

Critical Discourse Analysis of National Centre for Disease Control Messages on Covid-19 in Nigeria

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Abstract- Health Messages on SARS COVID-19 during the pandemic proliferated the Nigerian media space with information on the causes and dangers posed by the deadly Corona Virus. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Health (FMOH) and a presidential Taskforce made concerted efforts in creating awareness about the disease through daily updates on mortality, recovery and infection rates across the country. The mainstream media, with support from local and foreign donors, also designed several educational health messages on risks and vulnerability factors associated with the Corona Virus. Regrettably, misconceptions on risk and vulnerability factors associated with the virus still persist spawning a pandemic narrative that contradicts what is obtainable in scientific literature. Against this background, this study examined the ideological underpinnings in National Centre for Disease Control Messages on Covid-19 in Nigeria with a view to enhance the quality of data health messages on diseases are framed. A qualitative research design that combines Content-based Analytical Approach and Critical Discourse Analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2015, Wodak & Fairclough, 2013; Bednarek, 2006) was adopted for the study. The first step of the analysis was a Language Audit that involved the identification of specific critical discursual features namely: Perspectivization, Focalization, Topoi, Metaphor, Semantic Prosody in the selected Educational Health Messages. The second step is a Thematic Content Analysis that involved transcribing, coding and classifying selected themes in the data. Data to be derived from the textual analysis and thematic analysis were used to explain how risks and vulnerability to SARS COVID-19 are construed in health messages. Results of the analyses was then used to determine whether risk in Health Messages on SARS COVID-19 is associated with the following variables: a dangerous disease that has no cure and is contagious [D; nC; C] or whether vulnerability to SARS COVID-19 can be determined by Age, Race, Region and Gender [A; R₁; R₂ G]. The public health implications of the expected findings will be discussed in respect to (a) global mis-information on the SARS COVID-19 pandemic, (b) Health Education/Advocacy in Nigeria (c) perception of risk and vulnerability in pandemic discourse on SARS Covid-19. It is anticipated that the findings derived from the study would significantly enhance the quality of data on which health programs are designed. It would also

guide researchers to rework their theoretical assumptions and frameworks as they embark on new empirical and theoretical inquiries on the SARS COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Risk; Vulnerability; COVID-19 Pandemic Narrative; Critical Discourse Analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Language, Ideology, Power and Social Relations
The relationship between language and ideology is closely intertwined, as it is through language that power dynamics embedded in communication are manifested. Ideologies are conceptualized as systems of beliefs or social constructs. This implies that the beliefs in question are not subjective or individualistic in nature, but rather are products of the individuals who adhere to them (Omotola, 2009). However, these beliefs are not merely individual opinions, but rather they are ideas that can be accessed by a group as socio-culturally shared knowledge, encompassing collective attitudes, norms, and values (Scarborough, 1990). Undoubtedly, it presents a challenge to conceive of a society that could operate without the presence of an ideology in some form. According to Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield (1994), the mass media fulfil a role in maintaining and disseminating ideologies. This is achieved both indirectly through mediation processes and directly through news products. The primary mechanism for this dissemination is through the use of news language.

According to van Dijk (2005), ideology can be understood as a distinct type of social cognition that is commonly held by social groups, particularly through the medium of news discourse. This implies that the mass media has a significant role in shaping the social perceptions and behaviours of individuals within a group. Specifically, it influences their communication patterns, while also serving as a tool for creating, perpetuating, and questioning ideologies. Ideology can be conceptualized as a cognitive framework that facilitates individuals'

functioning within a given society, since it serves as a model for justifying and explaining societal phenomena. The influence of ideologies on the linguistic portrayal of social groups extends to the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge within these groups. This concept can be likened to what van Dijk (2005) refers to as "group knowledge."

1.2 Framing Ideology, Power and Social Relations in Discourse: Perspectives from CDA

Jahedi et al. (2014), emphasize that under the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the concept of "ideologies" is not regarded as an abstract realm of ideas, but rather as interconnected with tangible actions that are deeply rooted in social institutions. According to Wodak (2015), the aforementioned statement is supported, and she argues that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is primarily concerned with the less overt form of ideology. Wodak asserts that CDA focuses on the concealed and underlying ideologies that are embedded within everyday beliefs. These ideologies often manifest themselves in the form of conceptual metaphors and analogies, which capture the attention of linguists.

