MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF MENTAL HEALTH: INSIGHTS FROM NIGERIAN NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study examines the representation of mental health issues in Nigerian newspapers from January 2020 to December 2022. Articles from newspapers such as *Vanguard, The Punch, The Nation,* and *Tribune* were analysed through content analysis and in-depth interviews were held with health desk editors. However, out of 1872 publications, only 7.8% addressed mental health, with emphasis on predominant themes of dangerousness (34.7%), stigmatisation (21.8%), and criminality (13.6%). Furthermore, derogatory language such as "madman" appeared in over 40% of these articles, supporting harmful stereotypes. Qualitative findings from interviews also revealed that editorial decisions and cultural influences heavily shape these portrayals. Journalists often lack specialised knowledge of mental health and face gatekeeping that limits balanced reporting. Additionally, mental health stories are deprioritised in favour of political and economic content, contributing to the underrepresentation of the issue. The study concludes that cultural influences, editorial decisions, and journalists' expertise significantly shape the representation of mental health. We recommend implementing culturally sensitive communication strategies and specialised training for journalists to improve mental health reporting

Key Words: Mental Health; Newspaper Coverage; Nigeria; Mixed Methods; Media Representation

Introduction

Background

Newspapers, radio, television, and social media among other media sources help promote mental health discourse in Nigeria (Coverdale, Raymond, & Classen, 2002). Although the media greatly shapes public opinion and behaviour (Chandran, Mathur, & Rao, 2019), its representation of mental health often contains inaccuracies and prejudices that link mental illnesses to violence and therefore increase stigma (Atilola & Olayiwola, 2013; Dumas-Mallet & Gonon, 2020).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as a condition of well-being in which people realise their abilities, manage normal stresses, work well, and contribute to their society. In Nigeria, about one in four people have some kind of mental disorder (WHO, 2021). Though sometimes presenting psychiatric problems wrongly, the media's influence in forming public opinions of mental health is major yet divisive

Entman's (1993) framing theory clarifies how public perceptions and problem definitions are shaped by media. Cultural elements greatly affect these depictions in Nigeria, sometimes supporting stigma and false information (Hofstede, 1991; Zhang, Yan & Tang, 2015). Promoting accurate and sympathetic pictures depends on an analysis of how mental health is presented in Nigerian newspapers (Coverdale et al., 2002).

Statement of the Problem

Particularly in forming public opinions on mental health, the media's function as a main information source greatly impacts public attitude and conduct (Chandran et al., 2019). Though a lot of research has been done on media representations of mental health in Western environments, the way mental health is portrayed in Nigerian newspapers is still underexplored; existing studies typically link mental illness with spiritual or magical treatments rather than scientific approaches (Stuart, 2006; Atilola & Olayiwola, 2013; Smith, 2015).

This study disparity emphasises the importance of closely examining how Nigerian publications present mental health-related issues. Furthermore, the causes of these representations should be explored more thoroughly, highlighting a notable information vacuum. Investigating the viewpoints of health desk editors from the four major Nigerian newspapers (Vanguard, The Punch, The Nation, and Tribune) selected for this study is essential. These individuals oversee health-related content, make editorial decisions, and shape how mental health issues are portrayed in their respective publications.

Research Questions

1. What is the extent of mental illness coverage in Nigerian newspapers from 2020 to 2022, and what patterns and motivations underlie this coverage?
2. How do Nigerian newspapers portray mental health issues in terms of framing, language, and emphasis, contributing to the shaping of public discourse on mental health in Nigeria?

Literature Review

Mental Health and Cultural Sensitivity in Nigeria

Cultural sensitivity is the understanding and respect for the range of cultural backgrounds, identities, and concerns for people—especially those with mental health problems (Kirmayer, 2012). Sensitive communication is crucial to reducing stigma and fostering understanding as cultural nuances significantly influence attitudes and discussions about mental health in Nigeria (Choudhry et al., 2016). Conventional notions about the causes of mental illness, traditional therapy approaches, and societal expectations all help to define Nigerian knowledge and conversation of mental health concerns (Atilola, 2014). This underlines the importance of designing communication strategies that match the different cultural fabric of Nigeria to manage mental health-related issues and promote inclusive discussions adequately.

