NIGERIAN CHILDREN'S THEATRE IN THE COVID-19 ERA: A FOCUS ON SOCIAL MEDIA ENTERTAINMENT

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges posed by Covid-19 pandemic to the development of children's theatre in Nigeria and the possibilities of sustaining and promoting it via social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, etc. Using insights from Sandra Ball Rokeach and Melvin Defleur's Media System Dependency Theory and Dolf Zillmann's Entertainment Theory and adopting both the interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) methods, the study argues that the social media entertainment model is an effective means of promoting Nigerian children's theatre in the Covid-19 era because of its capacity to reach out to most children irrespective of distance and time. The study, therefore, recommends that for this aim to be achieved, parents and governments should collaborate with experts in children's theatre studies in the provision of necessary materials and proper guiding of children in order not to expose them to corruptive programmes.

Keywords: Children's theatre, Social media entertainment, Covid-19 pandemic, 'The Crab.'

Introduction

It is common knowledge that an eruption of any pandemic often leads to huge socio-economic losses and colossal health hazards, most times culminating in a large number of deaths. Therefore, in swift response, health experts usually prescribe a number of control measures to check its spread, among which are: i. constant washing of hands; ii. controlled ways of coughing and sneezing; iii. wearing of face masks; iv. ban on large scale gathering; v. adoption of social distancing measures; vi. restriction of/total ban on movements; and vii. temporary closure of public places, such as markets, schools, churches/mosques, stadiums, clubs and theatres, etc. (Ataguba and Ataguba 12; Omoera, Onyemuchara and Okwuowulu 285).

Corona virus, whose latest phase or variant is disturbing nations, is one of the most recent pandemics to invade the globe. Scientists traced its origin to Wuhan, China, at the tail-end of 2019, hence, the name: 'Covid-19.' It then spread with terrifying speed to various parts of the world leaving in its trail many deaths. Poised to checkmate the spread, the World Health Organisation

(WHO) in collaboration with other international and national health agencies and stakeholders introduced some control measures, prominent among which are: maintenance of social distancing, ban on large gathering, restriction/total ban on human movement and temporary closure of schools, places of worship, stadiums, clubs and other entertainment centres, including theatres. The social distancing measure and the total clampdown on public places have, however, impacted negatively on the operation and growth of the performing arts in Nigeria and elsewhere.

It is observed, for instance, that the closure of schools during the lockdown made it impossible for the few existing experts in the field of children's theatre in Nigeria to interact physically and regularly with their students, let alone engaging in practical performances. At the University of Port Harcourt, for example, the hitherto ever-busy University of Port Harcourt Arts Theatre ('The Crab') was under lock and key for several months. The effect is that when academic activities eventually resumed, some of the few facilities in the theatre became rusty, and others even became unusable. Similarly, it was observed that some of the students had lost their acting skills as a result of lack of regular rehearsals. Most of the children that patronised the regular performances at 'The Crab' were equally negatively affected by the closure of the theatre. Three of those interviewed by this researcher expressed displeasure over the closure of the theatre which provided them entertainment. They, however, felt slightly relieved by the few available theatrical/dramatic productions they found on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube, etc., even though they also acknowledged that most of the performances they got online were either exotic or not primarily designed for Nigerian children's consumption. All these triggered the interest of this researcher to embark on this study.

The crucial question, then is: how can Nigerian children's theatre be sustained in the Covid-19 era – characterised by social distancing rules and outright closure of theatres? This article is prompted by that problem and goes on to examine how social media entertainment can serve as a panacea because of its capacity to capture sounds and pictures simultaneously as well as successfully transmit them to millions of children irrespective of distance and time. The study will be anchored in Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin Defleur's Media System Dependency Theory and Dolf Zillmann's Entertainment Theory using a combination of interview and analytical approaches. It will be done in three parts with the first focusing on conceptual issues, a definition of 'the child,' 'children's theatre' and 'social entertainment'; the second on the theoretical framework; and the third on methodology and presentation of data and analysis of responses from interview/focus group discussion on how

social entertainment can be gainfully used to promote children's theatre in the Covid-19 era.

