

Poetry: Therapeutic Functions and Effects on Youth Mental Well-being in Post-COVID -19 Era in Nigeria

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Abstract

Poetry is a form of positive distraction for youths that can improve mental well-being. During stress, trauma, and grief, poetry writing helps put thoughts together. The COVID-19 lockdown period gave rise to many artistic expressions from the youth. This form of engagement continued during the post-COVID Period, which led to increased numbers of active participants in poetry writing and literary organizations activities in Nigeria. This paper examines the experiences of youth involved in poetry writing during and after the COVID lockdown in Nigeria. It also explores the perceived contribution of poetry writing to mental well-being of youth. However, there are young people who write poetry who died by suicide, using their poems as an outlet before their death. The study adopts a descriptive research design through a qualitative approach, and the data were sourced through secondary data and interviews. The theoretical framework for this paper is the social action theory. The research established that poetry is therapeutic in nature. It helps to deal with difficult circumstances. Youths interviewed associate positive feeling to poetry writing. But the research found that literary engagement and group activities contribute to mental well-being too. This study, thus, recommends that more scholarly attention should be directed to literary hubs and their contribution of mental well-being of youth

Keywords: Poetry, Writing, Youth, Post COVID-19, Mental Health, Mental Well-being

Introduction

“Expressive writing, especially poetry writing, has a way of helping people deal with loss, grief, trauma, and emotional pain. Turning the pain to words reduces the weight and burden that a person carries. Poetry, as a healing tool applicable and accessible to anyone, can have

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a concrete impact in all areas of medicine, specifically in providing innovative methods for healing both individually and holistically,” (Xang & Yi, 2020).

As for the youth, their engagement with art that makes them put their emotions into use by freely expressing them in lines and verses is therapeutic. The COVID-19 lockdown is a period of so much anxiety and stress for the youth. Pandemics are central to global history. They have a global impact and create anchor points in time. They also interrogate the foundations of society, the sustainability of its material basis, the role of expertise, our social codes, and behavioral norms. (Frankema & Tworek, 2020). “Well, before COVID-19 was even a speck on the horizon, more agile and resilient thinking modes had been identified as essential in confronting an increasingly complex, volatile, and uncertain world” (Portincaso, 2023). However, “the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures implemented to deal with the virus disrupted the social and professional lives of people the world over and had major implications for mental health” (Glowacz, et al, 2022). Staying away from friends, school, work, and other everyday lives gave me many reasons to turn to poetry writing. In a study that was carried out in Belgium and Netherlands, some respondents wrote poems on the Corona because they considered it to be therapeutic, while others preferred to write on other themes. (Dera, 2021). “Poetry received a significant boost in popularity during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Politicians, medics, teachers, protesters, all manner of people from around the world and in various circumstances, turned to poetry as a means of coping with the new realities” (Caleshu et al, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic presented profound disruptions to young people at a critical period of psychosocial development. Bell et al (2023) report the overwhelming effect of COVID-19 on work, nonwork life, and mental health of young people. The proportion of young people who reported that the pandemic had a negative impact was consistent across the three aspects of their lives examined. In the primary service population, 75.6% reported a negative impact on their work or study, 74.7% on their non- work life, and 75.6% on their mental health.

Experiences of Youth Involved in Poetry Writing, Reading, and Poetry Competitions in the COVID Era

Words are known to have healing power; the way thoughts are put together in creatively written verses of poetry has the power to inspire, move, or resonate with readers. Poetry affords individuals the opportunity to implore language in letting out bottled emotions. When dealing with difficult situations like the breakup of a relationship or migrating to a new environment, poetry suffices for young people as an avenue to put the words laced with emotions of the present situation to life in a poetic way. Previous studies have confirmed the healing power of words. (Xiang, 2020). (Metselar, 2020) describes poetic words as a powerful tool for survival in turbulent times. (Kwok et al, 2022) opined that poetry is a therapeutic tool in the clinical management of pain, and it can serve as medicine for both the patient and the

