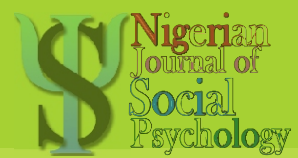


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# After the Coverage Comes the Damage: Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 Reportage on the Mental Health of Nigerian Journalists

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## Abstract

While several researches have focused on the mental health of first responders, the mental health of journalists that risked their lives to update the public as the pandemic unfolded has remained under-explored, particularly from the African/Nigerian perspective. It is against this backdrop that this study examines the mental health ‘damages’ that Nigerian journalists faced during the pandemic. Data were generated using Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted with 13 Nigerian journalists who reported extensively on the pandemic. Findings suggest that the digital disruption of the usual journalistic routines during the pandemic affected the mental health of the journalists. Participants said they lacked sufficient personal protective gears and this exposed them to the virus as some eventually contracted COVID-19. They faced *corofrontation* and lacked effective support systems, as some resorted to self-care in managing their mental health during the coverage. Ensuring adequate support systems and resources for journalists are therefore, crucial not only during pandemics but also in building a stronger and more resilient journalism industry for the future.

**Keywords:** *Mental Health, COVID-19, Nigerian Journalists, Pandemic Coverage, Stress, Fear*

## Introduction

Journalism practice is not new to crisis. As a matter of fact, journalism thrives during crisis (Ogbodo et al., 2020; Ogbodo, 2018). Journalists have demonstrated repeatedly that they can navigate difficult terrains and brave the odds to get any type of news out in order to satisfy the informational needs of the masses (Seib, 2021). If they waste a little time, fake news purveyors may exploit the vacuum to spread misinformation which risks endangering the public (Kozyreva, Lewandowsky & Hertwig, 2020). Yet, some events can be more challenging than others. The COVID-19 pandemic may be situated within the context of a disruptor or the more challenging event, which significantly altered the routine work flow that reporters were accustomed to. As a disruptor, COVID-19 disordered the existing news-making norms and pushed journalists to the edge with limited time to adjust (Zhao et al., 2023).

During the onset of COVID-19, journalists from various media organisations typically hurried to be the first to break the news as the pandemic unfolded. Within a short time, the unprecedented nature of the pandemic overwhelmed them, particularly when lockdowns became one of the global measures to contain its spread (Ndlela, 2023). This altered the long-established journalistic routines and norms as some news outfits either transitioned to virtual operations, shut down indefinitely or remained partially open to keep the public informed as the pandemic evolved (Guerra & Piazza, 2022). This marked the beginning of the transition to digital technologies as some journalists operated from home where they constantly navigated dealing with children’s homeschooling next to them and interviewing their sources to be able to feed the public (Tandoc et al., 2022).

This added to the stress and mental trauma that the pandemic brought with it. The transition to digital reporting was not a smooth one as many Nigerian journalists did not have prior knowledge of the use of these technologies. They had to figure out how to start doing a new form of journalism in ways they were not accustomed to. This eventually led to retrenchment of some journalists who could not adjust to the new trend, and increased their fear, which affected their mental wellbeing as demonstrated in the results of this study.

Indeed, Mache and Harth (2020) had earlier suggested that technological advancements and the demands that go along with them have a tendency to significantly affect staff wellness and raise stress levels. For this reason, it is crucial to pay more attention to how journalists navigated this stressful period of their practice, especially in the context of how rapid technological transformation which altered the usual journalistic norms affected their mental health challenges during the pandemic. More precisely, researchers have called for more scholarship to deconstruct how changes in journalistic routines help to offer a more profound interpretation of stress in press during a pandemic or unprepared shifts in news-making routines (Ndlovu & Sibanda, 2022; Evans, 2016).

During health emergencies, journalists play a central role as information intermediaries, providing updates, debunking misinformation, and holding authorities accountable. They function as a bridge between experts, policymakers, and the public, translating scientific jargon into accessible language (Valdeón, 2018; Luzón, 2013). Crisis coverage has formed a substantial subject of journalism scholarships for several years, mainly in relation to specific events such as wars or terrorism (Konow Lund & Olsson, 2016). While the greater chunk of this research revolves around armed conflicts and events linked to terrorism, some of the key findings might help to interpret the experiences and performance of journalists in the coverage of coronavirus disease. Nevertheless, there are some limitations to applying the observed patterns of reporting armed conflicts and terrorist attacks to the COVID-19 crisis or what the German virologist, Christian Drosten was quoted as describing as a “natural disaster in slow-motion” (Quandt et al., 2020). Although the pandemic evolved over a longer period, both the public and the media had no time to prepare for an event of that magnitude. Yet, anticipating the unexpected is, to a great extent, an essential part of journalism practice (Michael Ryfe, 2006).

