



Harmonising Minds and Culture: Exploring the Role of Music in Mental Health Awareness through Activism in Nigeria



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Abstract

Mental health issues in Nigeria are pervasive, yet the stigma surrounding them limits open discussions and access to care. Music artists, activists, and therapists have emerged as key advocates, using music as a platform to raise awareness and challenge misconceptions. This study explored the role of Nigerian music and activism in shaping mental health discourse, highlighting their contributions to public awareness and understanding. Additionally, the study examined how music and activism could influence mental health policies in the country. A qualitative approach was used, involving in-depth interviews with seven participants, including Nigerian musicians and therapists engaged in mental health advocacy. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes related to mental health awareness, advocacy, and the intersection of music and activism. Findings revealed that while music is a powerful tool for raising awareness and fostering emotional expression, it has had limited impact on policy change. Themes of resilience, inclusivity, and advocacy emerged as significant, showing how music influences public perceptions. However, participants emphasized the need for government involvement to translate public awareness into effective mental health policies. While music has proven effective in generating awareness and reducing stigma, its ability to drive policy changes remains limited. For significant, lasting impact, a coordinated effort between musicians, activists, and government institutions is necessary to address mental health issues comprehensively in Nigeria.

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Contents

Abstract.....	399
1 Introduction.....	400
2 Materials and Methods.....	402
3 Results and Discussions.....	403
4 Conclusion.....	409
Acknowledgments.....	410
References.....	411
Biography of Authors.....	414

1 Introduction

Mental health issues in Nigeria, often stigmatised and misunderstood, have emerged as a significant public health concern (Nwedu, 2019; Wada et al., 2021). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022), over 50 million people in the country are affected by conditions like anxiety, depression, and schizophrenia. The crisis is compounded by inadequate healthcare resources command, cultural misconceptions and persistent social stigma, living conversations around mental health marginalisation (Ezeakor, 2013; WHO, 2022). However, a shift is underway, largely driven by Nigerian artists and activists using their platforms to highlight mental health struggles. It has been observed that Nigerian artists address issues like depression, addiction, and loneliness through music, intertwining creative expression with messages of resilience and emotional awareness. Their work not only confronts these challenges but also offers solace and advocacy, fostering a supportive environment for mental health conversations. This study, *Harmonising Minds and Culture: Exploring the Role of Music in Mental Health Awareness through Activism in Nigeria*, explores how musicians use their art to challenge stigma, raise awareness, and influence audience perceptions of mental health, contributing to broader mental health reform in Nigeria.

According to the WHO (2022), the term "mental health" refers to an individual's emotional, psychological, and social well-being, which influences how the individual thinks, feels, and acts, notably in handling stress, relating to others, and making decisions. This aspect of general health, a crucial element of overall well-being, includes both the absence of mental diseases and the existence of healthy mental functioning (WHO, 2022). Both of these elements are encompassed in the notion of general health. In this discussion, "mental health awareness" denotes the identification of mental health disorders, comprehension of their ramifications, and the elimination of the accompanying stigma.

Mental health in Nigeria faces significant challenges, exacerbated by deep-rooted cultural stigma, limited mental health education, and inadequate healthcare infrastructure (Wada et al., 2021). Despite the increasing prevalence of mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and schizophrenia, mental health issues remain highly stigmatised and misunderstood (Gureje & Lasebikan, 2006; Adewuya & Makanjuola, 2008). Many individuals suffering from mental health conditions are often viewed as "possessed" or morally flawed, which discourages open discussions and deters people from seeking treatment. Nigeria, a country with over 200 million people, has less than 10,000 mental health practitioners (including Psychiatrists and Clinical Psychologists), reflecting a severe shortage of mental health professionals and resources. According to Fadele et al. (2024), the social environment in Nigeria makes it difficult to access care, leading to a mental health crisis characterised by untreated conditions and increasing suicidal rates. Cultural misconceptions further marginalised those struggling with mental health issues, reinforcing isolation and suffering.

