantly, thereby making online shopping too expensive for many. The shipping cost when imbued in the cost of a product makes online commodities extraordinarily expensive, and hence discourages people from shopping online.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has demonstrated how the Nigerian society adopts digital life in public and private spheres during the COVID-19 national lockdown. It has established that like every other society, the Nigerian society adopts digital life as an alternative to keep afloat in the course of the lockdown. The development, however, is very sudden and least anticipated, hence, it encounters severe structural, systemic, environmental and social forces that have constrained it, thereby reducing the overall impact on the socioeconomic wellbeing of individuals and the country at large. Like technological determinists would suggest, the drive towards digital life in the country is not backed by the readiness of the society to do same, and hence, falls short to deliver the desired social change. To make digitization truly workable in the country moving forward, it is expedient to put in place the necessary structures that would facilitate it. This requires a holistic approach towards addressing germane issues that retard socioeconomic development in the country such as accelerating infrastructural development from the grassroots, flattening the inequality curve in the country, improvement on electricity



supply, frantic effort to reduce the endemic poverty, strengthening cyber security and digital safety, and investment in the telecommunication industry to enable it serve the needs of the Nigerian society optimally. This will go a long way to provide an enabling environment for a more productive digital life, with rippling effects on other sectors of the economy.

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