

Stance and engagement in online discourse of religious encumbrances during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates the encumbrance of COVID-19 on the spiritual, health and general well-being of Nigerians and its implications. This study, based on a qualitative process, drawing inputs from Hyland's Stance and Engagement Theory, explores the engagement elements and discursive strategies evident in the different stances of Nigerians on the government's ban on churches and its implications on their spiritual well-being. Eighteen different online comments and reactions of Nigerians to four purposively selected news items in The Punch, Premium Times and The Guardian e-newspapers from May-July 2020 were sampled and subjected to discourse analysis. The analysis reveals that people's affinity to religion, doctrine and clerics affected their attitude and stance on the ban on worship centres. It was also discovered that the discursive strategies embedded in the stances of the participants portrayed the church as an all-round solution centre and, by implication, whatever keeps them away from the church is out to destroy them. The engagement elements compelled the readers' presence, tasked the readers' cognition and guided them to the participants' desired line of thought. Moreover, it was recommended that the government include religious bodies in policymaking, especially when it involves religious issues, to minimise resistance.

Key Words: Churches, COVID-19, Lockdown, Online Discourse, Stance and Engagement, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, the federal government put some measures in place, including lockdowns of public places, stay-at-home orders, wearing nose masks, physical distancing, and restraint in social affairs, including religious meetings, as major means to curb the spread of the virus. The long-standing religious practices of many Nigerians were altered and underwent profound changes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic caused by a new coronavirus. The Nigerian government and various State governments started restricting the number of worshippers to 20 and 50, depending on the size of the hall, with social distancing per service, which should not exceed two hours. This measure prompted many religious leaders to appeal to their followers to not only take safety precautions but also to embrace their spirituality to help confront the health, social, and economic challenges ahead (CFR, 19 March 2020). Most Catholic churches changed the way they carry out Mass to contain the infection; Priests placed the wafer on people's hands rather than on their tongues and stopped giving wine in the communal chalice, but in smaller cups individually. Instead of shaking hands during the sign of peace, members of the congregation were asked simply to pray for the person sitting next to them. However, some other orthodox churches insisted on doing it the normal way, explaining

that congregants partaking in Holy Communion cannot be a source of spreading the virus and urged believers not to relent in prayers until the virus disappears from society (The Independent News, 18 March 2020). In the long run, the postulated escalation in the transmission of the disease in the country prompted the government to ban all forms of religious, social and public gatherings. This led some religious groups to embrace technological solutions like live-streaming their services on different social media platforms. Most religious groups delved into social work and charity services, including donating medical equipment to hospitals and communities, material assistance to (poor) members, financial aid to the government and vulnerable groups, etc., in a bid to collaborate with the efforts of the government in rolling out preventive procedures and cushioning the effects of the pandemic. However, Nigerians did not embrace the prolonged sanctions on spiritual activities, especially some clerics. Their reactions made News Headlines and generated heated arguments on social media, which form the focus of the present study.

2. COVID-19 and religious undertones in Nigeria

The reported growing rate of COVID-19 infection led the government to extend the earlier planned relaxation of confinement measures, especially in hard-hit regions like Kano, Abuja, Lagos and Ogun. This prolonged ban on religious activities irked some Imams, who went ahead and violated the state-imposed restrictions and were suspended. Perhaps, people's strong attachment to religion in Nigeria is the reason most people thought that it was a calculated attempt and conspiracy by the secular powers to regulate their religion and prevent them from praying (Wall Africa, 19 May 2020).

Moreover, some Nigerian pastors who also suspected an ulterior motive felt that the government was relegating the religious sector (the church) in the socio-political activities of the country and so, raised their voices against the perceived malicious nature of the government's programme to the attraction of the media. Among them was Bishop David Oyedepo, President of Living Faith Church, who remarked that it was very wrong for markets to remain open while Churches are closed for COVID-19. He further explained, "I don't know what hospital records the kind of healings that the church of God records. And now hospitals, where people die every day, are open, but the church is closed because the oppression of the devil has no medical cure" (Punch, 7 May 2020). Another popular pastor, Chris Oyakhilome, the General Overseer of the Christ Embassy, slammed pastors for consenting to the closure of churches without consulting with other pastors and praying down the hand of God. He concluded that such pastors were not after the kingdom: "It never meant anything to you.... That's because Christ has not yet become your Lord; you've been your own lord all along. You've never truly known him" (Premium Times, 5 May 2020). Another Anglican bishop, Ephraim Ikeakor, while criticising his fellow clerics for shutting down their churches, argued that the masses need both physical and spiritual food to survive the pandemic. He argued that worshippers come to places of worship for salvation and not for destruction. He lamented that the lockdown of churches stopped people from assembling and having effectual, fervent prayers that would heal the land.

