



Perception of Nigerian Newspaper Representations of Children with Disability in South-East Nigeria

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Abstract

This study explores perceptions of the audience who besides being the recipients of the representations of children with disabilities in the Nigerian newspapers become a character feature in the article through the social model of disability. The research design consists of the sample group of 24 participants who were randomly selected with the help of Focus Group Discussions in three of the five South-east states, namely Anambra, Imo and Ebonyi, amongst the schools catering to persons with disabilities. The participants were teachers, parents as well as children with disabilities. The results indicate that coverage of issues concerning disability in the newspapers remains scanty, shallow, and largely event-based, occurring mostly during happenings involving public personalities or festivals. This selective and uneven media coverage was seen by patients as a factor that leads to stigmatization, misconception, and marginalization in society. The study revealed that majority of the respondents did not read newspapers on a regular basis because of disability-related limitation and instead accessed electronic media. The conversations showed how children with disabilities experience intense stigmatization, abandonment, and emotional suffering whereas parents and caregivers are overwhelmed by shame toward their children and the absence of media advocacy. Respondents accused the media of covering disability matters through the subjective rubrics of the reporters besides the failure to inform the general population or promote the breaking of stereotypes. It suggests a very keen and constant media coverage, training of journalists on the sensitive reporting of matters relating to disabilities in regard to disability reporting by the media, and empowerment of children with disabilities to be able to approach media activities.

Keywords: Children with disabilities, Media representation, Newspaper coverage, Perception, Stigmatization

I. Introduction

Children with disabilities have over the history, and in most of the societies been denied access to several basic human rights and needs of human living including access to education, family life, adequate health care, recreation, training and empowerment and right to take part in the normal activities of child life (UNICEF, 2007). Their story, according to Nwanze, Azeez, and Salami (2024) is branded by a kind of a social exclusion that is an alarming denial of the fundamental rights of such people. According to Etieyibo and Odirin (2016), the plight of children with disabilities is that they are discriminated against due to the callous myths within a culture, as they can be considered witches, under assault of evil spirits and other Christian beliefs, children are cursed or punished by the after-effects of their fore fathers acts. Moreover, the National Child Development Agency (2021) has stated that, such children can be put in the most vulnerable category to the abuse and neglect as perpetrated by the adults entrusted with them. Even though the percentage of children with disability are huge and the level of discrimination against them is quite high, their problem is hardly scratched on the international and or national agenda and hardly gets mentioned on 3rd December each year, as the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (UNICEF, 2003). Therefore, they are very hard to see. People do not want to reveal that a child has a disability because of high levels of stigmatization related to the condition.

Children with disabilities are not only facing challenges in their countries but also efforts to mitigate the impact of the challenges are being done globally. These efforts have been translated into instruments of human rights, starting with the 1971 Declaration of the Rights of Persons with Mental Retardation, and continuing to the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities including children. Some of the



designated initiatives included the 1989 convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) The International Decades of Disabled Persons, the 1993 Standard rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities and the 1994 Salamanca Statement and Framework for action on the Special Needs Education among other list that is inexhaustible as contained in Innocent Digest NO 13, (UNICEF 2003). Despite such efforts, children with disabilities continue to be problematic to international, regional and national policy makers, institutions, academia and research.

The most significant aspect of this research is audience perception study, which according to the National Library of Medicine (2022) are strong with media dictating ideas, knowledge, attitudes, and insights of children with disabilities. The media has a role of creating awareness of children with disability issues by attracting a relevant attention to the cause of children with disabilities.

Mass media keeps on collating different contents with the aim of fuelling a perception. Acholonu (2021) is also convinced that different types of communication are utilized to spread information about health values with the purpose of shaping the way people perceive them. Despite the fact that media messages are passed to a diverse audience, the influence or perception is overwhelming among the target audience. Particularly, the media coverage by the newspapers is a source of image and perception construction to the general population, in this case children with disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, teachers, and caregivers, since they are most affected by information about its representatives. The level and pattern of communication at the newspaper content level influences the ideas, emotions and attitudes that this couple of selected group have about disabilities in children. It is with these details in mind that this study will examine specific populations within the South-East within the country of Nigeria since the study proposes to address select populations due to the fact that they have special centers that take care of the children with the disability and that they believe largely negatively about disability (Haihambo, 2004).

Statement of Problem

Children with disabilities cause triangular distress, a three-pronged interaction between the child with dysfunctionality, the family emotionally distressed due to peculiarity of their child and the society bearing the expression (Daniel, Okefianam, Ugorji, Agbasi, Onyido, Fakorede & Egbuno, 2021).

