





Assessing Digital Media and the Learning Process among Private Universities in Nigeria in the Post-COVID-19 Era

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ABSTRACT

Studies on digital media learning among schools in Nigeria have focused more on the experiences of both learners and facilitators in the COVID-19 lockdown with only a few reflecting on the post-COVID experiences of learning using the digital media. Relying on secondary sources, this study interrogated the fate of digital media learning among private universities in the post-COVID era in Nigeria. The findings revealed that unlike the public universities which struggled to respond to the challenges of learning amid the COVID-19 lockdown, several private universities responded firmly to ensure learning was sustained. This response, however, ushered in new challenges like limited finance, erratic internet services, poor student assessment procedure, lack of basic technology skills among tutors and learners, absence of defined coping mechanisms for coping with the changes and concerns about the integrity of evaluation and assessment in the context of digital learning. This has been made worse in the post-COVID-19 era where tutors and learners have struggled even more to meet the challenges of digital learning. However, the need to sustain digital learning as the new normal at private universities in Nigeria remains consistently compelling given the relative positive impacts of digital learning on students' performances and teachers' capacity-building across the globe. This study, therefore, concluded that private universities in Nigeria must ensure that they capitalise on the gains recorded from online learning by sustaining its practice in the post-COVID era to meet global standards. Also, the government must provide an adequate support system to sustain digital learning in universities.

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INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which swept the globe due to its easy transmission, had devastating consequences for global interactions and led to the adoption of several safety protocols, including the shutting down of airspaces, schools, churches, social gatherings and other key sectors.¹ The World Health Organisation reported that, between January 2020 and December 2021, an estimated

¹ Taofeeq Ibn-Mohammed et al., "A Critical Analysis of the Impacts of COVID-19 on the Global Economy and Ecosystems and Opportunities for Circular Economy Strategies," *Resources, Conservation and Recycling* 164 (2021): 105169; Emmanuel Aboagye, "Transitioning from Face-to-Face to Online Instruction in the COVID-19 Era: Challenges of Tutors at Colleges of Education in Ghana," *Social Education Research*, 2021, 9–19.

14.9 million people died as a result of the rapidly spreading pandemic.² This impressed upon countries the need for strict enforcement of social distancing and total lockdown of public spaces, including educational institutions, to mitigate its spread. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced most countries to shut down many sectors of their economy and this negatively affected the global economy. The education sector was one of the most affected, and this has led to the adoption of copious forms of digital media learning globally to meet the challenges of learners.³ Unlike the other sectors, the educational sector was the worst hit as the forced closure of schools by the respective home governments greatly impacted learning and teaching.⁴ Indeed, scholars have admitted that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was greatly felt among higher education institutions across the globe.⁵

While most developed countries adequately and swiftly responded to the challenges posed to learning and teaching by COVID-19 based on their consequentially advanced level of digital literacy and technology, the reverse was the case in developing countries, especially those in Africa. Thus, most scholars admitted that most universities in Africa struggled with responding to the new normal which entailed administering the hybrid mode of learning.⁶ Given that most developing nations suffer from a lack of sophisticated technology, the use of online learning media among learners and educators for learning and teaching has remained significantly difficult in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷ Consequent to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared the closure of tertiary institutions and this led to calls for online learning to sustain learning. However, the decision to adopt online learning among public and private universities was not an easy one given the cost implications.⁸ Despite these fears, the tertiary institutions resolved to sustain learning through the improvement of their digital technology tools and the adoption of online learning platforms.

Accordingly, the trends, dynamics, and experiences of online learning among Nigerian tertiary institutions have varied. While some scholars have argued that the adoption of online learning has recorded relative success,⁹ others have argued otherwise.¹⁰ Despite these varying positions, the need for more incisive engagements with the emerging issues of online learning has remained compelling in recent times. Though some works have interrogated the effects of digital learning on knowledge

² WHO, "14.9 Million Excess Deaths Associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020 and 2021," 2022, <https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2022-14.9-million-excess-deaths-were-associated-with-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-2020-and-2021>.

³ David W Hedding et al., "COVID-19 and the Academe in South Africa: Not Business as Usual," *South African Journal of Science* 116, no. 7–8 (2020): 1–3; Brigid A McKenna, Ciara Horton, and Peter M Kopittke, "Online Engagement during COVID-19: Comparing a Course Previously Delivered Traditionally with Emergency Online Delivery," *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* 2022, no. 1 (2022): 6813033.

⁴ Thiyaharajan Muthuprasad et al., "Students' Perception and Preference for Online Education in India during COVID-19 Pandemic," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 3, no. 1 (2021): 100101; McKenna, Horton, and Kopittke, "Online Engagement during COVID-19: Comparing a Course Previously Delivered Traditionally with Emergency Online Delivery."

⁵ Aboagye, "Transitioning from Face-to-Face to Online Instruction in the COVID-19 Era: Challenges of Tutors at Colleges of Education in Ghana"; Hedding et al., "COVID-19 and the Academe in South Africa: Not Business as Usual"; Rune Hjelsvold et al., "Educators' Experiences Online: How COVID-19 Encouraged Pedagogical Change in CS Education," in *Norsk IKT-Konferanse for Forskning Og Utdanning*, vol. 4, 2020.