Previous studies have highlighted the transformative role of music in promoting mental health awareness and activism (Rebecchini, 2021; Reynolds, 2023). Globally, music has been recognised as a therapeutic tool, capable of conveying complex emotions, providing emotional relief, and encouraging dialogue around sensitive topics like mental health (Ramírez-Meléndez, 2023). In Nigeria, artists like Falz ('Hypocrite' and 'Child of the World', addressing depression and societal pressures), Burna Boy ('Monsters You Made', highlighting trauma and social consciousness), Johnny Drille ('Wait for Me' and 'Mystery Girl', exploring loneliness and emotional vulnerability), Niniola ('Addicted', touching on addiction and emotional dependence) and Asa ('Jailer', focusing on emotional entrapment and mental anguish) have incorporated themes of mental health into their music. The work has offered listeners solace, helped normalise conversations around mental

health, and challenged the stigma surrounding mental illness. Studies have also indicated that music can serve as a bridge, connecting people to mental health resources and encouraging societal empathy towards those affected by mental disorders (Rodwin et al., 2022; Reynolds, 2023; Fadele et al., 2024).

While previous research has acknowledged the role of music in mental health advocacy (Tang et al., 2020; Salihu et al., 2021; Omole, 2023), few studies have deeply explored how Nigerian artists actively engaged in mental health activism and the specific ways their music influences public perceptions and conversations. Moreover, existing literature often lacks a focused examination of how music can serve as an intervention in stigmatised communities like Nigeria, where mental health awareness is still in its infancy. This study aims to fill this gap by analysing how musicians in Nigeria use their platforms not only to create awareness but also to challenge the deeply entrenched stigma surrounding mental health. By doing so, this study will explore music's potential as a powerful tool in shaping a more inclusive mental health discourse and fostering societal change. It is important to note that throughout this study, the terms "artist" and "musician" are used interchangeably to refer to individuals who create and perform music. The following research questions were considered in this study: How have Nigerian artists and activists utilised music as a medium to raise awareness about mental health issues and combat the stigma associated with mental illnesses? What are the key themes and messages conveyed through music and activism related to mental health in Nigeria? How have Nigerian artists and activists organised music festivals, concerts, and mental health awareness campaigns impacted public perception and policy regarding mental health?

Literature Review

Theoretical Review

The Framing Theory

This study draws on Goffman's (1974), Framing Theory, which explains how individuals and groups structure their perceptions and experiences through interpretative "frames." These frames help organise complex social realities, shaping how issues like mental health are understood and addressed by society. In contexts such as Nigeria, where mental health is often stigmatised, framing becomes a critical tool for altering public discourse. Nigerian musicians and activists leverage this process by using their art to reshape how mental health is viewed, breaking down barriers of stigma and encouraging more open conversations around emotional well-being.

Framing Theory emphasises that the way information is presented can dramatically influence public understanding and engagement. In this context, musicians serve as framers by crafting narratives within their music that make mental health challenges like depression, anxiety, and loneliness more relatable and approachable. By embedding these issues within themes of resilience, vulnerability, and empowerment, musicians help listeners reframe their views on mental health. Goffman's theory also notes that framing is a dynamic process shaped by cultural norms and societal structures. In Nigeria, where cultural misconceptions about mental health persist, music serves as a medium that reframes these misconceptions, offering a more compassionate and inclusive narrative (Aller et al., 2021; Foulkes & Andrews, 2023; Beable et al., 2017).

Furthermore, Framing Theory suggests that frames are not confined to individual actors but are part of broader societal and media systems. Nigerian musicians contribute to a larger movement that not only raises awareness of mental health but also advocates for social reform through creative expression. This study applies Goffman's framework to explore how these musicians' messages resonate with diverse audiences and challenge deep-seated cultural narratives about mental health. By doing so, the study highlights the crucial role of music as both an artistic and activist tool, contributing to a broader understanding of mental health advocacy in Nigeria.

Review of Empirical Studies

Role of Music in Mental Health Awareness

Numerous research indicates that music serves as an effective instrument for enhancing emotional resilience and mental health awareness (Saarikallio, 2017; Bartos et al., 2021; Salihu et al., 2021; Iyendo et al., 2024). A study conducted by Tang et al. (2020), demonstrated that music therapy considerably alleviated participants' depressive symptoms, underscoring its beneficial impact on mental health. This study indicates that music

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facilitates emotional expression and communication in ways that verbal language may not achieve. [Cohen & Maxwell \(2020\)](#), reviewed that music therapy considerably alleviated participants' symptoms of anxiety and depression, illustrating its efficacy in improving mental health. This research indicates that individuals can convey their emotions and sentiments through music in ways that may be unattainable via verbal communication. The American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2020) indicates that music therapy markedly enhances mental health outcomes in the United States by alleviating stress, anxiety, and depression while also fostering social cohesion and community growth.

