

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DIGITAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN MENTAL HEALTH INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION IN DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The growing prevalence of mental health concerns among young adults in Nigeria has drawn attention to the role of media in shaping public perception and promoting mental health awareness. This study investigates university students' perceptions of the role of digital media, particularly social media platforms and institutional communication channels in the management of mental health in Delta State, Nigeria. Anchored in the Health Belief Model and Social Learning Theory, the research adopts a quantitative approach using structured questionnaires to collect data from university students across selected institutions. Findings reveal that digital media significantly influences mental health awareness, helps reduce stigma, and encourages help-seeking behaviour among students. However, challenges such as misinformation, limited access to credible mental health resources, and socio-cultural barriers continue to hinder effective communication. The study reflects the need for culturally sensitive, evidence-based media strategies and institutional support systems. It recommends tailored digital campaigns, improved mental health literacy, and policy-driven integration of mental health education within university environments to enhance student well-being and resilience.

Keywords: mental health, social media, youth perception, mental health awareness, stigma, communication strategies

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Introduction

Mental health has become a crucial national health concern in Nigeria, particularly among young people. Challenges like depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are widespread, emphasizing the imperative need for awareness and tailored programs (Alao & Taiwo, 2019). Effective approaches are vital for enhancing awareness, offering care and alleviating the stigma around mental health concerns (Edewor & Alao, 2020). The mental health emergency in Nigeria is additionally exacerbated by inadequate healthcare resources, cultural stigma, and obstacles to accessing services. In Delta State, youth unemployment (which stands at 45.6%) and substance abuse intensify these issues, highlighting the significance of information-based mental health programs (Niger Delta Youth Council, 2023; Ogunlade, 2023).

Social media, television, and radio are key sources of information for Nigerian youth, influencing their perceptions and understanding of

mental health. Research highlights the important role social media can play in forming youth opinions regarding mental health, demonstrating promise for promotion and information dissemination (Adekunle & Funke, 2021; Eze, 2019). For instance, platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter can offer assistance, though they can also reinforce misinformation or negative representation that exacerbate stigma (Onyema & Okonkwo, 2020). According to the World Health Organization (2013), mental illness accounts for 12% of all diseases that affect individuals, especially youths. If left unaddressed, mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder can become chronic and debilitating, influencing various aspects of life, including relationships, employment, and housing. Some of these mental illnesses that are picked up early in life can become chronic, recurrent, and extremely harmful to one's health. Individuals struggling with severe mental illnesses often face significant challenges in meeting societal

expectations, highlighting the importance of prioritising mental health awareness and care (Borgo, Ramos-Cerqueira, and Torres, 2017).

The World Health Organization reports that Nigeria has one of Africa's alarming depression rates, with 7.1% of the population affected (WHO, 2021). In Delta State, particular challenges comprise high youth unemployment, rampant substance misuse, and economic instability, all of which increase stress and anxiety among youths. These challenges underscore the significance of effective communication strategies to raise mental health awareness and motivate youths to seek help, utilize extensive media access—77.3% of youths use social media, 93.6% have access to television, and 98.2% can access radio (Adekunle & Funke, 2021). Addressing these factors requires tailored interventions that focus on effective information and communication strategies to educate and reduce stigma (Adeoye, 2018; Onyema & Okonkwo, 2020). The study explore the roles of digital media particularly social media in shaping youth awareness and attitudes toward mental health, taking into account Delta State's unique socio-cultural dynamics. By examining these communication channels, the study will assess how media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter influence mental health awareness and stigma.

In Nigeria, awareness and open dialogue surrounding mental health are often limited due to persistent cultural beliefs that view mental illness as a result of spiritual or familial misfortune, alongside strong societal stigma that deters individuals from seeking help. This lack of open communication, compounded by misinformation, leads to low help-seeking behaviour among youths, particularly in Delta State, where these issues are aggravated by limited access to reliable mental health resources and high levels of substance abuse and unemployment. Although social media and other communication platforms offer new avenues for mental health education and support, the specific ways in which these resources impact youths' understanding and perceptions of mental health in Delta State remain underexplored. This study aims to fill this knowledge gap by examining the perception of youth on the media programs and communication strategies in shaping and reducing mental health issues.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To examine how university students perceive the effectiveness of digital media in managing

mental health issues in Delta State.