These children also experience various discrimination, exclusion and stigmatisation by their age mates in the view that they are abnormal children with stereotyped mythological descriptions viz; witches, godforsaken, lesser human beings, cursed and others. Tallis (2002) found that parents of the disabled are subjected to tremendous sadness, concern, fear and distraction to their day to day activities and even emotional deterioration of their children which touches them to leave them in isolated places as also in locations where they cannot be seen by anyone. The outburst by the society against children with disabilities is disgraceful as the society regards them as disabled.

Objectives of the Study

The primary aim is to analyse audience attitudes of children with disabilities as portrayed in the media. Consequently, the study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- a. To investigate the portrayal of frames in narratives concerning children with disabilities as reported by Nigerian newspapers.
- b. To investigate the impression of newspaper articles regarding children with disabilities.
- c. To determine the impact of newspaper coverage on views of impairments in children.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- a. What is the portrayal of frames in narratives concerning children with disabilities as reported by Nigerian newspapers?
- b. What is the impression of newspaper articles regarding children with disabilities?
- c. What impact do newspaper reports have on views of disability in children?

II. Review of Literature

Perception Discourses of Misrepresentations of Disabilities in Children

According to Etieyibo and Odirin (2016), misrepresentation of living with disabilities is one of the issues that society has with the conditions pertaining to the issue especially in children due to religious and cultural beliefs. In certain religious factions, disabilities in children are regarded as the work of evil spirits that torment parents with children who have disabilities. Some cultural beliefs as shown by this research have continued to present a major challenge in the situation of the plights of the children with disabilities. Some cultures can associate such deformities with sacrileges committed by parents or the origin of family members, whereas other cultures do not find a place



in society where children with such conditions can be accepted. The above assertion is supported by the findings of Abang (2007) who states that the Nigerian society has an adverse attitude of the disabled because of myths and superstitions that they thought were enshrined in being disabled.

In a study aimed to explore religious practices and beliefs that are abusive against children with disabilities in Zimbabwe, Mukushi, Makhubele and Mabvurira (2019) have applied a qualitative study in documenting and understanding the various norms and assumptions held by people in the country concerning children with disabilities. The authors conjecture that indigenous systems of knowledge and beliefs on what causes disability are critical in shaping the attitude of the society towards people with disabilities and disability in general. According to James and Fleischer (2001), families with children with disabilities that the communities believe have someone to blame, do not want to associate themselves with the families because they believe that they will end up becoming contaminated. Disabled children are treated unjustly even when born. Additionally, majority of conventional beliefs regard disability as a consequence of supernatural forces or incompatible actions such as incest and most people within Africa are of the view that disability is caused by witchcraft or wrath by God or hadtha vengeful spirits or promiscuity on the part of one (Haihambo and Lightfoot, 2010).

Cultural practices on the other hand have encroached on the management of children with disabilities. According to Groce and Zola (1993), the cultural assumptions on disability are associated with their social assumption regarding the cause of disability as well as the valued and devalued features of individuals in a culture and the expected adult status of individuals with disability. Indeed, in certain Asian countries where there are cultural beliefs in reincarnation, disability is viewed as a temporary condition of this particular incarnation as well as a condition that was caused by previous life occurrences. Therefore, since cultures vary in terms of the social beliefs held by people, there will also be differences in terms of views on disability. Disabilities in people are understood differently by various cultures. Although cultures may be silent regarding the same due to religious beliefs, Haihambo (2004) argues that among the Igbo people, disabilities in children are usually taken in a negative perspective.

Communications between Children with Disabilities: a Communication Perspective

Children with sighted vision and hearing impairment use visual communication much better than those with in sound vision. It entails the representation of thoughts and facts on the basis of visual materials like signs, typography, drawings, illustrations, graphic designs, colour and electronic materials (Kenechukwu, 2014). One of the strengths of visual communication as a tool of interactive communication amongst children with disabilities is that it is non-discriminative to the literacy barrier and it is easy to implement with people who are hearing impaired. It also makes people in communication to experience three faculties of visual sensory functions of sensing, selecting and perceiving sources of communication. In other instances, communication among children with impairments can be conducted in the semiotic mode of engaging them with signs and signification. Parsa and Parsa (2002), as well as Lester (2011), point to the fact that visual semiotics focus on how visuals are interpreted, on what system of usage they prevail. Semiotics focuses more on the constitution of such issue through sign message. Signs may come in different forms: written and/or spoken words or in any sound and visual representation.

