

ASSESSMENT OF THE ROLE OF RADIO IN PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS IN ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

In the Nigerian public health, mental health appears to be one of the most neglected aspects owing to stigma, poor awareness, cultural beliefs, and inadequate communication. This study examined the role of radio in promoting mental health awareness in Enugu State. Specifically, the study investigated how often radio stations discuss mental health issues, the types of mental health content broadcast, and audience perception and response to such messages. The study adopted the Agenda-Setting Theory developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, as well as the Health Belief Model associated with Irwin M. Rosenstock. A survey research method was employed, while questionnaires were used as the instrument for data collection. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 380 were returned and analyzed. The results revealed that although many residents listen to radio regularly, mental health issues are rarely discussed on radio stations in Enugu State. The study also found that many respondents are not exposed to mental health programmes and that radio has limited impact on public understanding and behavioural response toward mental health issues. The study concluded that radio is underutilized as a tool for mental health communication in Enugu State. The study recommends increased airtime, structured programming, and collaboration between media organizations and mental health professionals to improve awareness.

Key words: Assessment, Role, Radio, Mental Health, Awareness.

Introduction

Mental health is a critical aspect of man's overall wellbeing, but sadly it has been so neglected, rarely discussed, and has remained an untapped part of the healthcare system in Enugu State and Nigeria by extension. The understanding of mental health issues by the public is shallow, which is often why many misconstrue it to be madness, thereby leading to stigma and eventual discrimination of the parties involved. Many individuals with mental health conditions do not seek help from professionals because of the fear of being excluded socially within their space or immediate environment. Many people simply understand mental health issues as madness and no one wants to be seen as mad. Those who present such mental conditions make effort to conceal such challenge which may overtime deteriorate to a more serious condition.

According to the World Health Organization, mental health encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being, influencing how individuals think, feel, and act. In Nigeria, mental health challenges are often misunderstood and stigmatized, leading to poor help-seeking behavior and reliance on spiritual or traditional interventions (World Health Organization, 2022). In some communities in Nigeria, mental illness is usually attributed to supernatural causes and people rely on spiritual or traditional cure rather than seeking medical attention (Aluh, Anyachebelu, Anosike, & Anizoba, 2018). This is why there is urgent need for strategic public awareness and enlightenment efforts aimed at reshaping public perceptions. Studies have shown that radio has been successfully used to disseminate health information and influence behavioural change in developing countries (Eaton et al., 2017).

In Enugu State, radio stations serve as important channels for public enlightenment on social and health-related issues particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. The radio has language power and reaches rural communities with greater considerations on cultural background, local

content, and values in the awareness creation and messaging. It also has the capacity to reach wider audience for effective participation and responses. However, despite its potential, the extent to which radio contributes to mental health awareness remains minimal. This study, therefore, investigates the role of radio in promoting mental health awareness in Enugu State.

Statement of Problem

Mental health has gradually become a significant aspect of public health concern in Nigeria and world over. In spite of the importance of mental health, the level of awareness in Nigeria remains low largely due to cultural misconstructions, stigmatization, and inadequate or limited access to correct information. Even with the awareness, many people still believe that mental health challenges have something to do with spiritual or supernatural forces which often results in discrimination and reluctance to seek professional help (Aluh, Anyachebelu, Anosike, & Anizoba, 2018; Wada, Rajwani, Anyam, & Karikari, 2021).

The media are expected to play a critical role in health communication by educating the public and shaping perceptions of health-related issues. Among the various media platforms, radio remains one of the most accessible and widely used in Nigeria, particularly in rural and semi-urban communities (Adegoke & Adegoke, 2017). With its wider reach and linguistic versatility and penetrability, radio is positioned as a veritable tool or channel for promoting mental health awareness.

However, with these potentials, the study seeks to examine the extent to which the radio promotes mental health awareness in Enugu State. Although, factors such as irregular programming, limited participation of mental health professionals, and entrenched cultural beliefs may hinder the effectiveness of radio in communicating mental health information (Fadele et al., 2024).

Evidence available from practitioners in Enugu shows that mental health awareness is very low in Enugu State (U. Nwachukwu, personal

communication, 2026).

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the role of radio in promoting mental health awareness in Enugu State.

The specific objectives are therefore, to:

1. Determine how often radio stations in Enugu State discuss mental health issues.
2. Identify the types of mental health content broadcast on radio.
3. Assess audience perception and response to mental health messages.

