

**PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF
UNDERGRADUATE THEATRE ARTISTS IN A NIGERIAN
UNIVERSITY**

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Abstract

Undergraduate theatre artists are performers in an academic discipline with psychological and emotional rigour that sets them apart from other undergraduates and performing artists. This study examined the psychological and emotional well-being of undergraduate theatre artists at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, involving 134 students (56 males, 78 females) from 100–400 levels. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire incorporating a 14-item psychological well-being scale measured on a 4-point Likert scale to assess discipline-specific perceptions and psychological well-being indicators across the six thematic areas. Statistical analysis included descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests to examine gender differences, with significance set at $p < 0.05$. Majority (90%, $n=121$) recognised that theatre arts education demands concern over emotional health. Sixty-one percent (61%) reported having performance anxiety: "often" (48%) or "every time" (13%). Emotional exhaustion during rehearsals affected 57%, exceeding performance-related exhaustion (47%). Therapy needs were reported by 35%, with males showing slightly higher rates than females. Work-life balance challenges affected 40% of students, while 32% experienced difficulties with emotional character separation. Females showed slightly higher mean scores for performance anxiety (2.77 ± 2.36 vs 2.52 ± 2.08). Prevalence of performance anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and therapy needs reveals gaps in mental health support systems within Theatre Arts education. Rehearsal-related emotional exhaustion exceeding performance-related exhaustion suggests that teaching methods may require restructuring to incorporate adequate recovery periods and

emotional regulation training, showing an urgent need for specialised mental health support services, and integration of psychological well-being training into Theatre Arts curriculum.

Keywords: *Undergraduate theatre artists, performance anxiety, emotional exhaustion, mental health, University of Ibadan*

Introduction

Theatre Arts education in Nigeria has faced tremendous changes since the formal establishment of university programmes in the 1960s. Theatre Arts as a discipline is currently one of the most sought-after and offered, with the programme domiciled in foremost universities such as the University of Ibadan (UI), Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), and the University of Lagos (UNILAG) (Oni, 2008; Adeogun, 2018). The University of Ibadan was founded in 1948 and pioneered Theatre Arts as a discipline in Nigeria, and continues to be the flagship institution for the training of creative artists in West Africa (Adeyemi, 2022). The Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan was established in 1962 as part of the School of Drama (Adedeji, 1971; Adelugba, 1984; Ogunba, 2013; Layiwola, 2015; Ayakoroma, 2022), and for the last five decades has grown to create a bridge between theatre training in African performance traditions and contemporary global practices (Adedokun, 1992). The Department of Theatre Arts at the UI has produced renowned theatre arts practitioners and scholars of international repute, and cultural ambassadors who have contributed significantly to African theatre and global performance studies (Balme and Karim, 2023).

Theatre arts programme in the Nigerian university curriculum is structured in a manner that it captures four major areas: performance, playwriting and dramatic literature, technical theatre, and theatre history and criticism (Julius-Adeoye, 2010). In other words, students combine practical training with theoretical courses; participate in semester productions, rehearsals and performances involving physical (Benson, 2010) and mental rigour, and workshops (Goble et al., 2021). The approach to teaching and learning demands a high level of creativity, emotional commitment and lots of collaborative engagements, which ultimately results in some form of academic and personal challenges that are not typical of other academic disciplines (Munna and Kalam, 2021).

One major challenge in theatre education is performance anxiety. Kenny (2016) indicates that up to 75% of performers often experience some form of stage fright or performance-related stress. The study noted that the repetitive cycle of rehearsals, critique, and public performance creates bouts of stress, emotional weight for expression (Benson, 2021), and potential psychological strain. In addition to that, the competitive nature of the creative industry, coupled with the uncertainty that comes with career prospects, contributes to an immense level of anxiety among these students (Henriksen et al., 2022). Another challenge is the financial pressure arising from the need to acquire important specialised materials, costumes, and equipment while dedicating substantial time to rehearsals and productions (Bennett et al., 2021; Stephen-Adesina, 2022; Spiro et al., 2023).

Lecturers sometimes adopt intensive emotional work, including improvisation, method acting techniques, and personal storytelling, which altogether have the potential of triggering psychological responses and requiring students to process complex emotional material (Carnicke, 2009; DeBettignies and Goldstein, 2019). As a result of this, the line between personal identity and artistic expression frequently blurs, leading to a significant impact on the students' psychological well-being and self-concept development (Jones, 2007).

