
Mental Health among Young Adults in the Age of Violent Filmic Contents in Nigeria

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Abstract

This research was conducted to examine mental health and violent film contents among young adults in Nigeria. The research was anchored on cultivation theory and observational learning and imitation behaviour theory. Cultivation theory postulated that heavy television viewers cultivate the perception of realities portrayed or beamed by movies or television and that people base their judgements about their actions in the world on the cultivated realities provided by movies or television. Observational and imitation behaviour theory assumed that most young adults imitate their movies and television role models regarding violent behaviour, aggressive orientations and dispositions. The researchers adopted a qualitative descriptive approach to conduct an in-depth review of available literature to examine the mental health among young adults. It further highlighted the violent films and its impacts on the security of the society and well-being of young adults in Nigeria. The researchers recommended that there must be a rate of violent contents acceptable and approved in each of the movies produced for the consumption of the public, especially among young adults in Nigeria.

Keywords: Mental Health, Young Adults, Age, Violent Films, Contents

Introduction

A swelling body of research evidences showed that young adults are affected by negative mental health consequences of their exposure to violent contents in films (Coulaud, Julien, Jesson, Bolduc, Ferlatte, Jenkins, Bertrand, Salway, Jauffret-Roustide & Knight, 2023). A prolonged contact with violence in movies, as Shaikh, Harihrasudan & Nawaz (2022) opined, stimulate a short-term or a long-term aggressive and violent behaviour in young adults. A short-term exposure would precipitate a momentary violence, while a long-term exposure to violence in films, which is usually a recurrent exposure, according to Shaikh *et al* (2022), would precipitate a long-lasting violence in young adults. Mental health issues arise at a very young age could be, as Liljeholm, Hillborg, Argentzell, Lövgren, Rosenberg & Bejerholm (2023) aver, attributed to heavy severe socio-economic

demands on young adults. Studies, as Kim & Murphy (2023) maintain, have long established a correlation between mental health and economic hardship. Besides, most young adults in Nigeria experienced mental health crises during COVID-19 pandemic that ravaged and killed many people in the world Evans, Alkan, Bhangoo, Tenenbaum, & Ng-Knight (2021). There were burdens of mental health crises on the general populace while COVID-19 lasted. Young adults are the most active users of social media in Nigeria, Lukose *et al* (2023), but there are several concerns about their mental health as a result of social comparisons learnt on social media.

Young adults are addicts of social media such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and Whatsapp and these platforms are used, as Fatima, Sattar, Imdadullah & Bashir (2022) aver, are used to watch violence-based entertainment contents, movies and pornographies. Even the removal of fuel subsidy by the Federal Government of Nigeria precipitates a lot mental disorders in both young adults and adults. Mental health issues are viewed in different perspectives. While some people regard mental health issue to mean having a lunacy, others regard it as being bothered by some issues that bring about sleepless nights and prevent you from thinking straight. One in every three people globally, as Osman, Michel, Schimmelmann, Schilbach, Meisenzahl & Schultze-Lutter (2023) maintain, experiences mental disorder at one point or the other in their lives. Excessive viewing of violent films has been recognised as the causal factor for depression, anxiety, body image disorder, attention deficit-disorders and acute stress disorder (Cooney, Barrett & Russell, 2023). As Valerie (2022) avers, films meant for early adults and middle adults are filled with violence, rapes and other violations of human rights compared to the films that are meant for the advanced adults. The prevalence of mental health issues among young adults in developing economies, as Jayawardana, Gannon, Doust & Mishra (2023) maintain, are on the rise without commensurate research evidences on its economic consequences. As a result of violent movies precipitating mental health issues, a good number of young adults have been rendered either unemployed, unemployable or thrown out of schools for constituting a danger to their peers. With regard to heavy viewing of violent films, mental health crisis among young adults in Nigeria and elsewhere, as Kim & Murphy (2023) observe, should attract the policy attention of stakeholders and policy makers, and the media practitioners, as well as mental health researchers. The regulations of internet have received little attention of the relevant agencies of Government. Internet, as a medium of wide communication should be subjected to ethical regulations. To some people, internet medium has done more harm than good in the society. Internet, despite its reach and global communication capability, has increased level of exposure to nudity, violence, aggression and fraud and other abuses too numerous to mention. This study is designed to examine mental health among young adults in the age of violent filmic contents in Nigeria. The prevalence of mental health issues among young adults arising from their exposure to violent filmic contents calls for systematic investigations.