Research Questions

To achieve the objectives of this study, the following research questions were posed:

1. How often do radio stations in Enugu State discuss mental health?
2. What type of mental health content is broadcast (education, interviews, jingles)?
3. How do audiences perceive and respond to these messages?

Review of Related Literature

Concept of Mental Health Awareness

Mental health awareness involves educating individuals about mental health conditions, their causes, symptoms, and treatment options available. It also aims to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behavior. Despite increasing global attention, mental health awareness in Nigeria remains limited, contributing to delayed diagnosis and effective treatment (World Health Organization, 2022). In Nigeria, mental health awareness is still at a low level, with many individuals lacking basic knowledge about mental disorders (Wada et al., 2021). This gap contributes to delayed treatment and poor health outcomes.

Radio as a Tool for Health Communication

Radio is a powerful medium for health communication due to its wide reach and ability to overcome barriers posed by literacy. In developing

countries, radio has been used effectively to disseminate information on various health issues, including HIV/AIDS, malaria, and maternal health. Its ability to reach large audiences regardless of literacy level makes it highly effective for public health campaigns (Adegoke & Adegoke, 2017). A study conducted in Enugu State found that community radio significantly increased health knowledge and influenced behavioral change among listeners. This demonstrates the medium's potential in addressing public health concerns, especially mental health.

Radio and Mental Health Awareness

Radio plays a crucial role in promoting mental health awareness by providing information, educating and facilitating discussions on symptoms, causes, and treatment options as well as reducing stigma. Studies in South-East Nigeria have shown that radio programmes contribute to improved understanding of mental health issues and encourage individuals to seek professional help (Ikpeama, Anaba, & Kalu, 2024). It also provides a platform for expert discussions and audience participation.

Furthermore, media exposure has been found to shape public attitudes toward mental illness, reducing negative stereotypes and promoting acceptance (Erubami, Bebenimibo, Ezeah, & Muobike, 2023). Mental health awareness in Nigeria remains low due to stigma and poor media attention. This position is further supported by a practitioner in mental health who strongly noted that radio stations rarely give attention to mental health programming (U. Nwachukwu, personal communication, 2024).

Mental Health Awareness and Education as Tools for Problem Solving

Mental health awareness and education go a long way in helping people understand and appreciate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. Through strategic awareness and education, individuals easily identify early signs of emotional or mental misalignment or difficulties within them or in others. When people are more aware of mental health issues, they are less

likely to ignore warning signs and more likely to seek help early (World Health Organization, 2022).

Mental health education teaches people how to manage stress, handle pressure, and cope with everyday challenges in a healthy way. It also helps improve decision-making, communication, and relationships at home, work, and in the community. With this knowledge, individuals are better able to solve personal and social problems (Jorm, 2012). At the community level, mental health awareness reduces stigma and encourages people to talk openly about their struggles. This creates a more supportive environment where people feel safe to ask for help. Schools, workplaces, and families benefit when mental health is taken seriously because it leads to better behaviour, improved productivity, and fewer crises (World Health Organization, 2022).

In summary, mental health awareness and education are important tools for solving problems. They equip people with the knowledge and skills needed to handle life's challenges in a healthier and more effective way.

Challenges of Mental Health Communication in Nigeria

Despite its potential, mental health communication in Enugu State and Nigeria in general faces several challenges, including:

1. **Cultural beliefs and stigma:** Cultural beliefs and stigma remain one of the strongest barriers to mental health communication in Nigeria. Many individuals still interpret mental illness through spiritual, supernatural, or moral lenses, often attributing it to witchcraft, curses, or personal weakness. This leads to discrimination, social exclusion, and reluctance to seek professional help, thereby reducing the effectiveness of media-driven awareness campaigns.
2. **Limited funding for health campaigns:** Mental health communication efforts are often constrained by inadequate funding

from both government and private stakeholders. Without sufficient financial support, media organizations struggle to produce regular, high-quality, and sustained mental health programmes. This results in irregular broadcasting and limited reach of awareness campaigns.

3. Inadequate media coverage: Mental health issues receive relatively low priority in media programming compared to other health and political issues. Many radio stations allocate minimal airtime to mental health content, and when covered, it is often superficial or inconsistent. This weak coverage limits public exposure to accurate and comprehensive mental health information.
4. Shortage of mental health professionals: Nigeria faces a significant shortage of qualified mental health professionals, including psychiatrists, psychologists, and counsellors. This shortage affects media engagement, as there are fewer experts available to provide credible, evidence-based contributions to radio and other media programmes. Consequently, misinformation or incomplete information may sometimes be disseminated.