Music has demonstrated the capacity to enhance mental health awareness in Nigeria ([Brennan, 2010](#)). Research conducted by [Omobowale et al. \(2023\)](#), revealed that Nigerian artists who include mental health themes in their art have substantially facilitated conversations regarding various psychopathological concerns among the youth. Their music has raised awareness of mental health difficulties in society, fostering discourse and creating a platform for discussion ([Opara, 2012](#); [Omoko, 2021](#)). Their music, frequently imbued with themes of optimism and perseverance, has contributed to diminishing the stigma associated with mental health issues and has motivated listeners to pursue assistance ([Njogu, 2005](#); [Akinduyo et al., 2024](#)). [Ogunleye and Omobowale \(2020\)](#) contended that music, as a culturally embedded medium in Nigeria, may engage varied audiences, rendering it an excellent instrument for comprehensive mental health promotion.

Music as a Medium for Activism

[Ward \(2022\)](#), asserts that the incorporation of music in activism is extensively documented among numerous social movements, particularly those focused on mental health awareness. Activist musicians leverage their platforms to illuminate urgent social issues, confront cultural stigmas, and galvanise communities ([Hess, 2019](#); [Ward, 2022](#)). Research by [Goessling \(2021\)](#), indicates that music in mental health advocacy might facilitate communication and cultivate solidarity among persons impacted by mental health conditions. The study highlighted that musicians, via their public influence, have the ability to alter societal norms and foster inclusive discussions on delicate issues such as mental health.

Historically, political activists have utilised music to convey emotions, enhance political consciousness, and effect societal change, exemplified by Fela Anikulapo Kuti, whose music invigorated Nigerian political engagement. [Fisher & Idowu \(2023\)](#), stated that Fela Anikulapo Kuti resisted dictatorships, highlighted social injustices, and elevated popular political awareness. Contemporary music in Nigeria plays a crucial role in mental health advocacy, akin to Fela's political engagement. Like Fela, modern singers are utilising their platforms to address mental health stigmas and promote candid discussions, similar to his approach to political issues ([Olaniyan, 2004](#); [Taylor, 2014](#); [Fisher & Idowu, 2023](#)). They perpetuate the tradition of utilising art to transform society via song. These findings correspond with a wider corpus of material that underscores music's capacity to facilitate social change via activism.

2 Materials and Methods

Design

This study utilised a qualitative research design, specifically employing semi-structured interviews to investigate the perspectives of Nigerian artists, activists, and therapists on the use of music as an avenue for mental health awareness. The design allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, insights, and reflections on how music and activism contribute to breaking the stigma around mental health in Nigeria. The approach was particularly suitable for capturing the subtle ways in which cultural expression intersects with mental health advocacy.

Participant

The participants in this study included seven (7) individuals, comprising five males and two females, aged between 25 and 40 years. The group consisted of four musicians, two therapists, and two activists, and some participants fulfilled dual roles, such as musician/activist and therapist/community organiser. This diverse

group and a blend of professionals contribute to a multidisciplinary perspective on mental health advocacy in Nigeria. The varied social demographic characteristics of the participants, such as age, gender, and profession, offered a broad spectrum of insights into the topic.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using semi-structured interview guides that facilitated open-ended discussions about the role of music in mental advocacy in Nigerian music, addressing mental health and the impact of music events on public perception. The interview questions were designed to prompt reflections on participants' professional and personal experiences with mental advocacy through music; context-specific responses and interviews are conducted both face-to-face and virtually, depending on the availability and location of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, allowing for in-depth discussions. The interview sections were recorded with the participant's consent verity command and stored securely to maintain confidentiality. Follow-up questions were used to clarify points and gather more detailed responses where necessary.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using thematic analysis, a method suited for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within the data. The process involved multiple readings of the interview transcripts, followed by coding to identify recurring themes related to mental health awareness and the role of music in breaking stigma. Codes were grouped into broader themes, and direct quotes from participants were used to support the findings. Triangulation was ensured by cross-referencing the data with relevant literature and conducting member-checking with participants to validate the accuracy of the analysis.

