

Stigma Toward Mental Health Intervention: The Effects of Urbanization, Social Media, and Culture in Africa

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Abstract: Mental health illnesses such as depressive disorders, anxiety, mood disorders, and substance abuse have been seen to have a positive correlation with increased urbanization and excessive social media (SM) usage. Modern countries are currently combating the effects of urbanization and destructive SM usage. In Africa, urbanization is rapidly increasing the prevalence of SM as well as increasing the number of mental health illnesses found and their effects. All the while, there is a large shortage of trained mental healthcare workers as some aspects of African culture continue to propagate the idea of mental illnesses being spiritual rather than medical. This theoretical paper is a literature review that focuses on how SM, urbanization, and African culture impact stigma towards mental health and the minimal services available in Africa. The article concludes with a discussion on ways that we can ease the effects of SM, urbanization, and negative African cultural perspectives on mental health. There is a need for open and understanding conversations with one another and young people, reduction of destructive SM usage, and support for those who live under increased cultural and socioeconomic pressure in Africa.

Keywords: *Africa, mental health, urbanization, social media, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.*

Introduction

The last 40 years have been full of changes in the way our world functions. These changes have particularly affected the ease of movement, communication, increased population density in urban areas, and the availability of entertainment.

They have also characterized the general trend of social interactions and accessibility to people and services.

Conversations between individuals have gradually transitioned from relying on one-on-one interactions with those that we physically meet, to now being able to talk to and interact with individuals from around the world at the touch of a button using social media and social networking services. The excessive use of social media has been known to be addictive, trigger loneliness and sadness as well as being antisocial (Walton, 2017). In itself, social media can be defined as:

“Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interacting with others” (Huang, 2020).

There are some dangers with the idea of selectively self-presenting. This can distort the mind of the user as they present only the best perception of themselves while they are using social media and social networking services to pursue intimate relationships (Sharabi, 2020).

Furthermore, the growth of urban areas over the last few years has simplified the accessibility of items such as drugs and alcohol as well as excessive amounts of social media, all of which can influence an individual’s thoughts and behavior (Carter et al., 2020). In 2007, The United Nations (UN) estimated that for the first time in history, more people on earth lived in urban areas than in rural areas (Ritchie & Roser, 2018)”. Consequently, there are few but heavily populated urban areas. Although it is difficult to specifically define what an ‘urban area’ is, as this meaning can

differ from nation to nation, it is important to note that, no matter how it is done, the development of a region needs to be done correctly. This helps avoid the wrong type of urbanization from occurring, which is characterized by highly prevalent modern stresses and isolation in packed and congested urban areas (Gizelis et al., 2021; Luciano et al., 2016; Rautio et al., 2018)

Although historically known for sticking to cultural practices, several regions of the African continent have urbanized greatly within the last 40 years. One nation, in particular, is Kenya, which has been urbanizing rapidly. Its public health system has noted a predictable rise in noncommunicable diseases and mental illnesses that are commonly found in urbanizing nations (Onyango & Onyango, 2018). Regardless of these concerns, the nation has found itself grappling with insufficient mental health professionals, reluctant citizens that will not seek mental health intervention, negative stigma towards those with mental illnesses, and a slowly increasing number of mental health disorders with the treatment gap of mental health illnesses in low-and-middle-income countries, like Kenya, reported at 75% (Mendenhall et al., 2018; Onu et al., 2016). This study aimed to discuss the negative effects of urbanization and negative social media usage while highlighting their impact on the mental health of Africans and how this can cause long-lasting issues on the continent due to negative stigma and the aversion of individuals to seek mental health intervention.

Effects of Urbanization

For this study, an urban area is defined as “a place that is officially designated as urban, with 2,500 inhabitants or more whose population resides in a compact settlement pattern and where more than 50 percent of the employed persons are engaged in nonagricultural occupations” (Ritchie & Roser, 2018)”.

