



Analysis of Media Literacy as Catalyst to Promotion of Health Education among Nigerian Youth

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Abstract

The impact of media on health cannot be overemphasised and the ample time spent by youth using the media makes it imperative as a means to address health-related issues. The researchers, in undertaking this study, were keen to analyse the relationship between media literacy and health issues reported by the media. Theoretically hinged on the message interpretation process and health belief models, this conceptual study drew analyses from fields of health-promoting media literacy education, theoretical foundations, issues of pedagogical approach and measurement, and scholarly approaches for advancing the field of media literacy and health communication. Using the library research method, findings from extant literature established that population health and well-being are intimately tied and that empowerment education is an effective model for achieving health behavioural change. It was concluded that the ever-pressing need for members of the public to make conscious decisions about their health through media information, naturally necessitates media literacy in today's world and. It was therefore recommended among other things that while media literacy and health literacy will continually be inseparable concepts, health educators should implement intensive media literacy education as a health promotion strategy for outcome measures that best demonstrate effectiveness.

Keywords: Conceptual Analysis, Media Literacy, Catalyst, Promotion, Health Education.

Introduction

The concern for youth health has increased worldwide. Health behaviour patterns and conditions, according to Marx, Hudson, Benham, Pateman, and Middleton (2007), are established in adolescence, and persists into adulthood, so it comes as no surprise that adults have considerable difficulty adopting and adhering to healthy behaviours that are groomed during their earlier years. Expanding the frontiers of this submission, Daniel, Moore and Kestens (2007) purport that these radical population health trends have been attributed to substantive and unprecedented changes in our living conditions and circumstances so that the unhealthy choice is now the easiest and most tempting one. Much of the blame is accorded to the mass media because it is perceived as a mean through which society gets factual and relevant information aside from being a correctional tool to the society.

The mass media is ranked among the most used and important media among youths of today. From the early days of the town crier, growing in leaps and bounds to the use of various channels and means to disseminate information, sensitise, educate and enlighten the audience about issues within the milieu it operates, the media have become prolific and imperative in every communication sphere known to man. Bergsma (2011) espouses that the media is a socialising agent influencing health behaviours, estimating that youth spend 33-50% of their waking hours with some form of media; while some researchers estimate that youth spend 33– 50% of their waking hours with some form of mass media (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). Informed by these trends, the popular conventional media (television, radio, newspaper and magazines) present powerful words and images that undoubtedly influence youth learning about health until the significant entry of social media which became a game changer even in its scope acting in capacity of widening the range of media message delivery to audience.

In recent decades, health professionals have increasingly recognised that the media have a significant influence on the health of young people. According to Bergsma and Carney (2008), health professionals have employed many strategies to address the effects of media on health; regulating media content and social marketing among many others are approaches that have been used traditionally. Some studies have tried to examine the accessibility and utilisation of health related messages delivered through various array of media. In a study by Dina and Vaughn (2000, p. 94), adults go online for medical advice often more than they visit health professionals but find it difficult understanding health information on the web because it is often written at high reading levels. Expanding the frontiers of this submission, Manganello and Laura (2013) submit that in 2003, Hispanic adults (16 or older) had the greatest difficulty with health literacy with 41% having below basic health literacy skills. This study is compared to 25% of American Indians, 24% of African Americans, 13% of Asian/Pacific Islanders and 9% of white adults (Kutner, Greenberg, Jin & Paulsen 2006). In developing countries in Africa, media literacy has just scratched the surface with little work having been done so far in this field. The importance of media literacy is felt far and wide in the African States, with the recent cases of fake news and its ill effects on Nigerian society.

Statement of the Problem

The fundamental tenets of media literacy include the following: media messages can be deconstructed in order for viewers to develop a more critical understanding of its techniques; media messages are constructed and, crucially, shape our culture; media employ recognizable techniques related to their own particular "language." Media contain ideological messages and are embedded with values and points of view; and lastly, media contain ideological messages and can be seen as having ideological messages (Thoman & Jolls, 2004). Currently, states in developed countries have enumerated sets of standards for media literacy education, to introduce skills of media advocacy and organising for change. In Nigeria however, it is not recorded or to the knowledge of academia if there are any sets of standards put in place by the society or key social institutions and media bodies to help youth understand better media literacy and media language.