3 Results and Discussions

Table 1
Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

S/N	Participant ID/ Profession	Sex	Age
1	Musician 1	Male	27 years
2	Musician 2	Female	35 years
3	Therapist	Male	40 years
4	Musician 3	Male	25 years
5	Therapist/Community Organiser	Female	38 years
6	Musician 4/Activist	Male	35 years
7	Activist	Male	30 years

The participants, comprising five males and two females, range in age from 25 to 40 years. This age variation suggests a blend of youthful energy and more seasoned experience, potentially offering a broad spectrum of insights into mental health awareness and activism. Professionally, the group includes four musicians, two therapists, two activists, and one community organiser, with some participants playing dual roles. For instance, one musician is also an activist, while a therapist also serves as a community organiser. This multidisciplinary mix underscores the importance of collaboration between cultural expression, healthcare, and social advocacy in promoting mental health awareness. The combination of musicians, therapists, and activists provides a unique perspective on how music can be a powerful tool in mental health advocacy (Powell et al., 2021; Pedersen & Paves, 2014; Wood et al., 2014). The participants' varied backgrounds point to a rich interplay between mental health, activism, and cultural engagement, reflecting the study's aim to explore how music can influence mental health awareness in Nigeria.

Music as a Medium for Mental Health Awareness

This section explores how Nigerian artists and activists have harnessed the power of music to raise awareness about mental health issues and combat the stigma associated with mental illnesses. Participants discussed how Nigerian musicians and activists used music to raise awareness.

1.1 Ways Nigerian Musicians have addressed Mental Health issues in the Music Industry

Participants shared some examples of how they felt Nigerian musicians have addressed mental health issues in the music industry. Many of the participants identified varying music that addressed mental health awareness through their lyrics, such as Addicted by "Niniola" which explores the struggles of addiction and mental health, prompting listeners to reflect on their own experiences and seek support when needed, Wait for Me by "Johnny Drille" which touches on themes of loneliness and self-reflection, providing solace to listeners grappling with similar emotions, Smile for Me by "Simi" which addresses the importance of seeking support and finding joy amidst mental health struggles, resonating with listeners across the country and Good Morning by "Brymo" in his song which convey messages of hope and resilience, encouraging listeners to persevere through life's challenges, including mental health struggles. However, all the participants identified different music and the impact of their lyrics in raising awareness about mental health. Views of some other participants are presented below:

Absolutely, Nigerian musicians have been instrumental in raising awareness about mental health issues through their music. For instance, artists like Burna Boy and Asa have incorporated themes of depression and anxiety into their lyrics, resonating with audiences who may be struggling with similar challenges (Musician 1, Male, 27 years)

Nigerian musicians have used their creative expression to tackle mental health issues head-on. For example, Waje's song "Strong Girl" celebrates resilience and self-love, empowering listeners to overcome mental health challenges and embrace their inner strength (Musician 4/Activists, Male, 35 years)

Without a doubt, Nigerian musicians have contributed significantly to the discourse on mental health through their music. For example, Falz's song "Talk" tackles societal issues, including mental health stigma, encouraging listeners to speak up and seek help when needed (Therapist, Male, 40 years)

1.2 Ways Music helps in Breaking down the Stigma around Mental Health in Nigeria

Participants expressed different ways that they think music is helping society in breaking down the stigma around mental health, especially in Nigeria. They believed that music transcends cultural and linguistic barriers, allowing messages of mental health awareness to reach diverse audiences across Nigeria and beyond. They also believed that music is a powerful storytelling medium, allowing artists to share personal experiences and struggles with mental health, thereby humanising the issue and reducing stigma. Through relatable lyrics and emotive melodies, music creates a safe space for individuals to connect with their emotions and experiences, fostering empathy and understanding towards mental health challenges. Through collaborations between musicians and mental health, organisations produce impactful campaigns that reach a wide audience, sparking conversations and challenging societal misconceptions about mental illness. Participants also expressed that by addressing mental health themes in their song lyrics, Nigerian musicians prompt listeners to reflect on societal attitudes and beliefs surrounding mental illness, encouraging critical thinking and introspection, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and supportive society.

