Mental Health Perceptions in Nigeria: The Role of Mass Media

BY

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Abstract

Mental health is globally attracting attention from individuals from all walks of life due to its importance and indispensability in the existence of mankind and in national development; as good mental health is wealth and progress. Despite this tremendous interest in mental health globally as an important aspect of human health, unfortunately, in Nigeria, this health concept has to an alarming degree been neglected, misconstrued, misinterpreted, and misrepresented by many. A problem that many have ascribed to different factors such as neglect, beliefs, cultural dispositions, lack of understanding of the concept of mental health, fear of stigmatization, and economic factors, as well as the mass media's (films) negative depictions/portrayals of mental health.

The study looked at the concept of mental health as revealed by many scholars and organizations, and its importance to the existence of mankind; looked at the roles and benefits of mass media in health promotion by describing the place of films in education, entertainment, awareness creation in Nigeria; highlighted the differences between mental health and mental illness and provided different types of mental health challenges; looked at the widely held perceptions of mental health by individuals in Nigeria, and at the role of mass media (films) in awareness creation and promotion of mental health; highlighted certain prevailing circumstances complicating the knowledge and promotion of mental health and admittances in Nigeria- ranging from fear of stigmatization, economic constraints, fear of exorcism and banishment, cultural beliefs and ideologies, beliefs in supernatural treatment and cure; and provided a way forward.

Keywords: Mental health1; Mass Media2; Films3; Perceptions4

INTRODUCTION

Mental health in Nigeria: An Overview/problem statement

Mental health over the years has been recognized as a global priority by world leaders; thus, its inclusion in the global Sustainable development Goals by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 (Africa Renewal, n.d). It has also gained much attention from countries as well as researchers due to its massive role in attaining global development (WHO,2022).

This aspect of human health has recently attracted attention from many from all walks of life due to its crucial role in stabilizing constructive human behavior as poor mental health could lead to poor behaviors including having a negative effect on an individual's day-to-day activities. In this regard, the WHO's report on mental health as chronicled by Africa Polling Institute (API) and EPIAFRIC (2020), stressed the importance of mental health when they maintained that mental health is a crucial aspect of human health, a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. As such, it must be positively promoted, protected, and restored.

According to their report, an individual's mental health is caused by several factors such as social, psychological, and biological… more so, violence, emotional instability, and persistent socio-

economic pressures, as well as hardships, are regarded as known risks to mental health.

When an individual suffers from mental health, it is evident in his/her daily activities and relationships with others, and this is associated with rapid change in behaviour, gender discrimination, unhealthy lifestyle, ill health, human rights violations, etc (African Polling Institute and EPIAFRIC, 2020).

Mental disorders are responsible for an immeasurable global burden of disease that is sadly, largely underestimated and undervalued, in Africa and especially in Nigeria. This is due to certain myths, misconceptions, and a lack of knowledge about the concept.

As revealed by the study on mental health conducted by the African Polling Institute and EPIAFRIC (2020), each year, about 30% of the population worldwide gets affected by a mental disorder and unfortunately, over two-thirds of those mental health patients do not receive the care they need. It is also estimated that by the year 2020, common mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse-related disorders, will disable more people than complications arising from AIDS, heart disease, accidents, and wars combined (African Polling Institute and EPIAFRIC, 2020).

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how individuals think, feel, and act, and also determines how individuals handle stress, relate to one another, and make healthy choices.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, mental health is essential at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood (CDC, 2021). In other words, it is an important factor of human existence that can not be neglected or misconstrued given its benefits to humankind.

Defining mental health, Malhotra and Shah (2015) averred that mental health is a phrase used to describe either a level of cognitive or emotional well-being or an absence of a mental disorder.

Mental health which is the fundamental crux of this study, affects people of different countries, ages, and gender and is not a respecter of fame and or position. It is also not unusual in Nigeria.

However, this aspect of human health is regrettably neglected in Nigeria, and the minimal attention accorded to it by many in Nigeria- in relation to conceptualization, health importance as well as management, is shrouded in misrepresentation, and fear of societal stigmatization upon admittance.