With studies in the area of health-promoting media literacy education and its effectiveness in its infancy, it becomes compelling to document the different contexts, processes and outcomes of health-focused media literacy education. Considering that these studies have been carried out with varying rigour and obtained different results, there are still many unanswered questions. According to Dennis (2004), despite research, policy and advocacy organisations, websites, and a movement mostly among educators, there is hardly any proof that health information literacy initiatives are widely used or successful. Upon this premise, this study is undertaken to analyse the place of media literacy in catalysing promotion of health education among Nigerian youth.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Ascertain existing health education and communication frameworks obtainable among youth in the Nigerian society.
2. Investigate a possible set of standards in place to help youth effectively interpret health education media messages.
3. Examine the effectiveness of media literacy initiatives among Nigerian youth.

Conceptualisation of Media Literacy

In most parts of the country, literacy is seen from the aspect of the ability to read and write. For a long time, this maxim has been the guide for differentiating between literate and illiterate. Therefore, literacy is a relative term and dynamic and it is a complex of language, thinking processes and skills, incorporating a range of habits, attitudes, interests and knowledge serving a range of purposes in different contexts. Whilst on a narrow definition, literacy can be explained as the process of teaching on a code which is why Keefe and Copeland (2011) purport that the definitions of literacy shape our perceptions of individuals who fall on either side of the standard (what a literate or non-literate is like) and thus in a deep way affect both the substance and style of educational programs and the way we view things.

The range of literacy definitions is typically from skill-based conceptions of functional literacy through to broad definitions and all definitions integrate social and political empowerment (Lo Bianco & Freebody, 2001). From a different perspective, Literacy according to Potter (2014) entails the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms. The submission of potter suggest that literacy is subjected to inquiry educative forms and encompassing student-centered learning. Going further, some research scholars in the field of literacy and media have conceptualised the term “literacy”. Literacy can no longer be simply defined in terms of reading, writing or numeracy nor can it be seen as an end in itself (UNESCO, 2004). The rapid changes in science and technology in the past 10 years suggest that people must be able to adapt continually to developments in science, technology and to the pressures of social integration, participation and democratisation. This indicates that the world is more visual than before so that understanding images is just as important as understanding words, consequently more skills are demanded. Albeit, in meeting the needs of the society, literacy remains a tool of learning throughout life. A recent study of literacy, conducted by Millis, Kennedy, Martin & Siansbury (2006, p.3) explained reading literacy as the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and valued by the individual. Young readers can construct meaning from a variety of texts. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment.

Media literacy has become a rapidly increasing concept from the 2000s. It has been the theme of many research types and has been covered by many academics and educational institutions. It is shown among the qualifications sought in the personnel to be recruited by some institutions. Committees have been established for this purpose in universities, and the people and associations carrying out the studies have brought new definitions to the literature. It is possible to collect these definitions under the headings

of descriptions explaining the concept of media literacy or a media literate individual's characteristic. The concept of media literacy has been associated with quality of life, citizenship rights, social integration, and social acceptance. Besides, media literacy is expressed as obtaining information from the media (television, radio, newspaper, Internet) and critically evaluating the received data (Horton, 2008).