Obviously, Nigeria's case is unlike that of Tanzania, where the President announced that "Churches will not be shut down because Coronavirus is a devil's tool against us" (VOA News, 27 March 2020) or Uganda where the government see the religious sector as undeniably

significant in playing a pivotal role in its successful fight against COVID-19 (Isiko, 2020). However, after two months, the Secretary to the Government of the Federation and Chairman of the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19, Boss Mustapha, announced the lifting of the ban on religious gatherings. He mentioned that the “restrictive opening” was granted on the condition that relevant containment protocols against COVID-19 be respected by all the affected religious groups in the country (Guardian, 6 June 2020). Nevertheless, the news was cheering to religious faithful while some protested the suggested guidelines provided by religious bodies in compliance with the government’s COVID-19 containment protocols (see The Sun, 29 May 2020). Among the protesters is the Senior Pastor of the Household of God International Ministries, Chris Okotie, who kicked against the Christian Association of Nigeria’s (CAN) proposed social distancing guidelines for churches, saying;

Social distancing in the Church of Jesus Christ is tantamount to blasphemous infidelity and an impeachment of the integrity of the Word of God. Healing is fundamental to the redemptive work of Jesus. To allow the idol of coronavirus to determine the scope of congregational worship in the house of God is an abomination of gargantuan proportions. No true minister of the gospel will succumb to such a travesty of the faith (Premium Times, 1 June 2020).

Apart from the negative nuances and reactions to the ban on public gatherings, in this case, churches, it made some positive impacts on people’s spiritual lives as people had time for personal retreat, and communion with God and most churches discovered the virtual mode of reaching out to their congregation and uplifting their spiritual lives. Also, the report of the survey carried out by The Guardian (6 June 2020) revealed that the evangelism and welfare aspects of the church are enhanced by home cell fellowship, which involves a smaller number of worshippers, thereby renewing the awareness of the spiritual roles of each family head. Furthermore, family altars were rekindled as families took responsibility for their spiritual well-being and did not wait to be prayed for by their pastors.

3. Previous Studies and Statement of the Problem

Existing studies on religious attitudes and concerns regarding the COVID-19 pandemic do not pay adequate attention to the pragma-linguistic perspective on the language used in reporting its encumbrances and their implications for the well-being of worshippers. However, we shall be concerned only with the few carried out in media discourse.

Isiko (2020) investigated religious attitudes and interpretations of pandemics in Uganda. The study analysed the religious explanatory models of pandemics based on a qualitative research process. The study established that pandemics provide an opportunity for human reflection on transcendent life and draw people closer to religion and the spiritual due to the fear, panic, and uncertainty with which they are associated. The study concludes that the hope and trust that society has in religious institutions make them the ultimate institutions to provide solace to millions of people affected by a pandemic; they seem to understand the effective management and prevention dynamics of pandemics for which scientists and politicians have no immediate answers.

Afolaranmi (2020) explores how pastors perform their pastoral ministry to their church members

during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The study reveals that the lockdown negatively affected church activities and the pastoral ministry of many church pastors greatly, which necessitated their exploring other ways, including internet ministry, to perform their pastoral ministry to their church members. The study concludes that pastors responded productively to the unexpected situation.

Obi-Ani, Anikwenze and Isiani (2020) interrogate the roles that social media play in either curtailing or aiding the spread of the news on the pandemic across the country. The paper notes that some churches devise conspiracy theories that mark out the pandemic as a fight against the church and a means of spreading news tilting to rapture and the end of the world, with the attendant takeover of the Anti-Christ as revealed in the book of Revelation. The study concludes that these kinds of messages instil panic and fear in the gullible.