Increased Anxiety in Urban Areas

Urban regions are popular among the majority of citizens around the world as they promise higher-paying jobs with modern-style housing available, access to entertainment, and a more exciting lifestyle. A 2016 study assessed patients

that lived in urban areas from 24 Italian mental health centers (MHCs), they were each suffering from anxiety or mood disorders were asked to participate, it was concluded that the main feeling toward life is a major sense of uncertainty and pessimism (Luciano et al., 2016). These same feelings of anxiety and mood disorders are predicted to become more prevalent in Africa as the population is projected to double over the next three decades, with 60% living in urban areas, increasing the pressure on young people to earn a living in extremely competitive jobs (Peterson, 2017; Sankoh et al., 2018; Vearey et al., 2019).

Morbidity and Mortality

The number of years lost to disability as a result of mental health and substance abuse disorders, which are more prevalent in urban regions, in Africa increased by 52% to 17.9 million years; This is nearly the same as years lost to disability as a result of infectious and parasitic diseases (18.6 million) on the continent (Sankoh et al., 2018). Furthermore, suicide rates have steadily been increasing with countries such as Kenya, which is a rapidly urbanizing nation, reporting a 58% increase between 2008 and 2017 averaging 317 suicides per year (2017 had 421 suicides, 330 men and 90 women) (Atallah, 2019). A connection can be made showing a positive correlation between the likelihood of someone living in an urban region developing a mental illness.

Urbanization and Happiness

There is a negative effect on happiness that occurs as people strive to step up to the demands of fitting into the urban lifestyle. In South Africa, the rural-urban migration has reportedly decreased subjective well-being by 8.3% which occurs when the beliefs in the urban lifestyle and dream are met with unfair social-economic structures and increased rates of stress (Collier, 2017; Gizelis et al., 2021; Mulcahy & Kollamparambil, 2016; Sampson et al., 2020).

This behavior and response can be explained by a mental health theory developed by John Watson and B.F. Skinner; *Behaviorism*. It links the resulting negative mentality to the idea that all behaviors are acquired through conditioning,

which in this case would be the conditioning of those who live in rural areas to believe that migrating to urban ones will automatically mean a better life (“The Major Theories”, 2015). As such, when the disappointments do arise after migrating, the individuals may be overcome with feelings of unhappiness and anxiety which can lead to the development of mental illness.

This is the case in the urbanized climate, there is a lot of pressure to keep up with the modern social norms and lifestyle that leads to an increased critical outlook on one’s own life and position in the social hierarchy. The current rate of urbanization on the African continent has been so rapid in some regions, like sub-Saharan Africa which is experiencing a growth rate of 4.1% annually (65 million urban dwellers annually), double that of the global growth rate of 2% (Güneralp et al., 2017; Saghir & Jena, 2018).

It is important to begin to talk to young people, in particular, that are struggling to make a living in these highly competitive labor markets as the pressure will likely increase due to the rising population in Africa. Furthermore, increasing support of the newly graduated individuals to be patient with themselves and work on small successes one step at a time until they get to more comfortable positions in life and work. They must be told of the importance of taking care of their mental health as much as they are also pushed to take care of their finances. Although few, mental health professionals in Africa are available, they should be sought for help before succumbing to the pressures of the urban region. Not much data is available, but there is ample evidence suggesting that many young people, and elders, may ultimately turn to drugs and alcohol which can lead them to develop substance abuse disorders and get addicted (Morgan & Mall, 2019).

The mind can make or break an individual. Self-efficacy and patience are an important part of an adult’s life and they should be informed and supported through the transformative years of their lives as they leave the school world and make their way into the workforce.

Social Media and The Mind

Social media’s effect on the mind has been a controversial topic in the world of Public Health. On one hand, it provides a place that people can communicate with one another, meet new people and learn from others, with the three current giants being Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Contrarily, dependence on social media has continued to raise alarms on an international level. Its dual capability as a place of social enhancement and that for social compensation makes social media a difficult subject to tackle.

A 2018 study of 212 students linked excessive social media use with depressive symptoms in university students, particularly those that use Twitter, where people can follow anyone and read their posts without them necessarily accepting any friend request (Jeri-Yabar et al., 2018). The majority of social media applications have stopped the need for people to be direct friends with those whose content they view, as such this leads them to see any and nearly all content that is not marked as private by the owner. There is an attempt to assess how different social media platforms affect individuals, however, this is difficult as there are many different types of social media platforms and social network services that one can use which can each have a distinct effect on the mind, depending on their usage.