The variation on what is considered a disability in a child explains the use of particular use of communication needs. According to Schiavo (2007), interpersonal communication is useful in instances where the disabled child lacks visual perception only. It is important to mention that in this context, interpersonal communication may be verbal or even nonverbal. Interactions constitute any utterance that consists of nonverbal and verbal indicators and symbols, which add to meaning of conduct and communication activities.

Besides employing nonverbal communication and pictorial illustrations, Kalu (2014) offers some approaches of using advocacy in favor of persons with disabilities including (a) planning and defining issues and strategies such as specific goals of decisions (b) developing and exchanging information (c) raising awareness among the people in the act to generate the necessary pressure on the policy-makers to influence them and (d) advocating resources of children with special needs. Canadian Child Care Federation (2004) acknowledges the uniqueness of each form of disability as regards to communicating with the children who are disabled.



Special Education as Solution to Children with Disabilities

Child development is dependent on education. Special education has been tailored to suit children with disabilities. According to Salva, Ysseldyke and Bolt (2010), the question of the eligibility into special education is dependent on two questions, namely: (a) does the student have a disability; and (b) is the disability in need of special education? The correlation of the answers to the questions above characterizes the peculiarities of learning needs of various classes of children with disabilities. An example; the students with autism who show symptoms of developmental disability that greatly impact on verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction are negatively impacted on educational performance. In this instance, the students with Autism can never be evaluated best by the speech language specialists and psychologists after careful analysis of the past education performances.

According to Obani (2004), special education refers to the education of the children who have special learning problems, difficulties and needs. It involves special technicalities and the use of special equipment which takes into consideration the special problem of the children. In the same breadth, the National Policy on Education of Federal Republic of Nigeria (2012) discusses the special education thus; Special education is the education of children and adult who have various learning problems due to various types of handicaps: child born with sight impairment, with partial sight, deaf or part deaf, mentally retarded, socially maladjusted, physically handicapped, etc, as a result of birth circumstance, inheritance, social standing, mental and physical health patterns, or accident in later life. Then there are those intellectually precocious children, who are not contented with the usual course of the normal school, and who will be, in due course of time, more than half tempted into stubbornness and apathy on account of it.

The Balance between Media Representations and Disarming Stereotypes of Children with Disabilities

The media have considerable power to affect the view of children with disabilities by the public, legislators, and society in general (Lidubwi, 2021). Sometimes, however, it resorts to stereotypes, or does not do sufficient justice to the different layers and multifaceted lives of theirs. The media needs to reflect the diversity of the handicap community. This involves offering variety in

illnesses, experiences and perspectives rather than just a few stereotypical stories. Through the evidence of the achievements, strengths, and the real life of the children with disabilities, it is possible to prevent negative stereotypes and create positive social perceptions.

McAndrew, Carroll, and O'Malley-Keighran (2020) affirm that disabled children have much to overcome before they can be acceptable to the society. Some of these barriers are the views, attitudes, and awareness of disability by the general population. Specific research has not been conducted on how disabled children are represented in the media, least of all in the Irish context. The children largely remained to be unheard even in that there were cases of crippled children in the debate. Most reports on the lived experience applied a third-person voice to childhood impairments and provided them with an unnatural voice.

With the help of media coverage, people are able to get to know the various ways of disability, issues that the kids and their families encounter, and what networks are available to support them. This facilitates relationship and understanding. It is necessary to raise awareness but it is important not to understimulated the disability, to create too emotional stories and make people have prejudices and disrespect their dignity as affected individuals. The media expertise should acquire the knowledgeable consent of the children and their families before they use them as the subjects of stories or photos. Respect of rights to privacy and dignity is imperative as well as giving a balanced analysis that is unbiased and acknowledges the challenges as well as the victories that children with disabilities face. This is what makes us better understand their life. Taking everything into consideration, proper and wide media coverage of children with disabilities can help in increasing acceptance and support of the society to the children with disabilities and create more awareness of the general public. It would help to debunk some of the legends, foster recognition and affect positive change.

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on a social model of disability theory according to which attitudes towards disability influence how people think and behave towards the disabled people.



Social Model of Disability Theory

The social model of disability theory is one of the common theories to be used in the course of the study on children with disabilities. The social model of disability theory is a child of the revolutionary cycle of Disabled People that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s in an attempt of seeking self-identity and nation-seeking international recognition right of disabled people. Two organizations emerged as the result of the Movement: The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), and the Liberation Network of People with Disabilities (Inclusion London, 2015).