Media Landscape in Nigeria

Nigeria's media landscape is dynamic and diverse, comprising various print, broadcast, and digital platforms. Newspapers, as traditional sources of information, play a crucial role in shaping public opinion (Coverdale et al., 2002). The media landscape reflects the rich tapestry of Nigeria's sociocultural and political environment, with media outlets serving as influential conduits for disseminating information, including discussions on mental health.

However, media ownership structures and editorial policies significantly impact the content and tone of mental health coverage in Nigerian newspapers (Adekunle & Adnan, 2016). Furthermore, ownership interests, political affiliations, and editorial decisions shape the framing of salient issues such as mental health narratives (Ojebuyi & Ekkennia, 2013). Therefore, understanding these influences is vital for interpreting the nuances of media portrayals and recognising potential biases or gaps in the coverage of mental health issues in Nigerian newspapers.

Framing in Media and Mental Health Representation

Entman's (1993) conceptual framework for framing theory is the choosing and emphasising of elements of observed reality to form moral assessments, causal interpretations, and issue definitions. Regarding Nigerian publications, the way mental health concerns are portrayed

depends much on framing. Often adopting episodic framing (Entman, 1993; Clement & Foster, 2008; Borah, 2011), mental diseases receive disproportionate attention from the media mostly quoting specialists and emphasising individual attribution. This can reinforce stigmatisation by presenting people with mental illness as passive, hazardous consumers of treatment (Klin & Lemish, 2008). Though the media plays a vital role in increasing awareness and changing public beliefs and attitudes, limited research in Africa—especially Nigeria—has examined mental health framing (Atilola, 2015; Mfoafo-M'Carthy et al., 2016). Interpreting these representations and appreciating possible biases in mental health coverage in Nigerian newspapers depends on an awareness of media ownership structures and editorial procedures.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative content analysis with qualitative interviews. Secondary data were collected from *Vanguard, The Punch, The Nation*, and *Tribune* newspapers. These newspapers were selected due to their long-standing establishment and national reach. The population of the study covered 46 national print newspapers published between January 2020 and December 2022. A convenience sampling method was used to select four newspapers, yielding a total of 1872 editions, with 468 editions from each newspaper. From these, 147 articles on mental health were identified. The quantitative data of the study consisted of the content from these articles.

In parallel, qualitative data were gathered through in-depth telephone interviews with four health editors from the selected newspapers. These editors were purposively selected and interviewed using a structured questionnaire designed to explore their perspectives on mental health coverage. The interviews were transcribed and analysed to identify recurring themes.

Data Analysis

A coding sheet with eleven items was used for content analysis of the identified articles. The data were manually collected and coded, facilitated by access to newspaper archives provided by the Federal Polytechnic Ede library. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS, generating frequency counts and percentages. The transcriptions of the interviews were analysed thematically to interpret the insights and perspectives of the health editors.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Research Question 1: What is the extent of mental illness coverage in Nigerian newspapers from 2020 to 2022, and what patterns and motivations underlie this coverage?

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage (%) of Coverage of Mental Health-Related Articles in Selected Nigerian Newspapers

Newspapers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Vanguard	44	29.9
Punch	40	27.2
Nation	34	23.1
Tribune	29	19.8
Total	147	100

The data from Table 1 shows that Vanguard Newspapers has a majority of 29.9% coverage of mental illness from 2020 to 2022, Punch Newspaper has 27.2%, Nation Newspaper has 23.1%, and Tribune Newspaper has 19.8%. This data implies that Vanguard newspaper has the highest coverage of mental illness for the period covered in the study.

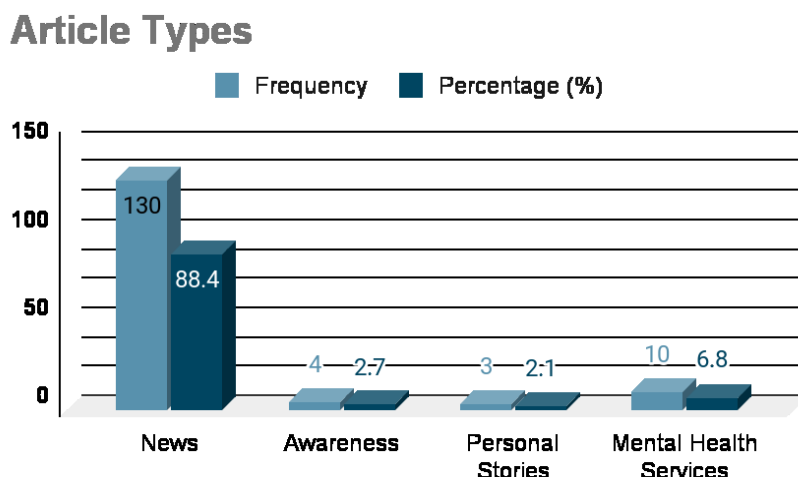**Figure 1: Types of Mental Health-Related Topics Covered**