According to Carlsson (2019, p.38), “media literacy appears to have been coined in 1955 by Professor Louis Forsdale in a call for helping our students gain necessary multi-media literacy.” Albeit the term did not gain much traction at the time until the end of the century with a general broadening of the concept of literacy. Media literacy is a term with different meanings to different scholars, educators, citizen activists, and the general public. Smiler (2014), while attempting to explain media literacy, espoused that “at the most basic and broadest level, media literacy refers to the ability to understand the content of any medium, at the surface level, it refers to the direct or manifest message being transmitted; while deeper levels address a broad variety of other messages that may range from traditional storytelling devices such as foreshadowing and allusion to more modern questions such as who is telling this story and what (or who) has been left out?.” In the same vein, definitions of media literacy range far and wide, but common attributes include the ability to access, evaluate, analyse, assess, comprehend, review, critique, and produce information from a variety of media. While, UNESCO (2004, p.13) purports that media literacy involves the continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential and to participate fully in a wider society. Daley (2003), submits that in a media-saturated society, the definition of literacy, which traditionally focused on reading and writing text, must be expanded to include the full range of media. In the same vein, media literacy is a “fundamental competency for literate citizens which empowers citizens to actively engage with media messages and fully participate in media culture” (Jenkins, 2006). Simply put, media literacy is a distinctive set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the mass media to process and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter. These perspectives are built on knowledge structures, skills and individual willingness. In the view of this, Lemish (2015, p. 198) purports that “media literacy was expected to struggle with vast and complicated social issues.”

The media is perceived to be the cause of society's troubles by exposing viewers and readers to issues in the same society, with education for media literacy as the solution. This is based on a reasoned submission that the mass media have the potential to exert a wide range of potentially negative effects on individuals. A corollary of this idea is that the media also offer a range of potentially positive effects. Often, when dealing with media issues or topics, we can sometimes be intimidated by the complex technological and institutional structures that dominate our media culture. We can feel powerless against the psychological sophistication of advertising messages and pop culture icons (Center for Media Literacy, 2003, p.19); this is because with the rapid advance of communication technologies, and societal changes, media literacy gradually has become a matter of public policy, more often being conceived of as a goal-oriented process, whereby children and young people, adults, are taught and trained to develop their knowledge, cultural awareness and skills relating to media and media culture.

Global Implications of Social Effect(s) of Media Literacy and Health Education on Youth

Global recognition of media literacy cannot be overemphasised. At the educational level, media literacy initiatives are premised on enlightening youth on critical media message consumption, from how the media shapes messages to the increasing pervasiveness of media advertisements. According to Mihailidis (2009, p.4) in his report, “few would argue with the need to offer youth effective educational platforms to help them understand the role of information in an increasingly hyper media age.” The youth we have now spend more time using one or more of the media for different reasons and are exposed to thousands or millions of media messages daily. This is because of the increasingly connected world and the availability of arrays of media.

With media literacy growing rapidly globally, its lack of unified framework and approach has kept its margins under educational radar in both developed and developing countries. Media literacy courses in schools can teach students to value access to information and work to develop students' critical capacities in comprehension, analysis and evaluation. This education initiative is used to convince youth on how important it is for citizens to actively engage and contribute to both traditional and alternative forms of media. This is why Smiler (2014, p3) highlighted three questions to better understand media literacy, as to educate youth to know the type of media they interact with:

1. Who created this message? (Concept: All messages are constructed)
2. What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message? (Concept: Media presents some lifestyles, values, and perspectives while omitting others)
3. Why is this message being sent? (Concept: Most media are designed to gain profit or power).

Corroborating Smiler's idea, Buckingham (2017) suggests that to develop media literacy among the youth, there is a need to develop a degree of competence which depends on three factors: Cognitive level, Emotional and Social Development on a whole. The youth's knowledge of the world and specific media experiences also plays an important role. In a study conducted by Sachdeva and Tripathi (2019, p.68) it was found that youngsters who have no basic information about media literacy are more easily trapped in inaccurate and false information and consider them to be true.

It is noteworthy that information literacy is associated with all of life and other literacy areas, and its benefits are highlighted (Yilmaz, 2020). A good example is the definition made in the final declaration of the international information literacy meeting held in Alexandria in 2005. According to the description mentioned above, information literacy is the ability to search, evaluate, use and create information in all areas of life to enable individuals to achieve their personal, social, professional and educational goals. It is stated that this literacy is a necessary condition for participatory citizenship, social acceptance, new knowledge production, personal and corporate development, and lifelong learning (Bundy, 2004).

