

Public Perceptions and Experiences of COVID-19 Pandemic in Ekiti: A Qualitative Study Using Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

Background: COVID-19 pandemic has been a turbulent crisis that took the globe by surprise, killing thousands of people. Nonetheless, individuals with underlying conditions are considered to be at risk. **Aim:** The study examined public perceptions of the vulnerability influencing the spread of COVID-19 in Ekiti State, Nigeria. **Materials and Methods:** The study used a qualitative method in which 65 participated in focus group discussions to elicit information about the subject matter. Thematic analysis was used to analyse field data. **Results:** The study found that vulnerability to COVID-19 was based on the following themes: immunity, imported, complications, lack of knowledge, recklessness and anyone. As a result, the study concluded that individuals can be vulnerable to COVID-19 if the person has weakened or impaired immunity and that the virus was imported from other countries. **Conclusion:** In addition, having any of the following underlying conditions such as asthma, diabetes, heart or liver or being ignorant of the spread of the virus, and failing to follow COVID-19 containment guidelines can make people more vulnerable to the virus. **Recommendations:** The study, therefore, recommends that health education about the virus be implemented. This could be directed towards strengthening beliefs that conform to accepted scientific views of COVID-19 and weakening those that do not. Notably, the public should be encouraged to follow COVID-19 containment guidelines, which include wearing a face masks, washing and sanitising our hands, and social distancing.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, experience, public perception, socioeconomic, vulnerability

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 can infect individuals at any age. However, individuals with underlying conditions, particularly the elderly are considered to be at increased risk. COVID-19 infections and other preexisting conditions that increase vulnerability to the virus include respiratory diseases such as respiratory diseases such as asthma, cardiovascular diseases such as hypertension and heart diseases, diabetes, and obesity.^[1] The main factors identified for the transmission of COVID-19 include: population density, airflow, and community consciousness and air temperature. In addition, poverty result in a substandard standard of living, which results in the emergence and spread of various infectious diseases including COVID-19. Several studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that those with low socio-economic status are highly vulnerable to COVID-19 virus.^[2] Large family sizes combined with poor housing, and working in an environment that exposed them to the virus are key drivers to their sensitivity to the infection in

all societies.^[3] It is on this note that the study would examine public perceptions on the vulnerability to COVID-19 in Ekiti State, Nigeria. The world has already seen epidemic caused by lethal virus such as severe acute respiratory syndrome, bird flu, Ebola to name a few. While vaccines could not be developed for those viruses, scientists have succeeded in developing vaccine for COVID-19.

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 is a newly discovered disease that, was first seen at Wuhan, China in December, 2019. The virus was declared a global pandemic

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by the World Health Organisation^[4] on the eleventh of March 2020. This is due to the rapid transmission rate and substantial number of deaths caused by the disease worldwide.^[4] The first case of COVID-19 in Nigeria was confirmed by the Federal Ministry of Health on the February 27, 2020 in an Italian citizen returning from Milan, Italy to Lagos. COVID-19 infections are mostly caused by direct or indirect contact with the affected individuals, transmission due to airborne transmission (aerosol) and surface contaminations. According to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, the most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, dry cough, and tiredness. Less common symptoms are aches and pains, sore throats, diarrhea, conjunctivitis, headaches, loss of taste or smell, and rashes on the skin or discoloration of fingers or toes. Severe symptoms include difficulty in breathing, shortness of breath, chest pain, and loss of consciousness. On the average, it takes 5–6 days from when the person is infected with the virus for symptoms to show, however, it can take up to 14 days.^[5]

Statement of the problem

According to Navin, Bandana, Soniya, Suresh, Amrit, Banadana and Shyam, the causes of COVID-19 are determined by human behaviour.^[6] This is consistent with the growing body of research on COVID-19. The transmission of COVID-19 has been extensively investigated particularly in relation to risk factors, preventive intervention, and health-seeking behaviour of individual. COVID-19 is a pandemic that has impacted the economies of every country on the earth. By May 2020, out of 5.6 million global cases, it has already claimed about 0.34 million lives. United Nation announced in the first week of April 2020 that Africa would be the next coronavirus epidemics centre adding that approximately 0.3 million people may die owing to a deficient health-care system and lack of awareness. UNICEF, on the other hand, addressed the social and economic impact of the outbreak in a report published on May 14, 2020 stating that children and families living in overcrowded areas are at increased risk.