- ii. To assess how information shared through social media influences university students' understanding and attitudes toward mental health in Delta State.
- iii. To find out the role of social media and institutional communication channels in mental health management among students.
- iv. To identify the challenges university students face in Delta State while accessing accurate and reliable mental health information through digital media.

Research Questions

- i. How does university students perceive the effectiveness of digital media in managing mental health issues in Delta State?
- ii. How does information shared through social media influences university students' understanding and attitudes toward mental health in Delta State?
- iii. What role do social media and institutional communication channels play in the management of mental health among students?
- iv. What are the challenges facing university students in Delta State regarding mental health information access?

Literature Review

Health and Mental Health

In 1948, the World Health Organization (WHO), cited in Victor (2021) defined health with a definition that is still used today, thus, "Health is a state of total physical, mental, and social well-being and not simply the nonexistence of disease or weakness." In 1986, WHO further elaborated that health is "a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living. Health is a positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources, as well as physical abilities. The typical aspect of health is physical health, which is easier to access than other dimensions of health. This leads to the disregard of other facets especially, mental health" (Felman, 2020). Typically, the term "mental health" is used in reference to illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and schizophrenia. However, particularly, 'mental health' refers to overall emotional, psychological and social well-being, both in and outside the context of named conditions. Mental health influences how people think, feel and behave; it

shapes how people perceive the world, make decisions and manage stress when it comes their way (Lanese, 2019).

Social Media and Communication in Mental Health

Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have become relevant channels for disseminating mental health awareness and information. As Adekunle and Funke (2021) observe, these platforms offer a space for peer assistance, professional advice, and the sharing of mental health information. However, they can also spread stereotypes and misinformation, which may harm mental well-being (Onyema & Okonkwo, 2020). In Nigeria, studies like Eze (2019) emphasize that social media communication has led to increased mental health awareness and acceptance, especially among young people, creating a supportive network for those facing mental health issues. Research highlights the significant role of information and communication in mental health management, particularly for youths. Findings show that access to accurate information can help reduce stigma and encourage people to seek help (Adekunle & Funke, 2021).

Effective communication can foster positive attitudes and coping strategies, which contribute to improved mental well-being (Iguoba et al., 2023; Chukwuemeka & Adebayo, 2021). Social support and peer networks improve mental health outcomes by providing emotional and practical support (Eze, 2019). According to Oku et al. (2015), Mental illnesses account for a significant proportion of the disease load among young people worldwide, with many disorders manifesting during adolescence and youth (12–24 years old) the same age range during which students pursue their higher education.

Mental Health in Nigeria

In Nigeria, where the study environment varies from other developed countries, minimal attention is paid to mental health, especially among adolescents and youths, the category to which most university students belong leading to a lack of proper awareness among them thereby reinforcing mental illness myths and stigmas which is the bane of mental illness care today. According to the Federal Ministry of Health (2017) In-depth information on mental health services in Nigeria is lacking, though there are policies aimed at addressing mental health issues in Nigeria. Nigeria's mental health policy was first formulated in 1991. In 2003, a bill for the

establishment of a Mental Health Act was introduced in the Nigerian Senate but was later withdrawn in 2009. In 2013, the bill was re-introduced to the National Assembly. However, 13 years since the bill was introduced to the National Assembly, it is yet to be passed into law. As a result of this, Nigerians still see mental health as a taboo because the country still adheres to the Lunatic Act of colonial legacy. These statistics notwithstanding, it would seem that the attention given to mental health disorders in Nigeria are at best fleeting; the level of awareness of the Nigerian public on mental health issues is also understandably poor, and misconceptions regarding mental health have continued to flourish. Poor knowledge of the mental illness, its causes and characteristics among Nigerians, has been a major obstacle to improving mental health in Nigeria (EpiAFRIC and the Africa Polling Institute [API], 2020). For instance, Nigeria has Africa's highest case load of depressive disorders and ranks 15th in the world in the frequency of suicides, according to the World Health Organization. Nigeria has fewer than 300 psychiatrists for an estimated population of over 200 million.