Theoretical Overview

The study is anchored on cultivation theory, observational learning and imitation behaviour theory. Cultivation analysis theory examines the process of cultivation (Anaeto, Onabajo & Osifeso, 2008) and whether television and other media encourage

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perceptions of realities that are more consistent with media portrayals than with actualities. Cultivation theory, as Harbin (2023) avers, assumes how television and movies depict social issues and how individual viewers perceive those issues. Heavy television viewing, as Anaeto, Onabajo & Osifeso (2008) maintain, distorts our perceptions of realities of the world we live in, making it seem more like a utopian world. The theory major postulation is ‘cultivation,’ a cultural process relating to coherent frameworks or knowledge and to underlying general concepts cultivated by exposure to the total and organically related world of television rather than exposure to individual programmes and selection (Gerbner, 1990:225) as cited by (Anaeto, Onabajo & Osifeso, 2008). This theory concentrates on the long-term effects of exposure-on both adults and children-rather than on the short-term impact on attitudes and opinions (Anaeto, Onabajo & Osifeso, 2008). Cultivation analysis means that heavy television viewers cultivate the perception of realities portrayed or beamed by television stations and people base their judgements about their actions in the world on the cultivated realities provided by television (Anaeto, Onabajo & Osifeso, 2008). The relevance of this theory to this research work is that young adults and children, in real life situations, tend to act, behave and talk like their modelled characters in movies. They assume the violent postures, in real life situations, of their role models in movies by being violent. Even if their movie role models are peace advocates, young adults and children tend to assume their behaviour. In other words, a follower or mentee of a film role model is the role model’s action-performer in real life situations.

Observational learning and imitation behaviour theory is relevant to this study because most young adults imitate their movies and television role models regarding violent behaviour, aggressive orientations and dispositions. Pavlov & Skinner (1957) affirm that an individual’s behaviour is affected by the message from the mass media to which he is exposed. In films or on television, as James (2019) asserts, the viewers identify with the aggressive or violent behaviour of their movies’ role models or heroes and exhibit such in real life situations. The violent and aggressive behaviour of a film role model becomes the violent and aggressive behaviour of his or her followers or mentees in real life situations. The theory essentially assumes that young adults tend to learn violent and behaviour from movies and to model their aggressive or violent behaviour on that of a *dramatis personae*. Observational learning theory is rooted in all three perspectives on media effects: individual differences, social categories and social relations perspectives. The theory places much emphasis on the youths, learning aggression or violent behaviour from their movie heroes or role models. This, to this researcher, is a weakness in the observational learning and imitation behaviour theory as aggressive behaviour and disposition, including violent behaviour could be learnt from other sources such as parents, classmates, neighbours and even friends (James, 2019).

Methodology

Until recently, the impacts of violent films on young adults and its influence on societal security and mental well-being of the young adults never captured the research attention of scholars and researchers in social sciences, fields of education and media studies.

Younger generations, as an important substituting part of the population, are crucial in the rebirth and regeneration of any nation. This paper therefore adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to conduct an in-depth review of available literature to examine the mental health among young adults. It further highlights the violent films and its impacts on the security of the society and well-being of young adults in Nigeria. The paper conducts empirical studies on mental health and violent films based on the findings from the literature review, while also suggesting a theory to guide the study. The reviewed sources include reference books, journals and other written materials linked to the issues.