As reported by the 2020 findings conducted by Africa Polling Institute and EPIAFRIC, 20%-30% of the Nigerian population suffers from mental disorders. This finding validates the 2006 report by WHO which revealed that about 20 million Nigerians suffer from mental illnesses in Nigeria and sadly, most of these people who suffer these mental breakdowns hardly get attention/assistance from trained professionals. This statement, however, could be attributable to several factors such as beliefs, perceptions, cultural ideologies, and societal reactions concerning cases of mental health in Nigeria; which is not solely divorced from the effects of media representations of these mental health issues and management.

In Nigeria, people are seen roaming the streets/cities naked or half-clothed and anyone that cares to check would be told that these people are lunatics. Unfortunately, no one bothers to know how these people got to the stage of roaming the streets naked simply because this has become the ugly normal people see on a daily basis and are less perturbed. Again, this pitiable condition is tolerated because the majority of people believe that these "lunatics" are incurable and were sentenced to a life of roaming the streets/cities naked or half-naked (API & EPICAFRIC,2020). This situation and norms are largely portrayed in the media (broadcast media films) and have permeated many lives and as such, have formed individuals' perceptions of what mental health/illness is. This also goes a long way in revealing how mental health as a serious health issue is perceived in Nigeria and the very minimal attention that it has received, considering its importance to human existence.

Moreso, improving mental health in Nigeria has presented a daunting task due to the poor attention accorded to this crucial aspect of human health. The study by Africa Polling Institute and EPICAFRIC (2020) referred to this attention as fleeting. In relation to the level of mental health awareness, the above study revealed that it is relatively poor, and with lots of misconceptions regarding mental health.

Although both terms (poor mental health and mental illnesses) are used interchangeably by many, especially in Nigeria, both concepts are not the same. As maintained by CDC (2021) a person can experience poor mental health and not be diagnosed with mental illness; likewise, a person diagnosed with a mental illness can experience periods of physical, medical, and social well-being. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, there is no difference between these two concepts- mental health and mental illness as anything mental health is regarded as madness. This is due to a poor understanding of mental health and the types of mental health and also because of several misconceptions surrounding mental health as represented by the media as well as individuals in the country.

In a similar vein, the differences between the two concepts (mental health and mental illness) were revealed in the comprehensive report by Africa Polling Institute and EPIAFRIC (2020). In their report, Mental illness, also known and referred to by many as mental health disorders, refers to a wide range of mental health conditions. They are disorders that affect an individual's mood, thinking, and behavior.

They gave examples of mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, etc.

According to the above report, it is inevitable for individuals to have mental health concerns from time to time (mental health), but when certain symptoms like stress, anxiety, mood swings, etc. become frequent it is then regarded as a mental illness because they have the ability to affect an individuals life and the people around them.

To successfully establish the differences between the two aforementioned concepts as conceived in the western world and in Nigeria, there is a need to list some of the types of mental illnesses/behaviors. The National Library of Medicine (nd), provided some types of mental illnesses/behaviors and they include:

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This is a person's inability to sit still, acting without thinking, starting but not finishing. And the main features are- inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity.

Aphobia (Phobias). A type of anxiety disorder. This is a strong irrational fear of something that possesses little or no real danger.

Alzheimer's Disease. It is the most common form of dementia among older people. This is a brain disorder that seriously affects an individual's ability to perform daily activities. Some symptoms include difficulty in speaking, reading, and writing; forgetting to carry out usual daily routines; becoming anxious or aggressive over time; or wandering away from home.

Bipolar Disorder, also known as Manic-depressive illness. This is a mood disorder that usually causes intense mood swings. Individuals often sometimes may feel extremely up, elated, irritable, or energized (manic episode); other times they feel down, sad, indifferent, or hopeless (Depressive episode); and some other times they could feel both manic and depressive and this is called (mixed-episode).

These types of mental illness include but are not limited to obsessive-compulsive disorder, and mood disorders, developmental disorders, schizophrenia.

