

THE ROLE OF ART DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The sudden emergence of COVID-19 in Nigeria did not only usher in lots of advanced disadvantages, but also created advantages which conceived new ways/path for survival, communication, and online social experimentations. This article examines the crucial roles of art during the COVID-19 in Nigeria, and how the pandemic affected the citizens, government, businesses, agriculture, and most importantly, how the medical sector and Nigerian leaders were able to handle the pandemic. Nigeria's political leadership failures, greed and lack of empathy during the COVID-19 lockdown were analysed and the dissatisfaction and critical protest of the masses were also explained. While a comprehensive analysis of the mental stability of Nigerians and digital platforms formed a formidable study for this article.

Keywords: Art, covid-19, politics, leadership, mental health.

Introduction

In 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus had an intensified impact on all areas of the society, including the arts in general. With social restrictions, registration and the introduction of different strict measures, the art world had to adapt to a new way of working and operations. As stated by Fancourt (2019), during the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Kingdom experienced three lockdowns, with many people across the country spending more than a year mostly confined indoors. During the first lockdown of 2020, only key workers continued working outside of the homes while the rest of working adults worked from home or were furloughed. Also, Fancourt (2019) stated that many in-person events were cancelled during the pandemic, so unless otherwise specified, we use the term arts and cultural activities to refer to home-based engagement. They include crafts (such as painting, sculpture or knitting); performing arts (such as dance, drama, and listening to music); writing and reading (such as reading fiction or writing poetry) and cultural events (such as engaging with museums, galleries, theatres or festivals, either in-person or through digital or virtual engagement).

However, during the unbearable crisis, the role of art became even more prominent and an unchallengeable source of comforting ambiance, reflection and inspiration for depressed people and many communities during the difficult times. This article sensitively explores the role of art during the COVID-19 pandemic, and most importantly, how art has powerfully provided comfort, brought different race of people together, and highlighted important social and political issues.

ART AS A SOURCE OF COMFORT

The coronavirus created isolation, fear and uncertainties for many people. In such trying times, art became a source of solace and provided many people with a much-needed escape from the harsh reality of the outside world. From music to literature, from painting to

sculpture, from drafting to crafting, from dancing to acting, art in its creative abundance, powerfully transported people to another world and provided undeniable hope and solace. A perfect example was the rise of online virtual art exhibitions and performances. With the closure of physical spaces and galleries, artists found new creative ways to share their work with the world. Virtual exhibitions and performances allowed people to make sense of rare moments and experience art from the safety of their homes. For example, YouTube and other social media platforms, created an avenue for people to enjoy dramatic art shows from the comfort of their bedrooms. This did not only provide a form of relaxation and entertainment galore, but also served as an alignment of healing and also exhibited the powerful essence of art when faced with difficulties. Additionally, performance art and controlled feasting were also form of self-care for many people during the pandemic.

As anxiety and stress increased, people creatively engaged in artistic activities such as painting, writing, reading, singing, acting and playing musical instruments, which also became a solid form of therapy that helped the individuals to successfully communicate and repair their broken emotions. Furthermore, the act of viewing online dramatic art shows, delicate art tours that showcased beautiful cities and galleries, or experiencing online art auctions has been proven to reduce stress and improve overall health, making it an important tool for a healthy transmission and mental healing. As stated by Marina (2021), who strongly states that, the process of art therapy allows individuals to create a space for self-expression, self-exploration, and enhance their capacity for emotional, mental, and physical well-being.

ARTISTICALLY BRINGING INDIVIDUALS TOGETHER

The coronavirus forced people to fearfully distance themselves from each other, creating feelings of abundant void, loneliness, and curiosity. In immediate response, relentless artists, aesthetes, and also the art world in general found ways to fill the eminent void and successfully brought people together through all forms of art. For example, many artists, whom were also photographers, dramatists and musicians used their social media platforms to host virtual concerts in an effort to reach a wider audience and create a sense of transparent entrainment and communicative community. These virtual concerts did not only provide countless experiments and entertainment, they also brought people from different races together for a social merriment-interaction and educational galore. Oyewole (2020) in his article noted that visual arts has influence on Covid-19 image, since the virus cannot be seen with naked eyes except under electron microscope, ----artists represent the virus image in different media, i.e., colours, digital, mental and plastic were used by artists to express corona virus as a theme or subject for discourse.

Similarly, well-educated street-performance artists used their skills to spread messages of hope and positivity during the lockdown. Numerous wall murals and graffiti paintings designed with motivating letterings like: *We will survive to shake hands and merry again, The best is yet to come, don't give up, After the rain comes rainbows, Stay indoors with your sweet family, your wife is not a witch, Charity begins at home, stay clean, stay at home.* These words appeared comical, but also served has words of motivation and at times entangled people with over emotionality.