Theoretical framework

Health belief model

Health belief model is commonly used to predict preventive behaviours when the prevention of a disease or health problem is considered a priority.^[7,8] The health belief model was introduced in the 1950s by social researchers at the United States Public Health Services and proposed as an appropriate model to described and predict people's health related behaviour. According to the theory, individuals should view the health threats, particularly COVID-19 as serious problem and engage in preventive behaviour. This indicates that they believe themselves to be vulnerable to the threat and assessed the dangers and complications associated with it.^[9]

The health belief model is a theoretical framework for promoting health and preventing disease. It is used to explain and forecast the changes in individual health behaviours. It is one of the most widely used models for analysing health behaviours. The health belief models' central elements are

focused on individual beliefs about health conditions, which are predictive of individual health-related behaviour. The model defines the critical factors influencing health behaviours as an individual's perceived threat of sickness or disease, belief in the consequences, potential benefits of action, perceived barriers to action, exposure to factors that prompt action, and confidence in ability to succeed.^[10] As a model of health behaviour that is empirical supported. It provides a framework for understanding how public health measures are adapted in response to public perception of COVID-19 risk, as well as, the benefits and barriers associated with recommended health behaviours for reducing COVID-19 transmission.^[11]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design

This study used a qualitative research design. This approach helped in the exploration and understanding of public perceptions regarding the vulnerability to COVID-19 in Ekiti State. In addition, this approach aided in identifying the key areas and interview guide for the data collection based on the preliminary interactions with research participants. The study used Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving 65 participants to elicit information about public perceptions of the vulnerabilities that contribute to the spread of COVID-19 in Ekiti State. The 65 participants cut across the three purposively selected Local Government Areas LGA in the State namely: Ado-Ekiti LGA, Ido/Osi LGA, and Ekiti East LGA.

Study area: Ekiti State

Ekiti State is one of the States in the Southwestern geopolitical zone of Nigeria. It is primarily agrarian with a sizeable proportion of civil servants, public servants, and students. It is a gateway from the Southwest to Abuja and other parts of Northern Nigeria. The State has three-tier health-care system including three teaching hospitals and several secondary and primary healthcare facilities. The major tribes in the state are Yorubas, which formed more than 90% of the population of the state. Other tribes include the Igbos, Hausas, and the Ebiras. Thus, there is a heterogeneity of cultures, traditions, and behaviours in the state which may have an effect on how they choose to access health services in the State.

Study population and sampling technique

The study employed a purposive sampling technique in selecting 65 respondents for FGDs in the three selected senatorial districts in the state. The Federal Government of Nigeria and the Ekiti State Government have prohibited large gatherings of people as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 outbreak. Each FGD had five to ten participants, who were seated 2 m apart in an open area in accordance with COVID-19 containment standards. The number of participants each FGD varied depending on age group and location. In addition, participants were advised to put on face masks and sanitise their hands with hand sanitisers to further minimise the risk of exposure.

The participants in this study came from a verity of different backgrounds in terms of gender, profession, education, and social status. The researchers on the ground announced participant recruitment for the study through social networks and invited potential participants aged 18–60 years to participate in the study. The data collection took place in a location chosen by the research participants.

Data collection

The qualitative study was conducted using interview guide with a moderator to guide the discussion and a note-taker responsible for taking notes, noting nonverbal responses, and ensuring that tape-recording was successful. A total of 24 interviews were conducted, and each interview lasted 70 min on the average.

Data analysis

The collected data from the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The analysis process included familiarisation, identification of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of themes, development of an exhaustive description, and creating the fundamental structure. Three researchers reviewed the data independently and develop themes summarising and extracting the meaningful contents.