According to earlier research on reporters and unexpected crises, there are several elements unique to the journalistic task that may raise the likelihood of psychological damage as a result of trauma (Monteiro et al., 2016). Research further suggests that the degree of stress experienced during an assignment—such as seeing several graphic details or speaking with multiple distraught victims may increase the likelihood of developing further issues after the coverage (MacDonald et al., 2023; Backholm & Idås, 2022). Additionally, research has demonstrated that reporters can become more susceptible to mental health issues if they share any close affinity with any of the victims of mass shooting incidents (Backholm & Björkqvist, 2012). This study has extended this line of inquiry using the COVID-19 context. The trauma of interviewing news sources who may have been infected by the virus may replicate the above scenarios. As frontline workers, journalists were sometimes operating from hospitals and other designated centres where many of the COVID-19 patients were kept. This practice exposed them to the risks of being infected with the virus. In addition to being infected witnessing the conditions of the victims and the fear of being infected traumatized them.

Thus, this paper investigates the impact of COVID-19 reportage on journalists’ mental

health and coping mechanisms in Nigeria. Some scholars have often argued that mental health is the absence of mental problems (see Keyes, 2005). While this definition is not disputed, it appears narrow. As such, this study broadly contextualizes it as an overall state of wellness whereby an individual recognizes his/her own potential, is able to manage everyday stressors, works effectively, and contributes to society. It can be socially or culturally constructed because what constitutes mental health for one person may not be considered the same by another (Olafsdottir, 2013). Journalists interviewed for this study acknowledged that their mental health was impacted by the extensive and demanding coverage of the pandemic.

### ***Positions of Extant Studies***

The health and safety of news reporters are crucial not only for the greater interest of the general public but also for the health of the nation. During the Ebola crisis in parts of Africa, journalists also found themselves in such excruciating conditions where they braved all odds to update us on the real-time dynamics of the virus, especially in Liberia (Allgaier & Svalastog, 2015). Even though they were under severe stress and at high risk of infection, journalists discharged their responsibilities, helping to save millions of lives through regular sensitization campaigns and coverage of the epidemic (Allgaier & Svalastog, 2015).

During health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists who try to perform this role may often be seen to have overstepped their limit thereby being perceived as irritants to those in power who often want the stories told in their favour for political gains. The COVID-19 crisis caught the media unprepared. This attests to why the coverage during the early stage of the pandemic was scarce (Boberg et al., 2004). The coverage only spiked when it became obvious that the virus had exploded in many countries and following its exponential spread, journalism and media switched to 'crisis mode' (Boberg et al., 2004). In view of their commitment to providing important healthcare news about the pandemic, journalists have asserted their importance as 'healthcare workers' during pandemic (Ogbodo et al., 2020; Onwe et al., 2020; Nwakpu et al., 2020). Yet, journalists' mental health during crisis is rarely taken seriously.

Commenting on journalists' safety on the frontline of coronavirus, Shilpa et al. (2023) note that reporters covering the COVID-19 pandemic should be trauma-literate. The scholars maintain that the knowledge of trauma would help to protect the reporters, but the urgent nature of the pandemic caught journalists unaware. Journalists were urged to "work remotely" instead of jeopardizing their safety, especially if they were not provided with enough personal protective equipment (PPE). Thus, "The important thing is equipment, such as masks, gloves and other protection. This is the responsibility of the news organization" (Ricchiardi, 2020, n.p). As previously argued, the Nigerian case scenario makes it difficult to truly work from home. So, urging journalists to work remotely may not necessarily be feasible in most Nigerian media settings where Internet access is still a luxury. Navigating through a difficult period even with safety concerns to get real-time information or updates about the virus makes media workers, especially the reporters, important frontline warriors whose experiences cannot be undermined.

From the foregoing, it can be argued that when disasters interrupt the news-collecting procedures, journalists may suffer from severe mental health challenges. While research has usually focused on PTSD after exposure to crisis coverage notably during wars and

disasters from the Global North scholars (e.g. Feinstein, Owen & Blair, 2002; Backholm; 2012), an Afrocentric perspective to this discourse is sparse. More uncertain is how Nigeria's underlying socio- psychological attributes might help to expand scholarship in media workers' mental health during a pandemic. Thus, an empirical spotlight on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Nigerian media workers is warranted. Against this backdrop, this study is guided by the following *research questions*:

- How did a shift from the traditional to digital news-making and distribution routines affect the mental health of Nigerian journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What were the major challenges faced by Nigerian journalists covering the pandemic, and how did these impact their mental health?
- What available supports were in place to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of Nigerian journalists?

### ***Theoretical Underpinning: The Transactional Model of Stress***

This study is underpinned by the Transactional Model of Stress (TMS). The model provides the lens through which the mental health of Nigerian journalists who covered the COVID- 19 pandemic could be interpreted. According to the concept, stress results from interactions between a person and his/her surroundings (Yan et al., 2021). TMS incorporates coping methods that may be either problem-oriented or focusing on emotions, depending on whether the goal is to alter the challenging scenario or control its psychological effect, as it focuses on the evaluation process essential to people's reactions to stress (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2024).