A glance through the above studies reveals that little or nothing has been done as regards pragmatic analyses of religious attitudes and concerns of Nigerians towards the pandemic. The present study thus fills this gap by analysing the stances and engagement elements employed by media participants to convey religious encumbrances and their implications on the well-being of Nigerians.

4. Stance and engagement

Stance, as a theoretical concept, signifies how speakers and writers convey their attitudinal dispositions, including judgements, feelings and personal opinions about certain issues. In the view of Hyland (2005:176), stance positions writers/speakers on a platform where they are enabled to ‘stamp their authority onto their arguments or step back and disguise their involvement’. Biber (2006) sees stance as a lexico-grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgements or commitment towards the propositional content of a message. The conveyance of these personal feelings involves careful choice of words to achieve an effect. According to Chilwa and Odebunmi (2016:98), scholars have also described this concept as evaluation, appraisal and attitude (Halliday, 1994; Martin, 2000; Bednarek, 2006). The data for this study reveal that participants read the news headlines and could communicate their unreserved feelings and attitudes towards it. The four elements of stance as identified by Hyland include: Hedges (words that indicate uncertainty or soften claims), Boosters (words that strengthen claims and amplify certainty), Attitude markers (words/phrases that reveal the writer’s feelings) and Self-mention (the use of the first-person pronoun to reference the writer).

Engagement, according to Hyland (2005:176), is the point where ‘writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognising the presence of their readers, pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants and guiding them to interpretations’. Hyland claims that writers assume that readers are likely to differ in opinion with their stance; therefore, they deploy diverse discourse tactics to involve them in the discourse to convince and win their solidarity. Consequently, Hyland argues that stance and engagement overlap i.e. they complement each other in the interpersonal aspect of discourse. The five ‘main elements of engagement’ as proposed by Hyland (2005:182) include reader pronouns, personal asides, appeals to shared knowledge, directives and questions. This study identifies lexical tags and labels of stance that

are fraught with positive reflections about the church. Apart from personal asides, the other four elements are germane to the present study and they are described and explained in detail in the analysis.

5. Methodology

The data for this study are obtained from e-Punch, Premium Times and Guardian sites. These newspapers cover a very wide variety of news items and enjoy readers' patronage in Nigeria, as evident in the numerous comments posted against headline stories. The corpus comprises data samples of online comments purposively selected from four News items that garnered attention, bothering on the lockdown of worship centres credited to Bishop Oyedepo, Pastor Oyakhilome, Rev. Okotie and other clerics and faithful from May to June 2020. The focus of the qualitative analysis of the data is to examine the stance and engagement elements deployed by the participants. Some grammatical expressions and lexical choices that reveal the participant's stances and evaluative views are also analysed. 'COM' in the samples stands for 'Comment'. The study restricts its samples to only **eighteen** for thorough analysis. The four news headlines as relayed in the three National newspapers that reproduced the comments include:

Opening markets, closing churches for COVID-19 wrong – Oyedepo
(Punch, May 7 2020)

COVID-19: Oyakhilome slams pastors for consenting to the closure of churches
(Premium Times, 5 May 2020)

COVID-19: Okotie condemns CAN's social distancing guidelines for churches
(Premium Times, 1 June 2020)

Two months without congregational worship... Clerics, other faithful share experiences
(The Guardian; Saturday Magazine, 6 June 2020)

6. Analysis and findings

Here is a qualitative discourse analysis of the stance and engagement of relevant readers' comments/responses to the above news items and propositions from other participants. Some participants use this avenue to ask questions, respond to other people's arguments and castigate the government, religious bodies and fellow participants whose lines of thought differ from theirs. Moreover, some participants use the avenue to establish solidarity with their pastors who have made headline news, while others disagree with and clarify erring opinions, encourage fellow believers, share their experiences and call on the government to lift the ban on worship centres. The data for analysis are only those bothering on Christianity (the church).