According to van Dijk (2006) within the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, ideologies can be seen as collective representations of social groupings. These ideologies are shaped reinforced, modified, and sustained through the use of language (ibid). Ideologies can be understood as conceptual frameworks that have a role in shaping and perpetuating power dynamics, dominance, and exploitation within society. These principles can be implemented through various forms of communication (such as genres) and internalized through personal characteristics or identities (such as styles). The examination of texts holds significant importance in the realm of ideological analysis and critique, particularly when situated within a comprehensive social analysis of events and social activities. According to Fairclough (2003), According to Wodak (2009), academics in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) are particularly interested in the operational aspects of ideology within the context of daily life. Hence, with the aim of raising awareness among agents regarding their own needs and interests, Weiss and Wodak (2003) propose that the critical analyst should engage in the process of demystifying discourses by interpreting ideologies.

The issue of power is a significant focus of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Power is commonly seen as an imbalanced dynamic between individuals or groups with distinct social positions or affiliations (Wodak, 2015a). Watt (1991), referenced in Mai and Al-Shaymaa (2015), provides a clear definition of power, explicitly outlining its characteristics. When A exercises power over B, it refers to the situation when A influences B in a way that goes against B's initial perception of what is in their best interest, regardless of whether B eventually recognizes the benefits of A's actions.

Nevertheless, according to van Dijk (2003), power can manifest itself not just through overtly abusive behaviours by members of dominating groups, but also through the many routine activities that are often overlooked in our daily lives. In this particular scenario, language serves as the medium via which power is exercised. According to Weiss and Wodak (2003), the following explanation is provided:

"Language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: language indexes power, expresses power, is involved where there is contention over and a challenge to power. Power does not derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and the long term." (Pp)

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that power is not an inherent and unchangeable entity, but rather a construct that may be challenged and opposed through language. According to Fairclough (1989), power is not a fixed and uncontested characteristic of any individual or social group, whether it is manifested within speech or operates outside of it. According to Wodak (2015), texts can be seen as arenas where social conflicts are played out, as they exhibit indications of various ideological battles for power and control. The expert asserts that through a comprehensive examination of texts, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) directs its attention towards the examination of how linguistic structures are employed in diverse manifestations and exertions of power.

The relationship between ideology, power and social relations manifest in the manner the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Health (FMoH) create awareness about the disease outbreaks. In respect to Covid-19 pandemic, misconceptions on risk and vulnerability

factors associated with the virus still persist despite efforts by the NCDC spawning narratives on risks and vulnerability factors, which contradict what is obtainable in scientific literature. Significant progress therefore awaits studies that will be conducted to examine how risk and vulnerability to SARS-Covid-19 are construed in National Centre for Disease Control Messages on Covid-19 In Nigeria.

Against this background, this study examined the discursive construction of ideology in National Centre for Disease Control Messages on Covid-19 in Nigeria. The specific objectives of the study include to: examine how risk to SARS-Covid-19 is construed in health messages disseminated in the mass media with a view to enhance the quality of data health messages on diseases are framed; examine how vulnerability to SARS-Covid-19 is construed in National Centre for Disease Control Messages on Covid-19 in Nigeria, and highlight the public health implications of the findings.

II. METHOD

A qualitative research design was adopted for the study that combines Content-based Linguistics Analytical approach was adopted for the study. Data for the study comprised twenty (20) Health Messages on SARS-Covid-19 pandemic disseminated in the mass media. The data was sourced from the NCDC website between the period from 2020-2022. The data is multi-modal in nature and embeds texts conveying health messages and images. The analysis is however delimited to only the textual elements in the health messages. The first step of the analysis consisted of a Language Audit that is aimed at

identification of specific discursual features based on insights from Critical Discourse Analysis. Discursive features such as Perspectivization, Focalization, Topoi, Metaphor, Semantic Prosody are identified in the selected Health Messages. The second step is a Thematic Content Analysis that is aimed at identifying related themes or issues related to the research objectives. Data to be derived from the content and thematic analysis were used to explain how risks and vulnerability to SARS COVID-19 are construed in health messages in respect to whether risk in Health Messages on SARS COVID-19 is associated with the following variables: a dangerous disease that has no cure and is contagious [D; nC; C] or whether vulnerability to SARS COVID-19 can be determined by Age, Violation of Protocol: social distancing; Wearing face mask, Hand Washing]

III. RESULTS

Research Objective 1: How is Covid-19 construed in National Centre for Disease Control Messages on Covid-19 in Nigeria?