The objectives of the study are to: 1. identify different social media platforms that can be used to entertain children in Covid-19 era; 2. examine the impact of social media on Nigerian children's theatre during Covid-19 era and the role of the parents; 3. assess the possible ways through which social media can promote Nigerian children's theatre in Covid-19 era; and 4. evaluate children's views on the use of social media as alternative platform to children's entertainment. Consequently, the research questions are as follow: 1. What are the different social media platforms that can be used to entertain children in the Covid-19 era? 2. What are the impact of social media platform on Nigerian children's theatre during the Covid-19 era and the role of the parents? 3. What are the possible ways through which social media can promote Nigerian children's theatre in the Covid-19 era? 4. How do Nigerian children view the social media as alternative platforms to children's theatre in the Covid-19 era?

Conceptual Clarification

Towards Defining a Child

"The child" constitutes the focal point in the discussion of children's theatre. It is pertinent to first clarify its meaning before proceeding to other issues. For some inexplicable reasons, it is not easy to define a child; and at present, there seems to be no single generally acceptable definition of a child. Sadeeq captures this point in his remarks that the various existing statutes seem to have varying definitions of the word 'child,' "so that a child is a child in one statute but not a child in another" (81). He specifically states that in Nigeria, for instance, "there is a legislative hesitation as to whether a child is properly to be termed a child, a minor or an infant; nor is this the only terminology to be considered" as "there are also juveniles and young persons to be woven into the legal fabric" (81). He further claims that in *The Children and Young Person's Law of Nigeria*, "a child is defined as any person less than fourteen years while a juvenile or young person is any person who has attained the age of 14 years but has not reached the age of 18 years," but that, the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria comparatively defines an adult as any person that has reached the age of 18 years (81).

Based on this, Sadeeq, concludes that people that are below the age of 18 years can rightly be classified as children (81). For the purpose of this paper, we align with Sadeeq's position that a child is any person that is below 18 years. It is, however, necessary to note, as Omoera has observed, that there are various stages of childhood, namely: early childhood (birth to about 5 years),

mid childhood (6 to about 11 years) and late childhood (12 to about 18 years) (206). Ideally, each stage has a form of theatre appropriate for it.

Children's Theatre: An Overview

Many scholars in theatre and media studies have attempted to define children's theatre from different perspectives. Dennis Eluyefa quotes Rosenberg and Prendergast, for instance, as having defined children's theatre as an art form which "consists of a performance of largely predetermined theatrical artwork by actors in the presence of an audience of young people" (82). The emphasis here clearly lies in the dominantly children audience and the predetermined form of the child-centred performance presented for them. Goldberg similarly defines children's theatre as a "formal theatrical experience in which a play is presented for an audience of children (5). He adds that the goal of children's theatre is "to provide the best possible theatrical experiences for the audience (5). However, in defining children's theatre, some other scholars have stressed the need for children to prominently feature in the performances. Eluyefa, for instance, defines children's theatre as "a piece of performance that involves children as actors/or as audience" (82). He maintains that children's theatre is "specifically created and performed for children audience either by children actors or professional adults or a combination of both" (82). Omoera, children's theatre is "an educational instructional approach which focuses on development through drama; it is a relaxed kind of theatre that is geared towards developing the participants" (210).

The major issue worth noting from all these varying meanings is that apart from being child-centred, children's theatre combines teaching and learning with entertainment, what some theatre scholars have variously dubbed "Entertainment Education" (Moyer-Guse 407), "pleasurable activity" (Omoera 206) and "edutainment" (Chidi-Ukagu 21), among others. The common theory emphasised by the above-mentioned scholars – that children's theatre combines education with fun re-echoes the famous Horatian dictum that the basic function of arts in general is *dulce et util* (to teach and entertain). Aristotle maintains the same view when he asserts that drama is a means through which children learn their first lessons (*Poetics BK IV*). In this study, children's theatre is viewed from a holistic perspective as "theatre that involves children in one way or the other – theatre for children, theatre with children and theatre by children" (Eluyefa 79). As already hinted, a veritable feature of children's theatre is its use of entertainment to teach the children audience various issues of life.