Youths' Perception of Mental Health in Nigeria

Various studies indicate that Nigerian youths often have misconceptions about mental health due to cultural beliefs and a lack of access to accurate information. For instance, Adeoye (2018) found that misconceptions can fuel stigma, discouraging young people from seeking help for mental health issues. Chukwuemeka and Adebayo (2021) argue that accurate mental health information is crucial for promoting positive attitudes and reducing stigma. They highlight the need for targeted communication strategies to address these misconceptions and reshape youths' understanding of mental health.

Media Campaign on Mental Health in Nigeria

Media campaigns have aimed to inform the public about mental disorders to prevailing myths and promote acceptance (Wada et al., 2021). Media campaigns on mental health in Nigeria have grown steadily in the past two decades, spurred by both governmental and non-governmental initiatives. According to Edewor and Alao (2020), traditional media campaigns during national health days, such as World Mental Health Day, have helped raise awareness but often lack continuity and localised focus. The emergence of social media has transformed the reach and engagement of mental

health messages, particularly among young Nigerians (Adesanya & Adegoke, 2022). Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have hosted viral campaigns such as #MentalHealthNaija and #EndTheStigma, which helped personalise mental health struggles and reduce taboos (Ukwuaniamaka et al., 2024). However, the effectiveness of such campaigns is often limited by inconsistent messaging, lack of cultural sensitivity, and the persistence of misinformation (Waszak, Kasprzycka-Waszak, & Kubanek, 2021). Ukwuaniamaka et al. (2024) highlight that while campaigns have increased visibility, they rarely address the structural issues such as access to care, trained personnel, and affordability that deter real change.

Empirical Review

Social media has proven effective in reducing stigma and raising mental health awareness, especially among younger populations (Eze, 2019). School-based mental health programs have demonstrated success in educating adolescents about mental health, helping them develop coping skills and positive attitudes (Adeoye, 2018). Cultural beliefs significantly influence mental health perceptions, often leading to stigma and resistance to mental health support (Onyema & Okonkwo, 2020). Studies show that peer networks and support groups positively influence mental health outcomes, as they provide a safe space for youths to share their experiences and learn from one another (Adekunle & Funke, 2021). Alao and Taiwo (2019) found that using local languages in radio programs significantly increased mental health awareness in rural communities. This finding underscores the importance of culturally appropriate messaging in mental health campaigns.

Edewor and Alao (2020) reported that peer-led interventions in schools had a lasting impact on students' mental health knowledge and attitudes. These programs not only provided accurate information but also fostered a supportive environment for discussing mental health issues. Akanbi (2020) highlighted the role of social influencers in shaping mental health perceptions. Influencers who openly discuss mental health challenges can help normalize conversations around the topic, thereby reducing stigma. However, this strategy requires careful monitoring to prevent the spread of misinformation. These findings suggest the importance of tailored mental health interventions and highlight the potential of social media and school

programs as vehicles for addressing mental health challenges among Nigerian youths.

Theoretical Framework Health Belief Model (HBM)

The Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, 1974) proposed that individuals' health actions were influenced by their perceptions of risk and the benefits of preventative measures. This model was relevant in examining how Nigerian youths' mental health beliefs shaped behaviors. The study applied HBM to assess how access to reliable information and communication tools affected perceptions and encouraged positive behavioral changes.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory, proposed by Albert Bandura, emphasized that people learned behaviors through observation, imitation, and modeling. This theory was particularly relevant for studying the influence of social media on youths' mental health perceptions. According to Eze (2019), exposure to positive mental health narratives on social media encouraged help-seeking behavior among youths. Conversely, negative or stigmatizing content reinforced harmful stereotypes.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey research design. The study population comprise six universities students in Delta State, Nigeria drawn from public and private universities totally a 95,512 student sample size was 300 using the Taro Yamane formula at a margin of error (e) of 0.05.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Digital media effectively raise awareness of mental health in Delta State.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	66	24
Agree	53	29
Neutral	138	50
Disagree	17	6
Strongly Disagree	1	1
Total	275	100