6.1. Elements of Stance:

Stance, as discussed earlier, implies how sources express their attitudinal dispositions and personal perspectives about certain subject matters, ideas or situations. A writer or speaker's stance may be objective, supportive, critical, conflicting or advocating a cause. The data are analysed under the three elements of stance identified as follows:

6.1.1 Attitude markers

Attitude markers play a crucial role in how individuals respond to controversial issues, particularly in times of crisis. The reactions analysed in this study demonstrate that language is

deeply intertwined with **emotion, ideology, and social action**. These attitudinal markers portray the speaker's subjective opinion, which could express judgement, (dis)approval, (un)certainty, optimism or scepticism, invoke moral values, or call for policy changes. Attitude markers serve as powerful instruments in public discourse; they shape the reader's perception of the subject at hand. By analysing public responses (COM 1-3) to Oyedepo's statement, "Opening markets, closing churches for COVID-19 wrong", we uncover how these markers frame the argument and persuade the audience.

COM 1: "The church is God's banquet hall where we are fed with spiritual food to keep us alive and strong. So whatever stops the church from fellowshipping is out to destroy what God is building". I wish they understand this...

COM 2: Nice talk Daddy in the House, Thank You, I was Wondering how our Govt shut down Churches & Schools and Open Markets, Bars, Joints, Restaurants, And Hotels Where Evil is happening every day, what is going on? Yesterday I went to a joint with my family hoping I will see few people like 20 as our Govt Said, to my surprise there is no Seat available and is a Place like 2 plots of land what is the need of Social Distances, I respect Govt for the Good work they are doing since this deadly Covid-19 virus cases and suggesting if they can close All those hotels, Bars, Joint, And Open Church & School. Our Education System Is not Stable and now is going down more and more Parents are spending more at Home & People are Forgetting Christianity more & more this is Evil And Signs Of Time God Helps Us.

COM 3: The first place to lock down is the worship centre, the question is why? Churches are even more important because people can receive healing in churches than the efforts of the state government health workers. Churches can organise healing or deliverance prayer meetings specifically against COVID-19. Governors of both states, Lagos and Ogun should reconsider their stands on this issue of lockdown of worship centres. We should not forget the popular slogan: "Doctors care but God heals".

In COM 1, the writer constructs the church as a vital space for spiritual nourishment, describing it as "*God's banquet hall*" This metaphor suggests that closing churches is equivalent to denying people their essential sustenance, leading to spiritual starvation and the destruction of God's work. The expression "*I wish they understand this*" signals the writer's emotional longing for a reversal of the ban on worship centres. This comment employs a mix of affective attitude (expressing sorrow and concern) and moral judgment (depicting the government's decision as harmful). By framing the closure as an attack on faith rather than a public health measure, the writer aligns with Bishop Oyedepo's stance and seeks to evoke empathy from the audience.

In COM 2, the writer contrasts the closure of churches with the continued operation of markets, bars, and hotels. The church is presented as a "*decent place*" where people are safe, while other locations are labelled as "*evil*." The comment also reflects a personal experience, as the writer expresses shock upon visiting a public place: "*To my surprise... I was wondering what is happening*." This reaction conveys surprise, scepticism, and disapproval. The writer strategically employs words like "*not stable, more and more, forgetting Christianity, and evil*" to heighten

emotional appeal and align the audience with his perspective. By invoking religious identity, the comment suggests that government policies undermine faith and prioritise economic interests over spiritual well-being. Furthermore, the writer extends the argument by advocating for the resumption of school activities, implying that religious and educational institutions are equally essential. This framing strengthens the call for policy change while reinforcing the speaker's commitment to moral and social values.

COM 3 adopts a confident and persuasive tone, emphasising the church's role in healing, deliverance, and prayer. The writer employs the phrase "**more important**" to elevate the church's significance above other institutions. The use of rhetorical questions, such as "*Why is the government treating worship centres differently?*" serves to challenge authority and invite the audience to critically evaluate the situation. The comment also includes directives—instructions aimed at both the government and fellow readers. The expression "*Lagos and Ogun should reconsider their stands on this issue*" is a clear demand for policy reversal. Similarly, the appeal to popular religious wisdom, "*Doctors care, but God heals,*" reinforces the argument that spiritual intervention is as crucial as medical care in times of crisis. By framing the issue as one of faith versus policy, the writer seeks to mobilise religious communities to advocate for the reopening of churches. The strategic use of the modal verb "should" and the collective pronoun "*we*" suggests a call to action, urging the audience to align with the speaker's viewpoint. From the foregoing, public sentiment was divided between health concerns and spiritual priorities. The responses illustrate how people used language to argue for the significance of religious worship, employing metaphors, emotional appeals, and rhetorical strategies to shape the audience's perception.