Empirical Studies

Buckingham (2019) carried out a study in which he examined fake news, disinformation and digital literacy. The researcher opined that "the technological dimension (digital or analogue) is irrelevant and instead, we should be talking about media literacy, not digital literacy. As communication technologies shift from analog to electronic to digital contexts, the term digital literacy (or digital literacies) emerges in congruence with research about the tools, texts and social practices needed to connect media literacy and Big Data practices. The distinction between the terms "media literacy" and "digital literacy" invokes Marshall McLuhan's phrase "the medium is the message" (1964) and subsequent debates about technological determinism in media and communication studies. In contrast, Nichols & Stornaiuolo (2019) in their work titled "Assembling digital literacies: Contingent pasts, possible futures" argued that the term "digital literacy" provides a useful convergence of media, information and computer literacy concepts that can connect communication technologies with their social uses. They identify concepts that explain digital literacy practices as "the way that users (e.g. individuals, groups, communities) leverage technologies (e.g., computers, software, mobile devices) to consume or produce content (e.g., textual, visual, multimedia artifacts) in digital contexts". Nonetheless, in their review of definitions, the researchers recognise that conceptualising literacy is a work in progress and call for the need for flexible theories, pedagogies, and methodologies. The researchers go further to propose connecting digital literacy and media literacy concepts by focusing on historical, economic and technical theories with "an emphasis that aligns with social practice approaches to digital literacies that were also part of earlier traditions in media education.

Horton (2008) conducted a study entitled "Understanding information literacy: A primer" and emphasised that literacy skills, which are seen as indispensable for the 21st century, are grouped in six groups: information literacy, media literacy, computer literacy, functional literacy, cultural literacy,

distance education, and e-learning literacy, and that these literacies partially overlap with each other but complement each other is indicated. The concept of media literacy, which is one of these literacy skills, is generally defined with two approaches. It is emphasised that the difference in process is due to the use of the English word media in two different meanings, such as “media” and “media”. In the first approach, media literacy is defined as obtaining information from media such as television, radio, newspapers, and the Internet, and critically evaluating it (Bawden, 2001). The second approach is defined as the ability to understand and use the environments in which information is produced, stored, and transmitted and media types such as text, graphics, newspaper, radio, television broadcast, CD, and DVD (Yılmaz, 2020). In both definitions, it is seen that there is a close relationship between media literacy and other forms of literacy. However, media literacy which is part of information literacy, is somewhat more limited in scope. Information literacy naturally includes media literacy, as it consists of the skills of accessing, using, and critically evaluating all kinds of information.

Aydemir and Erdamar (2018) in their study titled “Thematic analysis of studies in the field of media literacy education” revealed that the examined studies focused on the media literacy course and media literacy level themes. Adopting the survey model and quantitative data analysis methods, it was observed that including media literacy education in education faculties, making media literacy courses compulsory at secondary school, and teachers receiving in-service training are the prominent suggestions in the studies. In addition, the researchers submitted that these new types of literacy, which emerged due to developing technology and living conditions, have become a part of social life. Considering that education aims to transfer the knowledge taught at school to life, it is possible to conclude that the literacy types mentioned here should be used effectively in other lessons. For the sake of this study, the researchers think that in training other branch teachers, especially during undergraduate education which is mostly for youth, attention should be paid to courses on the media literacy discourse.

Masterman (2001) in a study on “A rationale for media education: Media literacy in the information Age” suggested that the optional media literacy course should be given early, not at an advanced age. Children’s media interests begins before school age and continues through teenagehood and all through their youthful years, until the end of their lives. Masterman buttresses that media education that is given without realising this fact fails, and it is necessary to provide both an entertaining and educational experience for media education to continue after school.