Each of the three giants come with their own niche’s. Facebook, is the most personal as it requires accepting friend request to interact with another person. Instagram primarily focuses on the uses of pictures and videos that people upload of themselves. Naturally, this leads to many posting the best versions of themselves and can fill a user’s mind with impractical body image, travel, business, and relationship standards. Twitter on the other hand does not need any acceptance or friend requests, it is characterized by simply following any user that is found. This can result in a person that feels isolated to have the sense that they are speaking to a larger audience and not just their limited friend group. Regardless of the social media platform of choice, it has been argued that frequent and excessive social media usage leads to increased mental health issues, particularly at a later stage in life (Feder et al., 2020).

Unwise Social Media Usage

There is a great need in our world to safeguard, particularly young people, from the wrong type of material being consumed on social media. The power that it can hold over someone's outlook on their own life should not be underestimated. Worldwide, multiple studies conclude with needing more research into the real correlation between social media and mental health issues showing that, in itself, social media is not truly understood as it is continually evolving through the growth and development of new platforms (Allen & Buzzi, 2020; Feder et al., 2020; Jeri-Yabar et al., 2018). As social media and its use keep on pervading through the widespread and continual increased use of mobile phones, we need to begin the discussion immediately, particularly with the youth, on the importance of smart social media usage. Important discussion points are how long to spend scrolling on social media and social networking services during the day, what pages to follow, the potential effects of the overuse of social media, and how to practice self-control.

Excessive Self-help

One of the dangers that arise from the consistent reliance and use of social media is the potential to self-prescribe interventions. This was reported in a study of 979 men (mean age of 36.0 years) majority of whom stated that they turn to social media to attempt a digital connection when experiencing loneliness (Seidler et al., 2020). People will tend to try and figure out quick fixes online that will help them with their conditions while they sometimes do not even understand what they are going through. There is a range of digital support interventions and digital social programs that can be used for self-help or self-guided treatment but they must be used wisely (Salehi et al., 2020). Misuse or overuse can result in people putting themselves at risk of performing the wrong type of self-help "therapy" and worst of all, following prevalent social trends whose use has become an integral part of advertising (Allcott et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2016).

There is a needed increase of communication and open conversations need to be had and encouraged, particularly on the African continent where discussing sex, drugs, alcohol, and mental

health is looked at as 'taboo' (Agbemenu et al., 2018; McCann et al., 2018).

African Culture

The African continent is the second-largest in the world that is filled with a diverse group of individuals spanning 54 different countries (Mashau et al., 2015). Although there is great diversity in race, ethnicity, language, class, and religion, there are still some similar cultural beliefs about mental health that are prevalent on the continent.

Spiritual Stigma against Mental Health

African culture provides one of the biggest difficulties when dealing with awareness of mental health issues. Some African media continually presents mental illnesses as an effect of being bewitched or cursed which shows a need for improved mental health literacy (Aroyewun – Adekomaiya, 2017; Choudhry et al., 2016; Labinjo et al., 2020). Because of some of these depictions, there are many poor coping methods as well as extremely low social support from neighbors and friends (Sibeko et al., 2016). The culture of treating a mental health issue as a curse or a spiritual event has historically made it easy to build stigma against those who are mentally ill. This has resulted in fewer Africans seeking professional mental healthcare with an annual rate of 14 per 100,000 visits to mental health outpatient facilities while the global rate is 1,051 per 100,000 (Sankoh et al., 2018). Instead, people hide their conditions as they continue to deteriorate.

Cultural Effects on Social Support

There is a very hard reality for those suffering from mental illnesses as they are already lacking sufficient facilities and trained professionals and are now socially isolated as well. Social networks and social support are incredibly important in the happy settlement and continual progression of individuals whether they are living in tough regions of the world or urban cities, particularly if they have any signs of developing a mental illness such as depression or anxiety (Sundvall et al., 2020). Superstition is continually holding the continent and its people back from being able to

provide support and help to the mentally ill in a socially welcoming manner.

