

Televised Interpreted COVID-19 Briefings and Deaf Viewers: A Preliminary Investigation of Associated Concerns

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KEYWORDS Coronavirus Disease. Deaf Viewers. Sign Language Interpreters. Television

ABSTRACT Since its emergence, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has placed a strain on human existence and social interactions. With its disruptive potentials, basic information on COVID-19 is essential for all including those who are deaf. However, until now access to COVID-19 related information to the deaf via sign language on television vis-à-vis quality and comprehensibility of deaf viewers remains a concern. Hence, the researchers initiated this study to explore and to provide understanding to concerns about COVID-19 press briefing as perceived by the Nigerian deaf community. The study adopted a qualitative research design using a semi-structured interview, this study found that visibility, incomplete interpretation, inadequate knowledge of deafness and deaf communication processes were factors that influenced perceived quality of televised interpreted PTF COVID-19 briefings. Participants had partial comprehension of interpreted COVID-19 briefings. Based on the findings, recommendations were made.

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO 2020) has not spared Nigeria nor her inhabitants with disabilities. Since its first COVID-19 case in China (Kalayou et al. 2020; Giandhari et al. 2021), the rate of infection has continued to rise, although the government was proactive to curb the rate of community infection and thus locked down the country for a while. Lockdown measures initiated in a bid to curtail the tide of COVID-19 infection did not only affect social and interpersonal relationship but also business opportunities. Its impact on education of persons with disabilities is immeasurable. Lamentably,

persons with disabilities are greatly affected by the pandemic (Maphalala and Adigun 2021).

Regrettably, sudden changes in human interactions and social engagements vis-à-vis physical and social distancing, and sudden use of a nose mask among other measures geared towards halting or slowing down community transmission of the COVID-19, came as a surprise to the members of the deaf community who basically communicate through sign language. According to Adigun (2019), members of the deaf community represent a minority group of individuals that experiences a two-way communication challenge with their non-deaf peers especially when communication is basically auditory-verbal.

While the Federal Government of Nigeria through the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19 pronounced the lockdown measure on 9th March 2020, the dissemination of adequate information about COVID-19 became vital. Regrettably, in the

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first few weeks of the briefings, sign language interpretation of PTF COVID-19 briefings was conspicuously missing. Hence, the struggle and agitation for inclusion of sign language interpretation in televised activities of the PTF became necessary. While introduction of sign language interpretation of PTF COVID-19 briefings was seen as a win for the Nigerian deaf community, televised interpreted PTF COVID-19 briefings established the assertions of Chioma (2013) on the importance of television on social awareness and discourses for all. Through the televised interpreted PTF COVID-19 briefings, deaf viewers had the privileged to watch, assimilate, appreciate, accept or reject images and/or information interpreted by the sign language interpreter. Sign language interpreters are non-deaf persons who understand, use and switch between sign language and verbal communication modes in an attempt to initiate, establish and advance understanding of concepts, emotions, feelings, ideas and phenomena between the deaf and non-deaf individuals (Adigun 2019). The activities of sign language interpreters include but are not limited to lip-reading, use of facial expressions, and movement and curvature of the hands as well as fingers to represent spoken words.

In the last two decades, conditions attached to effectiveness of sign language interpreters in televised programmes have been a contentious issue. For instance, Xiao and Feiyan (2013) note that having sign language interpretation on television creates additional difficulties and financial strains on media houses. Rather than being seen as an added value, broadcasters perceive sign language interpreting as an additional problem due to use of more resources like cameras, lighting and personnel. In addition, perceptions of deaf viewers regarding the quality of the televised sign language interpreted programmes, sign language interpreters' appearance, picture quality, type and/or size of the frames in which the SLIs appear, colour contrast between the main image and the sign language interpreter's frame, as well as illumination remain a concern.