⁶ Nhlanhla Landa, Sindiso Zhou, and Newlin Marongwe, "Education in Emergencies: Lessons from COVID-19 in South Africa," *International Review of Education* 67, no. 1 (2021): 167–83; Marieta Du Plessis et al., "South African Higher Education Institutions at the Beginning of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Sense-Making and Lessons Learnt," in *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 6 (Frontiers Media SA, 2022), 740016; Olasile Babatunde Adedoyin and Emrah Soykan, "Covid-19 Pandemic and Online Learning: The Challenges and Opportunities," *Interactive Learning Environments* 31, no. 2 (2023): 863–75.

⁷ Opeyemi Dele-Ajayi and Abeba Taddese, "EdTech in Nigeria: A Rapid Scan," *EdTech Hub Country Scan.–2020.–DOI 10* (2020); Wasiu Oyeleke Oyediran et al., "Prospects and Limitations of E-Learning Application in Private Tertiary Institutions amidst COVID-19 Lockdown in Nigeria," *Heliyon* 6, no. 11 (2020).

⁸ Obiora Kingsley Udem, Tochukwu Kingsley Ejike, and Uche Okpalibekwe, "Covid-19 and Future of Tertiary Education in Nigeria," *Contemporary Issues on Covid-19 Experiences in Nigeria*, 2021.

⁹ Stephen Tochukwu Nwachukwu, Chinweoke Methodius Ugwu, and Joseph O Wogu, "Digital Learning in Post Covid-19 Era: Policy Options and Prospects for Quality Education in Nigeria," *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 2021, 1–18; Obiageri Bridget Azubuike, Oyindamola Adegboye, and Habeeb Quadri, "Who Gets to Learn in a Pandemic? Exploring the Digital Divide in Remote Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria," *International Journal of Educational Research Open* 2 (2021): 100022.

¹⁰ Thelma Obiakor and Adedeji Adeniran, "COVID-19: Impending Situation Threatens to Deepen Nigeria's Education Crisis," *Center for the Study of the Economies of Africa*, 2020; Oyediran et al., "Prospects and Limitations of E-Learning Application in Private Tertiary Institutions amidst COVID-19 Lockdown in Nigeria"; Udem, Ejike, and Okpalibekwe, "Covid-19 and Future of Tertiary Education in Nigeria."

facilitation in the Nigerian higher education sector, there appears to be little research on the experiences of online learning among private universities and the extent to which online learning has been sustained in the post-COVID-19 era in South-West region Nigeria.¹¹ It is these areas that this research attempts to address. Therefore, adopting the Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) theory and secondary sources, this study contributes to the discourse by interrogating the fate of digital media learning among private universities in the post-COVID era in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Going by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, several governments, including Nigeria, have relied on the persistent warnings from the World Health Organisation (WHO) to shut down schools and other public gatherings to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Though several countries were left with no choice but to shut down schools, experiences with online learning have varied accordingly and this has generated scholarly debates among scholars. For instance, Talib et al. are of the view that the unexpected calls for online learning, occasioned by the outbreak of COVID-19, were sudden for many institutions of learning because many of them were neither previously exposed to digital learning nor familiar with the basic tools of online learning.¹² In this case, many facilitators were compelled to adapt to the new normal with or without any adequate support from their institutions and this affected the quality of learning during that period.

Hjelsvold et al. conducted a study among three hundred and three (303) university students and fifty-six (56) educators in Norway.¹³ They contended that time and lack of available resources greatly affected the shift towards online learning in the aftermath of the outbreak of COVID-19 and the shutting down of institutions. Other factors that slowed down online learning adoption during that period included undefined systems for obtaining feedback from students; limited opportunities for collaborative learning among students; inadequacy of technological facilities for students; limited knowledge of facilities for test preparation and deployment and lack of coordination between students and educators. Hjelsvold concludes that, though these challenges had adverse effects on online teaching in the wake of the shutting down of face-to-face interaction, learners were quick to adapt to the new ways of learning and that sustained the educational system. Muthuprasad et al. focused on students' perceptions and preferences for online learning in India in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁴ Given the flexibility and convenience of online learning in India, students were largely motivated to adopt it as this gave them some degree of freedom to carry out learning at their own rate.

Brigid et al. investigated the impact of COVID-19 on students' learning among third-year undergraduate students in Australia.¹⁵ It was observed that the resolve to teach online led to slow learning ability, decreased student engagement, lazier attitude towards attending tutorials, and low attendance across levels and classes. Furthermore, they observed that, despite the adequate facilities provided for online learning, students' activities were largely not encouraging. This calls for an improved facilitator-learner dialogue and an adequate learning structure to support this new mode of learning. In contrast, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) held that, upon the government's declaration of a state of emergency in key cities like Tokyo and Osaka, about 90% of schools resulted to online teaching mode while the remaining 10% continued with the physical or face-to-face learning. As the situation persisted, several schools were forced to

¹¹ Oyediran et al., "Prospects and Limitations of E-Learning Application in Private Tertiary Institutions amidst COVID-19 Lockdown in Nigeria"; Obiageli C Okoye, "Strategies of the Dominican University Nigeria in Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Alliance for African Partnership Perspectives* 1, no. 1 (2021): 43–48; N. Yakubu and S. Dasuki, "Emergency Online Teaching and Learning in a Nigerian Private University: An Activity Theory Perspective," Working Paper. UK Academy for Information Systems, 2021, https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/172592/1/UKAIS2021_AT_Paper.pdf; Babatunde Adeyeye et al., "Online Learning Platforms and Covenant University Students' Academic Performance in Practical Related Courses during COVID-19 Pandemic," *Sustainability* 14, no. 2 (2022): 878.