The Social Model of Disability was created so that disabled people could name and act against the oppression and exclusion of Disabled people. The assumption in social model of disability theory is that attitudes towards people with disabilities influence thinking and behavior of people towards the disabled individuals. The way they are treated and have the ability to participate in society also affects outcomes for disabled people. The Social Model of Disability believes that individuals with impairments are disabled because of the prohibitory mechanisms in the society that bar and discriminate against them. The theory makes a distinction between impairment and disability. Whilst impairment is the distinction held by an individual and is a difference in physical aspects, sensory aspects and cognitive aspects, 1 disability is described as the social outcomes which are produced by having impairment.

The theory best fits in this study on children with disabilities as the disability is explained in the theory as a socially constructed identity where the attitudes, beliefs and physical structures within the society constitute the impediment rather than the clinical or physical impairments which challenge persons with disabilities. The social kind of model of disability is the realization that disability is more of a creation of the society; since the disabled are encumbered to the obstacles presented to them by the society that literally make them unable to participate in the society. According to the model, impaired people are made to feel unwanted in the society through the attributes and the structure of the society and this makes people with impairment feel unwanted to participate fully in the activities in the society. It affirms that the children with disability can only participate equally through equal opportunities like the rest of the children who are not disabled by

providing them with access to education like physical structures of a school building, supportive policies to education and health care and communicative access to interaction and imparting of information and message on them.

III. Methodology

In this study, the research approach used was Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The research was conducted in the Southeastern part of Nigeria which includes Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia and Ebonyi States. These states were selected because they are related in terms of connectedness in political history, language, ethno-cultural beliefs, proximity (Nwankwo & Itanyi, 2019). In carrying out the survey, the population of the study is made of all disabled persons in the five South-East States of Nigeria. There appears an inconsistent number that has been on the disposal with regard to persons with disabilities as per WHO (2024), However, statistical records compiles that of every given population, 15 percent of the number would constitute a system of persons living with one form of disabilities or the other. Therefore the respondents were picked among the school of the disabled situated in the selected states and only eight of the schools domiciled in the three states were sampled to conduct FGD. In this way, the FGD utilized in this study had a sample size of 24 persons. The samples chosen were a blend of teachers, parents and the children with disabilities so that representatives could be attained of the respondents. These subjects were obtained through convenience whereby the researcher has obtained people who were available since the schools in focus were formerly informed of the appointment and purpose of the research. The FGD Guide was applied to the qualitative data that was the Focus Group Discussion. In order to develop the research guide, the facilitator made ensure that is relevant discussions were elicited that were based on the research questions through probing questions. The FGD Guide and the code sheet were answered and approved by the experts in the field of mass communication and who are more familiar with communication issues and health matters that border on communication and health. In the qualitative survey, questions that have been able to probe and solicit responses in the respondents have been formulated earlier by the researcher in the form of Focus Group Discussion Guide.

IV. Result

Qualitative Method of Collecting Data Presentation- Focus Group Discussion



The rendering of qualitative strand of study employed in this research embraced the Focus Group Discussion where in the select group of people including teachers, parents and caregivers of children with disabilities were engaged in open and interaction to investigate research questions of this study that could not be sieved through the newspapers being used.

1. Thematic Presentation of Interviews with Actors

The researcher adopts Focus Group Discussion in this study. Relative to the study which was Newspaper coverage of children with disabilities and perception of select Groups in Southeast, it became necessary to employ the FGD method of qualitative research to have an open dialogue with the select groups which consisted parents, teachers and caregivers of Children with disabilities to have the required study effect in a study like this. Going by this approach, the researcher has been able to unearth information that would not necessarily figure under the quantitative analysis of the newspapers which have been used in this study. When presenting the data, it was thought proper to use themes designed according to research objectives and spontaneous prompts, which prompted the researcher to present the interaction with the select groups in a given way.

2. Exposure to Newspapers

Probes were used to determine the exposure of participants to newspapers in order to determine how pleasant issues affecting persons living with disability were as a way of determining the perception of study groups in respect to frequency and prominence given to issues of persons living with disability in the media: The focus group participants that were interacted in the researcher are identified as Participant 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, to 24 of actual number of discussants used in the study. This was because of identification and confidentiality. In response to the question on how a solution can be found to the mass reporting issue on the disability issues, the Participant 3 indicated that reporters need to visit their schools and homes and report beats on them and highlight the plights of such children to the government and the population. The armed chair reporters are not essential when covering children with disabilities. The reporters need to visit the places where these children live so that they can have the first hand knowledge of how these children are deprived of a good life and know how to translate their story to the members of society and the politicians in the government.”