These challenges limit the impact and effectiveness of media campaigns aimed at improving mental health awareness.

Empirical Review

The role of the mass media has become increasingly visible owing to empirical studies on media and mental health communication, specifically the radio, in shaping public awareness, perception, and behavioural responses to mental health issues. Ikpeama et al., (2024), in their study titled “Influence of Radio Programme News on Mental Health Communication amongst Residents of South-East Nigeria,” examined how radio programmes contribute to mental health communication. Using a survey research design, the study found that exposure to radio programmes significantly improved awareness and understanding of mental health issues

among respondents. It also revealed that listeners developed more positive attitudes toward seeking professional help. However, while this study focused broadly on the South-East region and general influence of radio, the present study differs by concentrating specifically on Enugu State and further examining the frequency of mental health discussions, types of content broadcast, and audience perception and response, thereby providing a more localized and detailed analysis.

Erubami et al., (2023), in their study titled “Newspaper Depiction of Mental Illness in Nigeria,” investigated how media representation influences public perception of mental health. The study found that media interpretations significantly shape public attitudes, with positive representations helping to reduce stigma, while negative portrayals reinforce misconceptions about mental illness. While this study focused primarily on print media, the present study differs by focusing specifically on radio as a medium and examining audience engagement and response to mental health messages, not just representation.

Adegoke and Adegoke (2017), did a study on “The Role of Local Radio in Information Dissemination and Public Opinion Formation in Nigeria,” explored how radio contributes to information dissemination and opinion formation. The findings revealed that radio is highly effective in reaching diverse audiences due to its accessibility and affordability. However, the study did not focus specifically on mental health communication. The present study fills this gap by examining radio's role specifically in promoting mental health awareness.

Aluh et al., (2018), in their study titled “Mental Health Literacy: What Do Nigerian Adolescents Know about Depression?” examined awareness and understanding of mental health among adolescents. The study found that mental health literacy was generally low, with many respondents holding misconceptions about mental illness. While this study highlights the problem of low awareness, it does not examine the role of media in

addressing this gap. The present study bridges this by focusing on radio as a tool for improving mental health awareness.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the Agenda-Setting theory and the Health Belief Model (HBM) of the mass media.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) proposed the Agenda-Setting Theory, which explains that the media influence public perception by determining the salience of issues in society. That is, the media influence what issues the public considers important. By prioritizing mental health topics in their programming, radio stations can shape public discourse and increase awareness.

Health Belief Model (HBM)

The Health Belief Model (HBM) is one of the most widely used behavioural theories in health communication and public health research. It was developed by early social psychologists namely: Irwin M. Rosenstock, Godfrey M Hochbaum, and Stephen Kegeles as a framework for explaining preventive behaviour. According to Rosenstock (1974), people take action to protect their health only if they believe they are at risk and that taking action will benefit them more than not acting.

The model assumes that individuals are more likely to take positive health action when they believe a health issue is serious, personally relevant, and that taking action will produce benefits greater than the perceived barriers. HBM is commonly used in studies involving-health awareness campaigns, preventive health communication, etc. By using both models, it provides a framework for understanding how radio influences mental health awareness and audience engagement.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design, and both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained from the population. Data was analysed

using descriptive approach such as frequency distribution and percentages. The population figure for Enugu State was **3,267,837** and obtained from the 2006 National Population and Housing Census conducted by the National Population Commission (NPC, 2009). Since then, no other census has been conducted. So, in the absence of a more recent census, the population was projected using the exponential growth model recommended by the United Nations Population Division (United Nations, 2017):

Projection Formula

$$P = P_0(1+r)^t$$

Where:

P = Projected (current) population

P₀ = Base population (population at last census, 2006 figure)

r = Annual population growth rate (2.6% = 0.026)

t = Number of years after census

$$P = 3,267,837 \times 1.670$$

$$P = 5,457,288$$

The projected current (2026) population is 5.46 million people.

Using Taro Yamane (1967) formula which is the widely accepted formula in Social Sciences and Mass Communication research, a sample size of 400 was determined.

The population of study was focused on the three senatorial zones in Enugu and through simple random sampling one Local Government was selected from each senatorial zone. From each of the Local government selected, one community was randomly picked and accordingly, the questionnaire was administered.