Researcher characteristics

The interviewer team is comprised of experts from various health fields including two medical doctors, a professor of Medical Sociology, one postgraduate and graduate students with experience in conducting qualitative research. Prior to data collection, all members of the research team attended meetings on interviewing, facilitation, recording, note-taking, and transcribing. Both the research team and the research participants were complete strangers to one another.

RESULTS

This study is structured according to the following themes: immunity, complications/underlying conditions, ignorance, recklessness, and anybody.

Theme 1: Immunity

Developing effective immunity helps to limit disease spread by conferring protection on vulnerable individuals within a population. However, the development of effective immunity against the virus depends on a variety of factors, all of which are very difficult to attain in all settings. This is as information provided by a participant:

“We can say the little children between the ages of 0–5 years are prone to contact the virus. This is because, the immunity of the children is still low. Therefore, their immune system is not strong enough to withstand such virus. Besides, some of us also believed the aged ones can quickly contact this virus. Furthermore, those that are always inside the air condition, or lacking good exercise or eat canned food unlike someone who will eat local foods.” (24 Female Tailor SSCE, Christian, Ado-Ekiti LGA).

This statement is only partially true as studies have shown that children are more immune to COVID-19 than adults, but the elderly is more vulnerable.^[1] In addition, their study indicated that individuals could be affected by weakened immune system caused by inadequate nutrition which may be more prevalent among those living in the rural areas.

Another participant backed this view by stating:

“According to the information we heard, it is the elderly ones and the reason is that the elderly ones, their immune system is lower and weaker, and some of them have underline ailments they are treating, and which has made them vulnerable to COVID-19. Hence, it is those elderly ones from the age of 60 and above who are the ones that are vulnerable to this virus, and if they contact it, to cure them of it is somehow difficult. Those we heard that the virus had killed, their age starts from 70 or 80 years. Moreover, we also heard that these victims were wealthy people, but their wealth was unable to cure them.” (52 Male Civil Servant B.Tech. Christian, Ido/Osi LGA).

Another excerpt from the FGD stated that:

“As we hear them saying it then, it can easily affect the aged and the infant, because that is the reason why the government lock up churches, mosques, and schools. Thank God now, they have reopened all of them. However, we were told in the church that any person that is not up to 18 years, should not come to church. Hence, for them to have said so, we now believe it can affect the children quickly, so also the aged people.” (24 Male Bike Man NCE Christian, Ido/Osi LGA).

Many participants do not know which age group is most vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus. This is not implausible, given their inability to observe victims infected with the virus, and their reliance on radio reports of victims infected with the virus. One of the participants submitted the following in support:

“You know something that I have not seen before, I can’t be saying who it affects most, we only hear of it and it has not happened to anybody in this area before. You know if it has happened to someone here before, I would have gone there to know what is actually happening there. However, the way I view the COVID-19, I have never heard it kills any young people, it is only the elderly ones.” (28 Male Bike Man Primary Christian, Ido/Osi LGA).

Another participant concurred:

“Well, you see us here doing fine, so we can’t actually say who and who are vulnerable to COVID-19. It is those that are victims that can actually tell the experience, but for us, we are not able to say *per se*. However, I expect the NCDC to shed more light on the subject matter, because they do send messages and they can actually tell those that are vulnerable. However, I think the elderly ones from 50 years and above as stipulated by the NCDC are those vulnerable. However, in our area here, you can still see we have those who are more than 100 years of age and

they are still alive and healthy. So as a result, we can't say who are vulnerable" (34 Male Bike Man NCE Christian, FGD, Ido/Osi LGA).

Theme 2: Complications/underlying condition

COVID-19 can infect anyone, but those with underlying illnesses such as heart diseases, diabetes, asthma, are more vulnerable.^[1] As a result, the elderly is more susceptible to COVID-19 because they have a higher prevalence of underlying disorder that may increase susceptibility to diseases.^[1,2] Other participants inferred that the wealthy may be more susceptible to COVID-19 due to their diets or because they are more likely to have conditions that make them more susceptible. On this note, participants submitted that:

"It is the elderly. The reason why is the elderly ones (say 50 years and above), they may be having an underlined sickness. In my case now, I have not passed through what the elderly ones have gone through. For we youth, if we (youth) one contacts it and was unable to know, it may not do much harm, but in the elderly, we will quickly know and if they fail to detect it on time, it will affect them seriously" (20 Male Electrician SSCE Christian, Ekiti East LGA).