Researchers maintain that TMS is helpful for examining how journalists perceive pandemic stresses and their chosen reactions, even though the model's focus on people's experiences of stress is criticized by recognizing the significance of external variables, particularly the ability of employers to reduce stress by putting adequate resources in place (Tandoc et al., 2022). For clarity and how it relates to the pandemic discourse, this theory could be contextualized and condensed into four main ideas as espoused by Laugaa et al. (2008). Firstly, stress is seen as requiring different methods of assessments and coping mechanisms. Secondly, the model explains how people's assessment of, and reaction to stress could be shaped by social dynamics. Thirdly, TMS draws attention to numerous kinds of resources that people can benefit from as coping strategies during such stressful events. Last but not least, the framework normalizes the function of peripheral actors such as family members and colleagues in lessening the impact of stress. These ideas can be employed to evaluate the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of journalists who covered it.

## **Material and Methods**

### ***Study design and participants***

This is a qualitative research conducted through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Journalists were interviewed remotely using both purposive and snowball sampling techniques. A total of 13 journalists participated in the interviews. While three of the journalists who participated in the interviews were already known to the author, the rest were approached through the recommendations of the known participants (that is, via snowball sampling). To ensure diversity in the participants, their variation in years of practice, region of practice, genre of medium of practice, and gender were all considered. Ultimately, only those that reported extensively on the pandemic were included in the

study.

S/N	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Years of Reportorial experience	Month of first encounter with patients
Reporter1	45	Male	Married	15	March 2020
Reporter2	56	Male	Divorced	22	March 2020
Reporter3	41	Female	Married	07	April 2020
Reporter4	61	Male	Married	30	March 2020
Reporter5	44	Female	Married	10	March 2020
Reporter6	48	Male	Married	13	March 2020
Reporter7	39	Male	Married	13	March 2020
Reporter8	43	Male	Married	06	March 2020
Reporter9	33	Female	Single	04	April 2020
Reporter10	44	Female	Married	14	April 2020
Reporter11	37	Female	Married	07	March 2020
Reporter12	58	Male	Married	23	March 2020
Reporter13	42	Female	Married	13	March 2020

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants

### Procedures

Key Informant Interviews were conducted between 2nd April and 27<sup>th</sup> April, 2023. This period is vital because it marked the penultimate month before WHO declared the end of the emergency stage of the pandemic. While 10 of the interviews were conducted *ex-situ*, the rest were conducted *in situ*. With the consent of the participants, all interviews were audio-recorded. Details such as age, duration of reportorial experience, their first period of reporting the coronavirus news, and the frequency with which they reported about COVID-19 were also elicited from each of the interviewees before each session commenced. The broad questions asked each of the participants were: “Please tell me about your experiences of reporting the COVID-19 pandemic. How did you adjust to the new form of journalism ushered in by the pandemic?” This preceded some follow-up questions that were more specific and were intended to gain thorough descriptions. For instance, participants were asked: “How did you feel on the very first day you witnessed coronavirus patients?”; “Do you still feel like that now?”; “How did a shift from the normal journalistic routines affect your mental health during the onset of the pandemic?”; “What major challenges did you encounter in the course of sourcing information and reporting about the pandemic?”; “How did you cope with all the challenges?”; “Talk to me specifically about your mental wellbeing in relations to the coverage of the pandemic”. Probing question like “could you please tell me more about ...” was also used to dig deeper into the conversation. After the data collection, analysis was done using Thematic Analysis.

### Ethical concern

The study adhered strictly to the ethical standard of Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria. As such, approval for this study was secured from the Ethical Committee of the Department of Mass Communication with the number (EBSU/MAC/EC/23/011). Ahead of the interviews, I took my time to briefly highlight the objectives of the study and an oral consent was obtained from each participant before the interview. To ensure confidentiality, I used numbers instead of names (eg, Reporter1, Reporter2) etc. Also, all identifying information was expunged from the transcripts. After transcribing the audio recordings, the transcripts were encrypted and further saved in a password-protected

desktop.

## Results

**The results of this study are arranged into three main themes to address the research questions that guided this inquiry.**

### *Theme 1: Change in Journalism Routines and Mental Health of COVID-19 Reporters*

Everyone including media workers saw their life altered by the pandemic. With these alterations also came mental health challenges. Even after it ended, some people have made wearing face masks a habit. As a result, less is understood regarding the transition caused by digital disruptions to known journalistic routines on the mental health of reporters who covered the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation was particularly more difficult for Nigerian journalists who faced difficult working conditions even before the outbreak of the pandemic. Thus, “Nigerian journalism was already on life-support before the emergence of COVID-19...the pandemic added salt to our injuries” (Reporter2).

