

Coverage of Mental Disorder in Selected Nigerian Newspapers from 2015-2019

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Abstract

The general objective of the study was to ascertain how selected Nigerian newspapers covered mental illness stories from 2015-2019. Specifically, the study determined frequency of coverage of mental illness in the newspapers; level of prominence given to reports on mental illness; frames used in mental illness reportage; and subject matters under which stories were covered in the newspapers. Four national dailies in Nigeria were purposively selected for the study. They include *Daily Sun*, *The Guardian*, *The Nation*, and *Vanguard* newspapers. Constructed week sampling technique was used to select stories from the four newspapers from 2015 to 2019. Findings of the study reveal that only 51 stories were found from the 224 analysed editions. This is an indication that mental disorder lacks adequate coverage. Furthermore, no priority was given, as 92 percent of the stories were on the inside pages of the newspapers. The dominant story genre was straight news stories, indicating that the newspapers kept the audience abreast of the latest news on the subject. However, zero efforts were made to enlighten and broaden public knowledge of the intrinsic factors of mental disorders. Based on the findings, it was recommended that the media pay adequate attention to mental illness stories by publicising the topic through media education, awareness campaigns, and holistic reportage. The media's agenda-setting role, if implemented, could promulgate policies that enhance government allocation of resources towards mental health facilities across the country.

Keywords: Mental, Disorder, Suicide, Depression, Newspapers, Coverage

Introduction

Mental disorders are conditions that negatively affect human cognitive and behavioural activities. They interfere with one's ability to learn and function appropriately in the family, at work,

and in the broader society. Hyman, Chisholm, Kessler, Patel, and Whiteford (2006) believe that mental disorders may begin early in life and often run a chronic recurrent course.

The psychological well-being of every individual is undoubtedly cardinal. Being in the right frame of mind becomes evident in interactions with others and invariably in the love of self. A psychological disorder can decelerate one's future if not properly managed. Mental illness is not gender-specific or restricted to any social class, race, religion, belief, or culture; anyone could be prone to a psychiatric disorder. The major challenge lies in the stigmatisation and stereotyping of people with mental ailments in society.

Statistics from a Global Burden of Disease study in 2013 (cited in Mental Health Foundation, 2016) indicate that depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder are prevailing mental health conditions worldwide. Depressive disorders, according to Mental Health Foundation (2016), contribute significantly to the burden of suicide and heart disease, mortality and disability. These disabilities also have both a direct and an indirect impact on the length and quality of life.

Mental, bodily, and social well-being are all entwined strands of life. Mental health is critical to the overall well-being of people, societies, and countries. Unfortunately, in most areas of the globe, mental health and mental illnesses are not regarded as seriously as physical health; they are overlooked and mistreated {World Health Organization (WHO), 2003}.

Available report also shows that as many as 450 million people suffer from a mental or behavioural disorder, and

approximately one million people commit suicide yearly. Four of the six leading causes of periods lived with disability are neuropsychiatric disorders (individuals, alcohol-use, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder). One in four households has at least one member with a mental ailment (WHO, 2003).

According to World Health Organization-Assessment Instrument for Mental Health Systems (WHO-AIMS), 2006), mental health disorders are becoming common, and the global burden of mental health disorders will probably increase over the years. It is expected that common mental diseases, including depression, anxiety, and drug abuse-related disorders, would disable more people than AIDS, heart disease, accidents, and conflicts combined.

Although mental health has become a global public health concern and a preeminent United Nations (UN) sustainable development priority today, a truncated treatment gap persists in many low and middle-income countries. Narasimhan, Gopikumar, Jayakumar, Bunders, and Regeer (2019) posit that despite the development of evidence-based interventions, 75–90 percent of people with mental illness in low and medium-income countries (LMICs) are not in treatment.

The WHO, thus urges all countries and regions of the world to devote more attention to mental health prevention and promotion at the policy, legislative, decision-making, and resource allocation levels within

the entire healthcare system to minimise mental illnesses' health, social, and economic costs (WHO, 2003). Newspaper coverage of issues related to mental disorder can contribute in various ways to promotion of awareness on such issues (Elzersdorfer and Sonneck 1998, McCombs 2011).