Social Entertainment

Generally, social entertainment refers to the skilful use of the various platforms of the social media to provide entertainment and educational programmes to people. *Merriam Webster* defines the social media as all "forms of electronic communication through which users can create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content" (par.3). However, as earlier stated, the focus in this study is on how to use the social media to provide entertainment for children. In relation to children's theatre, the social media play the dual role of teaching the kids through entertaining programmes, what some scholars now popularly call "Entertainment Education." Moyer-Guse quotes the Kaiser Family Foundation as having defined entertainment education as "a popular strategy for incorporating health and other educational messages into popular entertainment media with the goal of positively influencing awareness, knowledge, attitudes and/or other behaviours" (407). As Luk has rightly observed that:

> The Media and Entertainment (M&E) sector has seemingly moved swiftly in response to Covid-19 by providing online concerts virtually, ramping up e-gaming, offering free entertainment subscription (i.e. communication companies have offered free access to a rotating selection of channels), releasing big blockbuster movies directly online, and animation studios adopting a fully remote working environment…. ("Foreword")

In the same vein, Harson expresses a strong belief that the social media can be fruitfully used to propagate and sustain children's theatre in the post Covid-19 era. As he puts it: While I can't predict the future, I do know that when audiences return, the pandemic's legacy will likely be that it accelerated the arts ability to connect with audiences through technology" (par.6). Though the social media may not offer exactly the face-to-face form of interaction we experienced in the pre-Covid-19 era, it nevertheless provides an alternative and effective avenue for sustaining children's theatre in the post Covid-19 era. Chidi-Ukagu, in a recent study on the challenges and strategies for sustaining Nigerian children's theatre in the Covid-19 era, claimed that the major strategy for sustaining Nigerian children's theatre in the Covid-19 era is for Nigerian children to join the rest of the world and embrace social entertainment which takes care of the problem of lockdowns and the challenges of observing social distancing (26). That same optimism is still being strongly maintained here because:

1. The social media has the capacity to reach out to many children audience in various parts of the globe.

2. The common gadgets (phones) are widely used by parents/guardians of most children.
3. The gadgets can easily be used by most parents and even their children.
4. The gadgets can be conveniently carried along at all times (and to any place).
5. The internet is accessible at any time of the day in most parts of the globe.
6. The various platforms (Facebooks, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc.) have audio-visual qualities which greatly appeal to children.
7. The children can access the performances over and over again.
8. Social media entertainment does not expose the children to large gatherings which can expose them to the much-dreaded Covid-19 virus, etc. This means that social entertainment media is only the way out to children's entertainment in Covid-19 era.

At this juncture, it will be necessary to note that Covid-19 is not the first pandemic the world has ever experienced. Mankind has experienced a number of pandemics at various times, each attributed to one cause or the other. In her illuminating study on pandemics, for instance, Lilly Golden has brilliantly recorded some of the pandemics that have so far ravaged the world thus:

i. **Black Death (aka Bubonic Plague):** This, according to her, erupted in China in 1339, and was later discovered to be caused by bacteria and spread by rats and flea (lice). Golden further asserted that this pandemic led to the death of over 20 million people across the globe.
ii. **Small Pox (aka Variola):** This was caused by Variola Virus and has, according to Golden, existed for over 3,000 years. It was eventually controlled through variolation and finally defeated through vaccination which was invented by Edward Jenner in 1796.
iii. **Cholera:** This is a bacteria disease which erupted in England in 1830s, and later spread to other parts of the world leading to millions of deaths.
iv. **The Spanish Flu of 1918:** The eruption of this pandemic coincided with the World War I and killed over 21 million people across the globe (46-63).

Golden went on to list Ebola virus, which first erupted in Sudan in 1976, HIV/AIDS and SARS as the other major pandemics that have attacked mankind (63).

Theoretical Framework

Media System Dependency Theory

Media System Dependency Theory was first proposed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin Defleur in 1976. The theory states how society, individuals, corporate bodies, industries, children, etc., depend on the media and how the media depend on people for information to give to the general public. According to Pablo Halpern, Ball-Rokeach and Defleur "proposed that a key variable in understanding how, when, and why media messages influence an audience's beliefs, feelings, or behaviour is the degree of audience dependence on media sources of information (4). However, Ball-Rokeach defines media system dependency theory as: a relationship in which the capacity of individuals to attain their goals is contingent upon the information resources of the media system – those resources being the capacities to (a) create and gather, (b) processes, and (c) disseminate information (487).