Xiao and Yu (2009) stated that about 46.3 percent of Chinese deaf were unsatisfied with the quality of sign language interpretation on television. Incomplete interpretations by Chinese sign language interpreters contributed to poor satisfaction and lack of interest in watching signed televised programmes by Chinese deaf. As noted by Sandler (2005), the interpreters' frames, picture quality, colour contrast,

synchronicity, interpreters' dress code, and a clear view of the interpreters' faces as well as their expressions are top priorities towards viewers' logical cohesion and comprehensibility. In fact, Wehrmeyer (2014) remarked that a lot of questions are yet to be answered in research studies in terms of deaf viewers' comprehensibility and quality of televised interpreted programmes. According to Stratiy (2005), incomprehensibility by deaf viewers was attributed to weak signing skills, lack of interpreters training programmes, poor metacognitive and/or metalinguistic processing skills, issues of divided attention and the size of the interpreters' picture frame (Stone 2009) as contributing factors.

Over-condensation or over-simplification, inadequate syntactic constructions, inconsistent or incorrect interpreters' use of facial expressions and mouthing, and limited vocabulary were identified by Wehrmeyer (2014) as factors that influence the perception of the deaf television audience. While the aforementioned were advanced in previous studies, it is somewhat disheartening that research activities during this pandemic in Nigeria are yet to beam searchlights on issues surrounding televised interpreted COVID-19 programmes *vis-à-vis* comprehensibility of deaf viewers and/or quality of the interpreted messages. Thus this study is essential in this critical time when it is vital that deaf viewers access information about preventive measures against COVID-19. This study was anchored on the motor theory of sign language perception (Gibet et al. 2012), which assumed that conceptual and sign language structures are encoded at motor programme levels.

Objective of the Study

This study aimed to explore and understand the perception of deaf Nigerians on the quality and the comprehensibility of the televised interpreted PTF's COVID-19 briefings.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In other to achieve the objectives of this study, the researchers employed a qualitative descriptive research design approach based on the interpretivist paradigm. Members of the southwest chapter of the Nigeria National Association of the Deaf (NNAD) were invited through WhatsApp to participate in the study. A total of 12 deaf adults were purposively selected for the study. Data used in

this study was collected via a semi-structured video-recorded interview, in a well-illuminated environment with little or no interferences. The sign language interpreter interpreted all English sentences to the participants in sign language. Ethics of social research was strictly adhered to.

Participants were pseudonymised as 'P1' to 'P12' so as to ensure confidentiality. Recorded video interviews were transcribed and cross-validated. During cross-validation, tenses of the interviewees were modified and reconstructed to reflect well-structured grammatical sentences suitable for further analysis. For instance, the sentences signed as, "*Mouth covered facemask. Interpreters not good for me*" by P4 were reconstructed to mean, "*I'm not comfortable with the use of a facemask by interpreters*". The researchers engaged thematic content analysis, which involved iterative reading of the data to analyse the transcribed interviews. The iterative process provided an opportunity to identify the patterns and themes emerging from the data, in order to use these themes to describe and address the research objectives.

RESULTS

Among the study participants, only three were pre-lingual deaf while others were post-lingual deaf adults. From the thematic analysis of participants' responses, three themes emerged on the qualities of sign language interpretation during PTF COVID-19 briefings. The themes were visibility, incomplete interpretation, and camera handlers/television stations' inadequate knowledge of deafness.

Visibility

The stage lighting disturbed participants for sign language interpreters during the PTF COVID-19 briefings. They frowned at the clarity of the view of the sign language interpreters due to inappropriate backdrops. Based on the foregoing, the assertions of P6 (female, 29 years old) could be summarised as follows:

...Although, I loved to watch interpreted PTF COVID-19 briefings but I struggle to follow the sign language interpreters because the lightings at most times is not suitable. As you can see, I use a recommended eyeglass. I, at most times, sit close to my television set in order for me to clearly see what was interpreted. (P6, female, 29 years old)

Incomplete Interpretation

Unfortunately, sign language interpreters who featured during the PTF COVID-19 briefings used non-transparent facemasks while interpreting thereby denying the deaf audience the opportunity to lip-read in addition to the use of manual communication. All participants interviewed bemoaned the use of non-transparent facemasks by the SLIs during the PTF COVID-19 briefings in Nigeria. Some of them referred to this as incomplete interpreted COVID-19 messages. P7 (female, 33 years old) affirmed that:

With the facemask, I was unable to follow some of the interpreted COVID-19 information delivered during the PTF briefing. You know, we deaf depend on so many processes of effective SL interpreting.