¹² Manar Abu Talib, Anissa M Bettayeb, and Razan I Omer, "Analytical Study on the Impact of Technology in Higher Education during the Age of COVID-19: Systematic Literature Review," *Education and Information Technologies* 26, no.6(2021): 6719–46.

¹³ Hjelsvold et al., "Educators' Experiences Online: How COVID-19 Encouraged Pedagogical Change in CS Education."

¹⁴ Muthuprasad et al., "Students' Perception and Preference for Online Education in India during COVID-19 Pandemic."

¹⁵ McKenna, Horton, and Kopittke, "Online Engagement during COVID-19: Comparing a Course Previously Delivered Traditionally with Emergency Online Delivery."

ease the rule by encouraging face-to-face learning albeit with strict maintenance of the basic COVID-19 preventive protocols. Specifically, learning in these cities was carried out using both physical and virtual modes, particularly, in 2021, and this has persisted since then.

Narrowing down the discourse to Africa, several authors have discussed the trends and dynamics that have characterised online learning. For instance, El Said explored how the COVID-19 lockdown impacted online learning in Egypt.¹⁶ Specifically, the study sought to investigate the differences in academic performance between face-to-face learning in the spring semester of 2019 and online teaching in the spring semester of 2020. Reflecting on the outcomes of course grades, course work, and examinations, El Said concluded that there was no significant difference in student performances during these different semesters. Segbenny et al. examined the consequences of COVID-19 on online learning for distance learners in Ghana.¹⁷ Their study found that there is a substantial relationship between the provision of online teaching equipment, competent operation of electronic gadgets, availability of online gadgets and online presentation methods among Ghanaian learners. They concluded that the success of online teaching will depend largely on the availability of online teaching materials and adequate training for students and educators.

Bozkurt and Sharma reflected on the provision of online learning in Egypt in the context of COVID-19 and revealed that private and international universities quickly adjusted to the shift to online teaching during the period.¹⁸ This process, for Bozkurt and Sharma, resulted in the adoption of LMS models like Moodle, Zoom, and other platforms to meet learners' expectations.¹⁹

Maatuk et al. explored the various issues surrounding online learning among students and instructors at public universities in Benghazi, Libya, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁰ Their study set out to determine the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning; the extent to which learners subscribe to e-learning and obstacles to the successful implementation of e-learning. Maatuk et al. contended that online learning was beneficial to the students studied as it helped to reduce the cost of physical schooling and equally ensured that learning was not halted during the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹

However, they noted that online teaching in Benghazi was fraught with a series of challenges. They included funding, lack of adequate training, poor teaching environment, lack of basic technological knowledge, copyright issues and absence of the requisite manpower. Macupe observed that there was prior experience of online learning in South Africa before the COVID-19 pandemic.²² While universities that had adequate facilities and were well-funded had a smooth transition from physical to online learning, the reverse was the case for poorly-funded universities. In most of the rural areas, facilitators and learners were not provided with the required training, devices, data and other necessary tools to aid online learning, and this further illustrated inadequate funding among underprivileged tertiary institutions in South Africa as a challenge to online learning.

Similarly, Hedding et al., noted that the closure of schools occasioned by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic had grave consequences for learning in South Africa.²³ The challenges witnessed included transformation gaps, administrative and systemic weaknesses, lack of basic knowledge about the pedagogy of learning and impacting, limited funding and lack of motivation. These problems

¹⁶ Ghada Refaat El Said, "How Did the COVID-19 Pandemic Affect Higher Education Learning Experience? An Empirical Investigation of Learners' Academic Performance at a University in a Developing Country," *Advances in Human-Computer Interaction* 2021, no. 1 (2021): 6649524.

¹⁷ Moses Segbenny et al., "Modelling the Perspectives of Distance Education Students towards Online Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic," *Smart Learning Environments* 9, no. 1 (December 9, 2022): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-022-00193-y>.

¹⁸ Aras Bozkurt and Ramesh C Sharma, "Emergency Remote Teaching in a Time of Global Crisis Due to CoronaVirus Pandemic," *Asian Journal of Distance Education* 15, no. 1 (2020): i-vi.

¹⁹ Bozkurt and Sharma, "Emergency Remote Teaching in a Time of Global Crisis Due to CoronaVirus Pandemic."

²⁰ Abdelsalam M Maatuk et al., "The COVID-19 Pandemic and E-Learning: Challenges and Opportunities from the Perspective of Students and Instructors," *Journal of Computing in Higher Education* 34, no. 1 (2022): 21-38.

²¹ Maatuk et al., "The COVID-19 Pandemic and E-Learning: Challenges and Opportunities from the Perspective of Students and Instructors."

²² B. Macupe, "Students 'Dreams Are Crumbling'," *Mail & Guardian*, 2020, <https://mg.co.za/education/2020-07-25-students-dreams-are-crumbling/>.

²³ Hedding et al., "COVID-19 and the Academe in South Africa: Not Business as Usual."

greatly impacted how institutions responded to calls for online learning and made learning difficult for students across the country. Furthermore, Tamrat (2021) discusses the challenges of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) with online learning in the aftermath of the outbreak of COVID-19 in Ethiopia. His study revealed that many PHEIs struggled with online learning and that greatly affected the business operations of the institutions in the areas of income, productivity, salary, and rental obligations. Tamrat concluded that many of these PHEIs will struggle with adjusting to physical learning except the government assisted by providing stimulus funding.²⁴ Kaisara and Bwalya contributed to the discourse by exploring the online learning situation among students in Namibia due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁵ They divided the problem into five categories: accessibility, platform layout, internet and network funding, isolation and physical environment. Their study concluded that learners faced a series of challenges that affected the learning process during the lockdown and that was most likely to continue in the post-COVID era.