Results of the analysis of educational health messages on Covid-19 indicate that covid-19 is construed in a manner that impacts the cognitive state of its audience in several ways. In specific, the disease is conceptualized as a highly contagious disease with persons who are 60 years and above and/or people with pre-existing medical conditions as those who are the most vulnerable. Thus, these vulnerable groups (the elderly and those with chronic illnesses) who exhibit severe symptoms are instructed to avoid non-essential outings and visitors as illustrated in Fig. 1.



Fig. 1 Health Message on Vulnerable Groups to Covid-19 from NCDC

Besides the issues of age and having pre-existing medical conditions, educational health messages on Covid-19 further associate the risk of contracting Covid-19 with those (irresponsible persons) who do not adhere to covid-19 protocols, specifically on social distancing (avoidance of non-essential outings and visitors) as depicted in Fig. 1. The binary between responsible and irresponsible citizens is reinforced in Fig.1, which in the wider Covid-19

narrative is used pejoratively as the Denialist or Covidiots.

The analysis of educational health messages on Covid-19 further revealed that messages are designed to inspire public confidence to create a feeling that following the protocol is worthwhile and indexical of high sense of responsibility as illustrated in Fig.2.

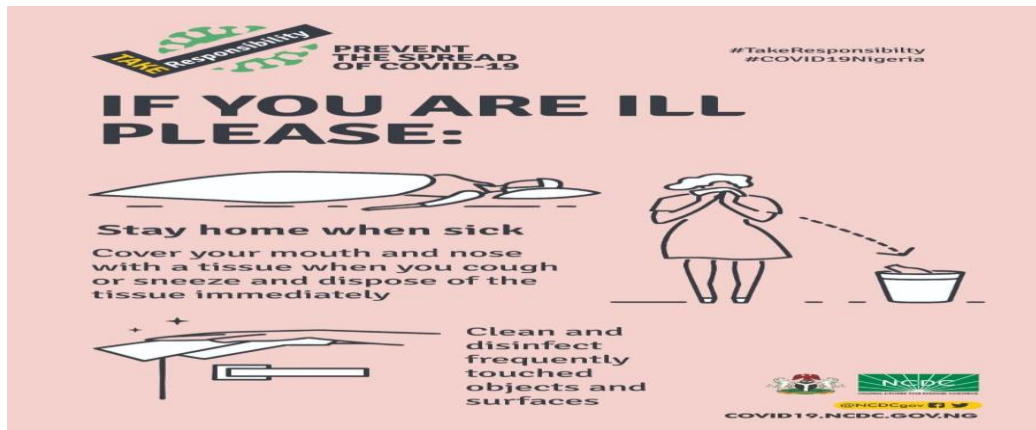


Fig. 2. Self-Efficacy Messaging in educational health messages on Covid-19

The crafting manageable instructions on adherence to Covid-19 Protocols and behaviours to manage the impact of the virus through the use of the wordings, *Covering the mouth, cleaning objects and surfaces, disinfecting, disposing tissues* and the encouragement of the public to engage in self-limiting (*avoid non-essential outings and visitors*) as illustrated in Fig. 1 exemplifies Self-efficacy Messaging (McCloughlin et al., 2022). These slogans have strategic functions in health communication and familiarity with the

slogans can possibility lead to instruction compliance and presenting the public as being exclusively responsible for their health (McCloughlin et al., 2022:).