clinician. The research further explained that ‘Poetic Medicine’ possesses a modality that can be utilized for the healing of grief loss, and also expand the resiliency in healthcare. The emerging pattern of writing poetry and other genres of literature during the early days of the pandemic was identified by some research works. (Giovanelli, 2023) postulated that since the advent of COVID-19, there has been an emergence of writing influenced by the experience of living through the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in increased risk factors for mental health problems. The uncertainties and isolation as a result of social distancing fuelled loneliness, which in turn has deleterious effects on physical and mental health (Moreno et al 2020). Against this backdrop, (Caleshu et al, 2023) observed that poetry reading and writing helped respondents to deal with issues like loneliness and anxieties. “This highlights the role that poetry and websites like the Poetry and COVID website can play in supporting individuals to manage considerable personal issues”. The scholars also opined that there is a close relationship between poetry writing in COVID Era and mental well-being of readers. “The most commonly felt impacts were helping them to express themselves and feel inspired (82% and 80% respectively). Many also benefitted from feeling closer to others, feeling better able to process their feelings about the pandemic, feeling less isolated and finding solace (68%, 66%, 59% and 58% respectively)”

Poetry has been used as a form of medical intervention in the case of some hospitalised children. Hospitalisation is a form of isolation that can cause anxiety. (Delamred et al, 2021) explained that hospitalisation can increase stress and anxiety among children and caregivers. The study was able to explore the possible therapeutic effects of poetry on hospitalised pediatric patients’ emotional well-being. Their research concluded with findings that showed that poetry writing intervention led to significant reductions in fear, sadness, anger, worry, and fatigue. However, there was no reduction in pain. “The study reveals promising results and serves as a starting point for future investigations on the therapeutic impact of poetry on hospitalised pediatric patients.” (Delamred et al 2021). Aligning with the views of (Shinu & Binu, 2024) “The act of writing about the tribulations of being ill as Lacan posits protects the writer from its more devastating effect.

(Odia et al, 2023) discuss the emergence of pandemic poetry as an evolving movement in Nigerian and African literature. The poems written during the pandemic captured the experiences of people during the Covid-19 pandemic. (Odia et al, 2023) further identify various ways by which Nigerian and Cameroonian poets responded to nature and its crisis during the pandemic. The study shows that some the pandemic-era poets are not established ones who had enjoyed scholarly reviews. However, the works of these ‘budding’ poets are considered impactful and worthy of discursive engagements across the strata of society. Thus, poetry writing during Covid-19 pandemic is basically a response to the challenges the world faced at that time. Both established writers and others who find poetry fascinating tried their hands on poetry to encourage expressiveness of feelings and ideas, kill boredom, and document that era for posterity.

Post COVID era and Poetry Writing among Nigerian Youths

The COVID-19 pandemic has extremely impacted the global economy. The loss of lives because of any pandemic leads to unmistakable damage to the public. Also, the pandemic left a lasting impact on social and cultural lives too (Mishra et al, 2020). When there are crises like war or pandemics which we all experienced in 2020, they're usually stress associated with the trauma of what was experienced. This after-effect can result in mental stress, which is detrimental to the mental well-being of survivors. The restrictive measures and socioeconomic effects put in place during the pandemic have a toll on the mental well-being of both the young and the old. Before the post-pandemic era, experts predicted a high increase in psychiatric illness in the aftermath of the pandemic. (Kathrivel, 2020).

The year 2021 is the healing year for the world, and Nigeria is not alone in healing from the traumatic experience of 2020. As opined by (Acim, 2021) poetry is a good tool to recount experiences, for people who lost their jobs and loved ones during the pandemic. Turning to poetry to introspect and recount is a way of maintaining mental well-being. It provides positive distraction and escapes from panic and anxiety. The Nigerian youths who are involved in creative engagements like poetry writing had the opportunity to take part in online poetry writing classes and readings during the pandemic and this continued for many in the post-COVID-19 era. 'The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a shift from a universal face-to-face education system based on physical classrooms to a system involving online videos and virtual meeting platforms (Yi & Moon, 2021). Almost all literary engagements and festivals now have a virtual interface for online participation.