In Nigeria, Azubuikwe et al. noted that there was a great disparity between public and private schools in the deployment of online teaching and learning facilities during the COVID-19 lockdown. Their research found that students in private universities had greater access to sustained digital learning as compared to those in public universities, and that was because the private universities committed more resources to digital learning.²⁶ Obiakor and Adeniran further noted that the response of private universities to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic to learning has further led to a sharp digital divide between learners of private and public universities in Nigeria.²⁷ While students at private universities were able to key into the use of sophisticated online learning platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, WhatsApp and the like, students at public universities struggled with learning due to the absence of requisite facilities owing to the absence of governmental support.

Nwanmereni noted that the implementation of the Nigerian government's directive to all tertiary institutions to stop physical learning for online learning was fraught with a series of challenges.²⁸ The challenges included a lack of a stable or steady power supply; a lack of basic ICT equipment in public schools; a lack of funding and training for educators; and the problem of abandoned infrastructural projects in public or government-owned institutions. He further noted that public schools did not experience the limitations alone; some private institutions struggled with adjusting to the demands of online learning.²⁹

Oyediran et al. argued that, while the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the innovation and significance of online learning, many universities in Nigeria have continuously struggled with meeting the demands of online teaching.³⁰ Thus, the problem is not whether universities will be committed to deploying educational technology; it is rather how prepared they will be in terms of responding to the challenges that come with it. Regardless of these challenges identified by the scholars, Nwachukwu et al., maintained that online learning and revolutionary educational technology would remain the key means of learning, communicating, and imparting knowledge in contemporary times.³¹ So, while universities in Nigeria have hitherto struggled with this task in the COVID-19 era, there is a need for the government to invest more in digital learning in the post-COVID-19 era.

²⁴ Wondwosen Tamrat, "Enduring the Impacts of COVID-19: Experiences of the Private Higher Education Sector in Ethiopia," *Studies in Higher Education* 46, no. 1 (2021): 59–74.

²⁵ Godwin Kaisara and Kelvin Joseph Bwalya, "Investigating the E-Learning Challenges Faced by Students during COVID-19 in Namibia," *International Journal of Higher Education* 10, no. 1 (2021): 308–18.

²⁶ Azubuikwe, Adegboye, and Quadri, "Who Gets to Learn in a Pandemic? Exploring the Digital Divide in Remote Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria."

²⁷ Obiakor and Adeniran, "COVID-19: Impending Situation Threatens to Deepen Nigeria's Education Crisis."

²⁸ Daniel Nil Nwanmereni, "Global Coronavirus Pandemic and the Improvised Online Lectures Perspectives in Select Universities in South-South, Nigeria," *Social Sciences and Humanities Open. Www. Papersssm. Com*, 2020.

²⁹ Nwanmereni, "Global Coronavirus Pandemic and the Improvised Online Lectures Perspectives in Select Universities in South-South, Nigeria."

³⁰ Oyediran et al., "Prospects and Limitations of E-Learning Application in Private Tertiary Institutions amidst COVID-19 Lockdown in Nigeria."

³¹ Nwachukwu, Ugwu, and Wogu, "Digital Learning in Post Covid-19 Era: Policy Options and Prospects for Quality Education in Nigeria."

In their summing up of Africa's response to online learning due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the shutting down of schools, Landa et al., pointed out that, as of February 2021, most universities in Africa were battling with rounding up their 2020 academic calendar.³² This was mainly caused by the inability of the learners and educators to access the Internet, low level of digital literacy, struggles with work-life balance, lack of adequate training on the deployment of online platforms for learning and lack of effective engagement between educators and learners. Based on the impact of the aforementioned challenges of online learning, they advocated for greater collaboration between the government and Internet service providers to encourage learning in under-resourced universities throughout the region. As Adedoyin and Soykan concluded, it was evident that several students from middle-class families struggled to meet the ICT demands of digital learning during the pandemic.³³ From the literature and scholarly works explored, many studies have explicated the experiences of learners and facilitators of private universities in South-West Nigeria with online learning in the post-COVID-19 era. This would be the main thrust of this research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Online Education

Online learning is the process of knowledge facilitation through technology-enabled platforms like email, chat and as well as audio and video conferencing. Unlike the other modes of learning, it is considered convenient.³⁴ It involves the learning and imparting of knowledge through reliance on different devices such as internet-enabled mobile phones and personal computers that make learning easier, more convenient and significantly productive.³⁵ For Bakia et al., this involves a plethora of programmes that rely on the Internet to aid learning within and outside the school environment.³⁶ It helps to facilitate smooth interactions between learners and teachers, which can be executed through the full or partial deployment of digital platforms. In summary, online learning involves the use of different software or programmes to aid the learning process and interactions between facilitators and a large group of learners.