Another participant emphasised the following:

"I will say those that live in the local areas cannot contact the virus unlike those like those who have prior condition before such as asthma. Imagine someone like me or this old man here who has gone to the farm this morning before coming for this interview, must have eaten fresh food even from the farm. Hence, the rich people are more prone to this disease unlike the poor people" (60; Female; Nurse; (CHEW); Christian, Ekiti East LGA).

Excerpt from the FGD stated that:

"It is the elderly ones especially those who have an underlined sickness before they contacted the virus, it can quickly affect them. Besides, they have weak immune unlike when they were still young" (28 Male Artisan SSCE Christian, Ekiti East LGA).

Despite the fact that the underlying conditions were mentioned, some participants believed that having prior health problems or being elderly resulted in weakened immune system, thereby making them vulnerable. As a result, an excerpt from a participant showed that:

"In my case, I will say it depends on the immunity. We have some people that have all these diseases like they are sicklier, ulcer, asthma, or diabetes. If one has all these diseases, he can't make it, and we have some people that have the virus and survive it. Hence, it all depends on the immune. If one has good immune, it will fight it, but in a situation where the person has a disease in his body, such person may not be able to fight the COVID-19 virus" (18 Female Student SSCE Christian, Ekiti East LGA).

Another participant also has this to say:

"The fact is that between 60 years and above, because some of them have many sicknesses such as diabetes, hypertension, heart attack, and as a result, it can easily penetrate into their immune system and everything will breakdown, and then they are gone" (54 Male Civil Servant B.Sc. Christian, Ado-Ekiti).

An interviewee stressed that:

"They said those from 55 years and above are vulnerable to the disease. The reason why I believe they are prone to the disease is that anybody that has entered menopause, her body cannot be strong as before when they are still doing their menses. Look at me now, I cannot run because my legs are paining me, and if I go to hospital to complain, they will say it is coronavirus. Hence, anybody that is above 45 or 60 years cannot enjoy his/her body system." (62 Female Trader (No Formal Education) Christian, Ido/Osi LGA).

Theme 3: Imported

The first case of COVID-19 was identified in Nigeria on February 27, 2020, when an Italian national working in Nigeria returned from Milan. According to Nakada and Rodrigo, COVID-19 transmission rate has been growing in cities. According to Hamidi, Sabouri, and Ewing shared transportation and human interaction make urban areas one of the most significant predictors of infection rates in the United States.^[13] Similarly, a strong correlation between population and COVID-19 virus was identified in both Turkey and Iran.^[14] However, it is pertinent to note that population density is not always significantly related to infection rate, presumably due to compliance with COVID-19 containment guidelines especially in developed nations such as USA and some European Countries.^[15] However, in developing nations such as Nigeria, high population density is commonly associated with informal urban settlements where social distancing is impracticable.^[16]

As a result, excerpt from the FGD showed that:

"It is the rich people because they are the ones who brought it to Nigeria by hugging one another. We don't know where they went to contact this virus. Imagine myself, if I leave here now, I will go to my garden, pull off my clothes, and eat fresh undiluted food. This is not like the educated ones who will from their house with AC, to their car with AC, and their office which also have AC" (70; Male; Farmer; No Formal Education; Muslim, Ekiti East, LGA).

Another participant revealed that:

"It is those rich people that brought it to this country. However, based on the information, we hear from the radio, they said children and the elderly ones should not go to church for now, so, I believe it is those two sets of people that are vulnerable to it, unlike the youths that are active" (44 Male Mechanic Primary Christian, Ekiti East LGA).