It is very unfortunate that the culture also pushes the idea of only turning to God, yourself, or family, as well as excessive positivity, whereby personal issues are encouraged to be met with a positive attitude and smile as “everything will be alright” (Atilola, 2016; Kpanake, 2018). All this does is suppress anyone that could be suffering from a serious mental illness into thinking that it is their lot in life to simply persevere and push through on their own instead of going for help.

Media companies should be monitored carefully and advised to stop promoting the unrealistic idea of witchcraft being a source of mental illness in individuals. Media has a great influence on our society and should be held responsible for the type of ideas it assists to put into people’s minds. There should be an open discussion between people of the older and the newer generations on what the needs, of the children as well as adults of today, are. We should discourage others from saying statements such as, “Children cannot be depressed, what do they have to worry about?.” Instead, we should begin truly listening to one another and try to understand where we are coming from. Children and young adults are people as well. If we do not treat one another with the urgency and respect that is appropriate, the continent will grow separate as the younger generations and millennials have different attitudes towards communication (Ventriglio & Bhugra, 2017).

Conclusion

Social media and urbanization currently play a big role in the perception of mental health intervention in Africa as a continent and the world as a whole. We need to be alert and attentive to the effects they have on the attitudes towards mental health interventions and the prevalence of mental illnesses on the continent. Urbanization, if not done properly, can lead to high amounts of pressure and an increased sense of isolation which can then lead to mood disorders, anxiety, and substance abuse. Instead, we need to work on building self-efficacy among young and older people in society while providing them with affordable and effective intervention methods that are supported socially by both friends and family.

There is no better place to begin to influence the acceptance of mental health interventions other than urban regions where such help can be more affordable and the mix of cultures can make the transition much smoother.

Social media also has an equal if not bigger role to play currently and in the coming years. Its use has continually grown over the past 20 years and it is now a mainstay in most people’s homes and day-to-day lives. We need to learn to effectively use it to strengthen connections with friends and families while creating new and healthy relationships. That is a more positive use for it in comparison to just looking at impossible standards set by influencers and public personas. If not used properly, people can lose their own identity as they continually present the most ideal version of themselves. This can lead to further complications as their satisfaction with their own lives will slowly decrease and they begin to crave online attention and approval which can sometimes lead to extremely negative outcomes. There is a responsibility to make sure that social media use is at the very least talked about if not regulated. Most people that begin to use it do not know of the risks it poses to their satisfaction with their lives as there are many ‘ideal’ standards to strive towards that are mostly just made up to increase the number of followers one has and for monetary purposes.

Lastly, culture is truly precious to each continent and people, however, it is important to know when it is time to revise some aspects of cultural behavior. African nations and tribes have always been deeply rooted in their cultural beliefs that it becomes nearly impossible to suggest new practices. There needs to be an increased sensitivity towards those who have mental illnesses and not just viewing them as bewitched. This will help to greatly decrease underlying stigma against such conditions and potentially lead to working towards increasing facilities as well as increasing the number of mental health professionals serving. However, culture does not simply come from the community as a whole. Each member of the African community has a part to play in any changes that we can make. We each must look at ourselves and think as to whether or not we are supporting change to the perceptions towards mental health interventions,

or we are part of the ongoing negative stigma towards it.

I recommend that we each ask ourselves some of the following questions:

1. How can I help with the perception of mental health interventions in Africa?
2. Do I support the negative stigma against those who are mentally ill?
3. What do I consume on social media and is it healthy for my self-efficacy and mind?

When we start actively introspecting and seeing where we stand in the fight against negative stigma, we may uncover that we have underlying thoughts and feelings that are destructive to this cause. Let us work together to discuss, educate, and empower one another on the topic of mental health intervention. There is a lot that needs to be done while urbanization and social media usage increase in prevalence, but with preparation, collaboration, and open-mindedness, we can be able to decrease their negative impact on our urbanizing society. Mental health is a real problem with real consequences. We need to all step up and find real solutions that will bring a lasting positive change to Africa.

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