The Learning Management System

There have been several attempts by scholars to conceptualise the notion of a Learning Management System (LMS). For instance, Watson and Watson describe the LMS as a web-designed software that can ensure the various forms of learning.³⁷ The LMS provides a well-organised platform that aids the distribution and management of pedagogical materials. It also enables an environment that aids learning activities such as students' registration, tracking of grades, announcing assignments, checking recent updates and uploading course-related information. Chugh and Luck further note that LMS refers to the web-based technology software that provides an online interactive forum and learning environment which helps in organising, coordinating, and delivering learning content between learners and facilitators.³⁸

The LMS is software that aids the learning processes through the online classroom environment. The LMS strives to ensure that a well-established system is provided to facilitate an academic process that supports online collaborative knowledge sharing, professional training, academic discussions and

³² Landa, Zhou, and Marongwe, "Education in Emergencies: Lessons from COVID-19 in South Africa."

³³ Adedoyin and Soykan, "Covid-19 Pandemic and Online Learning: The Challenges and Opportunities."

³⁴ Indira Dhull and MS' Sakshi, "Online Learning," *International Education and Research Journal (IERJ)* 33, no. 8 (2017).

³⁵ Vandana Singh and Alexander Thurman, "How Many Ways Can We Define Online Learning? A Systematic Literature Review of Definitions of Online Learning (1988-2018)," *American Journal of Distance Education* 33, no. 4 (2019): 289–306.

³⁶ Marianne Bakia et al., "Understanding the Implications of Online Learning for Educational Productivity.," *Office of Educational Technology, US Department of Education*, 2012.

³⁷ William R Watson and Sunnie Lee Watson, "An Argument for Clarity: What Are Learning Management Systems, What Are They Not, and What Should They Become?," *TechTrends* 51 (2007): 28–34.

³⁸ Darren Turnbull, Ritesh Chugh, and Jo Luck, "Learning Management Systems, an Overview," *Encyclopedia of Education and Information Technologies*, 2020, 1052–58.

other forms of communication.³⁹ In summary, the LMS connotes a series of online software tools that aid learning and regulate interactions between learners and educators.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) denotes all forms of technologies deployed or used in creating, storing, sharing, transmitting and transferring information between people. These technologies include telephone, satellite systems, network software and hardware, DVDs, televisions, computers the like.⁴⁰ It refers to the technologies that capture, display and transmit data and information. Such include devices, applications and networking programmes that provide platforms for people across the globe to interact.⁴¹ For Meral, ICT is often viewed as Information Technology (IT) but both concepts carry out different tasks. Hence, ICT is communication among people via the use of phones, wireless networks and other web-based software which make communication easy and fast.⁴²

This study adopts Rogers's Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) theory.⁴³ The theory accounts for how new ideas gain traction and spread among a people or social system. The DOI theory is more critical of how the human community perceives, relates to and ultimately adopts a new idea which shapes their behaviour. The way and manner in which an individual or social system imbibes a particular idea is what Rogers calls adoption. Thus, Rogers goes on to list five forms or categories of adopters and how they ensure that information or ideas are effectively imbibed in human societies. The categories of adopters are innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards.

First are the innovators who comprise people or individuals who invent ideas and are able to convince a lot of people about the expected benefits of such ideas. These types of people play critical roles in the DOI theory in that they go all out to take risks and ensure that an idea is created. Furthermore, the early adopters include opinion leaders, government representatives, and well-respected leaders who play key roles in embracing new ideas and ensuring their followers are well-informed about the potential of such opportunities or ideas. This group of people fashion useful strategies to convince the population about the significance of embracing such ideas. Then, the next category is the early majority. These types of people are not necessarily leaders but they play intermediary roles between the government and the people. This group of people rely on their convictions about the potency of an idea in coopting the masses. The late majority consists of people or individuals who only adopt or adapt to a new idea if it has been tested and embraced by a larger population.⁴⁴ They are mainly moved by the success stories of other people who have adopted and tried new ideas. Lastly, this group of people is sceptical of change, largely bound by traditional belief systems and highly conservative. The process of convincing or cajoling this group of people entails the use of statistical data, pressure and success stories.⁴⁵

Accordingly, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its widespread within a short period forced several countries to issue social distancing rules and other safety protocols. That led to the closure of schools in Nigeria by the government on the advice of the Ministry of Health. As a result of the directive, most private universities were initially at a loss as to how to best respond to their teaching demands in the face of government restrictions. Online learning has become the most appropriate means of sustaining learning among these institutions, albeit, in a slow manner. While some

³⁹ Luke H Bradley et al., "STEM through Authentic Research and Training Program (START) for Underrepresented Communities: Adapting to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of STEM Outreach* 4, no. 4 (2021): 10–15695.

⁴⁰ S Owusu-Ansah, "Human Factor Issues in the Use of E-Government Services among Ghanaian Middle Age Population: Improving Usability of Existing and Future Government Virtual Interactive Systems Design," 2014.

⁴¹ Mahima Nanda and Gurpreet Randhawa, "Smart Cities Project: Some Lessons for Indian Cities," in *Handbook of Research on Implementation and Deployment of IoT Projects in Smart Cities* (IGI Global, 2019), 80–95.

⁴² Kevser Zeynep Meral, "Social Media Ethics and Children in the Digital Era: Social Media Risks and Precautions," in *Multidisciplinary Approaches to Ethics in the Digital Era* (IGI Global, 2021), 166–82.

⁴³ Everett M Rogers and Leticia Smith, *Bibliography on the Diffusion of Innovations* (Department of Communication, Michigan State University, 1962).

⁴⁴ E. M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th ed. (Tampa, FL: Free Press, 2003).