Similarly, Reporter5 also notes that “we were taken unawares... it’s my first time of being a health reporter. I was usually assigned to cover judiciary matters... I wasn’t prepared for all that but my editor asked me to switch. All of us became science journalists by default... I used to write my story on paper and then submit it to the editor, but because of restrictions, we had to use phones to do most of our jobs. I struggled to adjust, to be honest. I don’t know how to type fast. It wasn’t easy, to be honest... I still feel goosebumps when I remember the peak of that pandemic”.

Similarly, Reporter6 said “we’re not used to Zoom meetings. It suddenly became the norm. For me, that represents a shift. It was an uncharted territory for us. All the usual body language we see and probe in physical interviews was lacking. Worse still, internet access made this technology difficult to use as we often cancel interviews due to poor connectivity...We relied mainly on secondary sources to run our news which makes it hard to ascertain the credibility of some of those sources”. A similar picture was also painted by another participant who said “normally, I go to my beat, I knew my sources. Then boom! COVID-19 happened to us. Suddenly, everything seemed distant and more difficult. Interviews shifted to phone calls and zoom with bad network, and the usual physical connection—the foundation of journalism—felt abnormal (Reporter9). Also, one of the participants notes that “dealing with all these new normal was mentally exhausting. On top of that, there was acute food shortage, and markets and workplaces were closed due to lockdown. This led to loss of livelihoods. Yet, people's lives depended on the information we provided which was sometimes contradictory and terrifying. I felt tremendous burden to be correct, truthful, and as responsible as possible” (Reporter11).

As Reporter6 earlier suggested, journalists were on entirely new ground while navigating the coverage. They were also abiding by the same guidelines or safety protocols imposed on the general population (AlAashry, 2022). Some media organizations were eventually closed, which caused problems for management and reporters in communicating. Indeed, a previous study has also demonstrated that journalists were compelled to source their stories online and notably through Zoom technology and phone as they were not allowed to go to the field (García-Avilés, 2021). Since many of their usual sources also faced similar restrictions, this period created logistical challenges. To safeguard themselves and news sources in rare cases of physical interviews, reporters had to keep a distance of at least two meters apart from their interviewees. As such, journalists may experience severe stress if their news sourcing habits are disrupted, as they were during COVID-19. Early



research on newsroom convergence, for instance, revealed that journalists were under a great deal of stress when required to provide content for novel platforms (Ivask, 2017). In another related instance, print journalists are now expected to collect videos for articles. Indeed, Robinson (2011) reinforced the ‘convergent crisis’, noting that print reporters had higher stress and strain at work when they switched from practices that were primarily focused on getting news for print to ones that were more centered on the internet. Changing the usual news sourcing routine from "beat" to a more "teams"-oriented strategy significantly raised stress among reporters (Dean, 2016).

From the foregoing, it could be argued that although the transition was swift, it was not smooth and it affected the mental wellbeing of the journalists. While the media are essential for disseminating information, interpreting complex data, defining agendas, and influencing public opinion during health crisis (Zhao et al., 2023), the role of the media in reporting crises is frequently interrogated; coverage is typically condemned for being too dramatic, ambiguous, and frantic (Scanlon, 2011).

As the COVID-19 outbreak unfolded, the continuous news streaming became overwhelming, leading to ‘infodemic’ (Medford et al., 2020). The concept of *infodemic* represents both the excess flow of pandemic information and the spreading of fake news about it. Indeed, Reporter4 also notes that “The deluge of fake news was perhaps the largest obstacle that confronted us. It was a never-ending struggle to outpace the influx of fake news on the internet. Everyone was frightened, and any news could be soothing or adding to their worries, and they were clinging to any story, no matter how utterly baseless. Fighting it and attempting to challenge the spread was as draining as it was frequently depressing” (Reporter11).

Corroborating the above view, another participant notes that “social media made our job cumbersome. Information was flying in from everywhere. We have no common narratives. Sometimes, COVID-19 fake news propagated on social media platforms made our job extremely difficult. People doubted the genuine news because of the influx of fake news that made its way faster to the online users” (Reporter2). Reporter12 also claimed that “I was overwhelmed by the amount of anguish I saw every day, even from a distance. I was monitoring how hospitals were overcrowded, and the news of an entire family lost to the virus and misinformation spreading uncontrollably. I felt a moral burden to help, but how much help could I render other than reporting what is right? It was draining to be exposed to trauma all the time, even indirectly. It was hard to sleep. I had nightmares almost every night throughout the peak period, and sometimes it felt like the doomsday was already here”. This view is akin to that of Reporter7, who notes that “After reporting these stories, sometimes, the thoughts keep coming back. They haunt my feelings, and I believe it affected my colleagues too”.