Results of the analysis further showed that Covid-19 is construed in educational health messages as a disease that impacts negatively on the cognitive or mental state of the public and evoke a sense or fear as illustrated in Fig. 3

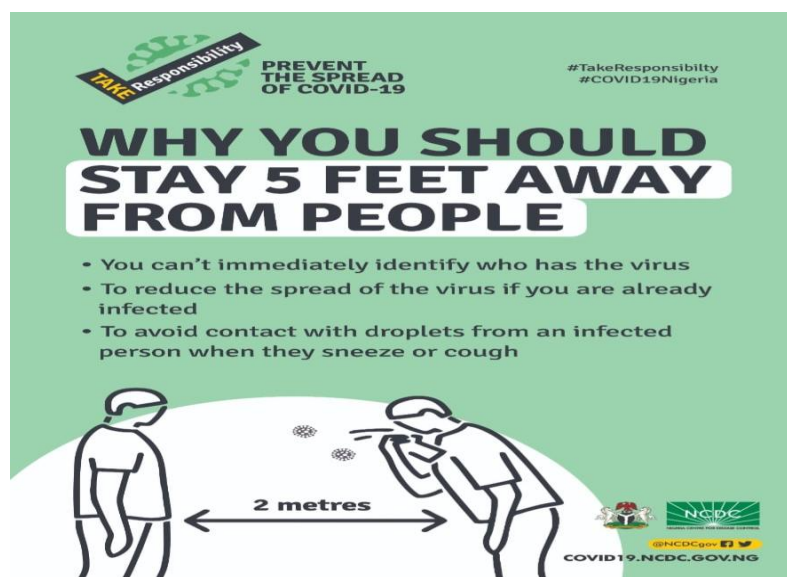


Fig.3. Fear Appeal in educational health messages on Covid-19

Although Fear Appeals (FA) provides a rationale for compliance but studies on pandemic communications revealed that it can lead to othering (polarizing and divisiveness) and fosters the harmful physical or social consequences of failing to comply with instructions or protocols (Berry (2006). The use of the expression STAY 5 FEET AWAY FROM PEOPLE in Fig.3 perpetuates negative cognitive and

affective attitude to persons who sneeze even though they do not test positive to Covid-19.

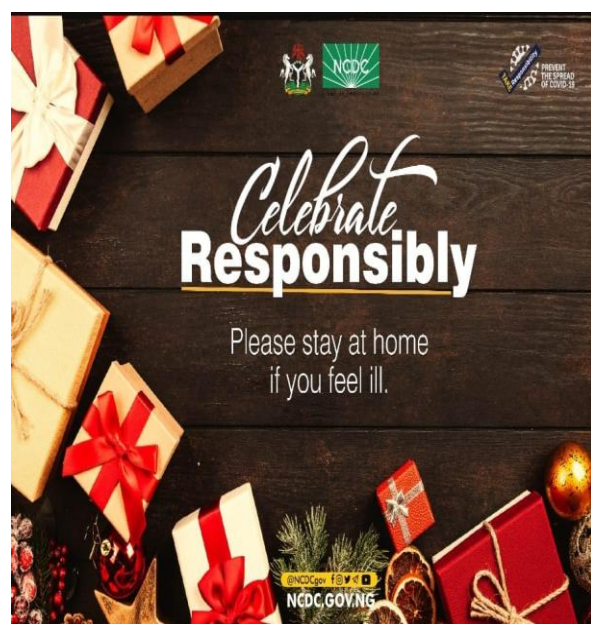
The cognitive affordances of educational health messages on Covid-19 is further revealed in moralizing health issues by designing messages with imperative sentences that specifies dos and do nots as shown in Fig. 4 a&b.



Fig.4a&b: Moralising Health in educational health messages on Covid-19

Moralising health messaging can contribute to stigmatizing of (supposed) non-compliant audience as illustrated in Fig. a &b creates a sense responsibility on the public to be to contribute to the in preventing and stopping the spread of the virus. The use of the imperatives (MAINTAIN A

PHYSICAL DISTANCE OF AT LEAST TWO METRES) and (STAY AT HOME) in Fig. 5 a&b have moral or ethical undertones and tend to create a sense of guilt among persons who violate the order and those who contract the virus as persons who do not adhere to instructions and safety measures.