Mental health and the Mass Media
The role of mass media especially the visual media (Television, films, and the new media) in health promotion cannot be underestimated in today's contemporary society, as they are believed to have a tremendous impact on individuals due to their visual advantage; thus, aiding in easy understanding, retention as well as emulation.

For this study, the emphasis would be laid on films as forms of mass media and as important tools for mental health promotion and awareness creation.

Film as a form of mass media is the greatest form of expression the world has ever known and a powerful medium that could be adapted to various situations of human societies (including health) anywhere in the world whenever necessary (see, Sanders & Norris, 2001, as cited in UK Essays, 2018).

Describing the importance and roles of films to a nation and its people, Arinze-Umobi and Chiweta-Oduah (2020) maintained that films as forms of mass media can be used for sensitisation, education, enlightenment, and positive health campaigns towards behavioral change because of their persuasive, manipulative, and educative nature. More so, these aforementioned roles/functions films play could be greatly attributed to their visual advantage which helps humans in easy comprehension, retention, shaping opinions, as well as in behavior whether negative or positive.

In a similar vein, Fitchet et al. (2014) maintained that film plays a unique role in today's society. They also described the film as an art of form, a language, an educational tool, a method of information delivery, and a vehicle for social marketing; which possesses the power of communicating stories, stirring emotions, inspiring, encouraging actions, and redressing inequities in health.

The Nigerian home video production otherwise known and referred to by many as the Nollywood movie industry has in recent times transmuted into a formidable force to be reckoned with in the entertainment industry. The above assertion is evidenced in the UNESCO report released in 2009 as cited by Jedlowski (2013). According to this report, Nollywood was ranked the second-largest film industry globally in terms of the sheer number of films produced.

This prestigious position occupied by the Nollywood industry recently is attributed to its use of native and indigenous characterization and themes which rotate around the traditional African society (Ekwugha et al. 2015).

Emphasizing the importance of films in awareness creation, educating, entertaining, tearing new frontiers, and forging solutions, and in the context of this study (mental health awareness creation and promotion), Borinstein 1992 in Vogel et al. 2008 maintained that movies are indispensable vehicles for information dissemination about mental health as well as social change. However, this view held by the above-mentioned scholar does not resonate with other scholars who believe that despite the role films (broadcast media) play in mental health awareness creation, the media to some extent transmit wrong or misplaced information about mental health (Wahl 1992; Knifton and Quinn 2008; Atilola and Olayiwola 2011). Other scholars believe that the media have contributed tremendously to the mental health stigma and inaccurate messages about mental health through exaggerations, comic images as well as in the portrayal of persons with psychiatric disorders, providing incorrect messages and information about mental health (see, eg., Wahl, 1995; Fernando, 2011). These misconceptions wrongly communicated in these films include but are not limited to: the causes, types, signs, symptoms, treatments… Sadly, these opinions are against the widely held beliefs about the importance, benefits, and influencing roles media (especially the broadcast media like films) play in making people understand and retain information about their health; thus, making these arguments debatable.

Most of the recurring contents/themes in relation to mental health portrayed in these films are, unfortunately, not the true representation of what mental health is. Thus, revealing a dearth of knowledge about mental health in its entirety. For instance, Nollywood films portray mental health issues as cases of witchcraft, and evil spirits to mention but a few that require spiritual/traditional exorcism and abandonment and in some instances, ostracism. These and many more instances of misrepresentation of mental health in films (to be explored in detail in subsequent sub-sections) are examples of negative portrayals as revealed by (see, e.g. Fernando, 2007; Gureje et al. 2005; Adewuya and Makanjuola, 2005; Ukpong, 2010).

Undoubtedly, it is believed that constant exposure to certain mass media content (especially the broadcast media), shapes individuals' perceptions of the real world and the happenings as well as goes a long way in re-aligning thoughts and behaviors. This was evidenced in the findings of many scholars who posit that "the more people are exposed to mass media, especially television, the more they will come to believe that the real world is like one they observe" (see, e.g., Okigbo, 1995, p. 107; Okunna, 2003; McQuail, 1987, p. 283). In other words, individuals consciously and/or unconsciously cultivate attitudes, behaviors, and messages that they are exposed to.