Indeed, journalists covering the coronavirus pandemic also faced regular challenges that affected their families. For instance, Ricchiardi (2020, n.p.) notes that “we all are in the same storm, but not necessarily in the same boat. We experience this in different ways. Journalists that are losing their jobs are experiencing a whole different realm of issues compared to those still working as staffers. There is high concern for family and infecting other people. You never know when you’re going to get this and pass it on. There’s much higher rates of distress, of anxiety, depression than I’ve seen before, when journalists reported on other traumatic events.” This further explains the dangers of working as a reporter on the frontline. As one of the participants said, “It [the pandemic] was really



worrisome. I was seriously concerned that I would get infected with the virus and spread it to members of my family. The so-called personal protective equipment and testing that journalists in other countries enjoyed were not available to many of us here” (Reporter1).

Solitude was also a serious factor that affected the mental health of Nigerian journalists during the pandemic. For instance, Reporter13 said that “I was also affected by the absence of face-to-face interactions with my colleagues in the office. We frequently turned to one another for encouragement, ideas, and simply to talk about anything, including hanging out sometimes in the late evening after work... That feeling of camaraderie wasn’t there anymore. That period should never happen to humanity again”. Another reporter said, “I literally paused my life during the pandemic. We could stay for about four months before getting paid half month’s salary. Many journalists stayed longer than that before getting paid. The motivation wasn’t there anymore. It was difficult for one not to be impacted directly or indirectly... and staying at home was boring and challenging...” (Reporter9). Yet, “the experience wasn’t entirely bad to say the truth. Of course, COVID-19 made journalism a more respected profession, and I experienced a newfound sense of importance in my profession regardless. However, it was a really challenging time that undoubtedly tested our capabilities as media professionals. Personally, it compelled me into self-care to deal with the crisis” (Reporter4).

As earlier noted, the media was essential in influencing how people perceived COVID-19 and their attitudes toward safety protocols. It was the period that accelerated the public’s interest in health information, as many who had access depended on the media for regular updates. The pressure to constantly update the public more accurately and promptly increased the workload of journalists. Control of public gatherings and movements also caused a significant change in media routines but arguably led to a greater public dependence on journalism. As such, media workers’ stress reactions were worsened by these conflicting demands on the industry. It further complicated the already challenging working conditions and sparked concerns about journalists’ mental health as frontline workers.

## ***Theme 2: Corofrontation of journalists and other challenges of covering the pandemic in Nigeria***

Reporters who covered the COVID-19 pandemic were confronted with multiple perils, including verbal attacks and physical intimidations from government and security agents. This is contextualized as *Corofrontation* in this paper. These challenges significantly impacted their ability to report on the pandemic effectively. Participants said they were challenged by working in a totally novel crisis scenario, fatigued due to “increased workloads and lack of protective gear” (Reporter2) as well as the fear of contracting the virus and infecting family members, “witnessing and streaming death and mass burials” (Reporter4) and trauma inherent in such experiences took psychological toll on the journalists. Indeed, “it was a traumatizing experience. I haven’t seen anything so devastating” (Reporter13). Reporter1 also noted that “personal protective equipment and testing [kits] that journalists in other places enjoyed were not available to many of us here”.

*Corofrontation* also came via physical and online attacks. For instance, “Government used police to attack us again and again. Sometimes you dare not challenge the authorities or updates that the government provides. This undoubtedly affected our reporting strategy

and how we reported some of the stories. The fear of being assaulted, and the legal threats all pile up and make you feel anxious and stressed all the time” (Reporter10). Similarly, another participant claimed that "There was an unbelievable amount of physical and online harassment of journalists...So many offensive remarks targeted at journalists, usually from government officials or the [COVID- 19] deniers to silence us. My colleague was attacked and his house address and other vital details were shared on social media for his report on the virus. ...you see, you are also concerned about your family”.

In their bid to hold the authorities to account, many journalists have been harassed and ‘banned for life’ in certain areas of Nigeria (Ogbodo et al., 2020). Working for media organizations already heaps enormous responsibilities on the journalists, who themselves have become as indispensable as they are vulnerable. The emergency powers under the guise of COVID-19 Laws enacted in various states across Nigeria and indeed the executive orders wielded by presidents and state governors in response to COVID-19 did not help matters for journalists either. Some of these ‘draconian’ laws set out the ‘standard’ of reporting the pandemic in ways that please the government which may not necessarily provide the details that the masses yearn for.

To completely shroud certain details about the pandemic in secrecy, Nigerian governments at various levels muzzled the press by evoking existing laws as well as hastily making new ones. This practice further alienated and silenced journalists. During the early days of the pandemic in Nigeria, two journalists were arrested and banned from Ebonyi State Government House for their reports on COVID-19 among other related cases (Ogbodo et al., 2020). In addition to the state- endorsed repression, journalists were not spared by the virus. In their quest to keep people abreast of the happenings and probably to reveal the hidden facts about the virus and its prevalence, so many reporters were exposed to the risks of the pandemic even as they struggled for commensurate pay and life insurance.