Baran, citing Ball-Rokeach and Defleur, states that "people become increasingly dependent on media and media content to understand what is going on around them, to learn how to behave meaningfully, and for escape" (424). This is true, for both adults and children depend on the media for their information, education, entertainment and general development. Folkerts and Lacy have described six ways of media influence on individuals as follows:

1. **Self-understanding:** People depend on the media to learn about themselves and to grow as individuals.
2. **Social Understanding:** People depend on the media to learn about the world and their community.
3. **Action Orientation:** People depend on the media to decide what to buy and how to act.
4. **Intervention Orientation:** People depend on the media to decide how to behave toward other people.
5. **Solitary Play:** People depend on the media to divert and entertain when they are alone.
6. **Social Play:** People depend on the media to entertain them when they are with friends and family (420).

Media System Dependency Theory shares some similarities with Uses and Gratification Theory. While Uses and Gratification Theory examines the audience's need for the media and media content and the gratification of those needs, the Media System Dependency Theory explains why we depend on the media content. Because there is so much dependency on the media and their contents, the media now gain power to influence the audience's belief and behaviours. This theory is highly relevant to this study because parents,

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caregivers, teachers and children depend on the media, especially the social media for their children's education, entertainment and general development, more especially now that the entire world is being tormented by the outbreak of corona virus disease which its third waves already destroying many lives. In order to avoid being infected by this deadly disease, the World Health Organisation (WHO) brought out some preventive measures which have already been discussed earlier. Unfortunately, all these preventive measures affected businesses and even children's entertainment life. Therefore, children now seek for alternative entertainment in the social media, hence there is clampdowns and lockdowns because of Covid-19 Pandemic. Concerning the media owners, on the other hand, they also depend on parents, educators and children to watch or download their programmes before they will be able to make profit out of it.

Entertainment Theory

Entertainment Theory was propounded in 1980s by Dolf Zillmann, and his collaborators. It seeks to understand not how we affect the media but more importantly what entertaining media content does to us unconsciously. According to Peter Vorderer and Annabell Halfmann, the reason why Zillmann and his collaborators embarked on their research was to "investigate why and when humour, emotional displays on the screen, retributions executed by characters in film or displayed emotions in movies are enjoyed by the audience" (5). As the investigation was still going on, Zillmann discovered some other theories, such as excitation transfer, mood management theory or affective disposition theory, social identity theory, parasocial interaction and selective exposure. He did not only want to determine the causes of the media usage but also the psychological processes and the effects of such media use. Zillmann's main interest on media users as they consume media entertainment was for them to use it solely for the purpose of managing mood, hence, he proposed the theory mood management theory. But Vorderer in his article entitled "Entertainment Theory" (2003) expressed that Zillmann's entertainment theory has remained weak in the academia in spite of its popularity in the recent times. According to him:

> Discusses whether or not there is an entertainment theory. This author contends that despite the increasing relevance of entertainment, the academic effort to deal with this phenomenon has remained weak. There is, mostly from a critical point of view, research aimed at analyzing and interpreting what entertaining texts, movies, programmes, and so forth, may stand for. But as an established academic field of study, entertainment research does not yet exist. (par.2)

In order to provide a stronger and viable entertainment theory, Vorderer introduced a new model of entertainment theory in one of his articles entitled "What's Next? Remarks on the current vitalization of entertainment theory." In this study, Vorderer developed new context of entertainment; but still based his background from already existing theory propounded by Zillmann and his collaborators in the 80s. In his study, Vorderer introduced a new two-faced model of entertainment. This model encompasses "enjoyment" and "appreciation" as two independent factors. Concerning the media entertainment, however, one of the things every media entertainer looks out for is to ensure that his audience enjoy and appreciate every bit of the media content they consume.

Lewis, in trying to find out the effects of entertainment media on the users, discovered that entertainment media is beneficial to audience's health through laughter. He stresses further that stress is reduced through laughter, that audience mood is also improved, likewise, one's creativity is enhanced and his pain and blood pressure reduced (par.6). He also adds that "educational television does have a major impact on kids" (par.6). This theory is relevant to the present study because entertainment media, especially the social media have served as dependable tools to children's education, entertainment and general development, more importantly in this Covid-19 era when children are being encouraged to seek for alternative sources of pleasure from the social media to avoid being infected by covid-19 disease. The social media, on the other hand, unconsciously exposes these children to the digital world whereby their creativity is being improved, their reading and communication skills as well as their Intelligence Quotient (IQ) are also developed.