In a study of newspaper coverage of mental illness in the UK from 1992 to 2008, Goulden et al. (2011) observed that media coverage of mental illness in the UK altered from 1992 to 2008, comparing coverage across a variety of psychiatric disorders. Improved coverage of depression, eating disorders, and bipolar disease has provided hope to people who have sought to enhance their awareness of mental illness in recent decades. In related study, Chen and Lawire (2017) reported that over a month, mental health reporting takes up a fifth of all health-related items in a sample of UK print media.

Subramanian (2019) study on mental illness frames in an Indian newspaper uncovered that *the Times of India*, India's largest-selling English newspaper, used two predominant frames in the editions studied. These frames had a mix of positive and negative aspects, with some challenging the stigma against people with mental conditions, while the others reinforced them.

Comparably, 216 articles on mental health were analysed by Chandan et al. (2020) in four newspapers (three English and one Tamli) in Chennai. The quantitative analysis of the articles

on language of reportage showed that various articles on suicide did not adhere to the guidelines of suicide reportage.

According to Nawkova et al. (2012), half of the articles in three central European nations analysed for five weeks in 2007 from six of the most frequently read newspapers and magazines in each country featured negative sentiments stigmatising persons with mental illnesses. The most common mental illness addressed in all three nations was substance abuse disorder (22%).

Coming down to Africa, Dzokoto, Barnett, Osei-Tutu and Briggs (2018) studied the mental health reportage in Ghanaian newspapers between 2000 to 2015 and found that the Ghanaian media act as a means for disseminating societal portrayals of mental illness in the country. It discovered among other things, that Ghanaian newspapers promoted awareness about mental illness.

Miller, Napakol and Kujak (2019) analysed the two largest circulating newspapers in Uganda (*The Monitor and The New Vision*) from January 1, 2017, to June 30, 2019, and discovered a substandard level of poor coverage. These newspapers recorded only 53 articles on mental illness.

A study conducted by WHO-AIMS conducted between 2005/2006 in six geopolitical zones in Nigeria- Calabar (South-South), Enugu (South-East), Kaduna (North-Central), Lagos (South-West), Maiduguri (North-East), and Sokoto (North-West), where six of the eight federal psychiatric hospitals are

located, revealed a significant amount of neglect of mental health issues in the country. The study indicated that the Mental Health Policy of 1991 is highly unimplemented and yet to be revised. The report further stated that although essential medicine exists, they are not readily available to health centres. Besides, only four per cent of government expenditures on health are dedicated to mental health. The findings show that mental health issues have not received any direct attention from non-governmental organisations, invariably implying a low national priority (WHO-AIMS, 2006).

According to a study by Ciboh(2010) on newspaper coverage of health issues in Nigeria, the four most mentioned health challenges by the newspapers studied (*The Guardian, Leadership, This day and Daily Independence*) were HIV/AIDS (46 times), Cardiovascular Maladies (42 times), Cancer (24 times) and Reproduction health problems (23 times). However, mental illness was 7th on the list of frequently featured articles and appeared 13 times. He further discovered that out of 378 newspaper stories published by the sampled newspapers, 254 were straight news stories, while 62 were articles.

Although there are several kinds of research on mental health, there is a dearth of studies on newspaper coverage of mental illness across the globe. Newspaper coverage of mental illness is yet to give an exhaustive analysis of this pertinent public health

concern. In Nigeria, however, there is little or no newspaper coverage of mental illness. Some researchers have focused on several aspects of mental disorder, discussing the knowledge, attitude, practices, challenges, treatments, prevention, and management of mental illness, but nothing significant to media coverage of this menace. This is a gap thi study intends to cover.

Objectives of the Study

This study focused on newspapers coverage of mental illness stories in Nigeria from 2015-2019. Specifically, the study determined:

1. frequency of coverage of mental illness in selected Nigerian newspapers from 2015-2019.
2. prominence given to reports on mental illness in selected newspapers.
3. frames used in reportage of mental illness in newspapers.
4. subject matters under which mental illness stories were reported in newspapers.