6.1.2 Boosters

Boosters are linguistic devices used to emphasise and reinforce claims, expressing certainty and confidence in a speaker's viewpoint. Words and phrases such as *unquestionably*, *certainly*, *without a doubt*, and *categorically* serve to amplify assertions and leave little room for alternative interpretations. In the analysed comments, participants used boosters to align themselves with Oyakhilome's stance, rejecting arguments that supported the temporary closure of churches. Participants in Comments 4, 5 and 6 deploy this persuasive power to support the second news headline "COVID-19: Oyakhilome slams pastors for consenting to the closure of churches" and confront the argument that supports staying away from the church for now to worship God until the pandemic is contained.

COM 4: The power of the corporate church. If you know, you will not be in his support. There was a collective prayer to receive a supply of the Spirit, which led to outdoor manifestations in the early church. You don't know what damage, spiritually the closure of the place of worship has done to lots of believers; lots of Christians will never be the same after this lockdown and closure. Wait till the closure is lifted, then you will understand. I stand with Bishop Oyedepo and Pastor Chris Oyakhilome.

COM 5: The Bible said that where two or three are gathered, He is there in their midst. The Bible did not say one person. I like it in church because of the feeling of love, care, support, togetherness, you know.

COM 6: In my thirty-something years on earth, I don't remember ever being away from church for two consecutive weeks. So, being away for about three months feels odd. I feel disconnected from God and this has nothing to do with my faith or believe in God as that cannot be altered; it's about the inspiration and strength you get from being in a place of worship among the brethren. I wake up in the morning and I pray with the family, especially for God to keep us safe from COVID-19 pandemic. But that is as far as it gets. I don't have that motivation to exercise my spiritual duties and responsibilities as a Christian. It's a feeling of emptiness, a void that can only be filled from worshipping in the congregation of the people of God.

COM 4 was written in response to a post supporting a pastor who advocated for church closures. The participant asserts that spiritual power, healing, and miracles are best received in the corporate church setting. To reinforce this claim, the participant employs strong boosters such as *will never*, *you don't know*, *wait until*, and *I stand with*. These phrases are carefully chosen to dismiss uncertainties, challenge opposing views, and guide readers toward the speaker's conviction. By using *will never*, the participant conveys absolute certainty that many Christians will struggle with their faith due to the lockdown. The rhetoric "*If you know...*" creates an illusion of authority, compelling readers to reason along the participant's line of thought. Ultimately, these linguistic choices shape the discourse by validating Oyakhilome's argument and urging readers to reject the alternative viewpoint. COM 5 strengthens the argument for in-person worship by invoking biblical authority and expressing unwavering confidence in what the Bible says, thereby constraining the readers from holding contrary opinions. The implicature is that corporate worship fosters love, care, support, and a sense of belonging—elements that are lacking in individual worship. Through the declarative phrase *I like it in church*, the participant reinforces his personal preference and implies that virtual worship cannot substitute physical gatherings. The combination of biblical allusions and absolute language serves to counteract opposing views, persuade readers, and legitimise the speaker's stance.

In COM 6, the participant employs a series of emotionally charged lexical choices to describe the church as a *place of connection, communion, inspiration, strength, motivation, fulfilment, and in-filling*. These descriptors emphasise the spiritual and emotional benefits of in-person worship, strengthening the participant's argument. To further reinforce his stance, the participant highlights his long-standing commitment to church attendance, noting the awkwardness he now feels due to the restrictions. Phrases like *I don't*, *cannot be altered*, *as far as*, *ever*, *only*, and *emptiness* emphasize the irreplaceable role of the church in his life. This strategic use of boosters helps the participant elicit sympathy from readers while persuading them to share his conviction.

6.1.3 Self-mentions

Self-mentions involve using first-person pronouns (*I, me, we, my, our, mine, us*) to highlight the speaker's personal experience, authority, and involvement in a discourse. These pronouns allow individuals to project their opinions with confidence, build rapport with readers, and reinforce the legitimacy of their arguments. Comments 7 – 9 are still in response to Oyakhilome's Statement.