Table 2: Information from digital media campaigns has helped reduced mental health stigma.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	36	14
Agree	127	46
Neutral	89	32
Disagree	23	8
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	275	100

Table 3: Communication strategies in Delta state are sufficient in addressing mental health challenges.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	40	14
Agree	140	51
Neutral	90	33
Disagree	5	2
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	275	100

Table 4: Digital media campaign in Delta state promotes mental health education.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	30	11
Agree	90	33
Neutral	148	53
Disagree	7	3
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	275	100

Table 5: Access to mental health information increases awareness among youth.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	125	45
Agree	89	32
Neutral	54	20
Disagree	7	3
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	275	100

Table 6: Youths in Delta State perceive mental health is important due to the availability of information.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	95	35
Agree	130	47
Neutral	40	14
Disagree	10	4
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	275	100

Table 7: Limited access to mental health information affects how youths view mental health.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	125	45
Agree	89	32
Neutral	54	20
Disagree	7	3
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	275	100

Table 8: social media effectively spreads awareness about mental health among youths.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	120	44
Agree	78	28
Neutral	74	27
Disagree	3	1
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	275	100

Table 9: communication channels like WhatsApp, Facebook, Tiktok, Instagram and X (Formerly Twitter) help in mental health management.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	58	21
Agree	135	49
Neutral	77	28
Disagree	5	2
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	275	100

Table 10: Misinformation on social media negatively affects mental health awareness

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	62	23
Agree	155	56
Neutral	53	19
Disagree	5	2
Strongly Agree	0	0
Total	275	100

Table 11: Stigma is a major barrier to accessing mental health information

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	150	55
Agree	80	29
Neutral	42	15
Disagree	3	1
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	275	100

Table 12: Cultural beliefs hinders access to accurate mental health information

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	110	40
Agree	89	32
Neutral	71	26
Disagree	5	2
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	275	100

Table 13: Poor internet access hinder obtaining reliable mental health information

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	155	56
Agree	70	26
Neutral	47	17
Disagree	3	1
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	275	100

(Source: Field Survey, 2025)

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: *How does university students perceive the effectiveness of digital media in managing mental health issues in Delta State?*

Tables 1, 2 and 4 provide insights into how

university students perceived the effectiveness of digital media in addressing mental health in Delta State. In Table 1, although 24% strongly agreed and 19% agreed that media programs effectively raise awareness, the majority (50%) remained neutral. This neutrality suggests a possible lack of awareness or engagement with such programs, echoing findings by Nwachukwu et al. (2020), who noted that media outreach on mental health often fails to penetrate student populations due to content inaccessibility or irrelevance.

Table 2 shows that 60% of respondents (14% strongly agree and 46% agree) believe that media campaigns have helped reduce mental health stigma. This positive perception supports existing literature that mass media can effectively shape public perceptions and reduce stigma when properly utilized (Obiechina & Uzochukwu, 2019). Similarly, Table 4, 53% of respondents were neutral about whether local radio and television promote mental health education. This highlights a missed opportunity in traditional media, which remains influential, especially in rural or underserved communities. Lack of specialized mental health programming may be the cause (Eze & Maduka, 2022). It can be concluded that while media campaigns are seen to reduce stigma and raise awareness, there remains a large proportion of youth who are indifferent or unaware of these programmes, suggesting a need for more youth-centered and targeted approaches.

Research Question 2: *How does information shared through social media influences university students' understanding and attitudes toward mental health in Delta State?*

Tables 3, 5-7 illustrate how access to information influences perception. Table 3, over half of the respondents (51%) agreed that communication strategies are sufficient, indicating a moderate confidence in current efforts. However, 33% who were neutral may point to a need for more engaging or inclusive communication models. A significant 77% in table 5 agree or strongly agree that access to mental health information increases awareness. This aligns with the Health Belief Model, which posits that individuals are more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviours when they are well-informed (Glanz et al., 2020).