Methodology

Design of the study: The study adopted the content analysis research design for examining the manifest and semiotic contents of publications.

Population for the study: According to Nigerian Press Council (2021) the number of newspapers and magazines in circulation across the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory is 509, however, there are 46 print and online newspapers that have a national outlook or major local newspapers

(Fung, 2010). The population for the study includes all the editions published by the 46 national newspapers in Nigeria for four years (January 2015 to December 2019) amounting to 67,160 editions. The figure above was calculated by multiplying the total number of national newspapers 46 x 1460 (which is the number of publications each year (365) multiplied by the four newspapers chosen for the study). Hence, a total number of 67,160 editions will constitute the population for the study.

Sample for the study: A purposive sample of four newspapers was drawn out of the 46 national newspapers. The sample for the study includes all the editions published by the four selected newspapers: *Daily Sun*, *The Guardian*, *The Nation* and *Vanguard* newspapers for four years (January 2015 to December 2019).

The newspapers selected for this study are among the top ten newspapers in the country and are listed among the 46 national newspapers. Moreover, these newspapers have national outlook, wide readership, daily publications and strong circulation strength.

This study adopted the constructed week sampling technique to select 224 editions (Two weeks per year) of the four newspapers for four years (14 days x 4 newspapers x 4 years = 224 editions). Previous studies have effectively used the constructed week sampling technique (Hester & Dougall, 2007).

Instrument for data collection: Instrument for data collection was the code sheet because it is the most appropriate tool for analysing the contents of the selected newspapers. The validated code sheet containing the prepared content categories was employed to objectively record and organise the relevant data available on the articles and place them accordingly.

Data collection method: Quantitative research method was utilised to retrieve recorded communication (hard copies of the newspapers) from the archives of Nnamdi Azikiwe Library of University of Nigeria Nsukka.

Data analysis techniques: Data were organized and analyzed using frequency and percentages. The Tables comprise data from the mental disorder stories collected from the selected newspapers for this study.

Findings of the study

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage (%) of Coverage of Mental Illness in Selected Nigerian Newspapers

Newspapers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Daily Sun</i>	21	41
<i>The Guardian</i>	15	29
<i>The Nation</i>	6	12
<i>Vanguard</i>	9	18
Total	51	100

Table 1 shows the rate at which stories on mental illness appeared in *Daily Sun*, *The Guardian*, *The Nation* and *Vanguard* newspapers. The total

number of times stories on mental illness appeared in the four selected newspapers were 51 times, with *Daily Sun* having the most articles.

The Table shows that the coverage was deficient, as only 51 reports surfaced from the 224 issues analysed.

Table 2: Percentage (%) of Story Genres Employed by the Newspapers in Reportage of Mental Illness

Story Genres	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	Total	Percentage (%)
Editorial	1	-	-	-	1	2
Features	6	4	-	2	12	24
Letter-to-the-Editor	-	-	-	-	-	-
Opinion article	4	4	4	3	15	29
Straight News	10	7	2	4	23	45
Total	21	15	6	9	51	100

Table focuses on story genre. The story genre is used to examine the level of importance attached to a story. A feature story, opinion article or editorial usually adopt an in-depth analysis and descriptive style, written explicitly to inform and educate. However, straight news is often brief

and to the point with the sole aim of informing the public about the latest happening.

Table 2 indicates that almost half of the stories were straight news reports against opinion articles and features. This shows that the stories lacked exhaustive analysis.

Table 3: Frequency and Percentage (%) on Page Placement of Stories on Mental Illness in Selected Newspapers (indicating prominence given)

Placement	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	Total	Percentage (%)
Front Page	1	-	-	-	1	2
Back Page	-	-	-	-	-	-
Centre Spread	2	1	-	-	3	6
Inside Page	18	14	6	9	47	92
Total	21	15	6	9	51	100

Table 3 focuses on page placement which ascertaining the level of significance given to mental illness stories. In newspaper placement, the front page, back page and centre spread are the most strategic in the newspaper layout. Therefore, articles

found on these pages are considered relevant by the newspaper houses.