### ***Theme 3: Resilience and Support as Coping Strategies***

The third category of theme revolves around resilience and support. In this category, journalists identified what makes them resilient and the supports they received to make their work a bit easier in coping with the situation. A wide-ranging support is required for journalists whose efforts in the reportage of the pandemic put them as frontline workers. The support could range from providing adequate PPE to enhanced risk allowance commensurate with the nature of the jobs they do.

Resilience and support have been vital factors in the lives of journalists covering the COVID-19 pandemic. Reporter 3 said “the unprecedented nature of this global health crisis has presented unique challenges for journalists, both professionally and personally. The immense pressure to provide accurate and timely information, coupled with the emotional toll of reporting on a devastating and rapidly evolving situation, has tested our resilience as journalists”. Indeed, resilience has been crucial for journalists to navigate the constant flow of information and rapidly changing circumstances during the pandemic. Journalists have had to adapt quickly to new developments, research and interpret scientific data, and communicate complex information to the public. The ability to bounce back from setbacks, stay focused, and continue their reporting despite the challenges has been essential but not without taking its toll on the mental wellbeing of the reporters.

Yet, support systems have been undermined for most of the journalists covering the pandemic in Nigeria. For instance, “Journalists covering the COVID-19 pandemic have faced elevated risks, including potential exposure to the virus, emotional stress, and even

threats to their safety in some cases” (Reporter4). In the face of this difficult situation, “support from employers, colleagues, and the wider journalism community is nowhere near enough” (Reporter4). As Reporter5 also noted, “...support was cosmetic. Just a one-off gesture in the form of a loan”. Notwithstanding, support for journalists takes various forms. Some news organizations provided resources such as safety guidelines, personal protective equipment, and mental health support services to address the physical and psychological well-being of their journalists. This was, however not the case for many others. Peer support networks, both within newsrooms and through professional organizations, have offered spaces for journalists to share experiences, seek advice, and find solace in knowing they are not alone in their struggles, but a number of journalists had no supports during the time.

Furthermore, Reporter11 notes that “the recognition and appreciation of the vital role journalists play in disseminating accurate information during a crisis have been crucial sources of support for me”. Public acknowledgment of the importance of journalism has boosted morale and reinforced the dedication of journalists to their mission, even in the face of adversity. It is important to note that resilience and support are not only needed during the pandemic itself but also in the aftermath. Journalists may experience post-traumatic stress disorder and burnout due to the intense and prolonged nature of their coverage of the crisis. Providing ongoing support, access to counselling services, and opportunities for rest and self-care are vital for their long-term recovery.

## **Discussion**

As journalists acted swiftly to avoid giving too much space for misinformation to thrive, and live up to the expectations of the public, the mental toll of the pandemic coverage soon caught up with them, thereby making media coverage of such public health emergencies risky. With the existing problems of poor facilities, inadequate training, and unstable economic conditions, journalism practice in Nigeria had many ‘demons’ to contend with even before the pandemic. Nonetheless, despite insufficient resources, the journalists still strived to provide high-quality coverage of the pandemic. Yet, even while mental health issues in high-pressure occupations like the media are becoming more widely acknowledged, little is known about those in Nigeria.

Journalists who covered the pandemic were found to have exhibited varying degrees of anxiety, depression, and stress-related symptoms. They took the challenging tasks of covering the pandemic at considerable personal risk, which, nonetheless, had an impact on their mental health. While organizational culture, ethics and professionalism govern how media activities are completed, there is no provision for how journalists deal with stress in Nigeria. Yet, public health organizations in Nigeria mostly depend on these outlets to inform the public about health-related hazards, which calls for more coverage that further strains journalists.

The demands of providing truthful updates, nonetheless, persisted while controlling public awareness and anxiety about the spread of the virus. This was made much more difficult by the fact that the spread of COVID-19 was sudden and alarming. While the virus spread, another challenge was how to contain the more viral ‘strain’ called fake news. As the participants noted, social media harbored fake news and this made life difficult for those with authentic information to flourish or tell their story effectively in the peak period of the pandemic. This was what led to the ‘*infodemic*’ mantra and news fatigue experienced by the masses and reporters as the pandemic evolved. This eventually took a major psychological toll on the reporters whose job was ‘hijacked’ by citizen journalists

(Ugbo, Chinedu-Okeke & Ogbodo, 2022). Journalists' efforts at combating fake news frequently entailed multidisciplinary cooperation, pulling experts and scientists from divergent backgrounds such as public health and public affairs analysts (Ogbodo, 2021). The pace with which this partnership was coordinated demonstrates how media practitioners can adjust to changing circumstances. This flexibility is impressive in Nigeria as well as other countries, demonstrating how media professionals managed to deal with significant health emergency and the disruptions that came with it. Yet, the mental toll this flexibility brought with it also overwhelmed the media workers. In the end, this analysis demonstrates the necessity of further assistance for journalists who operate in demanding settings. The period of the pandemic, particularly the early stage of it saw unprecedented news and information about death, pain, anxiety, social unrest, and uncertainties about what next.