Figure 1 shows that out of the total 147 articles recovered from newspapers, more than half (88.4%) of them were news articles. Article types in the form of mental health services were 10 (6.8%) in number. Only 4 (2.7%) articles covered awareness, while 3 (2.1%) article types were personal stories. The data also revealed the extent to which Nigerian newspapers cover stories about mental illness. It can also be deduced from the finding that Nigerian newspapers barely cover mental health-related issues, unlike the amount of emphasis given to physical health topics and other issues that may be of public interest — unless they appear in the news.

Patterns and Motivations
The qualitative analysis of interview responses sheds light on the extent of mental illness coverage in Nigerian newspapers from 2020 to 2022, revealing distinct patterns and motivations that underlie this coverage.

Cultural Influences on Mental Health Perception:
Cultural factors play a significant role in the low coverage of mental health-related topics in newspapers. The definition and understanding of mental health in Nigeria are shaped by cultural norms, contributing to a societal perception that distinguishes mental illness from other health issues. The reluctance to discuss mental health in cultural contexts, as explained by Mr. Y.A. (46), adds to the barriers to addressing this issue. He observes:

> Most of these things are from our cultures. We do not see mental illness
> the way we see other illnesses, and that might be one of the reasons why
> people have not talked about it.

Prioritisation of News and Editorial Decision-Making:
Newsworthiness and the prioritisation of issues in newspapers present another layer of explanation for the underrepresentation of mental health. Mrs S.O. (44) highlights the economic aspect, emphasising that newspapers prioritise stories that sell, typically focusing on political and economic issues. This reveals a challenge where mental health stories struggle for attention in the competitive media landscape. Mrs. S.O. states:

> You should understand that health stories are not prioritised when it
> comes to "front page" news in Nigeria. You will have more political
> stories and economic reports on the front page of newspapers. It is about
> stories that sell and stories that would resonate with readers.

Influence of Gatekeepers and Editorial Decisions:

The role of 'gatekeepers' within media organisations emerges as a crucial factor. Editorial decisions, often influenced by gatekeepers' preferences, impact published content. Mrs. S.O. (44) emphasises that the editorial process is shaped by what these gatekeepers perceive as relatable, leading to the potential dismissal of educative articles on mental health. She notes:

> Furthermore, it depends on who is writing and what the "gatekeepers" want. I might say I want to write on Depression, and my boss might decline that that's not what he or she wants in the newspaper. Sometimes what you write and publish is not totally your making, and it is influenced by such factors (gatekeepers). Most times, these people want what people can relate to, therefore the idea of publishing what they are not conversant with will probably get turned down.

Journalists' Lack of Expertise and Stigmatisation Concerns:

The study reveals a lack of knowledge among journalists regarding mental health, as many feel unequipped to address medical-related issues. Mrs. A.A. (38) emphasises the need for specialised knowledge, suggesting a reluctance among journalists to delve into mental health topics due to their non-specialist backgrounds. Additionally, there is an awareness that people with mental illnesses may face stigma, influencing journalists' ability to locate and interview them, as mentioned by Mr. Y.A. (46). Mrs. A.A. states:

> Defining mental health — it is a medical doctor — probably and effectively a psychiatrist — who can talk about mental health. I am just the health editor, and as an editor, I do not supply my own opinions, or thoughts about medical issues because I am not a doctor… I can only talk about health in the context of journalism practice, but I cannot talk about medical issues.

Research Question 2: How do Nigerian newspapers portray mental health issues in terms of framing, language, and emphasis, contributing to the shaping of public discourse on mental health in Nigeria?