Table 3 shows that (92%) of the stories were inside the pages of the sampled newspapers, indicating zero prominences which will result in low readership.

Table 4: Frequency and Percentage (%) on Depth of Coverage of Mental Illness Stories in Sampled Nigerian Newspapers

Depth of Coverage	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	Total	Percentage (%)
Full page	6	4	3	4	17	33
Half page	5	3	2	1	11	22
Quarter page	2	5		2	9	18
Below quarter	8	3	1	2	14	27
Total	21	15	6	9	51	100

Table 4 shows the depth of coverage of mental illness stories, often determined by the column/inches each of the stories occupies. The depth of coverage also shows the level of prominence a story received because a comprehensive analysis cannot fit into a quarter page. Consequently, the

more space allotted to a story, the more the article stretches. The table clearly shows that close to half of the stories fit into full pages in the sampled newspapers, indicating that the available articles received extensive analysis.

Table 5: Frequency and Percentage (%) Aspects of Subject Matters under which Mental Illness Stories Appeared

Subject Matter	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	Total	%
Drug/substance addiction	-	-	3	1	4	8
Suicide	13	6	1	4	24	47
Depression	1	-	-	2	3	6
Coping mechanism	-	1	-	1	2	4
Socio-environmental factor	-	2	-	-	2	4
Mental health education	7	6	2	1	16	31
Total	21	15	6	9	51	100

Table 5 shows that the subject matters category explored the different mental illness topics addressed in the selected newspapers. These topics were the most frequently mentioned subject under which stories on mental illness appeared. The data analysed show that the most prominent subject matter was suicide.

Table 6: Frequency and Percentage (%) on Types of Frames used for Reportage of Mental Illnesses in Nigerian Newspapers

Frames	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	Total	%
Human Interest Frame	4	2	1	2	9	18
Responsibility Frame	9	2	2	1	14	27
Morality Frame	7	9	2	5	23	45
Consequence Frame	1	2	1	1	5	10
Conflict Frame	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	21	15	6	9	51	100

Table 6 deals with frames which give stories direction. Frames help organize thoughts and present the article in a way that enhances understanding. Table 6 shows the diverse frames used in analysing the stories. The dominant one was the morality frame. It implies that the article incorporated a cultural, religious, or human-interest aspect in the story while suggesting social prescriptions on how to behave towards the problem.

Discussion of Findings

The objective of the analysis was to examine the coverage of mental illness between 2015 and 2019. Studies conducted by Goulden et al. (2011), Chen and Lawire (2017) and, Dzokoto et al. (2018) on Newspaper coverage of mental illness in the UK and Ghana reported an advanced reportage of depression, eating disorders, and bipolar disorder. Moreover, these studies indicate an overall increase in non-stigmatising articles.

Dzokoto et al. (2018) discovered that Ghanaian newspapers promoted

awareness about the mental disorder, advocated for those with a mental complication, provided mostly accurate basic knowledge about specific ailments, and informed the public about mental health care in Ghana. These reports are contrary to the finding of this study, as only 51 articles were obtained from the 224 editions sampled.

Studies by Nawkova et al. (2012), Chandan et al. (2020) and Miller, Napakol and Kujak (2019) discovered a deficient level of poor coverage of public health issues in their analyses; which is similar to the finding of this research objective. Consequently, it would be appropriate to conclude that mental illness lacked encyclopaedic reportage in the sampled Nigerian newspapers.

The predominant story genre was straight news stories. It implies that the newspapers were keeping the public abreast with the latest news on mental illness; without diverging into the causes, effects, challenges, consequences, prevention, and management of mental illness, which

will further broaden people's knowledge on mental health.

Studies by Goulen et al. (2011) and Dzokoto, Barnett, Osei-Tutu & Briggs (2011) indicate an improved reportage of mental conditions such as depression, eating disorders, and bipolar disorder. A detailed analysis would not be possible through straight news stories. Invariably, the researchers employed a more thorough approach to communicating these ideas to the public. The finding is contrary to this study, as the reports were mainly straight news, showing leakage in coverage.