The socioeconomic and political environment in Nigeria poses a great challenge to youths (Ayam, 2023). Poetry has been used as a means of socio-political engagement among the youth before the situation of COVID-19 lockdown and after the lockdown. The year 2022 is a poetry year for the Nigerian youths involved in poetry writing. This post-COVID year witnessed a lot of poetry writing and also competitions giving rewards to established and emerging poets. The sad realities of the everyday life of the Nigerian youth find their way into the poetry coming out of the youth population via poetry writing competitions. The tons of sad poems the youths enter for competitions in Nigeria and outside the shores of the country are a reflection of the situation the youths live in. When these emotions bottle up, they have negative consequences on mental well-being. It is safe to say the more youths engage in poetry writing, the better for their mental health.

One of the big challenges for the emerging, established writers, poets inclusive is the postponement of the biggest prize for Literature in Africa; the Nigeria Prize for Literature sponsored by Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas Limited announced on 7th August 2020 that the submission process was disrupted by the pandemics. Not taking part in the 2020 cycle of the competition denied an individual to win the sum of 100,000 dollars in the prize money for the competition. (Guardian 7th August 2020 s://guardian.ng/art/literature/2020-long-prize-for-literature-award-postponed).

The major inspiration for the young Nigerian poet who is emerging or finding his or her voice is the shortlist announcement for the Nigeria Prize for Literature Poetry category for 2022. Suede Agema, Romeo Oriogun, and Sadiq Dzukogi, the three young men are above the conventional age of who is a youth, but they are less than 40. According to (Augoye, 2022) “The shortlisted books for the 2022 edition of the literature prize are ‘Memory and the Call of Water’ by Su’eddie Vershima Agema, ‘Nomad’ by Romeo Oriogun and ‘Your Crib, My Qibla’ by Sadiq Dzukogi’. The Sun Newspaper of October 22nd of 2022 reported that the 2022 submissions for the NNLG Prize for Literature (Poetry) were high. According to the paper, leading publishing experts indicate that poetry submissions had been unprecedented the world over and that the entries for the 2022 Nigeria Prize for Literature were the most ever in the history of the prize.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts social action theory. This is because “social action theory is a theory that attempts to examine people’s actions and the underlying reasons for those actions. This theory looks at how people take actions that are personally meaningful to them and how these (inter)actions affect society and its norms.”(Drew 2024).

The theory supports the notion that there are four types of action according to its proponent Max Weber, which are traditional action, affective action, rational action and value rationality. “By using this theory, we can understand the behavior of each individual or group that each has different motives and goals for an action taken. This theory can be used to understand the types of action behavior of each individual or group. By understanding the behavior of each individual or group, it is as if we have appreciated and understood their reasons for taking an action” (Fatah, 2024). This theory is appropriate for this study because poetry writing among youths in COVID and post COVID period is a social action influenced by the value associated with the healing power of poetry and its perceived therapeutic nature. This value and attention given to poetry can be argued as the bases for literary engagement in times of trouble, isolation, anxiety and depression. However, social actions are influenced by others too.

Methodology

This study is qualitative in its approach. Data were sourced through secondary data and interviews were conducted with participants of two major Non-governmental Literary Organizations promoting poetry writing, recitations and performances in Nigeria. These two literary hubs serve as gatekeepers by providing contacts of participants, and over 20 participants were reached, but 11 responded to the interview. The two groups were selected because they have an online presence and representation in almost all the states in Nigeria. Also, personal experience of researcher’s virtual space literary engagements that bother on poetry reading and recitations during COVID lockdown and after the lockdown was also beneficial.

Findings and Discussion

According to Poets in Nigeria (PIN), an organization promoting poetry among Nigerian undergraduates by organizing a yearly competition tagged the Nigerian Students Poetry Prize, the number of poetry entries increased during COVID and two years after COVID (post covid era).

Year of participation in Nigerian Student Poetry Prize (NSPP)	Number of Poetry Entries
2020	540
2021	247
2022	538

Figure i. (Source. www.poetsinnig.org)

Figure i above is a tabular representation of participation of undergraduates who took part in Nigerian Student Poetry Prize from 2020 the COVID Lockdown year to 2022.

Participation in Splendors of Dawn Poetry Foundation Poetry Competition	Number of Poetry Entries
2020	30
2021	35
2022	45

Figure ii. (source www.splendoursofdawnpoetryfoundation)

Figure ii is the tabular representation of participation in another literary hub promoting poetry writing in Nigeria.