Table 2: Tone of the Articles (Association/Disassociation with Violence)

Variables	Frequency (147)	Percentage (%)
Negative tone	62	42.2
Positive tone	34	23.1
Neutral tone	51	34.7

Table 2 shows that about half (42.2%) of the tone of the articles was negative. What this suggests is that the psychiatric character or condition highlighted in the headline or story was linked to criminal acts, societal disturbance, or reckless behaviour that harms oneself or others. For instance, headlines such as *"Mob Set Mentally Ill Man Ablaze for Killing Nine"* and *"Lagos Residents Lynch Mentally-Ill, Allege Invasion of Property"* exemplify how mental illness is linked to dangerous behaviour and how the public would act towards such narrative. In contrast, a quarter (23.1%) of items had a positive tone, meaning that the psychiatric aspect or condition highlighted in the headline or article was linked to good citizenship, social functioning, and the possibility of improvement with well-established medical and psychiatric therapy. For example, a headline such as *"Drug Addicts Recount Journey to Sanity, Higher Awareness Recommended for Mental Disorder"* shows a positive tone. The remaining one-third (34.7%) of the total items had

a neutral tone, meaning that neither of the tones mentioned earlier was linked with the psychiatric character or concern indicated in the headline or article. It was neither positive nor negative. For instance, *"Rising Cases of Mental Disorder Worrisome, Psychiatrists Lament"*.

Figure 2: Theme of the Articles
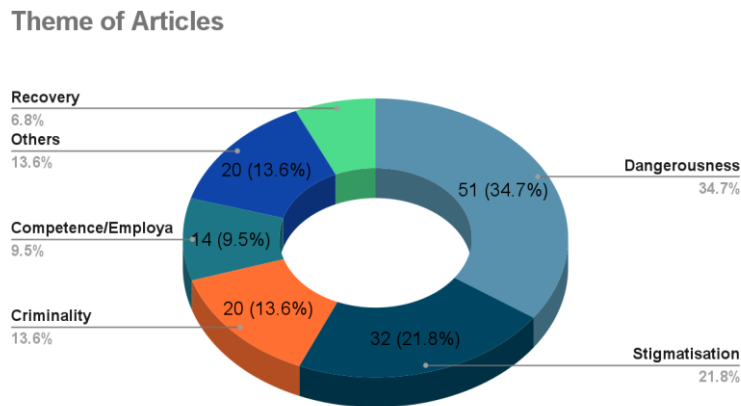
Regarding the theme of articles on mental illness in Nigerian newspapers, as shown in Figure 2, one-third (34.7%) of articles had the theme of dangerousness. The theme of dangerousness in articles refers to articles that associate people living with mental illness with violent acts (mostly interpersonal violence). For instance, a headline like *"Mentally-Ill Man Stabs Brother to Death in Ogun Over New Year Ram"* illustrates the frequent depiction of mentally ill individuals as dangerous. Furthermore, one-fifth (21.8%) of the themes of articles in newspapers were the stigmatisation of people living with mental illness. One-seventh (13.6%) of articles had the theme of criminality, meaning that people with mental illness were found committing social crimes. Similarly, one-seventh (13.6%) of the themes had other themes apart from the aforementioned themes. 14 (9.5%) articles had the theme of competence or employability. These are articles that discuss the fact that people living with mental illness have the potential to be functioning members of society. Finally, only 10 (6.8%) articles had the theme of recovery. These are articles that explain how a psychiatric patient recovered or has the potential to recover. Media depictions of successful treatment of and recovery from mental illness have the potential to decrease social stigma. However, the data in Figure 2 implies that dangerousness is the highest theme of the articles in the study.

Table 3: Use of Derogatory Words in the Articles

Variables	Frequency (N=147)	Percentage=100%
Mad man/madwoman	61	41.5
Mentally challenged	32	21.8
Lunatic	12	8.2
Mentally ill	17	11.5
Mentally deranged	3	2
Others	22	15

Table 3 shows the use of derogatory words in describing mentally unstable people by Nigerian newspapers. A high frequency of 61 items—about half (41.5%) of the total percentage—used either "madman/madwoman" to describe mentally ill individuals. Only one-fifth (21.8%) used the phrase "mentally challenged" to describe mentally ill people, while one-seventh (15%) of

words used in articles to describe mentally challenged people were classified as "others", as they do not fall under the other categories of derogatory words listed. One-ninth (11.5%) used the phrase "mentally ill", while 12 (8.2%) of items from newspapers used the word "lunatic". Only 3 (2%) of the total articles in the Nigerian newspapers use the phrase "mentally deranged". However, this implies that Nigerian newspapers used derogatory words in reporting mental illness, and the most commonly used is "madman/madwoman".