This is why this study would strive to explore certain perceptions and behavior pertaining to mental health in Nigeria as a result of broadcast media portrayal, as well as, proffer possible solutions.

Perceptions of mental health in Nigeria and in the media
Mental health in Nigeria is perceived differently by people from all walks of life and this could be attributed to several factors such as a dearth of knowledge about mental health, beliefs, and customs, misconceptions to mention but a few. These complexities and uncertainties shrouding the concept of mental health in Nigeria have been highly contentious among scholars and have attracted the attention of many scholars.

While a group of scholars has strongly attributed these mental health complexities, and misconceptions to perceptions held by people from different social groups (Wig, 1999; Gureje et al. 2005; Abdullahi and Brown, 2011; Rashed, 2003), some other scholars categorize these complexities/ misconceptions into (religious, magical, spiritual) which they argue are very popular among people of Africa, especially among Nigerians (see. Fernando, 2007; Gureje et al. 2005; Adewuya and Makanjuola, 2005). In a similar vein, Armiyau (2015) argued that supernatural beliefs about mental health and its entirety are popular and are mostly held by Nigerians. The above point by Armiyau could be ascribed to the fact that Nigerians are people of culture and cannot be divorced from their cultures as this is unfortunately seen in the various ways they interact, act, perceive things/phenomena, assess health, as well as make healthy choices.

Magical beliefs in a study by Aroyewun-Adekomaiya and Aroyewun (2019) as major causes of mental illness occurred at a 61.5% rate. The findings align with the position held by Cross (2010) who maintained that magical belief in media representations of mental health issues could be understood as reflecting the general perceptions of mental illness that have deep cultural and historical roots. This perception of magical belief as a major cause of mental health as expressed by scholars is majorly linked to cultural and historical roots in a society that believes, maintains, and supports magical belief (Aina, 2004; Gureje et al. 2005).

More so, the study conducted by Labinjo et al (2020) in trying to understand the perceptions, attitudes, and cultural understandings of mental health in Nigeria revealed that 38% of study respondents believe that mental illness is majorly caused by supernatural factors; 26% attributed these to psychological factors such as drug abuse; 15% to stress; 2% revealed that mental health issues were caused by medical/biological factors; 3% of respondents believed genetic factors cause mental disorders.

In another study by Obememe et al. (2013) on the stigma and mental illness among nursing professionals in Nigeria across the six geopolitical zones of the country, their findings reveal that 40% of the study respondents viewed mentally ill persons as violent. This is also corroborated by the findings of Labinjo et al (2020). Another study conducted by Ukpong (2010) on stigmatizing attitudes toward mentally challenged individuals in Nigerian University hospitals reveals that 52% of the study respondents believed that mental health disorders are caused by witches/wizards; 42% believe that mental health is a result of demon possession, in other words, spiritual problems; and close to one-third of the study respondents felt mental health challenges were/are as a result of divine punishment due to beliefs and values.

More so, the misconceptions and uncertainties around mental health in Nigeria are not only eminent in the widely believed causes of mental health, but rather it transcends to the symptoms. As Armiyau (2015) revealed, most Nigerians regard certain behaviors (Loquaciousness, eccentric behaviors, wandering, violence, aggression, destructiveness) as common symptoms of mental illness. Some other scholars perceive mental health victims as mentally retarded, dangerous, unpredictable, violent, aggressive, mad, unable to talk to, a nuisance, less intelligent, and poorly dressed (see. Adesanmi et al. 2018; Adewuya & Oguntande, 2007; Kabir et al. 2004; Kapadia et al. 2018; Oluwole et al. 2016; Ronzoni et al., 2010).

Surprisingly, the above-listed symptoms of mental illnesses are completely different from the symptoms of mental illness in the western world. As of June 28, 2021, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention listed on its website the different symptoms of mental health. These symptoms are (i) early adverse life experiences, such as trauma or a history of abuse (for example, child abuse, sexual abuse, sexual assault, witnessing violence; (ii) experiences related to other ongoing (chronic) medical conditions, such as cancer or diabetes; (iii) biological factors or chemical imbalances in the brain; (iv) use of alcohol or drugs; (v) having feelings of loneliness or isolation.