⁴⁵ M. Rogers, E. *Diffusion of Innovation*, 4th ed. (New York, NY: Free Press, 2003).

universities debated which online software to use, others had concerns about the learners and parents, and even the facilitators reluctantly accepted the proposals of the educational managers.

This led to a series of early delays and disagreements among the key actors in the learning process. The initial face-off was not because ICT was a new idea to many of them but they disagreed on the best facilitation process to adopt. Amidst these controversies and varying positions, some private universities began to take the lead with online learning and their success stories eventually spurred several others to design their online learning strategies in the new normal. Interestingly, the way the private universities in Nigeria eventually resorted to online learning and how they were able to convince the parents, facilitators and learners clearly demonstrates the workings of the DOI theory, as espoused by Rogers, in that context.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach which entails explorative, descriptive and contextual strategies was adopted for this study. Secondary sources of data collection were deployed by the researchers. The utilised secondary sources included books, journal articles, online articles, archival materials, newspapers, dissertations, magazines and podcasts. Unlike the primary data, the secondary sources involved the gathering of existing information for further research.⁴⁶ Secondary data collection involves the search for relevant information and findings reported by previous authors for the sake of confirming new findings or debunking the existing findings. The overall goal of this method is to contribute to scientific knowledge by offering alternate perspectives or affirming the relevance of the existing perspectives.⁴⁷

The data elicited from the secondary sources were analyzed using the content analysis method. Qualitative content analysis is a method of analysis based on the systematic coding and quantification of contents or information that has been either written, visualised or presented in the oral form.⁴⁸ The importance of this method cannot be overstated in any worthwhile scientific research. For this, Krippendorff adds that it is an empirically grounded method, exploratory in process, and predictive or inferential in intent.⁴⁹ It goes beyond traditional notions of symbols, contents, and intents to develop its own methodology, allowing researchers to plan, execute, communicate, reproduce, and critically evaluate their analyses, regardless of the specific results.⁵⁰

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

COVID-19, Digital Media and Private Universities' Online Learning Experiences in Nigeria

The resolve among many tertiary institutions to embrace online learning came as a result of the directive from the Ministry of Health that all public spaces be shut down. This directive compelled schools to consider the available alternatives to physical learning. Upon the announcement of the shutdown of tertiary institutions in Nigeria, the management of public and private universities was at a crossroads as to how best to sustain learning amidst the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the public schools struggled to find a formidable solution to the challenge, most private universities quickly switched to online learning to sustain their ongoing academic sessions.

Falola et al., noted that "in Nigeria, the lockdown forced many university lecturers to work remotely. Students' engagement via various e-learning platforms gained attention during the pandemic. The level at which university lecturers in Nigeria now explore e-learning platforms for teaching, research, community impact, and administrative responsibilities has changed the narrative of conventional learning and teaching in Nigeria."⁵¹ To assist in achieving this goal, numerous web-based software tools were adopted to ease learning and communication among learners and educators.

⁴⁶ Mike Allen, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* (SAGE publications, 2017).

⁴⁷ Melissa P Johnston, "Secondary Data Analysis: A Method of Which the Time Has Come," *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries* 3, no. 3 (2014): 619–26.

⁴⁸ K. Huxley, *Content Analysis, Quantitative* (SAGE Publications Limited, 2020).

⁴⁹ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Sage publications, 2018).

⁵⁰ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 : SAGE Publications, Inc., 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071878781>.

⁵¹ H O Falola et al., "Empirical Investigation of E-Learning Opportunities and Faculty Engagement in Nigerian Universities: Moderating Role of Demographic Characteristics," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 9, no. 1 (2022): 2118741.

YouTube, Google Meet, Classera, Google Classroom, Microsoft Team, Zoom, Duo, Coursera, Moodle, and other learning software are examples of the adopted platforms.

However, the online teaching experiences among these private universities in Nigeria were fraught with a series of challenges that continue to affect learning even in the post-COVID-19 era. These challenges, which cut across learners, educators, proprietors and even parents, include lack of motivation, lack of research and inadequate knowledge about the use of ICT, over-reliance on face-to-face learning, lack of infrastructure, lack of sophisticated technology to aid communication, economic crisis, non-availability of power and internet facilities, limited funding, uncertainties surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, the declining value of learning, distractions from family members, boredom in classes, truancy and sheer laziness among educators and learners. The aforementioned challenges are discussed below.

The most pressing challenge that became a serious bone of contention among the private universities in Nigeria, especially in the South-West region, was the problem of the persisting economic crisis in Nigeria which had seen a drop in student enrolment, funding, and provision of basic amenities, among others. Thus, many of these universities were at a crossroads on how best to meet the cost of executing online learning amidst the economic crisis that had remained prevalent in the country. Given that most private universities are owned and funded by individuals, the dwindling economies in the country largely affected funding, and this was made worse by the inability of parents to pay or offset the backlog of school fees owed by their wards.⁵² Even private universities that were owned by churches or corporate organisations were affected by the economic crisis as the schools were already preparing some measures for saving resources before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, meeting up with the cost of online learning was a major challenge for the private universities in Nigeria and this led to several permutations within them.

The economic crisis further ushered in the next inevitable problem which is the motivation for engaging in online learning by the private universities in Nigeria. Given that the economic crisis has already had severe consequences for these universities, resolving to use online learning was not a decision that was easily accepted. Most private universities, particularly those in the South-West region, reluctantly motivated themselves, educators and students, to keep their commitment to uninterrupted academic sessions which was a selling point for these institutions. Due to the incessant strike actions embarked upon by the staff unions in the public universities which slow down and interrupt the academic calendar, parents resolve to send their wards to private universities, and this has somehow put pressure on these private universities to fulfil their promise to the students and their parents.