Given that anyone can be vulnerable; some participants believe that the wealthy are more susceptible because they are the ones who brought the virus to the country's poor individuals. As a result, a participant had the following to say:

“There is nobody that cannot contact the virus as long as the person has come in contact with the virus. Anybody can contact. Second, it is the rich people that are prone to it because I believe coronavirus is not from Nigeria. Hence, it is the rich people that are prone to it” (20 Male Electrician SSCE Christian, Ekiti East LGA).

Another participant submitted thus:

“Any gathering that is large is vulnerable, especially in the market not even churches. The rich are as well prone to this disease because of the kind of the food they eat, unlike the poor that eat fresh food from their farm. There is no place that the disease cannot be contacted. The rich are exposed because of the unnecessary things that they consumed, even the fact that they travel a lot, exposed us to the disease” (55 Female Trader SSCE Christian, Ekiti East, LGA).

Excerpt from the FGD showed that:

“The disease is common among the rich because they tend to travel a lot. The educated reads about the disease and take care of themselves unlike the noneducated who don't get to know much about the disease” (47 Male Mechanic Primary Christian, Ekiti East LGA).

Another participant has this to say:

“I can say is the rich, because most of the time, if they have headache, they will travel abroad and from there contact the virus, and bring it to the country and distributed it to other rich men. Because you can't see a rich man being a friend of the poor man” (17 Female Student SSCE Christian, Ido/Osi LGA).

Another excerpt from the FGD stated thus:

“It is the rich man sickness and not for the poor like us. It is the rich man sickness because they are the ones that are prone to this virus. Hence, we the poor, we thank God and God will not allow us to see such, because they are the ones that can travel to other countries, and I know it is from those other countries that they imported the virus to Nigeria” (54 Male Civil Servant B.Sc. Christian, Ido/Osi LGA).

In the same vein, excerpt from the FGD explained that:

“In order not to waste your time, those that can be victim of this virus are the rich people, the politicians, because if you see our politicians, it is in other countries that they are investing. Some of them even ship their family abroad unlike the poor people like our father that they have never been to Lagos State before. However, on how it came to Nigeria, just like some people are suffering, so does we here, and it is when one politician come home, that all of us will go and welcome him and in the process shake hands with him or hug him, and therefore, the poor will have the

virus. Had it been the government is doing the needful for the poor, there will be limit for the poor running after the rich because everyone will be comfortable. Furthermore, our representatives too, they contributed to this suffering. Those things that belong to the masses, they will keep it for their personal use” (28 Male Bike Man Primary Christian, Ido/Osi LGA).

Theme 4: Lack of knowledge

The pandemic has evolved into a major public health crisis with nations adopting unprecedented infection prevention and control measures in an attempt to halt the spread of the virus. However, the knowledge, attitude, and practices of the people toward the virus are critical in understanding the epidemiological changes of the virus and the compliance and measures to be adopted in the country. Based on this, a participant stressed that:

“The illiterates as well tend to be more exposed because of their level of knowledge. I think it is the illiterate because they don't have the knowledge about the virus. Some of them don't even believe that the virus is real, but those that are literate, they believe it and know what is going on and can prevent it” (16 Female Student SSCE Muslim, FGD, Ado-Ekiti LGA).

In the same vein, another participant explained thus:

“If am to say, it is the ignorance ones. One thing they say is that ‘information is powerful.’ Because what you don't know, you don't know how to avoid it. Many people, even if you tell them based on their illiteracy, they will not accept. They are many people that his still believing that COVID-19 is not real. Hence, how do you convince them to wear face mask, how do you convince them to maintain social distance when they don't believe it's real? Also, if you're talking of disease that emanated from other country, that is when we can be talking of the rich people are the ones spreading it. Although they might be the ones that contacted it and brought it into the country, the ones that will spread it easily are the ignorant ones.” (52 Male Civil Servant B.Tech. Christian, Ado-Ekiti LGA).