Music concerts and events dedicated to mental health awareness provide platforms for open dialogue and community support, encouraging individuals to speak up about their struggles without fear of judgment (Therapist, Male 40 years)

Music videos often depict narratives of resilience and recovery, showcasing individuals overcoming mental health obstacles and inspiring hope among viewers (Therapist/Community Organizer, Female, 38 years)

Music serves as a powerful storytelling medium, allowing artists to share personal experiences and struggles with mental health, thereby humanizing the issue and reducing stigma (Musician 1, Male, 27 years)

Themes and Messages

This section aims to identify the key themes and messages conveyed through music and activism related to mental health in Nigeria. The analysis reveals that Nigerian musicians and activists address mental health issues through various approaches, focusing on advocacy, awareness, resilience, and inclusivity. The following themes emerged from the analysis:

1.3 Common Themes or Messages about Mental Health Observed in Nigerian Music and Activism

1.3.1 Advocacy for Mental Health

A significant theme that the participants mentioned is the advocacy for mental health awareness and the de-stigmatisation of mental illnesses. They believed musicians use their platforms to challenge societal norms and address systemic barriers preventing individuals from accessing mental health support and resources. This was identified in the mode of storytelling and vivid imagery, which help bring attention to issues such as anxiety, depression, trauma, and addiction. By addressing these topics openly, musicians help normalise conversations about mental health, reducing stigma and encouraging listeners to seek help.

Through storytelling and vivid imagery, songs raise awareness about the wide spectrum of mental health conditions, from anxiety and depression to trauma and addiction. (Therapist, Male, 40 years)

Activism within the Nigerian music industry often centres on advocating for mental health awareness and de-stigmatization. Artists use their platforms to challenge societal norms and address systemic barriers that prevent individuals from accessing mental health support and resources. (Musician 3, Male, 25 years)

1.3.2 Advocacy for Mental Health Funding

One of the participants expressed that Nigerian musicians also advocate for policy changes and increased funding for mental health services. They believed they use their influence to push for greater government investment in mental health infrastructure and support programs to improve access and quality of care for all Nigerians. This advocacy work not only raises awareness but also encourages structural changes in society, promoting a more supportive environment for those dealing with mental health issues

"Through their lyrics and public statements, Nigerian musicians advocate for policy changes and increased funding for mental health services. They leverage their influence on issues or greater government investment in mental health infrastructure and support programs to improve access and quality of care for all Nigerians." (Activist, Male, 30 years)

"Collaborations between musicians and mental health organisations have led to the creation of impactful campaigns and initiatives." (Therapist/Community Organiser, Female, 38 years)

1.3.3 Hope and Perseverance

Participants expressed that many Nigerian songs celebrate the strength and resilience of individuals facing mental health challenges. They discussed that these themes of hope and perseverance are crucial in supporting and encouraging listeners. They believed that such messages could be uplifting for those struggling with mental health issues, offering them hope and encouragement to persevere.

"Many songs celebrate the strength and resilience of individuals facing mental health challenges, emphasising themes of hope and perseverance." (Musician 1, Male, 27 years)

1.3.4 Inclusivity and Diversity

One of the participants discussed inclusivity in mental health discussions, which ensures that all voices are heard and respected, fostering a more comprehensive and empathetic approach to mental health advocacy. He believed that Artists strive to represent diverse experiences and identities, ensuring that no one feels marginalised or overlooked.

"Nigerian music and activism often emphasize the importance of inclusivity and diversity within the mental health discourse. Artists strive to represent diverse experiences and identities, ensuring that no one feels marginalised or overlooked in discussions about mental well-being." (Musician 4/Activists, Male, 35 years)

1.3.5 Resilience and Overcoming Adversity

One of the Participants also highlighted the importance of resilience and the ability to overcome adversity. He believed that musical lyrics provide listeners with powerful examples of triumph over mental health struggles, fostering a sense of empowerment. Believing that these messages emphasise the strength and perseverance required to navigate mental health challenges.