Theoretical Framework

The study is hinged on the Message Interpretation Process Model and the Media System Dependency Theory. The Message Interpretation Process Model (MIPM) is believed to be an offshoot of social cognitive theory, expectancy theory and the dual-process theories of attitude change. The message interpretation process model is a model that tracks media effects from an information processing perspective. The Media Interpretation model posits that media message processing is comprised of logical analysis in which a person compares the message to their perceptions and personal experiences, and one’s affective reactions to the message. Specifically, the model specifies that the perceived similarity of media portrayals to self, the perceived realism of media portrayals, and the desirability of media portrayals contribute to the level of identification with the media message (Scull & Kupersmidt, 2017). The level of identification with the media message predicts then positive or negative response as expectancies as regard to the behavioural choices. Message interpretation model has been used primarily as a framework for understanding how media literacy interventions, which aim to decrease perceived realism, similarity, and desirability of unhealthy media messages (Pinkleton, Austin, Cohen, & Fitzgerald, 2008). If implemented or applied to health communication in developing countries can reduce the influence of media on youth’s health outcomes. According to this model, perceived desirability captures an emotional response to a media message and is conceptualised as one’s liking or enjoyment of the characters, storyline, or other elements of a media message. This implies that the young portion of the Nigerian audience’s acceptability of the theme of an information or health message has a long way in accepting the message and behaving

accordingly. The logical and emotional constructs contribute to the level of identification with the portrayal, product, or behaviour in the media message. Higher levels of identification predict more positive expectancies, and in turn, impact actual behaviours.

The second theory employed to guide this study is the Health Belief Model (HBM). This model is another widely researched model of health behaviour (Hochbaum, Rosenstock & Kegell, 2016). The HBM attempts to predict health-related behaviour in terms of certain belief patterns. This theory provides that a person's motivation to undertake a health behaviour can be divided into three categories: individual perceptions, modifying factors and likelihood of action. Individual perceptions are factors that affect the perception of illness and with the importance of health to the individual, perceived susceptibility and perceived severity. Modifying factors include demographic variables, perceived threat and perceived severity. The likelihood of action is the perceived benefits minus the perceived barriers of taking the recommended health action. The combination of these factors causes a response that often manifests into the likelihood of that behaviour occurring (Hochbaum, Rosenstock & Kegell, 2016). Hence, according to this model, an individual's decision to engage in a health behaviour is based on his perceptions. Therefore, by changing his perception, one can get him to adopt a new behaviour. Going further, the model postulates that a person takes a healthcare decision based on factors which include perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers, health value and cues to action. In addition to the six factors that influence making a healthcare decision, various demographic factors like age, sex, race, social class, education, employment status, knowledge and experience play a role in how an individual perceives the urgency of taking appropriate action to deal with his health education.

The stringent principles of this model align with the researchers' quest to conceptually analyse the underlying synergy between media literacy and promotion of health education messages and programmes among Nigerian youth.

Methodology

The researchers relied primarily on secondary sources of data such as models, usage areas and other literacy studies to reach a substantive conclusion in this paper. This entailed the adoption of the library research method, and consulting empirical and theoretical studies from other researchers and scholars in the fields of educational broadcasting, mass media and digital technology studies. Analysis was hinged on contextual and exploratory studies derived from extant literature which comprised academic journals, textbooks, and other referenced online materials.

Analysis from a Contextual Review of Media Literacy, eHealth Literacy and the Role of the Social Environment

Existing health education and communication frameworks obtainable among Youth

Diane & Isabella (2018) espoused that several factors have contributed and metamorphosed to the development of health systems, allowing users to adopt much more active roles in their health management than the customary process. This empowerment has enabled groups and individuals power to take charge of their own health. For example, sharing health decision-making with professionals or by adopting a health-promotion lifestyle in the 21st century is as important and a priority in public health sector. Diane and Isabella admit that in an increasingly media saturated environment, a large portion of health-related messages are circulated daily and accessed through the various arrays of media or digital sources. Thus, this led researchers and health practitioners to develop the two closely related but nonetheless distinct concepts related – “media literacy” and “health literacy.”