Street art decorations also became very common, because many streets were totally deserted, this gave lee-way for few stubborn artists who felt the burning urge to leave their art

studios/homes and make the lonely main roads and walk-ways their creative grounds, because they encountered zero obstruction or distractions. According to Oyewole (2020) the role of an artist in this global pandemic shifts from the studio to the street. The artist becomes a collector of truth, a story teller, a social activist, a social commentator, and a curator of human experience. Many art-warning signs, which appeared in form of flyers/banners, relief sculptures, huge art installations, erupted suddenly in empty spaces that created balance and visibility to the few on-lookers who were either health-workers, mobile food vendors and service personnel. According to Alu et al (2024) categorically explained that their findings showed that the art forms used for public health information were; posters, drawing, graffiti...Art was used for awareness, production, usage direction, protocol materials, and strategic display. This proves that public/street art served as an integral communication to remind people to stay safe and appreciate the efforts of essential artists and workers. Additionally, these works of art also served as a form of spirit-lifting reassurance and added joy and beauty to the hearts of the locked-down communities.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES

It is without doubt that the Covid-19 came with everything that had to do with dissatisfaction that totally affected people's personal lives, the virus also spread and caused social and political problems. In response, artists and civilians used their social media platforms to address these issues and raised positive awareness. For an example, during the covid-19 lock down, the federal government of Nigeria released millions of relief materials/palliatives and food items to each and every state/local government.

It is disheartening to say that most of the Governors, Chairmen, and House of Representatives, including their personal assistances and village rulers hide the materials and food items which ran into thousands and bluntly refused to share them to the ridiculed and starving citizens that could not open their shops, visit their farms, or freely attend to places that their source of income are generated from. According to Igwe (2022), the response to the virus provided new opportunities to exploit the weaknesses in the system to divert funds and food supplies away from the ordinary people who need them most. Palliatives meant for the public were hijacked by politicians and distributed only among party loyalists.

In response, many human right activists, artists and also the highly frustrated Nigerian civilians, used their social media platforms to amplify the voices of marginalized people and demanded social justice. Femi Falana's appeal can't be forgotten, where he boldly accused the Nigerian government of hoarding palliatives and being neither truthful nor sincere in their handling of the coronavirus satiation. Supported by Kayode (2020), in a newspaper article, Human Rights Lawyer, Femi Falana (SAN), has appealed to state governors still 'hoarding' COVID-19 palliatives at different warehouses in the country to distribute the relief items to citizens immediately.

Many visual artists in Nigeria created powerful photographs and installations that evoked the struggle for human-right equality. These sparked a national protests and debates against politicians who were entangled with greed and selfishness, and police brutality was not pardoned. Additionally, it was more shocking for the protesters to find out, when they forcefully broke into giant warehouses used to hoard palliatives, that almost all the materials, mostly the food items were half-way rotten or either spoilt. Items such as: thousands of bags

of beans, rice, maize, and cartons of instant noodles, spaghetti, corn beefs, tin tomatoes, and so many other useful palliatives. Some warehouses located in the remote areas of the North, also had millions of tubers of yam, potatoes, and seed crops meant to be freely given to the poor farmers. Most of these food crops spoilt. This showed the true bitter colours of Nigerian politicians, proving that they were more dangerous than the Covid-19 pandemic.

The high rate of political injustice experienced by vulnerable Nigerians has become a shameful propaganda, even till this very day. A prominent Nigerian cartoonist known as Mike Asukwo, used his cartoon illustration titled *Oracle on Lockdown* to demonstrate the reckless abandonment, shameful acts of Nigerian politicians, and also showcased an abundantly clueless president of Nigeria positioned in the centre of bones, while devastated and hungry Nigerians who seemed to appear as maltreated refugees complained bitterly in front of the president. Properly explained by Odoh et al (2023) states that, in the light of the devastating impact of the pandemic-----the expectation of Nigerians was that President Buhari, like his counterparts in other countries, would be seen as personally leading the fight against the virus outbreak by holding daily or weekly media briefings. However, the President's first address to the nation concerning the COVID-19 pandemic took place on March 29, 2020, a month and two days after the first case of the virus outbreak was reported. This goes a long way to prove how highly redundantly irresponsible the Nigerian political class/leaders were during the pandemic.

Other cartoonist artists also used their works to highlight these issues and advocated for change. These artists gave voice to the voiceless through their art and provided a platform for marginalized communities to directly or indirectly share their experiences and struggles.