"In Nigerian music, themes of resilience and overcoming adversity are commonly intertwined with mental health narratives." (Musician 1, Male, 27 years)

1.4 Ways these themes contribute to the Mental Health Discourse in Nigeria

Participants were engaged in understanding how these themes contribute to the mental health discourse in Nigeria. They itemise various ways that the themes contribute to a more compassionate and emphatic society where mental health is recognised as a fundamental aspect of overall wellbeing. They attempt to reshape the narrative surrounding mental health and promoting a culture of care and support for all, by confronting stigma head-on and promoting accurate information which help to dispel myths and educate the public about the realities of living with mental illness. By addressing these topics openly and honestly, Nigerian artists encourage listeners to reflect on their own experiences and seek support when needed. Incorporating mental health themes in Nigerian music helps to normalise discussions surrounding mental well-being, reducing stigma and promoting understanding. Also, the themes serve as a form of catharsis for both the artists and their listeners, providing a platform for emotional expression and healing. Fyrthermore, the themes call for increased access to mental health services, better support systems, and more inclusive policies that prioritize the well-being of all Nigerians. By sharing personal stories and experiences related to mental health, Nigerian musicians humanise the issue and make it relatable to their audience. They believed that relatability fosters empathy and compassion, creating a supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable discussing their mental health struggles without fear of judgment.

These themes also serve as a form of catharsis for the artists and their listeners, providing a platform for emotional expression and healing. Through music, people can find solace in knowing that they are not alone in their experiences and that others understand what they are going through (Musician 4/Activists, Male, 35 years)

These themes in Nigerian music contribute to the mental health discourse by sparking important conversations and raising awareness about the prevalence of mental health issues in our society. By addressing these topics openly and honestly, musicians encourage listeners to reflect on their own experiences and seek support when needed (Musician 1, Male, 27 years)

Impact of Music Events on Mental Health Awareness

This section explores how Nigerian music events such as festivals, concerts, or campaigns have significantly impacted public perception of mental health and how these themes impacted changes in public attitudes or policies regarding mental health after these events.

1.5 Impact of Music Festivals, Concerts, or Campaigns on Public Perception of Mental Health

Participants describe various musical festivals, concerts, and campaigns that they believed had a significant impact on public perception of mental health. Several notable events were mentioned by the interviewees, which included Music Mind Matters, 'The Artists for Mental Health', 'Break the Silence', 'Depression No Dey Show for Face', 'Harmony Healing', The 'Mind Matters Music Festival', 'Mind Over Music', The 'Healing Vibes Concert'. These notable events were discussed as having had a significant impact on public perception of

mental health in Nigeria. These events bring together music artists, activists, and mental health professionals to raise awareness and promote mental well-being in a supportive environment. They also believed that through a series of concerts and community events, the campaign encouraged individuals to speak out about their experiences and seek support without fear of judgment. Through powerful performances and engaging discussions, the concert sparked important conversations and challenged the stigma surrounding mental illness.

The "Artists for Mental Health" initiative brought together a diverse group of Nigerian musicians to use their platforms to raise awareness about mental health. Through collaborative songwriting sessions, music videos, and live performances, these artists shared powerful messages of hope and resilience, inspiring others to prioritize their mental well-being (Musician 4/Activist, Male, 35 years)

One notable event that significantly impacted public perception of mental health in Nigeria was the "Music Minds Matter" concert, which brought together musicians, activists, and mental health professionals to raise awareness about mental health issues. Through powerful performances and engaging discussions, the concert sparked important conversations and challenged the stigma surrounding mental illness (Musician 1, Male, 27 years)

1.6 Changes noticed in Public Attitudes or Policies in Mental Health after the Events

Changes that participants noticed in public attitudes or policies in mental health after these events are shifting towards proactive measures aimed at promoting mental well-being and resilience at the grassroots level, notable increase in funding and resources allocated to mental health services and facilities across Nigeria, positive shift in public attitudes towards mental health in Nigeria, More people openly discuss their struggles and seek help without fear of stigma or discrimination, it increased visibility of mental health issues in policy discussions, inspired individuals to come together and create networks of support for those struggling with mental illness, greater recognition of the importance of mental health education in schools and communities, and integrate mental health awareness into the curriculum and provide resources for students and teachers.