Access to timely and accurate information was a significant challenge for Nigerian journalists. Thus, "Government agencies and health authorities often did not provide us with regular and transparent updates, leading to a lack of reliable data for journalists to report on most of the times" (Reporter3). Similarly, "Access to the right source was really hard to get because of the lockdowns. It was difficult to get your source for interviews. Many were naturally reluctant to talk about the virus in Ebonyi State due to the emergency law announced by the Governor. Those who talked often prefer anonymity to protect their identities" (Reporter12). This arguably limited the ability of journalists to verify and disseminate accurate information to the public. It further hindered their efforts to hold authorities accountable. At another time, Reporter13 said the government "hijacked our [journalists] job". In Nigeria, rather than allow the scientific community to do its job, governments at various levels hijacked the narrative, thereby subjecting media organizations in the country to tell the pandemic stories from their [governments'] perspectives. This was particularly the case during the early stage and peak of the coronavirus crisis in Nigeria (March – July 2020). To navigate these hurdles, some of the journalists said they went beyond the government's dominant narratives to sourcing stories from the scientific community and reputable foreign media outlets and health institutions to get the clearer picture of the trends on the virus.

Journalists in Nigeria also faced threats and intimidation while covering COVID-19. Some reporters who exposed government failures or reported on sensitive topics about the pandemic faced harassment, arrest, and even physical violence. Thus, "Reporting the pandemic comes with threats and risks of unimaginable proportion" (Reporter9). These actions created a climate of fear and self-censorship, preventing journalists from providing comprehensive coverage of the crisis because anything on the contrary would make matters worse for them.

Moreover, some of the journalists in Nigeria lacked the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) to keep themselves safe while reporting on the pandemic. This lack of protection put them at risk of contracting the virus and further hindered their ability to effectively cover the crisis. Journalists need proper safety measures in place to ensure their well-being while carrying out their essential work (Quandt et al., 2020). As Reporter9 said, "journalists were often left to source whatever protective gear they needed at the frontline. This means that if you can't afford one, you're left more vulnerable". Long before the emergence of coronavirus, Nigerian journalists have had to contend with varying safety concerns particularly through the repressive laws on libel, defamation and press freedom (Msughter & Pate, 2021). In addition to the aforementioned concerns, the journalists also face constant police brutality, assassination,

verbal and physical assaults by security personnel, and incarceration to name a few (Alade & Sanusi, 2022). Apart from physical attacks, Nigerian journalists also faced psychological trauma during and after the pandemic (Alade & Sanusi, 2022). Some of the journalists were targets of online abuse and trolling. As a result of their digital footprints, these journalists can easily be tracked and assassinated or arrested for reporting what the government or individuals perceive as not in conformity with its hegemonic narratives. This has made Nigerian journalists more susceptible and the profession more dangerous. These issues became worse with the emergence of COVID-19 as they navigated censorship, job losses, and safety concerns that traumatized them.

Moreover, one of the respondents also said “I know a few of my colleagues who contracted the virus, and some who died as a result” (Reporter7). Indeed, a [report](#) suggests that seven Nigerian journalists covering the pandemic died within the space of seven days in Ogun State Nigeria. As such, the journalists also fell victims of the exact pandemic they were reporting. This put extra stress on the press. The fear of losing their jobs and getting exposed to the pandemic made some media workers tensed and traumatized. Most of the journalists never got any material and immaterial supports needed to navigate the pandemic. The study also made the case that news outlets had the responsibility to provide sufficient logistical and psychological support to media workers in such a difficult period.

The pandemic had a severe economic impact on the media industry, leading to layoffs, pay cuts, and reduced resources for news organizations. Some journalists were at the receiving end of this economic meltdown. Indeed, Reporter4 notably said that “Many of us [journalists] faced financial difficulties, making it harder for us to feed well”. This was corroborated by Reporter9 who had to endure four months before getting paid only ‘a half month’s salary’. This obviously affected their motivation level and compounded their stress and mental health challenges while the pandemic lasted. Thus, “the motivation wasn’t there anymore. It was difficult for one not to be impacted directly or indirectly... and staying at home was boring and challenging...” (Reporter9). Similarly, “the fear of being laid off coupled with limited resources also impacted on our performance” (Reporter6). This also meant reduced capacity for investigative reporting and in- depth analysis of the pandemic's impact on the society. Worse, reporters lacked trauma literacy.