The organization reports an increase in participation after COVID. In the interviews conducted, some respondents reported that they started writing during the COVID lockdown, but they didn't write for competitions until the preceding years, while some reported they started reading during the lockdown. According to a participant (in-depth interview 2023), her journey as a poet started after the pandemic

“My journey with poetry started in 2021 towards the end of 2021 and since then I have been writing poems. During the lockdown I didn't do much besides reading and chatting with friends on WhatsApp and Facebook, but poetry helps a lot, after the lockdown. Before the lockdown I was only reading poetry but when I started writing, poetry serves as escape for me, I see poetry as a savior, it helps me lot. Through poetry writing I have been able to meet other writers.”

Mahbuat Salahuudeen
Age 19
Place of interview: Abeokuta
August 18th 2023

In the mental well – being sphere, the study reveals that the youth who engage in poetry find poetry as a coping mechanism. It is important to note at this juncture that the young poets are aware that poetry writing can't take away the problem, but it serves as positive distraction. The therapeutic nature and power of poetry described by poetryandcovidarchive.com website, cited by (Caleshu, 2023) was confirmed in this study too. However, aside the positive well-being experienced by just writing poetry, taking part in competitions and taking part in literary activities organised by literary communities contribute to mental well-being too.

'I attended literary festivals and events online during COVID-19 and after the lockdown. I live close to the Jos wildlife Park and I joined other creatives for hiking and small group literary events, we hang out to discuss creativity it helps a lot'.

(In -depth Interview, 2023)
Younglan Talyoung
Age 25
Jos
24th August 2023

Expressions such as the above are rendered to buttress the fact that mental well-being goes beyond engaging in poetry writing for the youths. Mental-well-being is promoted via group engagement with like minds. It is believed that meeting of like minds is a dose for a healthy mind.

Furthermore, it is believed that mental health issues like depression and anxiety are discussed during some literary engagements like book reading and poetry performances. This study finds out that one of the literary organisations organised a session on mental health and mental well-being during Covid-19 lockdown and the tradition continued after the lockdown. According to (Oribahbor 2020, May) the initiative is set aside to promote mental well-being of youths. This initiative is one of the activities of Poets in Nigeria Initiative (PIN).

Experience of youth population who engaged in poetry writing during and after the pandemic didn't just increase, but it also showed that the experience of pandemic influenced their interest in poetry writing. It is a known fact that poetry is a coping mechanism perhaps that was the reason poetry gained popularity during and after the Covid-19 lockdown. (Caleshu,2023) explained that "poetry received a significant boost in popularity during the COVID-19 lockdowns. "Politicians, medics, teachers, protesters, all manner of people from around the world and in various circumstances, turned to poetry as a means of coping with the new reality"

In essence, there is a need to encourage and promote the reemergence of poetry as a coping mechanism. Moreover, there is need to re-assess the mental health of the youth population generally and adopt some of the coping mechanisms this group of youth engaged in to the larger youth population like promotion of book reading culture and literary engagements.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study has been useful in proving that poetry writing and reading are still useful in coping with problems like anxiety, thereby promoting mental well-being. The young poets constituting a portion of Nigerian Youth population associate value to poetry writing. This social action is influenced by factors like social media engagement, which could also be a form of literary engagement and association with like minds through books or groups.

Thus, mental well-being is believed to be promoted more in group engagements and activities, considering the fact that some groups are aware of mental health needs of their members and activities are tailored to meet these needs.

In addition, the study discovered that poetry as an outlet for emotion can be useful in identifying youths who might be having mental health challenges. Adeleke Rachel Tioluwani and four students, Nigerian writers had died of suicide between 2019 and 2020 (Ace, 2024). Two of these young poets, Adeleke Rachael Toluwani and Chukuemeka Akachi, wrote about their challenges and struggles with mental health in poems they published on the social media page. This paper is suggesting that poetry can be a voluble tool for mental advocacy among the general youth population.

Extensive research into the diverse contributions of poetry writing, reading, recitation and performances towards mental well-being of youth will enhance the appreciation of the therapeutic role of poetry, especially in times of problems or ill health. This study, thus, recommends that more scholarly attention should be directed to literary hubs and their contribution to mental well-being of youth.

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