Table 6 shows that 82% agree that available information helps youths recognize the importance of mental health, supporting the idea that exposure to

mental health content can shift cultural narratives and increase acceptance (Olawuyi & Oladeji, 2021). Table 7 emphasizes the downside of information inequality. Similar to earlier tables, 77% believe that limited access to mental health information negatively affects how youth view mental health. This underscores the importance of inclusive information dissemination and affirms the digital divide theory (Robinson et al., 2020). No doubt youth perception is largely shaped by the accessibility and quality of mental health information, reinforcing the need for more robust, school-based and multimedia mental health education.

Research Question 3: *What role do social media and institutional communication channels play in the management of mental health among students?*

Tables 8-11 discuss how social media and online communication platforms influence mental health awareness and management. In Table 8, 72% of respondents believe that social media spreads awareness effectively. This supports findings by Oduguwa et al. (2020), who highlighted the role of social platforms in creating mental health awareness among Nigerian youths. Table 10 confirms the relevance of platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and X (Formerly Twitter), with 70% agreeing on their role in mental health management. This validates social media as a preferred information channel among youths (Adesanya & Adegoke, 2022).

However, Table 9, presents a critical concern—79% of respondents believe misinformation on social media negatively impacts awareness. This mirrors global concerns about the spread of inaccurate health information online (Waszak et al., 2021). Table 10 presents a more mixed view on online counseling. While 60% agree they are effective, 37% remained neutral. This neutrality could be due to skepticism or lack of personal experience with such services (Ajayi & Osayomi, 2023). It can be deduce that social media plays a significant dual role—it amplifies awareness but also poses a risk of misinformation. There is a need for better regulation and promotion of verified mental health content.

Research Question 4: *What are the primary challenges facing university students in Delta State regarding mental health information access?*

Tables 11-13 identify barriers to accessing mental health information among youths. Table 11

reveals that stigma remains the biggest barrier, with 84% agreeing. This is consistent with previous studies that report widespread mental health stigma in Nigerian society (Ifeagwazi et al., 2020). Cultural beliefs were also seen as a hindrance as reflected in table 14 with 72% acknowledging their impact. Traditional misconceptions often attribute mental illness to spiritual causes, deterring youths from seeking help (Onokah et al., 2019). Table 12 shows that 84% of respondents experience limited access to mental health services, highlighting infrastructural deficiencies in mental health support systems in Delta State and Nigeria generally (WHO, 2022).

Table 13 shows that 82% of respondents believe poor internet access hinders access to reliable information, a key insight in a digital era where much mental health support is online based. It could be seen that Youths in Delta State face structural, cultural, and technological barriers that limit their access to accurate mental health information. These must be addressed through policy reforms, infrastructural development, and public education.

Conclusion

The findings from this study lead to several pivotal conclusions that media platforms, especially social media, play a crucial role in shaping youths' perceptions of mental health. Their influence can be harnessed positively to disseminate accurate information and foster supportive communities. Also, effective mental health communication must consider local cultural beliefs and practices and strategies that align with the community's values are more likely to be accepted and impactful. There's a pressing need to ensure that youths have access to trustworthy and accurate mental health information. This involves curating content that is both informative and relatable.

Addressing mental health challenges among youths necessitates a multifaceted approach, combining media campaigns, community engagement, and policy interventions and educating youths about mental health empowers them to seek help, support peers, and challenge prevailing stigmas.

Recommendations

Based on the finding from the study there is need to developed tailored campaigns on mental health information. Health agencies and government should leverage on social media by enhancing accessibility to information on mental health information. Government should also utilize the

social media and other online media platforms to bring issues of mental health to the knowledge of youth. Government and health care bodies should make information on mental health more accessible on the social media so as to address the challenge of misinformation and other challenges associated with information on mental health

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