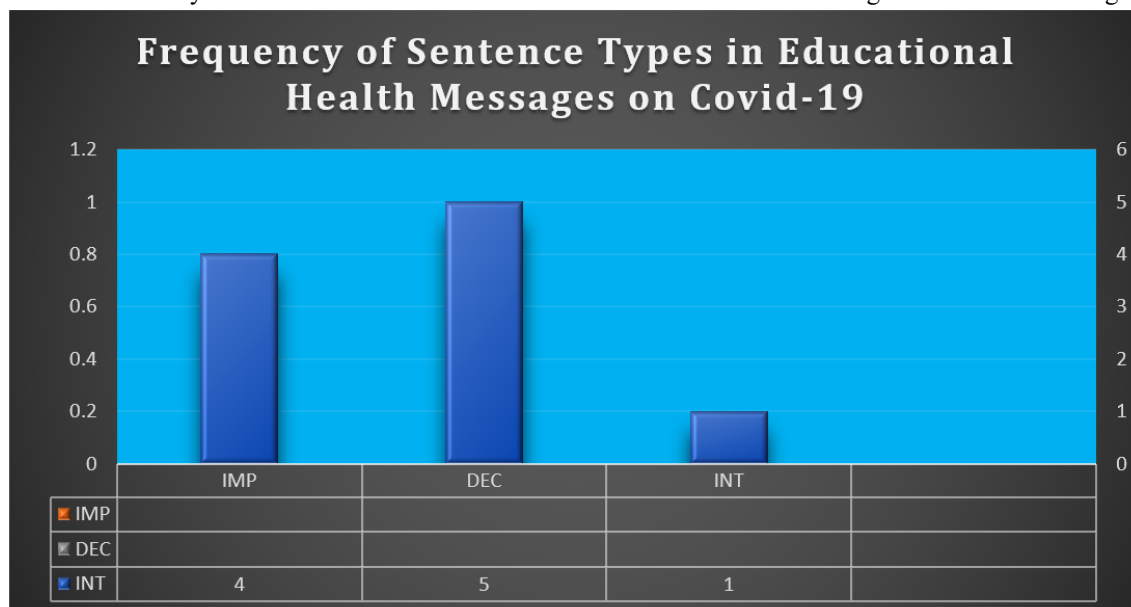


This practice of crafting health messages based on appeal to ethics can reinforce the binary between responsible and irresponsible citizens and foster a pandemic narrative that can undermine social cohesion (Mc Cloughlin, et al., (2022).

Research Question 2: How is power differential enacted in National Centre for Disease Control Messages on Covid-19 in Nigeria?

Research on the interrelationship between language and power and ideology has evolved significantly giving rise to understanding on the different nuances of meaning associated with power and belief manifest in language. Table 1 presents a Mood Analysis of sentences in National Centre for Disease Control Messages on Covid-19 in Nigeria.

Table 1: Mood Analysis of Sentences in National Centre for Disease Control Messages on Covid-19 in Nigeria



As indicated in Table 1, Imperative sentence (Commands) occur the most with a frequency of (80%) compared to declarative sentence (90%) and interrogative sentence (20%). This finding suggests that there is power differential in the relation between the producers and consumers of health messages on Covid-19. The power relation enacted in Health Messages on Covid-19 depicts National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) as a powerful institution that gives directives and commands that demands compliance as observed across the data (Figure 1-5). This claim is substantiated by the high frequency of imperative sentences in the dataset compared to the declarative sentences and interrogatives sentences. This finding confirms claims in studies on epidemic psychology that power relations manifests through linguistic interactions (Strong 1990).

IV. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The study consistently revealed that the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) constructed COVID-19 primarily as a dangerous, global, and highly contagious disease, emphasizing prevention

through social distancing, hygiene, and personal responsibility. Across the dataset, the discourse was dominated by Information Education Communication (IEC) strategies rather than Behavior Change Communication (BCC) models. This approach positions the NCDC as the knowledgeable authority and the public as passive recipients of information, reinforcing institutional power hierarchies consistent with Fairclough's (1995) conceptualization of discourse as a medium of social control.

Furthermore, the use of focalization, framing, metaphor, and topoi was consistent across messages. For instance, metaphors such as "*covidiots*" and phrases like "*take responsibility*" discursively constructed a moral binary between the *responsible* and *irresponsible* citizen. This mirrors findings from other global COVID-19 discourse studies (e.g., Wodak, 2020; Van Dijk, 2021) that found similar dichotomies between compliant and defiant populations in institutional messaging. The use of modal auxiliaries like "*must*" and adverbs such as "*responsibly*" subtly enacted power through

suggestion rather than compulsion a strategy that maintains social compliance without overt coercion, as identified by Wodak's (2015) Discourse Historical Approach. These findings align with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) propositions that institutional discourse both reflects and reproduces power relations. The NCDC messages thus served as instruments of ideological reinforcement, sustaining the asymmetry between the state (expert authority) and citizens (subjects of governance).