Table 4: Types of Mental Illness Discussed in the Articles

Variables	Frequency(N=147)	Percentage=100%
General (unspecified)	67	45.6
Depression	38	25.9
Schizophrenia	1	0.7
Bipolar	0	0
Anxiety disorder	23	15.6
Others	18	12.2

Table 4 shows the type of mental illness diagnosed in newspapers. There are 147 items in total, and 67 (45.6%) of the 147 types of mental illness recorded in newspapers were "general", that is, they were not specified. However, about a quarter percentage (25.9%) reporting in newspapers diagnosed "depression". One-sixth (15.6%) of the total percentage of news articles had "anxiety disorder" diagnosed as a type of mental disorder. One-eighth (12.2%) of news articles retrieved from newspapers diagnosed "other" types of mental disorders. Psychosis and its symptoms, such as hallucinations or delusions, were frequently mentioned in these reports and classified as "others". However, an infinitesimal number of news articles mentioned "schizophrenia" as a type of mental illness. "Schizophrenia" only appeared once (0.7%). Similarly, a staggering total of zero articles had "bipolar disorder" as a diagnosis of mental illness.

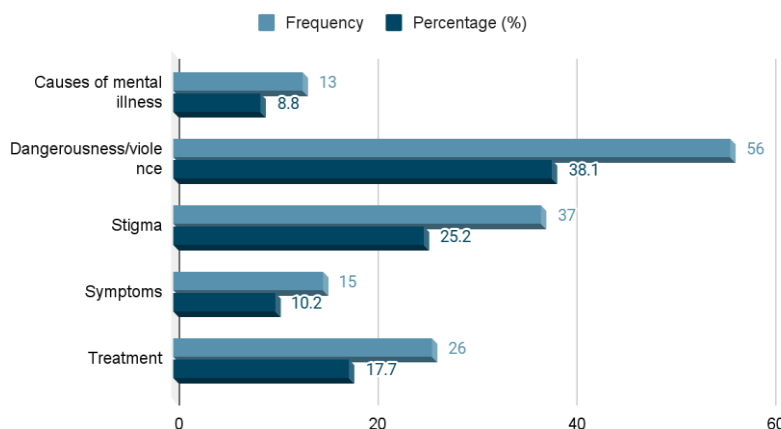**Figure 3: Titles of Articles in Newspapers**

Figure 2 further reveals article topics regarding mental illness in Nigerian newspapers. About one-third (38.1%) of article topics associated mental illness in article topics with dangerousness and violence. One-quarter (25.2%) were on stigma, with topics that reveal that people living with mental illnesses should be dissociated from society. However, one-sixth (17.7%) of article topics were on the treatment of mental illness, while one-tenth (10.2%) were on symptoms of mental

illness. Finally, only one-eleventh (8.8%) of the article topics in newspapers were the causes of mental illness. These are articles that mostly address the causes of mental illness. In conclusion, this data highlights that article topics in newspapers often associate mental illness with dangerousness or violence.

Decoding Mental Health Narratives in Nigerian Newspapers
To begin, participants emphasised the diverse nature of psychiatric illnesses, ranging from common conditions like depression and anxiety to more severe disorders such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. In the exploration of how Nigerian newspapers portray mental health, Mrs S.O. (40) highlighted a significant issue: misdiagnosis or lack of specificity in news reports. She noted:

> I will never say that a person has "psychosis" and leave it blank. I would not diagnose a mental health condition without explaining the condition in a report. This would give whoever I am reporting to have an understanding of what I'm talking about. Stigma does not come from the health desk but the news desk.

Furthering the findings from content analysis, the discussion shifted to the association of individuals with mental conditions with violence in newspapers. Mrs. A.A. (37) justified the use of certain language, stating:

> You might want to criticise the use of derogatory words like 'mad', but let me break it down for you. First, when a journalist writes that 'Mad-man Kills 15 People', we should ask ourselves, did it happen? If it happens, then what is anybody's concern? If it truly happens, then the journalist has not broken any law. Second thing, if someone kills another person, do you want to tell me that the person is mentally stable? Thirdly, if a person is known to be roaming the street, naked and unclothed, and showing signs of lunacy, we all know that one or the other, the probability is high that the person is mad. If these symptoms are displayed, then nobody needs a psychiatrist to diagnose that the person is mad. It is not normal for someone who is healthy to walk around naked or kill someone.

This perspective, emphasising violent and irrational behaviours, contributes to the stigmatisation of mentally ill individuals, as noted in the study.