A definition of health literacy in a regular context says people are health literate when “the skills and ability of those requiring health information and services are aligned with the demand and complexity

of information and services” (Parker & Ratzan, 2010, p. 28). Expanding the frontiers of this submission, health literacy is a set of skills employed in organizing and applying health knowledge, attitudes and practices that are relevant when managing one’s health environs. Corroborating this, Onome (2020) purports that functional health literacy is defined as an individual’s capacity to obtain process and understand basic health information services and competence to use such information and services in ways to enhance health. Whilst Femi & Oyinade (2017) submits that health literacy relates to the possession of knowledge about health, needing a skill-based process that individuals use to identify and transform information to knowledge.

Youth Effectiveness in Interpreting Health Education Media Messages

It is worthy of note that the exclusion of functional health literacy has a drastic consequence on the well-being of youth. This exclusion to Onome (2020) is seen as a product of social, cultural, and political conditions rather than educational ones. In the world at large, poor health literacy among adults is of greater concern due to their often use and increasing need for health information and services to maintain a healthy life. Therefore, poor health literacy can lead to poor medication, self-medication without prescriptions, abuse of drugs, ignorance to preventive health services and increase risk of overall mortality. Therefore, for active participation in health literacy in a society, Dutt & Manjula (2017) stressed the ability to read, write and operate with numbers; while World Bank Research (2012) giving strength to Dutt’s submission, underpins that poor reading and writing skills make people susceptible to poverty and social exclusion.

The concept of Media Health Literacy is unique in that it takes into consideration not only information that has been communicated through the media to offer health guidance; but it also considers implicit and explicit mass media content commonly generated by commercial entities or health systems that can be either health-promoting or health-compromising. While media in general has long since been recognised as the only social institution that accompanies the individual throughout the entire life course, over the past decade, digital media has received particular attention with regards to use for health purposes.

Effectiveness of Media Literacy Initiatives among Nigerian Youth.

The presence and placement of media literacy initiatives among young Nigerian citizens continues to be an area of debate and interest. Media literacy education is not simply addressing “fake news” or teaching skills in using information and communication technologies. Certainly, those areas are a part of media literacy, but media literacy education comprises a broader, critical field of study and cross-disciplinary pedagogy anchored in cultivating critical thinking and reflective habits of mind about the messages we receive and create. The Nigerian media landscape, and especially the digital media also known as social media, constitute a complex social interactive environment to navigate by users in order to promote and maintain healthy choices using the information available in this milieu. Therefore, tasks related to Media and eHealth Literacy are thus by no means trivial. When media literacy definitions, models, standards, and other literacy areas related to media literacy are examined, it is seen that the concept of media literacy depends on knowledge skills, breadth of vision, and field of education. Also, it is seen that it is a concept that encompasses many features from human rights to lifelong learning in all areas of life, including personal, social, and cultural.

Conclusion

Today, media literacy has become an essential role in participation in society as a citizen. Building a healthy structure for people to be informed through the media naturally necessitates media literacy in today’s world where new communication technologies are dominant. From review of relevant literature, there is a cogent

nexus between media literacy and eHealth literacy, and the rapid development of media technologies and the fact that they have a place in every aspect of life make media literacy necessary. For young Nigerians, the media-mediated production of social life and economic, political, and cultural life increases the importance of literacy skills even more. In light of the conclusion, the following are recommended:

1. The ever-pressing need for members of the public to make conscious decisions about their health through media information, naturally necessitates media literacy in today's world.
2. Health educators should implement intensive media literacy education as a health promotion strategy for outcome measures that best demonstrate effectiveness.
3. For social communication to continue as a bridge between generations and for young individuals to use technology easily for health information and other education needs when necessary, they should be equipped with modern literacy skills. For this, as in many developing countries of the world like Nigeria, there should be courses in health media literacy and general communication skills included in the curricula.

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