One significant change I have observed is the emergence of grassroots organizations and support groups focused on mental health. Events like the "Healing Vibes Concert" have inspired individuals to come together and create networks of support for those struggling with mental illness (Musician 2, Female, 35 years)

Since participating in mental health awareness events like the "Music Minds Matter" concert, I have noticed a positive shift in public attitudes towards mental health in Nigeria. More people openly discuss their struggles and seek help without fear of stigma or discrimination (Musician 1, Male, 27 years)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of Nigerian music in promoting mental health awareness and combating stigma, as well as to understand how themes of resilience, advocacy, and inclusivity are represented in music and activism. Through interviews with musicians, therapists, and activists, the study provided insights into how music serves as a medium for mental health discourse in Nigeria.

One of the purposes of this study was to explore how Nigerian musicians use their platforms to raise awareness about mental health concerns and create empathy and understanding around these challenges. Participants agreed that Nigerian musicians have greatly contributed to mental health advocacy through their music. Artists like Niniola, Johnny Drille, Simi, and Brymo address mental health subjects such as addiction, loneliness, and self-reflection, offering audiences peace and encouraging them to seek support. This finding corresponds with research on the use of music as a therapeutic aid in mental health interventions. [Gebhardt et al. \(2013\)](#) assert that music therapy facilitates emotional expression, alleviates anxiety, and promotes self-awareness. Moreover, studies indicate that music featuring significant lyrics might positively influence mental health, prompting individuals to contemplate their particular challenges ([McFerran & Saarikallio, 2014](#); [Bhattacharya et al., 2023](#)). In Nigeria, a study by [Omole \(2023\)](#), substantiates the notion that popular music exerts a societal influence on public health practices, particularly mental health awareness.

Conversely, some critics contend that the influence of music on mental health awareness is frequently exaggerated, particularly in nations with restricted access to mental health treatments. [Oladeji et al. \(2022\)](#), posited that although music can enhance awareness, it may not lead to tangible changes without comprehensive structural reforms in healthcare. The credible rationale for this discovery resides in music's distinctive capacity to overcome obstacles and cultivate emotional bonds. Music facilitates creative expression and narrative, profoundly resonating with audiences ([Gonzalvo, 2023](#)). In a society that stigmatises mental health, music acts as a non-threatening medium to initiate discussions around mental well-being ([Animbom, 2023](#)). Musicians, as prominent personalities, wield influence, and their candidness regarding mental health issues can catalyse societal transformation.

Another purpose of the study was to evaluate how music can break down mental health stigma, especially in Nigeria, where the stigma around mental illness remains strong. The study revealed that music has been beneficial in breaking down mental health stigma by establishing safe spaces for individuals to engage with their feelings. Participants expressed that music humanises mental health struggles, helping listeners feel less isolated and more willing to seek help. The role of music in reducing stigma is well-documented. According to [Richards \(2023\)](#), exposure to narratives that humanise mental illness can reduce public stigma. Music, by its nature, can carry personal stories and emotions that make mental health challenges more relatable to the public ([Dingle et al., 2021](#); [Destiny Apuke et al., 2023](#)).

In line with this, research by [Skewes McFerran & Lotter \(2024\)](#) supports the notion that music can evoke empathy and understanding, which are key elements in reducing stigma around mental illness. However, some scholars, such as [Zhang & Zhao \(2024\)](#), argue that while music may increase awareness, it may not directly lead to reduced stigma if not accompanied by education and mental health literacy. Without structured efforts to dispel myths, the audience may not fully grasp the seriousness of mental health conditions. According to [Reynolds \(2023\)](#), the ability of music to evoke empathy is likely why it helps reduce mental health stigma. Through storytelling, musicians bring mental health issues into public discourse, framing these issues in a way that resonates emotionally ([Ficek, 2023](#)). In Nigeria, where mental illness is often misunderstood, music bridges the gap between personal experience and public perception, helping to foster a more compassionate understanding of mental health.

The study aimed to identify key themes conveyed through music that relate to mental health, particularly those promoting resilience, hope, and inclusivity. The study revealed that many Nigerian songs celebrate resilience and overcoming adversity, offering listeners messages of hope. Participants noted that musicians strive for inclusivity by representing diverse mental health experiences, ensuring that all voices are heard in the mental health discourse. The theme of resilience in music is widely supported in literature. Research by [Imara & Sihombing \(2023\)](#), highlights that music can enhance emotional resilience by providing listeners with examples of strength and perseverance. Similarly, a study by [Eseadi & Ngwu \(2023\)](#), showed that music therapy focusing on resilience can reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety.