Mental Health and Young Adults

Television is the most widely watched medium among children and young adults. As Tahir Mahmood, Urwah Iftikhar, Muhammad, Ahsan & Bhatti (2020) aver, the media are endlessly creating cartoons and movies with increased violence and which numerous studies have been found to be harmful to the security of lives and property of the citizenry. Media violence poses a threat to public health because it precipitates real-world aggressive behaviour and violence (Muhammad, 2019). Progress to adulthood, as Seo & Park (2021) maintain, impacts the mental health of young adults. Mental health of young adults is much impacted by social issues such as being gainfully employed, marriage and social support (Seo & Park, 2021). Experiences of status in adolescence affects coping skill, mental and social skills as young adults, as Copeland (2021) observes, transit to adulthood. Individuals who are not depressive themselves, as Copeland (2021) maintains, may become depressive if they are always associated with depressive friends; playing and social relationship with peers play a crucial role in the mental health development of adolescent and young adults (Copeland, 2021; Huang, Wang, Ge & Cai, 2023, citing Washington Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Poor information about and weak knowledge of mental health and likely causal factors of mental health to avoid, as Osman *et al* (2023) aver, are still scanty in most developing societies of Africa and Asia. Mental health literacy, as Osman *et al* (2023) observe, is extremely poor among young adults in Nigeria. Mental health literacy is the possession of knowledge and required information about treatment and prevention of mental health disorders. Young adults, as Takacs, Katona & Ihász (2023) maintain, are the most vulnerable group who experience development of mental health problems, especially during pandemic. The increasing cases of mental health problems among young adults, as Bond & Power (2021) maintain, have spurred the mental health professional to develop mental health services. Mental health disorder, as Agyapong, Shalaby, Vuong, Gusnowski, Surood, Greenshaw, Wei & Agyapong (2023) posit, can prevent young adults from academic attainments and affect their interpersonal relationships. Mental health disorders, as Ong, Lakoma, Gees Bhosrekar, Hickok, McLean, Murphy, Poland, Purtell & Ross-Degnan (2021) have also been identified as a causal factor for the rate of suicide among young adults in Nigeria. Expertise or services of professionals of mental health, as Reich, Niermann, Voss, Venz, Pieper & Beesdo-Baum (2023) assert, have been under-utilised or not used at all to curb the raging rise of mental health disorders among young adults in Nigeria. Even children experience mental health and their adulthood is affected if the

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interpersonal relationship has been affected in their early years (Neuman & Rohmann, 2023).

Studies, as Huang *et al* (2023) observe, have shown that self-efficacy and mental health are correlated. Many young adults with socio-economic problems, as Narendorf, Arora, Santa Maria, Bender, Shelton, Hsu, Ferguson & Barman-Adhikari (2023) observe, have higher level of mental health problems, but less access to mental health service use. As Evans *et al* (2021) posit, marital status was associated with mental health problems, especially during COVID-19 pandemic. Education is also linked to mental health problems as people with less education experience mental crises. In schools, students with low grades experience anxiety and depressive symptoms (Evans *et al* 2021).

There are basically three forms of young adults: early adults whose age ranges from 20-39, middle adults whose age ranges from 40-59, and advanced adults whose age ranges from 60 and above. The early and middle adults are more affected by the violent contents of movies. The advanced adults by their commonsense of media operations are able to vet and filter the movie contents, and abandon the contents not in sync with their beliefs, experiences and worldview.

Mental Health and Violent Films

Viewing of violent movies, especially at young and impressionable age, according to Shaikh *et al* (2022) has been identified to cause aggressive behaviour, stress, peer rejection and socially unwanted consequences for young adults. Film is an indispensable cultural fabric of Nigerian ethnic-nationalities. By dint of movies, cultural practices and mores of each community are not only externalised, but they also sell the image and the people of the community to the global audiences. During the development process, as Waltz & Chou (2023) maintain, most young adults face challenges in the attainment of good mental health as a result of intervening variables among which violent films take a leading role. Children and teenagers, according to Shaikh *et al* (2022), find it extremely difficult to separate the violent fictional films they watched from real life situations.

Research explorations on the influence of films on young adults have continued to widen in recent times (Aniukwu, 2020). You are actually what you watch, Yuldasheva and Mukhopadhyay (2022), either on television or in movies. Young adults get exposed to violent contents not only in movies, but also video games and television medium. Film, as one of the most important media of mass communication that shoulders cultural transmission from one generation to another, has been an unrivalled teacher of violence and young adults have been its most faithful learners Aneasha, Sharad, Ajay, Kaushal & Nandal (2023). Film medium is not only a teacher of violence and aggressive behaviour, but is also a tutor of drug uses, abuse and alcoholism. Violent films, as Ponnann, De Rycker, Fong & Syed (2018) state, cause aggressive behaviour in young adults. Male heavy viewers of violent contents in the movies, as Asmarani & Hidayat (2022) opine, subject their wives to torture, abuse their rights and subject them to other violent acts, including sexual and domestic. As Huesmann, Dubow, Boxer, Bushman, Smith, Docherty & O'Brien (2021) posit, young adults who are exposed to violent use of weapons in films behave violently with weapons in real life situations. The cinema, as

Carruthers & Taggart (1973) opine, is under intense public scrutiny for heavily relying on violent contents of movies to arrest the attention of the audiences.