The above perceptions of mental health/ illness and findings of previous studies that had been conducted on the subject matter (mental health) go a long way to show that mental health is and remains a concept that has been misconstrued by many. This is due to the fact that many people in Nigeria do not fully understand what mental health is and what it means to say that an individual has a mental health challenge. These misconceptions have then affected how the topic of mental health is approached in Nigeria and has led to majorly non-admittance, as no one wants to be referred to as a mentally ill person in Nigeria. This then makes it apt to discuss in the preceding section possible factors for mental health non-admittances in Nigeria.

Prevailing Circumstances complicating mental health knowledge, association, and admittances in Nigeria

Several factors are deemed responsible for the lack of attention and misconceptions about mental health in Nigeria. These factors include:

Fear of stigmatization: the fear of stigmatization makes individuals who may have mental health challenges avoid admitting this in Nigeria because they are scared that they would be regarded as people worthy of disgrace. Sadly, this unfortunate trend is exhibited by both enlightened individuals in society and unenlightened ones. This is supported by the words of Armiyau (2015) who maintained that there is a widespread stigma and discrimination among the mentally ill in Nigeria even in populations that are expected to be enlightened in this aspect.

Fear of exorcism/ Banishment as opposed to medical solutions- because of the widely held beliefs in most African/ Nigerian societies, most individuals with mental health challenges would rather keep their problems to themselves and die silently than seek help. This is because they stand the risk of undergoing unhealthy exorcisms, beating as well as a banishment in societies.

Dehumanization: Fear of dehumanization is one major reason why people fail to associate with mental health or even seek information relating to mental health. Some parts of Nigeria are still rooted in their obnoxious cultures and traditions that they would rather subject a person with a mental health issue or problem to untold hardship, and abuse. Some persons are even chained (and called lunatics), forced to drink medicines, or forceful injection of drugs into their systems.

Financial constraints: unlike the western world where most medical bills are provided free and in some cases are affordable to the commonest man in the society, medical treatments are costly in Nigeria especially psychological treatments and counseling. People die in silence and hardly seek mental-health information because they may not afford the costs associated with treatments.

Beliefs in supernatural treatment and cure: people would rather adopt obnoxious and traditional practices to address mental health/illness rather than strive to understand the issue and seek adequate help.

The belief that mental health/illness is hereditary and as such no need to admit/believe there is something new.

All of these factors above make the understanding and acceptance of mental health in Nigeria a herculean task.

Mental Health In Nigeria: Way Forward
To successfully promote mental health in Nigeria, there is a need for active sensitization through the broadcast visual media. Since the emphasis in this study is on films, Nigerian home movie producers should endeavor to broaden their knowledge and understanding of mental health through research, as this would help in the accurate writing, production, and directing of mental health films; thus, promoting the right contents on mental health to the audiences. Asides from the efforts required of the Nigerian movie film producers, all hands should be on deck including the right ministries and departments in Nigeria in the sensitisation and differentiation of mental health and mental illness.

More so, mass media (broadcast, print, and the new media) should also be used to change the narratives about mental health as their powers to inform, educate, entertain, persuade, and penetrate their audiences towards forming opinions still remain irreplaceable.

Government, departments, and agencies must assume the responsibilities of tackling and following up on reports on mental health as they are lodged.

There is also a need for comprehensive advocacy on mental health challenges/illnesses and a way forward at all levels of governance, school systems, and administrative strata. This advocacy must also be taken to the pulpits i.e. religious leaders must also play vital roles in the advocacy and sensitisation of mental health in Nigeria.

There is also a need for NGOs in the area of mental health to coalesce and form a formidable force in bringing this knowledge to the people and taking the right steps when needed.

There is also a need for the integration of mental health needs into primary health care as this would go a long way in helping people thrive.

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