Nawkova et al. (2012) and Chandan et al. (2020) also pointed out poor reporting of public health issues in their findings. Ciboh (2010) further added that out of 378 newspaper stories published by the sampled newspapers, 254 were straight news stories, while 62 were articles. The findings by Nawkova et al. (2012), Chandan et al. (2020) and Ciboh (2010) correspond with the discovery of this research objective intimating mental health and health-related topics are often reported as news stories as they unfold without an exhaustive look into pertinent factors surrounding the problems.

Page placement customarily ascertains the level of importance conferred to a story. From the data analysed on the page placement of mental illness, it was discovered that most of the stories (92%) were inside the respective pages of the sampled newspapers. It is an indication that the sampled newspapers failed to give

priority to mental illness stories. Moreover, these articles buried inside the pages of the sampled newspapers will minimise the readership. Stories on mental health and health-related topics are generally of poor quality in placement, analysis and language, as was proven by researchers such as Chandan et al. (2020), Nawkova et al. (2012) and Ciboh (2010).

The column and inches each story fit into were determines the depth of coverage. The finding shows that nearly half of the stories were on complete pages of the sampled newspapers, which shows that these newspapers gave the available reports an exhaustive analysis. This finding was strongly supported by Goulden et al. (2011), Chen and Lawire (2017) and Dzokoto, Barnett, Osei-Tutu & Briggs (2011), as these studies commended the media for an improved reportage. These publications acted as a vehicle for disseminating societal images of mental illness throughout society. The articles raised awareness about mental illness, campaigned for persons suffering from it, offered correct fundamental information about various diseases, and informed the public about mental health treatment.

The subject Matters category explored different mental illness-related issues treated in the selected newspapers. The data showed that suicide was the most prominent subject matter. According to Nawkova et al. (2012), the most common mental illness theme addressed in all three newspapers was substance abuse disorder (22%). Chen and Lawire

(2017) study showed suicide at 15% at 31 stories, as the second most prevalent subject matter, just slightly lower than Dementia, which sits at number one with 32 articles (16%). The study by Chen and Lawire (2017) was the most related to the finding of this study as the predominant theme spotted was suicide at 47% (24 articles).

The dominant frame used for the reportage was the morality frame. Miller, Napakol and Kujak (2019) spotted thematic frames as the dominant frame, demonstrating that the topic was viewed as a social issue, not an individual problem. Subramanian (2019) study used two predominant frames in the editions studied. These frames had a mix of positive and negative aspects, with some challenging the stigma against people with mental conditions, while the others reinforced them. The dominant frame discovered in this study was the morality frame, which shares the same tenets as the frame employed by Miller, Napakol and Kujak (2019). These frames approach mental illness as a social anomaly, offering cultural, religious, or human-interest perspectives to the available stories, with social prescriptions on how to behave towards the problem.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that the media failed to live up to its agenda-settings responsibility because the level of coverage discovered on the topic showed that priority was not given to mental illness

stories. Only one story was discovered on the front page, with the rest of the stories buried inside the pages of the respective newspapers. Topical issues are placed strategically on the cover page, centre spread or back cover to increase readership. Space allotment is another essential aspect that denotes the level of prominence because a detailed report cannot fit into a quarter page. For the public to change their perception about mental disorders, stigmatization of people with mental illness, an exhaustive analysis must be made available to the public on the said topic. Language of reportage and height of discrimination identified in some newspapers showed a lack of professionalism. Furthermore, the findings show that the studied newspapers failed to uphold media principles and to give this pertinent topic holistic coverage.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The media should pay more attention to mental health by using its agenda-setting function to project and publicise this issue to the public through holistic reportage, media education, and awareness campaigns.
2. The media should promulgate programmes that will query the government's decision-making on mental health, which will unalterably promote policy formulation on resource allocation within the overall health sector,

especially the mental health care system.

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