THE SENSITIVE ROLE OF THE ARTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The reoccurring restrictions, social isolations and other social hindrances brought numerous challenges in the arts and cultural areas. Total shutdown of companies, industries and factories which lead to people losing their jobs and sufficiently falling into depression. Notwithstanding, the Covid-19 pandemic also paved new ways for in-house arts activities, including digital arts activities, online arts and cultural groups, and streamed performances. As stated by Fancourt (2019) the pandemic lengthened across late 2020 into 2021, hybrid models of engagement and socially-distanced engagement emerged, and since July 2021, the reopening of society has provided more freedom for the cultural industries.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic caused mental and financial hardship, mainly for those whose source of living depended on outdoor buying, selling, and most especially those working in the open market sector, these pushed many people to turn to the arts as a dynamic means of surviving with the challenges of the coronavirus in Nigeria. New ideas emerged, even the healthcare sector joined in by using visual arts to appease their patients, workers, themselves and was even able to raise funds from different organizations who were deeply ready to support the starving people, mostly children and the disabled who had no one to turn to.

However, it is with no reasonable doubt, that during the initial stages of the lockdown, lots of individuals turned to in-house arts and cultural activities, in words of Bradbury (2021), with around 1 in 5 people increasing their arts activity engagement and 1 in 8 increasing how much

they watched arts performances online above usual pre-pandemic levels. It is therefore reasonable to say that the role of art during the Covid-19 can't be undermined, because it helped deeply in averting many challenges which would have erupted and destroyed many lives, ranging from parents, young people, and the physically challenged, but these sets of individuals were engaged with online activities, workshops, and watching more art performances than usual. Even people with autism and mental illnesses participated more actively without any barriers. Not forgetting the involvement of parents who made sure that their children didn't lack educationally, by not only helping to school their kids at home, but also paid accurate attention in making sure that the children were paying adequate attention to the online home-schooling which increased drastically.

SURVIVING DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, realistically, food, water and other life-saving alternatives were very helpful and important, but art engagements were strongly needed to balance the mental state of many people. Such balance included: time spent on the internet watching artistic and cultural shows, creating digital artistic art-craft/games, shows, drama, art-musicals, art motivational live-talks, auctioning of art works and other time-saving creational activities. All these art activities might not have brought absolute satisfaction, but it increased people belief for a better tomorrow and blocked untimely anxiety and depression.

Arts in general have been actively used by numerous individuals as a means of a helpful activity to deal with the unbearable stresses of the covid-19 plague. This is to boldly state that the arts have been found to not only promote beauty, but has also alleviated self-confidence, physiological easiness, and a sense of positivism. These engagements in the arts have deeply helped people to erase discomfoting feelings and reduced the upsurge of suicidal thoughts; by using many specific artistic schemes to cope and regulate emotions, such as online art entertainment that sweetly provokes attention and distract peoples mind from worries. Joining new online art groups and interacting with people from different races, while communicating and trying to learn new languages and skills from them, also helped greatly in self-regulation and improving intellectual capability, self-knowledge and positive emotional alertness to artistic and social-cultural activities at home. All these were totally necessary for the physical and mental well-being of everyone, and these engagements were pursued not just for the love of art, but for art-for-health-sake.

Even with the undesirable effects of the covid-19, it is without doubt that online arts activity sites offered arts establishments and self-employed Nigerian workers the opportunity to still stay in touch and communicate with their customers/clients and promote and sell whatever goods they sold. This helped immensely to stabilize their mental health and well-being. However, there were also many obstructions, including brutally poor or fluctuating internet access, trouble in accessing certain groups due to not having membership codes, and also not being able to go out and fix damaged phones, lap-tops, computers, and other mechanical or electronic devices or tools. Although people were been protected from the virus, but the technological challenges were unbearable and heart-wrecking.

THE IMPACT OF THE CORONAVIRUS ON NIGERIAN WORKERS

Evidence suggests that the Covid-19 led to a significant reduction in revenues in the Nigeria art world, industries and also the agricultural areas. These challenges, such as the inability to

meet up with commercial demands due to the temporary stoppage of face-to-face buying and selling, total suspension of out-door activities and permanent closer of event centers, shopping malls, excitement parks, markets and other places where people gathered for merriment. It was more demoralizing, because employment growth declined brutally and hunger and starvation increased successfully.