Furthermore, the role of derogatory language in news reports was attributed to the news desk by Mrs. S.O. (40), who clarified:

> Most times when there seems to be the wrong use of words (employment of derogatory words), it is going to be on the news editor. A health editor must and should never use derogatory words when reporting mental health stories. However, news editors tend to use and support the usage of derogatory words in reportage.

Despite acknowledging the potential for improvement, Mrs. A.A. (37) pointed out the challenge of headline length. The tension between clinical accuracy and brevity in reporting was highlighted:

> You want us to do away with derogatory words and use clinical words, right? But for headlines, the shorter they are, the better. However, with more awareness, people rarely use those derogatory words these days. Of course, journalists can do better. But if journalists report that a "madman kills 20", that is not misinforming.

In conclusion, the study reveals the complex interplay of framing, language, and emphasis in the portrayal of mental health issues in Nigerian newspapers. The findings underscore the need for

nuanced reporting to challenge stigmatising narratives and promote a more accurate and compassionate understanding of mental health in public discourse.

Discussion of Findings

This study confirmed other studies (Miller, Napakol & Kujak, 2020; Chandan, Sridhar, Jain, Ramalakshmi, Gopal & Raghavan, 2020; Odenigbo & Anyakoha, 2021) by pointing up a notable underrepresentation of mental health concerns in Nigerian publications. Analysis of 1,872 issues from January 2020 to December 2022 identified just 147 items connected to mental health, therefore underlining inadequate coverage similar to other findings.

Neglect of mental health concerns in Nigeria by the government and people corresponds to World Health Organisation (Atilola, 2014; Al Jazeera News, 2019; EpiAFRIC, 2020) statistics. A 2020 Africa Polling Institute and EpiAFRIC study highlight how widely lacking mental health awareness is in Nigeria, therefore aggravating the neglect. This shortfall is especially alarming considering how the media shapes public knowledge of mental health (Yeo et al., 2001; Suhail, 2005; Choudhry et al., 2016).

The representation of mental health in Nigerian publications is highly influenced by cultural elements. Studies by Galderisi, Heinz, Kastrup, Beezhold, and Sartorius (2015) show how cultural background shapes society's perceptions and attitudes towards mental health, therefore influencing media portrayal. Emphasising risk, criminality, and violence, negative representations reflect editorial decisions motivated by the need to sell news (Stuart, 2006; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017).

General terminology used by journalists for mental health problems helps to distort and spread false information (McGinty, Kennedy-Hendricks, Choksy & Barry, 2016; Wahl, Wood & Richards, 2002). The inclination for dramatic and unpleasant images reinforces societal preconceptions and helps to sustain stigma and prejudice against those who are mentally ill (Stuart, 2006; Graber & Dunaway, 2022). Nigerian newspapers mostly cover mental health from a morality frame that combines cultural, religious, and human-interest points of view (Entman, 1993; Subramanian, 2019).

Conclusion

The results of this study conclude that mental health-related problems are significantly underrepresented in Nigerian newspapers. Mostly shaped by cultural beliefs, editorial decisions, and journalists' lack of adequate knowledge of mental health, the main themes of reportage are dangerousness, stigmatisation and crime. This underrepresentation perpetuates stigma and false information, therefore influencing public understanding and perceptions of mental health.

Recommendations
1. **Training for Journalists:** It is necessary to provide specialised training programmes for journalists to raise their knowledge of mental health-related issues and guarantee better reporting quality. Such programmes should include honest portrayal of mental health issues, ethical reporting methods, and culturally appropriate communication.
2. **Editorial Policies:** Newspapers should change their editorial policies to provide truthful, sympathetic, thorough coverage of mental health problems top priority. This might entail establishing policies for mental health reporting and making sure that pieces avoid spreading false information or stigma.
3. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Starting public awareness initiatives to inform the general people about mental health, and try to lower stigma by increasing understanding. Working together with media houses, psychologists, and non-governmental groups will help magnify these initiatives.
4. **Increased Coverage:** Encourage newspapers to increase the frequency and depth of mental health coverage. Highlighting personal stories, mental health services, and positive

outcomes can provide a balanced perspective and foster a supportive environment for individuals facing mental health challenges.

5. **Research and Monitoring:** Create a mechanism for continuous media mental health coverage observation and study. Frequent evaluations can point up areas that need work as well as the effects of put-in-place policies on public knowledge of and attitude towards mental health.

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