3. The difficulties that parents of children with disabilities encounter

The facilitator met with the small groups in Ebonyi State to learn of the issues with living with disabilities and find out whether there was possible correlation with the news reported. According to their answers, there are many problems related to living with disabilities: Participant 7 explained the plight of parents with children disabilities this way: It is not that easy to take care of a disabled child. Some of these children are left to their own devices. The parents who lack money and are unable to take the children to special schools that are particular to the condition in which their children are trapped in their homes. As parents we feel bad and demoralized. Another way is that so many parents of disabled children experience the shame of bringing such children out on the streets. Our children suffer emotional disturbances in case of negative reception of the other children towards them, and they feel good when their compatriots accept them.

4. Various problems experienced by disabled children and stigmatization

Based on the discussion carried out in states covered, the researcher came to the understanding that, stigmatization is the greatest enemy of the children with disabilities since they are perceived by people as Witches, *Ogbanje*, and worthless. Therefore, the disabled children as identified through the discovery are frequently neglected, abused and isolated by the larger society. When it comes to the behavioral aspects; Participant answered that, yes the newspapers have created awareness about stigmatization but not much so. His answers read that; when the albinos are born they are poor homes they cannot afford their creams, they have odors and they develop skin diseases and people do not associate with them. The visually impaired people appear aggressive based on what people perceive them to be. There should be a replacement of stigmatization with acceptance The newspapers needed to talk positively on how problems of the children could be relieved and how the society could supplement a way to heal and accommodate the children rather than tagging them as problems”.

V. Discussions

Based on the information regarding FGD, it was demonstrated that few attendees are introduced to reading of newspapers since a range of those with disabilities are affected with blindness and can only



acquire media communications about disabilities through television, radio and internet. The result of this study revealed that there were very few reports about children with disabilities in the Nigerian newspapers analyzed. It was also evidenced by the decrease in the number of stories published during the six months period of study.

When it came to the frequency of reporting on disability by the newspapers, most of the participants believed that the newspaper does not cover them in the same manner that they cover other news stories. To them, newspaper only report disabilities when there is a significant event taking place that involves them like when they are visited by a popular person like government officials, or being celebrated. Some feel that the reports of newspapers on children with disabilities are business news where they pay to publish only their messages, events and interviews. Their visibility regarding the reports on newspapers on children with disabilities is, in general, not exceptional.

With the conversation of the participants, the researcher came to the conclusion that some of these groups see the news that the newspapers are reporting about children with disabilities as their own views of the reporters. This was inferred through their chorus answer, what we read in the newspapers about disabilities in children is what the newspapers write on children with different forms of disabilities.

VI. Conclusion

This study examined how children with disabilities are covered on a daily basis on the newspapers and how the select samples of parents, caregivers and teachers within the Southeast region of Nigeria perceive them. Focus Group Discussion reflected that the target and affected group of children in disability are those that feel that there is overall absence in newspaper stories about children with disability hence, an implication or cause on children with disabilities to create the stigmatization and disorientation on children with disabilities. The researcher played the role of facilitator to the FGD sessions because it was through this that they could interact well with the participants and the study is recorded in the form of smart phone which is later interpreted in the form of thematic during data analysis which was determined by the two research objective with perception of select groups. The FGD has found that despite the perception by the participants that the newspapers are the information crusaders not much information had been published

to convince the audience and discourage stigmatisation and the notions that were little known about the disabilities. Conclusively thus, the Nigerian newspapers have not played its agenda setting role by omitting the children with disabilities among high expectations to the extent that they represent in media channels groups that are affected by the plight of children with disabilities.

VII. Recommendations

In light of the findings and conclusion made in this study, it is found appropriate to suggest the following recommendations:

- a. The media as the agent of change must make sure that issues of disabilities ought to be given a lot of coverage to eliminate the chances of the media contributing to the discrimination and relegation of disabled children.
- b. The skills and knowledge ought to be inculcated to the media professional to report on the problem facing the children with disabilities to ensure access and inclusivity on the contents and news packages on children with disabilities.
- c. Media stakeholders, organizations should provide awards and incentives to the media representatives and encourage journalists to pursue stories on children with disability. This can be done by the provision of media council, UNICEF, World health Organizations and Center for Diseases Control.
- d. The children with disabilities may be trained and empowered in being journalists themselves hence being more interested when news about them is covered and reported about them hence the problem of low frequency and reduced prominence of issues concerning them in the media may become resolved within the shortest time in the future.

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