Theme 5: Recklessness

According to the Punch Editorial Board in 2020, stressed that despite warnings and guidelines, many politicians have openly adopted the behaviour of an out-of-control child.^[17] In addition, it appears that religious leaders vented their anger at their losses caused by the pandemic and pushed undue pressure on the government to overturn the prohibition on religious gatherings. Concerning the roles of religion leaders in COVID-19 transmission, the Chairman of Nigeria's Presidential Taskforce on COVID-19 warned church leaders to refrain from displaying reckless confidence in their ability to combat the disease.^[18] Based on this, some participants submitted the following:

“The aged. If the aged people contacted the virus, he/she won't be able to spread it that much. We the youth can also contacted and spread it, because if any youth contacted it

without us knowing, as we all go to church and market, he will spread it. But for the aged, you know they only come out once in a while, it is the youth that will give them the virus, because the virus will not come and meet them at home” (31 Male Bike Man SSCE Muslim, Ekiti East LGA).

Another FGD participants stated thus:

“The people in the place of leadership are most vulnerable because of their lifestyle and the kind of food that they eat, always staying in the AC aid the spread of COVID-19, and this practice is common among the rich, unlike the poor who always eat fresh fruit, and will consider taking herbs if any ailment arises. The churches and the mosques are more exposed because of the large number of gatherings, but for the traditional worshippers are safe because of their use of diabolical powers” (15 Female Student SSCE Christian, Ekiti East LGA).

Excerpt from the FGD also revealed that:

“It is those unmarried people because they can be promiscuous. Because in the process of promiscuity, they will hug and kiss each other. You don’t expect me that is married to engage in extra-marital affairs. If I must say, people are much in churches and mosque. So, the tendency of contacting it is possible. It is the educated ones because the illiterate, there is nothing that we cannot eat. If it is leaves we eat, it will have positive impact in our body. But the literate, they are the ones eating canned foods” (60 Female Trader (No Formal Education) Christian, Ido/Osi LGA).

In addition, some participant argued that carelessness of the youth may contribute to the spread of the virus. This may be the result of inadequate supervision. On this note, a participant submitted the following information:

“To me, is the children. Imagine a situation where someone with the virus has touched a particular surface, and a child goes there to touch that surface, or a child that is playing outside in which the child should have been chased inside can contact the virus” (21 Male Student SSCE Christian, Ekiti East LGA).

Theme 6: Anybody/any age group

Concerning the vulnerability to COVID-19, the study discovered that some participants believed the virus made no distinction to anyone. Regardless, of a person’s status, the person is prone to contracting the virus if proper preventive measures are not taken. This is what an excerpt from the study revealed:

“They (both rich and poor people) are both exposed depending on how they exposed themselves or rather take care of themselves. The religion that does not practice or observe all the necessary preventive measures can be exposed to this virus.” (19 Male Student SSCE Christian, Ekiti East, LGA).

Another result from the study also showed that:

“If you remember, the government said all the religious houses should be lockdown, because in a situation where people are gathering, they can easily contact it, and they will not keep to social distance. So that is why the government said they don’t want it for now and that everybody should stay at home. It is the rich people’s sickness. Though, there is nobody that the virus cannot kill. It kills both the old and the young, because we were told it is an airborne disease” (55 Male Driver Primary Muslim, Ido/Osi LGA).

Another participant commented on the literacy and marital status of those infected with the virus. She added that anyone, regardless of education or marital status, can become infected.

As such she stated that:

“Both of them (literate and illiterate) can contact it. COVID-19 does not know educational status. Though, the educated ones have the information, but the illiterate hear the preventive measures from the radio. Between the married and the unmarried people, both can also contact the virus because the married people will also have friends and the unmarried will also like social functions. For the religious houses, all of us are the same. If we’re doing our monthly programme in our churches, we will gather together to pray. The Muslim also do same” (17 Female Student SSCE Christian, Ido/Osi LGA).