COM 7: It has been very odd to wake up every Sunday these past two months and not go

to church. I have never really been a fan of online service because of the environment I live. It is either a neighbour is playing music too loud or someone is knocking at your door for something. More importantly, it has been very difficult to pray on my own without prayer points and directions from our ministers. I can't even count how many times I have tried to pray and found myself drifting. There are a lot of distractions and most times one ends up abandoning the online service halfway. There is no connectivity when you worship in your home. As a Christian, I believe that the church is the safest place in the world to be.

COM 8: I have been missing the praise and worship session, as well as the sermon and congregational worship. Although I join online services on Sundays, it is not the same as being in the church and hearing the ministration in the church, especially because of the distractions from other activities at home. The federal government should please lift the ban on worship centres because I believe a place of worship is a place of divine deliverance and healing, and with absolute faith in God, there will be healing possibilities for those who have the virus.

COM 9: The shutdown of churches due to the pandemic has deprived me of the opportunity of meeting my friends and fellow church members every Sunday. I also miss the brotherhood, congregational benefits, emotional support and socio-economic gains that worshipping together generates.

In COM 7 and COM 8, participants employ self-mentions to articulate their spiritual challenges and frustration over the church closures. By frequently using *I, my, and me*, they personalise their experiences, making their arguments more relatable and emotionally compelling. Both participants reject the idea that online worship can replace in-person gatherings. In introspection, the participants narrate their personal experiences, expressing vulnerability and sharing their struggles, which creates a sense of credibility while gaining readers' empathy and convincing them that the ban on worship centres has had a deeply personal and negative impact on Christians. COM 9 highlights the holistic benefits of attending church, including spiritual, emotional, and socio-economic advantages. The participant employs self-referential expressions such as *I, me, and my* to emphasise her commitments and articulate her travails. By explicitly stating how the closure has affected her, she crafts a compelling narrative that elicits support from readers while positioning herself as an authoritative voice on the issue.

6.2. Engagement markers:

Engagement markers are linguistic cues used to connect with an audience, encourage participation, and foster a sense of solidarity. These markers guide readers through the discourse, ensuring that they remain engaged and aligned with the speaker's argument while fostering community and building trust and credibility. Here are the three engagement markers identified in the data and analysed as follows:

6.2.1 Reader Pronouns

Reader pronouns (*you, we, us, our, your*) enhance engagement and create a shared sense of experience. They directly address the audience, inviting them to reflect on the issue from a personal perspective. The participants in COM 10, 11 & 12 employ linguistic indices to invite the audience/readers into the discourse following the headline “COVID-19: Okotie condemns CAN’s social distancing guidelines for churches”.

COM 10: For me, there isn’t the same joy as before; not doing the sign of peace and not taking communion in the mouth is like removing a part of the Mass, basically. It's a shame but we understand that these measures have to be taken.

COM 11: I am not happy because this is the Lenten period when we need to go to church and partake in the events taking place at the church. Before now, every Friday at 4 p.m., we always had the Stations of the Cross in church, but now everything has changed and the number of people who attend has dropped because everyone is scared of the virus.

COM 12: For the first time, people's attitude during Mass is beginning to change. Many people are scared whenever they come to church now. You see people trying to select sitting positions away from others. And the diocese has stopped the sign of peace during Mass so you notice that people try to avoid personal contact with others. I think awareness is high now because of the way the virus is ravaging other countries in parts of Europe.

The participant in COM 10 expresses dissatisfaction with the government-mandated restrictions on church activities. By referring to specific aspects of Catholic Mass that have been disrupted, he elicits empathy from readers and urges them to consider the emotional and spiritual impact of these changes. The use of *we* throughout the comment signals inclusivity, positioning the participant and the audience as partners in shared frustration. This strategic choice strengthens the argument by appealing to collective emotions while tactfully persuading them to understand the need for the measures, though he detests them. COM 11 deliberately deployed the inclusive ‘we’ to send a clear signal of involvement by textually constructing himself and the readers as participants with a similar understanding and goals. He mentions the significance of the season, compares the situation to previous times and concludes that everything has changed because of the ravaging virus. Highlighting the negative impact of the pandemic on believers, he creates a sense of urgency in tackling the ugly situation and reinforces the argument for resuming normal worship.