Although the value of organizational assistance for journalists coping with trauma has been widely acknowledged in other settings (Shilpa et al., 2023; Backholm, 2012), many Nigerian media organizations lack the resources to put such initiatives into place. Funding for crisis of that magnitude was beyond the reach of some of the domestic media outfits. Thus, there is an urgent need for affordable, simply applied strategies to support media professionals in managing trauma independently. The ideal way to address this often-overlooked need would be to provide all media professionals with a variety of thorough and culturally-relevant mental health supports.

As Nigeria journalists have claimed, they frequently experienced significant levels of tension, fatigue, and depression. However, due to the nature of their job (often seen from the perspective of entertainment and glamour), some of these symptoms rarely manifest. This study has revealed that there are significant mental health issues associated with covering COVID-19 pandemic. This study also demonstrated that there was a high prevalence of physical aggression, coercion, and assault, as well as prohibitive and emergency legislations implemented swiftly by both governments at various levels (Federal, State and Local). These factors are frequently connected to difficult and stressful working circumstances. Such demands accumulate gradually and if left

unchecked, lead to emotional weariness and burnout. Level of stress can be increased by workloads and other dynamics already mentioned. Participants also reported feeling overburdened and struggled to handle all their tasks.

Another challenge arises from negotiating the ethical dilemma and professional commitment often seen as putting work above one's own happiness. Because prolonged working hours, tight deadlines, and related newsroom practices are accepted as the norms, many journalists consider concealing mental health difficulties to be standard procedure. The necessity of sufficient support networks in the newsroom is not as frequently recognized or addressed. While some of the participants said that little supports exist, they are not organized in nature; they are more of peer or personal support. Instead of concentrating on long-term strategies and rearranging systems to produce healthier working environments, interventions were mostly temporal, one-off, or as one of the participants noted, 'cosmetic', and were only available for few media workers depending on their organisations. As such, this paper argues that Nigerian newsroom culture increased mental health issues of the journalists due to lack of formalized support and coping mechanisms for the journalists that risked their lives to update the public during the pandemic.

Many media companies also cultivated a culture of contempt for mental health concerns because they see these as barriers to completing the tasks. Some of the journalists interviewed for this study noted how it is taboo to talk about mental health in the newsrooms, with many people keeping quiet as a result. In the Nigerian journalism setting, mental health disorder is often stigmatized, and people who experience it are viewed as weak, cursed or unfit for the profession. Because of this, reporters who suffer from mental illness are reluctant to seek treatment, hiding their problems and attempting to carry on with their work notwithstanding what they are going through. When considered collectively, the results highlight the necessity of media-specific treatments that acknowledge the particular demands of working in such setting. Up until now, mental health concerns and the requirement for precisely defined treatments on media settings have not received enough attention. The available ones have been dominated by scholars outside Nigeria and Africa. This gap was what necessitated this study.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the disruption in journalistic routines caused by the pandemic affected Nigerian journalists' mental wellbeing. Yet, the ability to adapt, persevere, and stay mentally and physically healthy has allowed journalists to continue their essential work of informing the public and holding authorities accountable. Ensuring adequate support systems and resources for journalists is crucial not only during the pandemic but also in building a stronger and more resilient journalism industry for the future. Thus, irrespective of the fact that excess workload and other challenges drained reporters physically and emotionally, they showed resilience and the spirit of professionalism in the discharge of their reportorial duties. Comprehensive support and insurance should therefore be made available for journalists working under such an acute crisis. At the moment, such supports are lacking for Nigerian journalists. Regular and intensive training for health crisis reporters should also be encouraged to promote readiness and efficiency in reporting.

Despite being vital to the society, media professionals are obviously under pressure and may experience burnout as a result. Scholarship on mental wellness in the media has gained traction, but not much of it has been done in an African/Nigerian setting. It is the

reason this research investigated how reporting on coronavirus affected Nigerian journalists' mental health. It accomplishes this by analyzing the main stressors these media professionals encountered during the coverage of the pandemic and how their media outfits 'supported' their mental health to navigate that crucial period. Therefore, this study is imperative and has provided a deeper understanding of the media landscape and obstacles faced by Nigerian journalists that affected their mental health in the context of the pandemic coverage.

#### *Recommendations and future directions*

This study has added to scholarship on mental health in journalism particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the extent to which the findings can be generalized is not clear given that they relied only on qualitative data. While this method provides important insights from the lived experiences of the journalists, a mixed methods approach that employs both questionnaires and interviews with bigger samples may likely provide more robust findings. Such research may also consider the use of longitudinal design to possibly track changes or trends in journalists' mental health over time.

Although studies on trauma and mental health in media landscapes have started emerging, particularly from the Global North, those from the less-explored contexts like Africa/Nigeria require broader insights. This will help to broaden our knowledge of the pandemic and the trauma journalists face in covering such big events.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

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