Presentation of Data

Following the field work which saw to the distribution of 400 copies of questionnaires, the needed data was gathered and out of the total of 400

questionnaires administered, 380 were duly completed and returned which represents a response rate of 95%, while 20 questionnaires were not returned. Therefore, the results are presented as follows:

Frequency of Radio Exposure and Mental Health Discussion (N=380)

Item	Response	Frequency	Percentage
RQ1: How often do radio stations discuss mental health?	Very Often	45	11.8%
	Often	75	19.7%
	Rarely	160	42.11%
	Never	100	26.3%
Total		380	100%
Sub question 1: Do you regularly listen to radio?	Yes	260	68.4%
	No	120	31.5 1
Total		380	100%
Sub question 2: Do you regularly hear mental health programmes?	Yes	130	34.21%
	No	250	65.79%
Total		380	100%
Sub question 3: When do you mostly hear such programmes?	Morning	100	26.3%
	Afternoon	60	15.8%
	Evening	220	57.8%
Total		380	100%

The table shows that greater number of the respondents reported that mental health issues are rarely (42.11%) or never (26.3%) discussed on radio. This implies that radio stations in Enugu do not give considerable time or attention to mental health programming. Interestingly, a greater number of the respondents (68.4%) indicated that they listen to radio regularly, showing that accessibility to radio is not the problem. Irrespective of the high level of listenership, a greater number (65.79%) revealed that they do not regularly hear mental health programmes.

This therefore clearly shows that low level of exposure to mental health information on radio is not due to lack of audience engagement with radio, rather it is due to inadequate airing of mental health programmes or content by the radio stations. Another beautiful finding by the study is that the mental health programmes where aired are mostly in the evening when

people must have retired home after the days work and now have the time to tune in and listen to such discussions, though, the scheduling may not satisfy all segments of the audience.

Types of Mental Health Content on Radio (N=380)

Item	Response	Frequency	Percentage
RQ2: What type of metal health content is broadcast?	Educational Programmes	100	26.3%
	Interviews	70	18.4%
	Jingles	50	13.1%
	None/Not aware	160	42.1%
Total		380	100%
Sub question 1: Which type of programme do you find most informative?	Educational	170	44.7%
	Interviews	110	28.9%
	Jingles	100	26.3%
Total		380	100%
Sub question 2: Which format do you engage mostly with?	Expert	130	34.2%
	Discussions	140	36.8%
	Talk Shows	110	28.9%
	Drama/Jingles	110	28.9%
Total		380	100%

From the above table, a large proportion of respondents (42.1%) are not aware of any particular mental health content on radio, which further reinforces that such is not adequately featured. Those who are aware indicated that educational programmes (44.7%) and interviews (28.9%) are the formats preferred, and their low percentage suggests that the coverage is very limited. Notably, educational programmes with 44.7% was identified by respondents as the format that provides more information. The findings equally indicate that they listen more to talk shows and expert discussions on radio. This means that the audience have liking for informative mental health content but they are not adequately accessible on radio.

Audience Perception and Response (N=380)

Item	Response	Frequency	Percentage
RQ3: How do audiences perceive mental health messages on radio?	Positive	130	34.2%
	Neutral	140	36.8%
	Negative	110	28.9%
Total		380	100%
Sub question 1: Has radio improved your understanding of mental health?	Yes	140	36.8%
	No	240	63.1%
Total		380	100%
Sub question 2: Have you taken action based on the radio messages?	Yes	150	39.47%
	No	230	60.53%
Total		380	100%

The findings reveal that a majority of the respondents (36.8%%) are neutral about their perception of mental health messages on radio while 28.9% are negative. Only 34.2% indicated that they have a positive perception about the contents disseminated. This simply shows that radio has not made a reasonable impact yet on how people see or react to mental health issues. A significant portion of the respondents (63.1%) were of the opinion that radio has not improved their understanding on mental health issues. Accordingly, a substantial number of the respondents communicated that they have not taken any action based on radio messages. The findings have vividly shown that radio has limited influence on awareness and behavioural change, supporting the deduction that mental health communication on radio is still low.

Discussion of Findings

In line with the objective of the study which is to assess the role of radio in promoting mental health awareness in Enugu State; the findings from the study revealed that irrespective of its wide use and reach, radio is still not employed very well in the promotion of mental health awareness in the state. It was obvious from the findings that a good number of the respondents regularly listen to radio but most of them revealed that mental health issues are rarely discussed or never discussed. This shows a lacuna between the capacity of radio as a tool for communication and its real

application in handling mental health issues.