COM 12 started by lamenting over the situation in the church and to his dismay, many congregants now comply with the social distance rule, which to him is because they are afraid of getting infected, they are complying with the instructions of the church leadership and by extension, the directives of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). He explicitly addresses the reader in the discourse by acknowledging his presence with the second person ‘*you*’, thus fixing him into the scenario and immersing him in the discourse. His last sentence implies that he has resigned to fate (accepted the guidelines given by CAN), considering the extent of

devastation that the pandemic has caused in other parts of the world. Together, the engagement markers observed in COM 10-12 create a dynamic interaction between the writers and their audience, enhancing communication and fostering a deeper connection with the discourse.

6.2.2 Appeals to shared knowledge

Appeals to shared knowledge involve presenting incidents, facts, experiences, or cultural backgrounds that the writer assumes would be familiar and relatable to the audience to build rapport and establish common ground. For instance, referencing events, beliefs, cultural experiences, or widely accepted facts can make the discourse more relatable and persuasive. Expressions like “the fact is” or “we know that” strengthen the speaker’s argument by drawing on collective understanding and experience, thereby encouraging reader involvement and shaping public perception. COM 13, 14, and 15 are some of the experiences shared by the participants in response to the fourth news headline, “Two months without congregational worship... Clerics, other faithful share experiences”.

COM 13: The fact is that things have not been the same again in the church since the outbreak was reported. Receiving the Holy Communion and the sign of peace during Mass are optional because everyone knows the situation about the outbreak. I want this to be over so everything can be the same again.

COM 14: I felt a gap in my spiritual life during the lockdown on religious gatherings. I’m sure other Christians did too. There is nothing more important in my life now than congregating with fellow brethren to worship the Almighty God. The church lockdown has of course made Christians to realise that worshipping in the presence of God is indeed life.

COM 15: The closure of churches due to the COVID-19 pandemic we know, negatively affected many members spiritually, especially those who love congregational worship. It has indeed brought down the spiritual life of those who love to attend crusades, deliverance and powerful programmes.

The participant’s use of *the fact* and *everyone knows* in COM 13 signals a shared situational knowledge, hence persuades the readers to accept as reality the proposition that the pandemic altered the normal in the church and to show solidarity with him by recognising as familiar the impediments associated with the virus as regards church settings. References to the Holy Communion and the Sign of Peace are Christian Religious Practices that every believer is familiar with. This knowledge reinforces the writer’s argument, enhances credibility and persuades readers to accept the argument as common knowledge. The last sentence is a strategy to tactically instil in the reader a sense of urgency and readiness to resume their normal Christian life.

The participant in COM 14, having shared his frustrations during the lockdown, assumes a certain level of understanding from the audience; thus, *I’m sure other Christians did too*. This tactful and inclusive formula conveys confidence in their feelings, which fosters a sense of connection and shared experience. He further assigns the argument “*worshipping in the presence*

of God is indeed life” to the reader-participant with the linguistic construction “*of course*” thus explicitly inveigling the reader to identify with and accept the views he assigns to them. COM 15 employs some linguistic strategies, such as *we know* and *indeed* to direct the reader’s thought process toward the impact of church lockdowns. This collaborative atmosphere strategically created by the writer allows the readers to align with his thoughts as he steers their minds through the impact of some “*powerful programmes and crusades*” that are often organised by churches for the uplifting of people’s spiritual lives, which have not held for some time because of the pandemic, affecting people’s spiritual lives negatively.

6.2.3 Questioning

Questioning is another engagement strategy often employed by discourse participants to stimulate thought, challenge policies and assumptions and encourage active reader participation. Questions, whether interrogative, rhetorical or tag, emphasise a line of argument and evoke readers’ critical and analytical participation on issues that affect society by stirring them to contemplate how they are affected by the topic. Most of the interrogatives in COM 16, 17 and 18 are rhetorical and tactically employed to elicit participation and engagement from the readers. The data, which also stems from the last news headline “two months without congregational worship... Clerics, other faithful share experiences” reveal that interrogatives are effective engagement tools used by participants to arouse the interest of the readers/other participants and encourage them to explore an unresolved issue with the writers (Osisanwo, 2016). According to the data, they achieve this by addressing the readers as equal conversational partners who share their curiosity and inviting them to follow where the arguments lead (Hyland, 2005).