Camera Handlers/Television Stations' Inadequate Knowledge of Deafness

Participants believed that television stations in Nigeria had little or no knowledge of how to incorporate the deaf in their programmes. They were not happy with the fact that there were not dedicated cameras that focused solely on sign language interpreters, or that the technical crews failed to provide contrast for the picture-in-picture frames of the sign language interpreters. P3 (female, 20 years old), said:

I noticed that the cameramen were just moving the camera away from the SLIs anyhow. They move the camera to the sign language interpreters only when they feel like. No contrasting backdrop to sign language interpreters' frame. The frame was very small, which made it difficult for me to actively follow and understand interpreted messages.

In view of **comprehensibility of the interpreted COVID-19 briefings**, *partial comprehension of interpreted PTF COVID-19 briefings* as a theme emerged. Participants expressed their concern about their inability to comprehend the interpreted COVID-19 messages. Participants attributed the foregoing to the unprofessionalism of the cameramen, the small size of the picture-in-picture interpreters' frames. P8 (male, 32 years old), had this to say:

It was somewhat difficult to follow and understand interpreted PTF COVID-19 briefing telecast. Cameramen do not actually focus on the

sign language interpreters. They (cameramen) shift their focus away from the interpreters most times, making me miss what the sign language interpreter had previously said. The interpreters' frame was too small and with no colour contrast.

DISCUSSION

Causalities caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) across the globe have necessitated the importance of information about the virus (Kalayou et al. 2020; Giandhari et al. 2021). Hence, sharing of updated information about COVID-19 to all irrespective of hearing disabilities is sacrosanct. Essentially, relevant COVID-19 information shared using appropriate communication mode is critical for survival of all especially for those individuals who are deaf and/or hard of hearing. Adequate information about the virus is necessary for healthy living and consciousness of all preventive mechanisms against the virus. Lamentably, past studies have identified communication and social challenges of the deaf (Adigun 2019; Wehrmeyer 2014) vis-à-vis its implication on health information. However, a paucity of research evidence exists on how deaf individuals access first-hand relevant COVID-19 information via the various COVID-19 press briefings. In other to bridge the existing research gap, this preliminary investigation explored perception of deaf views about televised interpreted COVID-19 briefings in Nigeria.

This study established that perceptions of the Nigerian deaf community on the quality of the sign language interpretation during the PTF COVID-19 briefings were shaped by visibility, incomplete interpretation, and camera handlers/television stations' inadequate knowledge of deafness and deaf communication processes. These three factors were found to negatively influence the participants' perceptions of the quality of televised interpreted PTF COVID-19 briefings. This finding provided support for the assertions made by Wehrmeyer (2014), Sandler (2005), and Xiao and Yu (2009).

Findings revealed that participants had only partial comprehension of the interpreted PTF COVID-19 briefings. This finding may have been a result of uncoordinated processes by camera handlers or the technical crew of the television houses who assigned small picture-in-picture frames without adequate contrasting to enhance the understanding and comprehensibility of the interpreted PTF

COVID-19 briefings. The finding is consistent with Wehrmeyer (2014), Stratiy (2005) and Xiao and Yu (2009), who stated that deaf audiences could have difficulties in understanding interpreted messages when there was no colour contrast in terms of interpreters' clothing or stage backgrounds.

CONCLUSION

The quality of televised interpreted PTF COVID-19 briefings could be hampered by sign language interpreters' use of non-transparent facemasks, lighting quality, size of the picture-in-picture frames and lack of colour contrasts. Deaf viewers did not have adequate understanding of televised interpreted PTF COVID-19 briefings. This was attributed to inadequate understanding of the communication needs of deaf viewers by cameramen and technical crew of television stations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the foregoing, it was deemed expedient for television stations to train their camera handlers and technical crews on deafness and deaf communication processes. Such training would better inform the camera handlers and technical crews on the basic information needs and essentials of televised sign language interpreted programmes.

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Paper received for publication in September, 2021

Paper accepted for publication in September, 2021