Scenes of violence and crimes, as Khalifa (2022) suggests, are aimed at arresting the attention of a large number of film viewers. Watching violent movies can compound mental health problems of the patients (Poulgrain, Bremner, Zimmerman, Jao, Winter, Riordan, Bizumic, Hunter & Scarf, 2022). Exposure sexually violent films activates the desire to violate a woman (Mullin & Linz, 1995). The likelihood of a young adult replicating the violent actions and behaviour of his or her movie role models in real life situations is very high (Shaikh *et al* 2022). There are two forms of violence as found by Ghandali, Hassani-Abharian, Sadeghi-Firoozabadi & Nooripour, 2022). The first form if violence relates to real violence reported in news programmes with a warning and fantasy violence shown on television series and movies (Ghandali *et al* 2022). Heavy viewers of violent films perceive aggressive and violent behaviour as normal in real life situations (Shaikh *et al* 2022). As Evans *et al* (2021) say, occupation, economic conditions and income can subject an individual to mental health crises. For example, health care professionals are less likely to have good quality sleep compared to other professionals.

Violent Film Contents and Societal Security

Exposure to violence in movies, as Basch, Leblanc, Ethan & Basch (2021) maintain, is a precursor to violence and a threat to society well-being later in the lives of young persons. In a study conducted by Riddle & Martins (2022) in the United States of America, 765 primetime television programmes and movies were aired on 21 broadcast and cable networks. The findings revealed that the violence increased significantly at the time in the United States. As postulated by many theories and the findings of most research studies, increased media and movie violence and aggression are equivalent to increase in societal violence and aggression. The more the young adults watch violent movies the more they uptake the use of drugs and alcohol (Gandali *et al* 2022). There have been extensive studies on television-induced violence, but studies on film-induced violence have never received ample research attention from the media and mental health researchers lately. Knowledge to separate real-world situations from media portrayed violence, fantasies and aggression is important for a safe society and safe citizenry. Mahmood (2020) posits that violence generated from watching violent movies could come in form of physical, psychological, emotional or sexual violence and innocent people, especially the women are always the victims. Studies have long established that young adult viewers of violent movies have difficulty in separating fantasy from ground realities (Mahmood, 2020). Violence and aggression learnt and viewed in movies and television are replicated in real life situations. As many studies have revealed, aggression and violence perpetrated by young adults as result of the violent movies and cartoons have sent many to their early graves or inflict bodily harm to many in both developed and developing societies of the world. Firearms, as Kjarvik & Bushman (2023) opine, are the leading cause of death for children in the United States of America. Most of the children and young adults learn how to operate guns by watching violent films. The media, especially television, movies and internet have both positive and negative significant

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impacts on children and young adults. Violent acts, thuggery and violent rapes, and violent robbery have been on the increase lately in Nigeria. Exposure to violent films, as Eneizat, Halim & Dalib (2023) maintain, is a key driver of prevalent violence in the society. Studies have long established a correlation between heavy viewing of violent movies and acting violence in real life situations. Research evidences, according to Bushman, Jamieson, Weitz & Romer (2013), have shown that more presence of guns in movies precipitates aggressive behaviour and stimulate violent use of guns among your adults. Films have presented violence and have sustained the contents of violence to grab the interest and attention of film viewers. Accessing violent videos on social media, movies and television would have negative impacts on children and young adults (Imah, Laksono, Karisma & Wintarti 2022).

Conclusion

Technology-based mental health platforms ensure an unhindered access to counselling and professional services of mental health practitioners and providers by the victims of mental health crises. Online consulting should be made available to young adults who are more technology-savvy than the advanced adults. In other words, ready-made mental health professional services should be made available online at all time. Several scholars have suggested ways to reduce negative effects of viewing violence-filled films. However, the roles of censorship come into play here. Relevant agencies of government in Nigeria must vet the contents of films before they are pushed out to be sold to public.

There must be a rate of violent contents accepted and approved in each of the movies produced for the consumption of the public. Besides, movie actors, actresses and movie producers and directors and even movie costumiers have to be trained and re-trained about the need to reduce the violent contents in movies to safeguard the mental health and well-being of young adults in Nigeria. Parental monitoring and supervision are essential to know which movies the young adults and children are exposed to and train them on how not to be affected by the viewing of violent films. Broadcast stations and internet should be regulated by the government. Broadcast stations should cease to air films and programmes that portray violent acts. Children and young adults are moved to act the roles of their role models in the movies in real life situations.

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