Unfortunately, nothing could be done as the death tow of the civilians and the medical workers increased as the pandemic began to spread like an obsessed wide fire. Many educated and uneducated rich people were forced to run back from abroad to Nigeria for safety, believing that the virus was more active overseas. In the midst of all the turmoil, the people who seemed to suffer the most were ordinary Nigerian and petty traders who relied on what they sold for the day to be able to feed their families. Another set of people who were left with zero hope of survival and really felt the effect of the Covid-19 were those who were sacked from their various places of work, due to the companies could not stand the heavy calamities caused by the pandemic.

Notwithstanding, the pandemic challenges continued to excel and the full impact of the pandemic brawled and deeply affected all sectors, raising so many problematic situations that led to many Nigeria workers to struggle with mental health defects, due to an alarming financial difficulty and worries about how to sustain not just themselves but their families.

Some Nigerian workers went as far as selling off most of their properties through online platforms to be able to survive the harsh days ahead. Even those who could not handle laptops had to forcefully learn and rapidly became online warriors from the comfort of their homes, they sold anything they could lay their minds and hands on. The internet became a beneficial factor for survival which rapidly reduced outdoors activities and most importantly, increased unusual bound, creating avenue for families to spend more quality time with unpretentious care.

However, this never stopped the challenges ahead, which includes starvation, fatigue caused from remaining stationary and doing the same task repeatedly and continuously. This ushered in loneliness and increased stress levels. Acute illiterates and hardcore traditionalists found it very difficult and ridiculous to engage with online platforms such as Skype and Zoom, and other online platforms. Most Nigerian traditional herbalists found it highly frustrating and unsuitable for them to communicate with their members and gods to perform ritual and cultural rites. Not only did they encounter technical issues, but many felt that their traditional cultural activities are not suited for the online mode.

THE ASSISTANCE OF ART ACTIVITIES DURING THE CORONAVIRUS EPIDEMIC

An accurate balanced state of mind of a human being is very important for ever individual to function properly. However, a disordered mental defect of humans was very pronounced during the coronavirus tragedy, this triggered lots of acute illnesses, like: high blood pressure, partial stroke, depression and so on. This was where art came in and played a great role to reduce such illness and made sure that the health and psychological wellbeing of its participants were managed and normalized, mostly those who made sure that they found interesting artistic ways of keeping in touch with online social activities and also gregariously

linked up with old and new friends, making sure that the pleasant interactions always ended livelier than outdoor associations.

This created a healthy mental stability for their wellbeing, reducing depression, deleted sudden death from abandonment, and created a greater avenue for newer engagements and recreational activities. The main assistances of art in helping the wellbeing of the online art participants are; it strongly upgraded their mental state and boldly stabilised the mental defects caused by the pandemic, through creative strategies, such as friendly supports, mutual communications, and multi-ethnic interactions. This solidified different races together and evidently reduced low esteem and properly protected many people from losing their lives.

CORONAVIRUS EFFECTS ON THE MENTAL STATE AND WELLBEING OF THE NIGERIAN PEOPLE

Nigerians are known as people who can hardly feed themselves two square meal a day, but still believe that they can become the president of Nigeria the next day. They are also known as people who could walk through fire without shoes, and they could also be dying and smiling at the same time. In general, the normal slogan is: *We must survive, no matter how, anyhow and anywhere, we must survive!* Therefore, the Nigeria people during the Covid-19 pandemic quickly identified with the internet, as a space for survival, through the continuously usage of online cultural and artistic programs to not only enrich themselves, but also to keep busy and block chronic boredom.

From a brief interview done with few Nigerians, it is safe to say that above 80 percent of Nigerians were totally occupied by the internet. Those who couldn't afford to buy laptops, tablets or computers, used their phones which made it very easy to access online activities. Most people became over-night bloggers, content creators, art dealers, artistic comedians, cultural clowns and so on. All these artistic activities helped to balance the mental state of the Nigerians, and without doubt, most Nigerians would clearly say that after medicine, art saved their lives and also positively changed their life's perception.

Agreeably, the artistic activities charged Nigerian's association and engagement in art activities and created more artistic cravings for art activities, such as performance art, poetry, sculpturing, painting, and other satisfactory art activities that strongly helped to destroy depression during the first lockdown. The older adults and people with disabilities were also not left behind, online art activities had special programs for the disabled and other defects that could stop people from online engagements. According to McFarland (2024) results show that older adults aging with/into disabilities express an overwhelming desire and even urgent need to access interactive arts programming from the relatively safe spaces of their homes both within and outside pandemic time. Furthermore, an online art performance program has found that an art musical and painting performance play served as an intervention for the blind, this removed them from a state of solitude and immensely improve their joy. Sian states on her blog, four disabled women locked down, locked in, shut up and shouted down. While the rest of the nation is in meltdown, it takes a lot to phase this quartet. The new terrain is worrying and frustrating but these women are prepared -perhaps they have waited for a moment like this their whole live. She continued by noting, when disabled people feel less connected, potentially more isolated and disabled artists future in the arts is at greater risk. It is an important piece of art representation for disabled people and disabled women in

particular, sharing the life experience of being a disabled person in general and during this pandemic.