Methodology

This researcher adopted both interview and focus group discussion research methods. Ten (10) questions were used to interact with ten (10) selected children (aged 13-16), thus:

1.   Do you know what Covid-19 is?
2.   Do you like watching stage drama?.
3.   Since the outbreak of Covid-19, have you been opportune to watch any stage drama?
4.   Would you like children's theatre activities to remain closed during Covid-19 era until the ban on social activities is lifted up?
5.   Do you know what social media means?
6.   Can you mention some of the social media platforms you know?
7.   Do you believe that social media can serve as alternative platform to Nigerian children's theatre in Covid-19 era?

8. What are the impacts of the social media to Nigerian children's theatre in Covid-19 era?
9. Would you suggest social media platform as a way out to Covid-19 pandemic or electronic media?
10. How can social media promote Nigerian children's theatre in Covid-19 era?

The researcher asked them their views on the use of the social media platforms for the transmission of theatrical performances to Nigerian children in the post-Covid-19 era, given the fact that there may still be the need for people to observe social distancing rules and the like after the ban on theatre might have been lifted. Virtually all the children expressed satisfactory knowledge of the eruption of Covid-19 pandemic and its concomitant ban on social gathering. They also expressed profound knowledge of the social media and its various platforms. Eight out of the ten children gladly recommended the use of the social media because of its accessibility, wide reach and availability at all times. Two others specifically mentioned that one of the main advantages of social entertainment is that it brings audio-visual entertainment right there in the comfort of their rooms, thereby helping them to skirt around the problem of going out at night amidst the curfews imposed by the government. When the researcher asked further whether they could not get similar entertainment from the electronic media (radio/TV/film), they quipped that comparatively, those mediums have several limitations, such as being expensive, having limited outreach and being very bulky, etc. Most of the children also revealed that social media platforms afford them the opportunity to watch the programmes together with their parents and siblings whenever they want thereby cementing the bond among them.

Presentation of Data and Analysis of Responses from Interview/Focus Group Discussion
From the researcher's interactions with the few students on the possible use of social entertainment to promote Nigerian children's theatre in the Covid-19 era, coupled with her personal experiences with her two children, Ihuomachi Chidi-Ukagu (female aged 7) and Chidiebere Chidi-Ukagu (Junior) (male aged 4), she became convinced that the social media entertainment model is, indeed, a useful alternative to physical interaction among children for the purpose of promoting children's theatre in Nigeria in the Covid-19 era. From her interactions/experimentations with those children, the researcher further learned that individual parents can download very entertaining, educative and morally-edifying programmes, especially those with local content to entertain their children at their own convenience.

In larger groups, such as schools and churches, large screens could be used to present pre-recorded performances for children that wear their nose masks and are spaced out according to social distancing rules. However, this researcher is convinced that in order to get optimal results, parents and teachers should continually be available to guide their children and monitor the type of programmes they watch online. In this regard, UNICEF's article entitled *The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a Digital World* has warned that online entertainment, in spite of its many advantages, poses "significant risks to children's safety, privacy and well-being, magnifying threats and harms that many children already face off line and making already vulnerable children even more vulnerable" (8).

Conclusion

This study was animated by the need to explore the effects of Covid-19 pandemic on the sustenance and development of children's theatre in Nigeria. The central thesis espoused in the study is that in light of the occasional closure of theatres, the dearth of large theatres conducive for Nigerian children to converge and engage in theatrical activities, and the need to observe social distancing in order not to contact the Covid-19 virus, the most viable alternative to entertain and educate a vast majority of Nigerian children is to encourage them to join their counterparts from other parts of the world and embrace social entertainment which has to do with using the various social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to transmit and enjoy dramatic and theatrical materials mainly via phones and computers. Using available data, the study went on to argue that, indeed, social entertainment can be profitably used to sustain and promote children's theatre in the Covid-19 era because of its capacity to deploy audio-visual means to reach out to millions of children at the same time irrespective of their different locations. It noted that social entertainment eliminates the risks associated with large gathering and the possibility of contacting the dreaded Covid-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

Nigerian theatre experts and parents should sensitise the populace on the effective use of the various platforms of the social media to entertain and educate Nigerian children in the Covid-19 era. Nigerian theatre experts should research and produce programmes with rich cultural and moral content suitable for the Nigerian child. Parents are advised to supervise and monitor the type of programmes their children watch because bad contents can corrupt children because of their impressionable and vulnerable nature. Programmes selected for children should be as entertaining as they are educative because

children learn through fun. Producers of children's programmes should work assiduously to produce many in order to give the children varieties.

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