Report from the FGD supported the above view by stating that:

“Well, there is danger for those who are married and there is also danger for those who are not married. You know there is no way a person will be (say 10 or 11 years) that is not matured enough now. You know the children we give birth to in this generation, they are fertilizer. We do see a child of 10 years and you think he/she is up to 50 years. So, whether married person or not, there is nobody that cannot be a victim of COVID-19. If you remember, the government said all the religious houses should be lockdown, because in a situation where people are gathered, they can easily contact it, and they will not keep to social distance. So that is why the government said they don’t want it for now and that everybody should stay at home” (54 Male Security Man Primary Christian, Ado-Ekiti LGA).

Another qualitative FGD explained that:

“Everybody can contact it and even spread it. Even a baby inside the mother’s womb can contact it. So, nobody that cannot contact it. Everybody can contact it, but it is common among the young people. They are those that can easily contact it. Because they move around, and go for their business like those in the market, can easily contact it” (16 Male Student SSCE Christian, Ido/Osi LGA).

DISCUSSION

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, several studies have been conducted to determine the causes, effects, and methods of

preventing the rapid spread of the virus. This is to find a lasting solution to the pandemic given its global impacts. On this basis, the study was conducted to ascertain the public perception of COVID-19's vulnerability in Ekiti State. The study revealed the belief system of the people regarding the spread and vulnerability to the virus. The study also examines people's beliefs regarding factors that contribute to an individual's vulnerability to the virus.

The study's findings indicated that individuals with weakened immunity, particularly the elderly, are more susceptible to virus infection, as their immune systems are not strong enough to fight the virus. This is not implausible, as an increasing number of people are living long enough to experience aging and age-related deterioration.^[19] Moreover, the study reveals that the underlying medical conditions are a source of concern for the study participants. The complete picture of the COVID-19 pandemic is still unfolding. However, one of the most shocking aspects of COVID-19 is its lethality, particularly among the elderly and those with pre-existing condition.^[20] For example, in the United States, one of the most affected nations, approximately 81% of deaths from the disease occurred in people aged 65 years and older.^[12] Additionally, risk is increased for elderly individuals with health issues.

Given the novelty of the virus, the evolving nature of transmission in Nigeria, starting from its importation, clusters of cases, and community transmission influenced the public's perception that the virus was an imported disease. In February 27, 2020, the government had to beef up the surveillance at the airport after the country recorded its index case that was imported from Italy.^[21] The participants in the study believed that the wealthy class is responsible for the disease because they are the ones who brought it to Nigeria by their penchant for hugging. This, however, is because the poor had no idea how they became exposed to the virus in the first place, as they rarely leave their immediate environment. In addition, the survey showed that the participants feel that the consumption of fresh, unprocessed food by the poor makes them less susceptible to illness. Furthermore, the participants believed that their lifestyle choices should have rendered them less susceptible to the disease. These lifestyle activities include eating mostly fresh, unadulterated food, and performing certain tasks that help them stay fit, such as gardening, farm work, and trekking long distances, in contrast to the educated, who will travel from air-conditioned home in their air-conditioned car to their air-conditioned office.

With regard to the reckless lifestyle of many people, their ignorance and baseless belief in nature and herbal drugs have led some to refuse to comply with the preventive measures such as wearing facemask, handwashing, maintaining social distance, among others.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Older adults and those with pre-existing diseases are more susceptible to coronavirus infection and are at an increased

risk of death.^[3] This may explain why the elderly took more precautionary measures than the younger generation.^[23] Participants agreed that those with a weakened immune system, particularly the elderly, as well as those with underlying conditions such as asthma, heart, liver, or kidney diseases, are more susceptible to the virus.^[6] The study also revealed the participants' belief that COVID-19 is an imported disease, and that it is a disease for the wealthy, the reckless and those who are not active and those who are not eating well. The study therefore recommends that health education about the virus be implemented. This should be directed toward strengthening beliefs that conform to accepted scientific views of COVID-19 and weakening those that do not. Notably, the public should be encouraged to follow COVID-19 containment guidelines, which include wearing face masks, washing and sanitising our hands, and social distancing. This is critical because many people in the country continue to believe COVID-19 to be a fabrication or a hoax.^[22] Some have even concluded that God will prevent it from reaching them.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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