ART AS A TOOL OF MENTAL STABILITY AND MANAGEMENT DURING THE PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

In a sincere analyzation, one can boldly say that art is an energetic medicine for curing or managing people's mental state. Many art scholars have tried to express how unavoidable and important art affects or defects human's everyday life activities or mannerisms. It is therefore important to note the specific roles art played in stabilizing people's mental state during the covid19 lockdown in Nigeria.

By virtue, it is common sense to know that for the body to function well, the brain must be in good order to allow a tranquil mood. During the lockdown, unforeseen circumstances became the order of the day and many people found it very difficult to cope. In other ways, most people made sure that they devised different artistic ways of survival, which included, firstly, trying to accept the situation at hand and then positively envisioned themselves in a better state of mind and challengingly channeled all their strength towards creating all kinds of art craft and digital online creative activities, which included digital drawing, painting, drama, poetry and different types of musical and craft exhibitions. All these hugely reduced boredom, frustration, fatigue, sudden death, and also reduced the number of those who solely relied on hard drugs and hard liquor to survive.

As a matter of fact, those who were fully active with online art activities had more organized mood and lived all through the lockdown like nothing happened. As stated by Samantha, in an article, she noted, art positive effects reduced stress and increased enjoyment of having more free time. Most continued creative pursuits throughout lockdown, most commonly shifting to online platforms.

The coronavirus did not only disorganise people's life, but it also reorganized many people's lives and made them see a new way of living through online art activities. This shows that apart from the medical health workers who gave all they had and even their lives to fight Covid-19, art also saved a huge number of people and also curbed the deadly circumstances that would have consumed millions of people. Furthermore, art created an artistic positive impact for people who were literate and illiterates, unprofessional and professionals.

Many artists, illustrators and creative like-minds like Olamide Olasunmade, Emmanuel Eni, Oluseyi Oyenukan, Ayopo Onafowokan, Stephanie Unazeze, Zainab A. Baba, John Adenle, Dotun Popoola, Ijeoma Ogwuegbu, Ken Nwadiogbu, and many others, created works of art that played highly specific roles during the covid-19. Few examples of the works are *Lagos White Cap Chiefs*, created by Ayopo Onafowokan, *You Deserve a Beautiful Life* by Stephanie Unazeze, *The Burning Earth I Saw* by Emmanuel Eni, *Artisanal Production* by Oluseyi Oyenukan, *Koro be Careful* by John Adenle, etc.

CONCLUSION

From the very beginning of creation, it is clear to see that without art the creation of the world wouldn't come to actualization, this proves that God was an extraordinary artist by carefully taking time to create the world and then humans, whom He created in His own village and

image. It is therefore right to say that no matter the situation or condition, art always plays a great role in restoring, resuscitating, enhancing and managing, be it one's mental health, societal crisis, collusion, collapse or emergencies, art always exhibits its profound attributes.

For example, during demonstrations against bad government/governance, racial discriminations, police brutality and crime against humanity, artists and non-artist always use the power of their art to showcase their spontaneous pains, either on huge placards, boards, cardboard, clothes, body art, on walls, plain roads, and any surface their statements or designs can stick to. Most times, the words written on the surfaces serve as silent bullets that shoot into the conscience of those the inscriptions are meant for. This shows how essential art has supported and promoted positive achievement for a better society.

In summary, the solid role of art during the Covid-19 pandemic cannot be ignored or disregarded, this is because art created a tabernacle of peace and gave people an optimism to believe that their tomorrow would be better. It also paved an entrance for new ways and growth even in the midst of antagonistic disarray. Most importantly, it made people to meet new people from different races and merged them tightly in fondness through online virtual expositions and dramatic art plays.

Furthermore, die-hard online art lovers used every artistic means in their disposal to stay afloat with reality and things happening in the society. This moulded them into online artistic warriors, fighting to stay alive, in one piece with an improved art ideology which totally transformed their ways of living and life. It therefore certain that art will forever continue to take the lead in times of societal challenges and will always exhibit its outstanding and powerful expressions through the souls of people who have strongly refused to give into the pandemic fear of stagnancy, oppression, depression, and untimely death, both knowing and unknowingly.

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