On the flip side, some scholars, like [DeAngelis \(2020\)](#), question the effectiveness of music in promoting inclusivity, arguing that many mainstream songs reinforce stereotypical narratives that fail to address the complexities of mental health struggles. [Hernandez \(2023\)](#), claimed that while music promotes resilience, it may not adequately represent the subtle experiences of marginalised groups. Resilience and hope are natural themes in music, as they align with the emotional expression inherent in the medium. In a context like Nigeria, where mental health issues are often met with societal adversity, themes of overcoming struggles are particularly resonant. Musicians draw on their personal or societal experiences, which helps foster inclusivity, making listeners feel that their mental health struggles are acknowledged and respected ([Rodríguez-Gómez & Koldoris, 2022](#); [Fathayatih et al., 2022](#)).

The study also sought to understand whether music events and campaigns have led to changes in public attitudes and policies regarding mental health in Nigeria. Participants observed a positive shift in public attitudes toward mental health, with more people openly discussing their mental health struggles. Additionally, they noted that music events have inspired grassroots support groups and greater advocacy for mental health funding and policy changes. The power of public music events in shifting public attitudes is supported by [van der Hoeven & Hitters \(2023\)](#), who found that music festivals and campaigns can act as catalysts for social change. This is particularly true when artists partner with mental health organisations, as these collaborations can enhance the impact of awareness campaigns.

In Nigeria, [Wada et al. \(2021\)](#), found that music-led mental health campaigns have led to increased engagement with mental health services, particularly among youth. However, some critics, such as [Kamil \(2024\)](#), argue that while music events raise awareness, they rarely lead to substantial policy changes without coordinated governmental action. [Katerere-Virima \(2023\)](#), pointed out that grassroots efforts alone are insufficient to address the structural barriers to mental health care access in many African countries. The plausible explanation for this finding is that music events create highly visible platforms for dialogue, which help change public perceptions over time. By involving well-known musicians, these events can amplify messages and reach a wider audience, encouraging both individual reflection and societal action. Additionally, as these events gain momentum, they push mental health onto the political agenda, leading to increased advocacy for policy reforms ([Kasahara-Kiritani et al., 2018](#); [Simpson et al., 2021](#); [Hannigan & Coffey, 2011](#)).

Limitations of the Study

This study encountered some limitations that may affect the generalisability of its results. The sample size was limited, consisting of only seven individuals, which may not accurately reflect the larger population of artists, activists, and therapists engaged in mental health advocacy in Nigeria. The study predominantly utilised qualitative data, which, however profound in detail, may bring subjective biases stemming from individuals' own experiences and interpretations. A further disadvantage is the geographic emphasis, as the study predominantly encompassed individuals within specific professional networks, thus omitting varied perspectives from other locations or lesser-known industries. Ultimately, the cross-sectional approach constrained the evaluation of the enduring effects of music and activism on mental health awareness and policy reform.

4 Conclusion

This study examined the contributions of Nigerian musicians, activists, and therapists in promoting awareness of mental health concerns and dismantling the stigma associated with mental illness. The results indicate that music functions as a potent vehicle for mental health advocacy, facilitating emotional expression, narrative sharing, and social interaction. Nonetheless, whereas music has markedly heightened public awareness, it has been less effective in instigating policy changes absent coordinated political action. The themes of resilience, inclusion, and activism in Nigerian music enhance the greater mental health conversation but necessitate additional structural support for enduring change.

Recommendations

- 1) Collaboration between Musicians and Policymakers: To reconcile the disparity between awareness and policy reform, musicians and activists ought to engage more intimately with political entities and mental health organisations. This would increase the likelihood of converting public discourse into implementable policies.
- 2) Enhancement of Mental Health Campaigns: Future initiatives should incorporate a broader spectrum of musicians from all regions and genres to guarantee a more inclusive portrayal of mental health issues throughout Nigeria.
- 3) Longitudinal Studies: In order to comprehend the enduring effects of music and activism on mental health awareness and policy, subsequent studies should utilise longitudinal designs to monitor shifts in public perceptions, mental health services, and legislative advancements over time.
- 4) Incorporation of Mental Health in Educational Frameworks: Mental health awareness must be embedded within school curricula and public health initiatives to promote early comprehension and diminish stigma among youth.

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