COM 16: I missed every aspect of the church, especially corporate worship. There’s something about corporate worship; it lifts your soul. Tell me, why won’t I miss it? I missed fellowshiping with people, as we have become family. Although the adoption of virtual service during the period helped my church attend to the spiritual needs of the members, could it replace corporate worship? No.

COM 17: Oh, you think the church didn’t lose? The church lost to the lockdown the assembly of the faithful that brings about spiritual health, healing and rejuvenation of the mind, which all increase productivity. What alternative can fill this gap?

COM 18: Don’t you think that soul-winning and membership may dip as a new way of life has evolved during this lockdown? Most Christians, especially the youths who have been enjoying online services and seem to be getting the same result, won’t they want to continue thereafter? And for me, you think I didn’t miss fellowship with the brethren the most during the lockdown?

In COM 16, the participant, having emphasised the importance of corporate worship to uplifting his soul, poses the rhetorical question, “*Tell me, why won’t I miss it?*” This stimulates the readers’ interest and invites them to consider the emotional impact of the lockdown. Although the participant admitted that the virtual services during the lockdown helped attend to the spiritual needs of congregants, he interrogates its adequacy compared to corporate worship. The question, *could it replace corporate worship?* creates curiosity in the reader and challenges

assumptions that virtual service is the same or can replace corporate worship. He closes the dialogue by supplying the answer “No”, giving no room for divergent views, constraining the readers from objecting to his stance and steering readers toward agreement with his argument. In COM 17, reiterating that the lockdown affected the church as a body, the participant launches a question to invite the readers/audience to the discourse and lures them to explore his position on how and what the church lost because of the lockdown. He ended by leaving his readers with a rhetorical statement that serves as a cognitive task that will guide them to discover that the physical assembly of the faithful enhances all-around productivity, which is incomparable. Indorsing the position of the last participant, COM 18 raises questions about future challenges for churches post-lockdown, particularly over soul-winning, declining attendance and shifting worship habits. By framing these uncertainties as questions, the participant compels the audience to consider the potential consequences and reflect on their stance. However, he tactically guides their thought line by posing a rhetorical question that advances his stance and engages the cognitive domain of readers, encouraging them to think critically and recognise the depth of the issue.

7. Findings and Conclusion

The analysis reveals that The Punch, Premium Times and The Guardian e-newspapers have a forum (comment section) where readers and participants meet to chat, dialogue and discuss the issues bothering them as a nation. Participants take advantage of this forum to express their feelings, stamp their stances, persuade others and invite their readers to adopt their stances regarding the religious encumbrances and their implications on the well-being of worshippers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. They strategically achieve this through the use of elements of stance like attitude markers, self-mention (to convince readers and project their stance into the discourse) and boosters (expressions of certainty and inclusion) likewise engagement markers like reader pronouns (to construct both writer and reader as equal and immerse the reader into the text), appeals to shared knowledge (foster deeper engagement and involve readers in the text) and questioning (directives) to strengthen their arguments and influence public perception effectively. It was discovered that some participants display affinity to the clergy men, churches and doctrines, which influence their stance. Also, participants guide readers to the religious encumbrances during the lockdown by assigning views to them and compelling them to accept such as familiar in solidarity via stance and engagement elements including interrogatives, to arouse the cognitive domain of readers to their line of thought.

In conclusion, the comments analysed illustrate how public discourse, particularly in religious settings, is deeply influenced by shared knowledge and interactive questioning techniques. These lexical indices connote the church as an all-around solution centre, which ranks as one of the most important institutions in the lives of most Nigerians. By implication, the ban on worship centres destroyed people’s spiritual activities, especially their relationship with God and affected their emotional well-being as the fear of the pandemic got hold of them and distressed their socio-economic life, among others.

Recommendations

Given the significance of religion in shaping societal attitudes, it is recommended that:

1. The government engage religious leaders in policymaking when decisions affect worship practices, as clerics hold significant influence over their congregations.
2. Religious leaders should encourage constructive dialogue with authorities rather than fostering resistance to government policies, as negotiation is an effective tool in policy implementation that can curb religious protests in a democratic society.
3. Virtual and physical worship should coexist, ensuring that congregants have access to spiritual support regardless of external disruptions.

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