Notwithstanding, several private universities displayed the early signs of a lack of motivation to adopt online learning, and this equally explained the disposition of educators and learners to learning during the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown. Eli-Chukwu et al., aptly captured this problem as they argued that the online learning experiences among learners and facilitators of private universities during COVID-19 show that online learning was yet to take root, and that was because several of the universities were not prepared for the task and rigour of online learning.⁵³

Furthermore, there was also a clear lack of adequate research and knowledge about the available online teaching models and this was one of the most pressing issues confronting tertiary institutions in several developing countries, particularly Nigeria. Going by the poverty level and stunted development across these countries, educators and learners struggled, during the COVID-19 pandemic, to meet the global requirements in terms of offering basic online classes and this affected the quality of learning. Reflecting on the experiences of thirty-one countries across the globe, Bozkurt et al., noted that "the current practice can be defined as emergency remote education, and this practice is different from planned practices such as distance education, online learning, or other derivations."⁵⁴ As a result, several private universities in Nigeria's Southwest region were also caught up in this quagmire as facilitators and students were forced to scramble for insights and knowledge about online

⁵² Udem, Ejike, and Okpalibekwe, "Covid-19 and Future of Tertiary Education in Nigeria."

⁵³ Ngozi Clara Eli-Chukwu et al., "Challenges Confronting E-Learning in Higher Education Institutions in Nigeria amid Covid-19," *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education* 15, no. 1 (2023): 238–53.

⁵⁴ Bozkurt and Sharma, "Emergency Remote Teaching in a Time of Global Crisis Due to CoronaVirus Pandemic."

learning models. This problem led to a slow start in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and this had a negative impact on the quality of learning among these institutions.

Apart from the absence of the required or basic ICT knowledge, many private universities equally suffered from their inability to procure or provide sophisticated technology devices even when some of the educators were well prepared for this task due to their experience and exposure to the outside world. Most African countries had hitherto been confronted with the challenge but the challenges were brought to the fore by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Yonazi et al., developing countries have experienced difficulties adapting policies and regulations to rapid changes in technology and market structure.⁵⁵ As a result, while several tertiary institutions have demonstrated a desire to adapt to changes in the learning mode, the availability of sophisticated ICT and technological devices continues to stall this dream.

Given that most Nigerian universities rely heavily on face-to-face interactions, little emphasis was placed on acquiring sophisticated technological gadgets for online learning and that became an immediate problem to be addressed in the COVID-19 era. While this problem forced several private universities to invest heavily in sophisticated technology, the operations of some were constrained due to the unavailability of funds which had implications for the quality of their outputs. In this regard, Nwachukwu et al., noted that the absence of sophisticated technology to aid learning posed a serious challenge or dilemma as there was no adequate consolidation of learning among the many universities in Nigeria.⁵⁶

Across Nigeria, there is an erroneous impression that parents who are able to send their wards or children to private universities are extremely rich and fall within the privileged class. Recent experiences suggest that most parents with children in private universities actually source for their children's school fees by obtaining credit facilities and they are motivated to undertake the risk because they want to escape the problem of incessant strikes in public universities. Some parents even withdraw their children from public universities, to start all over at private universities, at the slightest instance of any disruption in the academic calendar. Such parents are further stressed when tasked to provide the tools for digital learning for their children. Though the rich parents responded swiftly to the request that they equip their children for digital learning, the facilitators, who were mostly low-income earners, were not able to provide the needed tools for themselves and this affected their responses to the digital activities occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Faloye and Ajayi, "such parents are less likely to engage in digital activities. They are also less likely to be able to afford quality education that would equip their children with the technological skills they require for further education and compete with their peers in the digital world."⁵⁷

Given that most universities have relied heavily on the face-to-face model of teaching, departing from such a model for online learning has become an immediate and pressing challenge among copious tertiary institutions of learning in Africa, especially in Nigeria. Most educators had grown up with face-to-face learning as the sole method of learning and teaching, and this has affected the way and manner in which students respond to the demands of online learning. This problem is not synonymous with learners as learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic period showed that several educators in private universities across the South-West region of Nigeria struggled with imparting knowledge or teaching, and this became too apparent in their dispositions to the global demands of education technology. According to Mercier et al., most educators felt a high degree of reality because several responses and adjustments to online learning did not reflect true learning requirements.⁵⁸ Many educators from private universities were uncomfortable teaching without being

⁵⁵ E. Yonazi et al., "ETransform Africa: The Transformational Use of ICTs in Africa," World Bank, 2012.

⁵⁶ Nwachukwu, Ugwu, and Wogu, "Digital Learning in Post Covid-19 Era: Policy Options and Prospects for Quality Education in Nigeria."

⁵⁷ Samuel T Faloye and Nurudeen Ajayi, "Understanding the Impact of the Digital Divide on South African Students in Higher Educational Institutions," *African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development* 14, no. 7 (2022): 1734-44.

⁵⁸ Kevin Mercier et al., "Physical Education Teachers' Experiences with Remote Instruction during the Initial Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education* 40, no. 2 (2021): 337-42.

able to effectively demonstrate the relevant or contemporary illustrations to the learners in a face-to-face context.

The uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and its likely end was the most problematic aspect of the private universities in Nigeria's commitment to online learning. Given that most private universities resolved to shift to online learning to justify the trust placed in them by students, educators, and even parents, their resources were stressed by the extra-budgetary financial implications of procuring digital tools and platforms. Such uncertainty resulted in the haphazard academic calendars that they and some public universities ran during the period. For instance, most private universities taught classes online but were constrained to conduct physical examinations. However, some others were confronted with ensuring that the students resumed physical learning weeks before the examination to teach the learners physically. Furthermore, many private universities were equally faced with the problem of recruiting new students for the next academic session, and this caused a series of postponements of resumption dates which adversely affected their academic calendars. During this period, educational institutions struggled to respond to the demands of online learning due to the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁹

With both learners and educators increasingly eager to respond and adapt to online learning, power shortage posed a significant challenge. Unlike when students were on campus and the university had no choice but to provide electricity for them, many learners were not able to enjoy such privileges at home. This affected the learners' and educators' ability to promptly attend online classes, and this had a severe effect on the learning process. Though power outage remains a critical challenge for most developing nations, especially those in Africa, it remains worse off in Nigeria, and this has impacted online learning during the COVID-19 period.⁶⁰

Furthermore, in most situations where learners and educators provided alternative power sources, online learning was hindered by the lack of a steady and reliable internet facility. Given that online activities increased during this period, several internet providers were unable to meet this expanding demand and that was a major problem for digital learning. Eli-Chukwu et al., noted that inadequate internet facilities greatly affected online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic periods.⁶¹ Aside from the lack of adequate internet access, several facilitators and students lacked the basic knowledge of computers, online software, and programmes.

Critical to the question of how private universities responded to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was the availability of funds. Lack of adequate funding for education remains a major problem in Nigeria and it is not surprising that most private universities are funded by individuals. Most public universities hesitated to implement a digital learning policy during the pandemic because of its extra financial implication on a system that was already grossly underfunded. In this context, Udem et al., observed that since most private universities depend on fees paid by students for sustenance, the lockdown affected the private universities significantly and slowed down their planning.⁶² In most cases, university administrators were faced with different options which included the complete shutdown of the university or reducing their staff members' remuneration.

Though many university administrations chose the latter, the choice had an equal impact on their learning outputs during the period. The most problematic part was the fact that many of the founders of these private universities lamented the biting demands of COVID-19 online learning demands, and this led to the adoption of certain coping strategies. Apart from the aforementioned challenges, several other issues such as internet fraud, impersonation, examination malpractice, falsification of data and information, truancy, and the question of privacy rights all acted as impediments to the smooth organisation of online learning. The most problematic of the listed challenges is the question of sustainability which the last section of this manuscript has reflected upon.

⁵⁹ James B Rieley, "Corona Virus and Its Impact on Higher Education," *Research Gate* 2, no. 3 (2020).

⁶⁰ I A Adeoye, A F Adanikin, and Ariyo Adanikin, "COVID-19 and E-Learning: Nigeria Tertiary Education System Experience," 2020.

⁶¹ Eli-Chukwu et al., "Challenges Confronting E-Learning in Higher Education Institutions in Nigeria amid Covid-19."

⁶² Udem, Ejike, and Okpalibekwe, "Covid-19 and Future of Tertiary Education in Nigeria."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Efforts must be made by the proprietors to provide post-COVID online training and retraining for learners and educators, and this should be supported or carried out in partnership with the requisite government agencies like the Ministry of Education and the Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC). This would help to strengthen past experiences with online learning among the stakeholders. Also, the training given on digital learning should be put into practice through the institutionalisation of the hybrid mode of learning and teaching even in the post-COVID-19 era. This practice should sustain the time, resources, and energy devoted to online learning and serve as avenues for refreshing the skills and techniques of online learning. This would help to improve the quality of education and learning, boost the global ranking of these universities and help with the production of graduates that are able to compete in the ever-growing technological world.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the extent to which private universities in South-West Nigeria responded and adapted themselves to the call for online learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study, based on the Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) theory, has examined the means and methods by which these universities eventually operated online learning after moments of hesitation due to its cost implications and lack of preparedness for it. With regards to the nature of online learning that took place in the COVID-19 pandemic era, this study has noted that there were a series of mix-ups, contestations, and controversies that trailed these exercises among the private universities in South-West Nigeria and the entire country. Copious factors such as limited funding, uncertainties about the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of motivation, unavailability of sophisticated ICT tools, lack of basic ICT knowledge, erratic internet and electricity supply, and the like have influenced online learning.

While some universities have attempted to address these challenges, verifiable evidence points to the fact that the process still has some emerging challenges. These emerging challenges eventually led to reflections on the sustenance of online learning in Nigeria following COVID-19. This study notes that given that most institutions, including private universities, were forced or compelled to switch to online learning, sustaining online learning has remained very difficult, if not almost impossible. It is observed that most private universities in the South-West are yet to recover from the huge financial implications of conducting online learning and this has forced many of them to return completely to physical learning.

Though some of these universities showed some early signs of continuing the hybrid mode of teaching and learning, recent experiences point to the fact that such a commitment has not been significantly substantiated. This brings to the fore the question of what to do if the world faces another outbreak of a deadly pandemic such as COVID-19 that requires a total shutdown. How would these schools respond? To what extent would they be able to build upon their previous experiences to improve the quality of online learning? These unanswered questions and other emerging issues remain critical to the adoption, survival and sustenance of online teaching and learning in private and public universities in Nigeria.

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