While many health messages portrayed the populace as responsible actors in disease prevention, others implied a lack of public agency. Some EHMs, for example, simultaneously appealed to community responsibility ("*We all can celebrate responsibly*") and positioned the public as *uninformed* or *unhygienic*, reinforcing stereotypes of negligence. This inconsistency in tone and perspective may reflect the tension between information dissemination and behavioral persuasion within the NCDC's communication framework.

Additionally, vulnerability in the messages was narrowly framed, focusing largely on the *elderly* and *those with pre-existing conditions*, with limited reference to socio-economic or regional disparities in disease exposure. This diverges from findings in prior health communication literature that emphasize social determinants of vulnerability (e.g., occupation, poverty, and access to healthcare). The NCDC messages thus emphasized individual behavioral responsibility over systemic or structural causes, indicating an ideological inclination toward individualization of risk rather than collective or institutional accountability.

Another point of inconsistency lies in the discursive modality used. While the textual data often employed declarative and imperative moods implying authority, the linguistic tone of some messages was mitigated through politeness markers, suggesting attempts to appear participatory. This oscillation between authoritative and persuasive modes may have diluted the clarity of intended behavioral outcomes.

The unique contribution of this study lies in uncovering how ideological and power differentials are linguistically realized in Nigerian COVID-19 health messages. Unlike studies in Western contexts that often foreground scientific rationality or public

trust, the NCDC's communication revealed a hybrid ideological structure blending moral appeal, institutional authority, and socio-cultural morality. The discursive construction of the pandemic in Nigeria was therefore not merely biomedical but moralized and politicized, embedding notions of civic duty and collective morality within public health discourse.

Moreover, the study is distinctive in its application of CDA frameworks (Fairclough, Wodak, and van Dijk) to multimodal health communication within an African context. It demonstrated that the NCDC's linguistic framing especially through the use of metaphors, focalization, and perspectivization not only conveyed epidemiological facts but also reproduced ideological stances that shaped citizens' perceptions of risk and responsibility. The emphasis on "responsibility" as both a moral and civic obligation suggests an effort to discipline public behavior through ideological persuasion, aligning with van Dijk's (2003) view of discourse as a mechanism of social cognition and control.

Ultimately, the study's findings highlight that the NCDC's health messages functioned as ideological instruments simultaneously informative and regulatory. They reinforced national narratives of moral citizenship while downplaying the structural inequities that exacerbate vulnerability. This ideological tension underscores the critical need for future health communication in Nigeria to balance authority with empathy, information with inclusion, and control with dialogue.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the ideological underpinnings and discursive construction of risk and vulnerability in the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) messages on COVID-19 in Nigeria. Through the combined application of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis model, van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive approach, and Wodak's Discourse-Historical perspective, the study revealed that health messages disseminated during the pandemic were deeply embedded with ideological meanings that extended beyond mere public health communication.

The findings demonstrated that the NCDC constructed COVID-19 as a dangerous and highly contagious disease, while emphasizing individual

responsibility through moral appeals such as the hashtag #TakeResponsibility. The linguistic and rhetorical structures of the messages positioned the NCDC as an authoritative actor with power to define what constituted responsible citizenship during the pandemic. Through the use of focalization, framing, metaphors, and topoi, the discourse subtly perpetuated a power dynamic where the state occupied the role of the knowledgeable guide, and the populace the obedient follower.

At the same time, inconsistencies in the messages particularly the oscillation between authoritative and persuasive tones, and the selective representation of vulnerability highlighted the tension between control and collaboration in public health communication. Vulnerability was largely portrayed as an individual condition rather than a function of broader socio-economic inequalities, thereby reinforcing an ideology of individualized risk rather than collective responsibility.

Uniquely, the study contributes to the understanding of how public health communication in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic intertwined scientific messaging with moral and ideological constructs. It exposes how institutional discourse served both informational and disciplinary purposes educating citizens while also reinforcing social hierarchies of power and responsibility.

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