This result differs from the position of Adegoke and Adegoke (2017) who held that radio is a strong tool for spreading information because of its wide reach and affordability. While maintaining this view, the current work shows that such potential has not been displayed by radio in the area of mental health messages in Enugu state.

Moreover, the study discovered that a greater number of the audience are not aware of any mental health content on radio and even if there is, they only stumble on it occasionally. This therefore implies that radio programming does not prioritize mental health concerns. While some respondents stated that educational programmes and interviews are the formats used, they are inadequate. This agrees with the position of Eaton et al. (2017) that effective health communication requires consistent and structured media engagement, which appears to be lacking in this context.

Also supporting the findings is an expert opinion from a mental health practitioner. In a personal communication, Dr. Ngozichukwu Unogu, former Managing Director of the Nigerian Correctional Centre, Enugu, stressed the importance of mental health awareness and self-care practices. She noted that individuals should pay closer attention to their mental well-being through adequate rest, balanced diet, regular exercise, and periodic digital detoxification. She also warned against the use of prescribed medications and psychoactive substances, which can contribute to mental health problems. Also, she stressed the need for early help-seeking behaviour and encouraged individuals, families, and institutions to prioritize mental well-being and actively combat stigma (N. Unogu, personal communication, 2024).

Looking at the perception of the respondents, the study revealed that most of them were neutral or negative about mental health communication on radio. Also, a good number revealed that radio has not improved their understanding of mental health and they have not taken any actions

regarding such exposure. The finding contrasts with the position held by Ikpeama, Anaba, and Kalu (2024), that exposure to radio enhances awareness and encourages positive attitudes. The discrepancy therefore implies that the effect of radio on mental health awareness may differ owing to the quality and availability of content.

Coming from the theoretical point of view, the discoveries made by this research is inconsistent with the Agenda-Setting function of the radio as submitted by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. As mental health issues are rarely discussed or featured by the radio stations in Enugu State, it will therefore not become or form an important topic of discussion among the people. In the same vein, since there is limited exposure to mental health contents, there is no urge to take any positive action by the people because they do not see it as a threat to their health (health risk) since they do not know much about it. This limits the chances of behavioural changes as proposed by Irwin M. Rosenstock in the Health Belief Model.

Further findings from a personal communication with Dr. Vincent Ubochi, Head of Clinical Services at the Nigerian Correctional Centre, Enugu, also revealed that mental health is as important as physical health and should not be neglected. He noted that seeking help for mental health challenges should not be seen as a sign of weakness, but rather as a necessary step toward recovery. In addition, he advised that individuals should not ignore early signs of mental health issues but should seek timely medical attention (V. Ubochi, personal communication, 2024).

The results of this study are further supported by expert opinion. In a personal communication, Mrs. Uzoamaka Nwachukwu, a psychotherapist and mental health practitioner in Enugu, noted that mental health awareness and education represent a first and critical step in reducing stigma and encouraging help-seeking behaviour. She explained that despite its importance, mental health awareness remains largely underserved in Enugu State. According to her, radio stations rarely give adequate attention to

mental health issues, and when they do, it is often limited to special occasions such as World Mental Health Day. She further observed that widespread misconceptions-especially the belief that mental health is synonymous with “madness” continue to hinder public understanding and delay help-seeking behaviour (U. Nwachukwu, personal communication, 2024).

Conclusion

The work assessed the role of radio in promoting mental health awareness in Enugu State, Nigeria. It focused on examining the frequency of the mental health messages and communication being broadcast, the content types, and how the audience perceive and respond to such communication. The study therefore concludes that despite the fact that radio remains one of the most accessible media platforms in Enugu State, it has not been used effectively in promoting mental health awareness.

The limited attention and coverage given to mental health programming has led to a very low public exposure, poor understanding, weak audience engagement, and minimal behavioural response to issues on mental health. Radio stations in Enugu State should give more attention to mental health messages so as to increase the audience awareness, reduce the stigma that comes with ignorance and then encourage positive responses by way of health seeking behaviours among the people.

Recommendations

In line with the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Radio stations should make mental health programmes more regular and sustainable, with adequate airtime and strategic scheduling during peak listening periods to ensure wider audience reach.
2. Radio stations should provide diverse, well-structured, and accurate mental health content, with qualified mental health professionals involved in content development and presentation. Partnerships with

government agencies, health institutions and NGOs should be encouraged to support sustained programming.

3. Audience participation should be strengthened through phone-in programmes, interactive discussions and feedback platforms to improve understanding, address misconceptions, and assess audience responses to mental health messages.

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