The new age of technological advancement and psychosocial dynamics has brought about a growing concern and recognition of students' emotional and psychological needs. But despite the growing awareness, issues of mental health and support systems in Nigerian universities are yet to be fully addressed (Idoko et al., 2021). According to Kukoyi et al. (2022), 87.5% of Nigerian university students show positive attitudes toward mental health services, but the rate of utilisation of these services remains relatively low due to factors such as poor social support (69.4%) and limited awareness. O'Reilly et al. (2018) indicate that 97.3% of students report that mental health promotion is not adequately emphasised in their educational curriculum, with 74.3% unaware of available support groups, marking a critical need for systematic investigation of students' mental health needs and the development of targeted interventions.

Limone and Toto (2022) suggest that many mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, phobias, suicidal behaviour, and substance use, are prevalent among university students in Nigeria, but the responses from many of the institutions are largely fragmented, overlooked, and under-resourced. Also, the cultural stigmatisation arising from mental health issues in the Nigerian society even complicates the help-seeking behaviour among students, causing severe barriers to accessing available support services (Ogunwale et al., 2023).

Beyond the educational settings, mental illness within the healthcare system also creates a significant treatment gap that is inadvertently pronounced in the former (Qureshi et al., 2021; Pederson et al., 2022). A look at the traditional African viewpoint shows how most psychological distresses are often attributed to spiritual or supernatural causes, which is, at large, parallel to Western therapeutic intervention and causing complexity in developing culturally appropriate mental health solutions (Abbo, 2011).

Despite the growing global concern and recognition of mental health challenges among university students, there persists a significant research gap on the psychological well-being of theatre students, especially in Nigeria (Labinjo et al., 2020). Most studies carried out in Western countries predominantly focus on cases in that climate with limited attention to the cultural, socio-economic, and educational factors that influence the experience of creative arts students in African countries (Gyamera and Asare, 2023). Even in local settings in Nigeria, where and when mental health research is carried out in educational settings, the focus is mostly broadly concentrated on general student populations or specific programmes such as medicine and nursing, paying minimal or no attention to the creative arts disciplines (Labinjo et al., 2020). This gap raises peculiar concerns given the psychological demands of theatre training (Stephen-Adesina, 2019) and the growing enrolment of theatre students amidst the proliferation of universities in Nigeria.

The lack of localised research data showing the underlying challenges, in essence, hampers the development of evidence-based interventions and support systems specifically tailored to the needs of theatre students (Cernasev et al., 2019). Without a knowledge of the existing challenges, coping mechanisms, and resilience factors within this population, educational institutions and the creative industry will

continue to falter in the aspect of implementation of effective mental health strategies (Wiedermann et al., 2023).

From the outset, this study set out to address two specific objectives: (a) to examine the perception of undergraduate theatre artists (Stephen-Adesina, 2022) on Theatre Arts being a psychologically and emotionally demanding discipline (and its peculiarities); (b) to investigate their experience with performance anxiety, emotional exhaustion from rehearsals and performances, their responses to work-life balance in Theatre Arts and their general outlook of therapy and medical interventions specifically tailored to them in their institution of learning. These objectives were accomplished with the aid of a structured questionnaire thematically designed to seek responses to the various expositions (performance anxiety, therapy unit need, emotional exhaustion, work-life balance, and emotional character separation) of psychological and emotional well-being as it pertains to undergraduate theatre artists at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Performance Anxiety

Performance anxiety, also known as stage fright, typifies psychological, physiological and behavioural responses that impede the well-being and performance of an artist (Niering et al., 2023). Beck (1976), in his cognitive behavioural theory (CBT), suggests that performance anxiety arises from negative thought patterns and catastrophic thinking about potential failure or judgment (Knapp and Beck, 2008). Bandura (1977) also sheds light on this concept in his social cognitive theory, emphasising the role of self-efficacy beliefs in determining anxiety levels, where individuals with lower confidence in their abilities are more prone to experiencing performance anxiety. The transactional model of stress and coping by Lazarus and Folkman in 1984 also lends credence to this challenge by suggesting that anxiety is a result of an individual's appraisal of the performance situation as threatening and their perception of inadequate coping resources to manage the demands (Jackson, 2023).

In Kenny's (2016) extensive research on performance anxiety among performance artists, the findings show that theatre artists often experience heightened anxiety due to the vulnerability required in dramatic performance. He asserts that, unlike musicians who may hide behind their instruments, theatre artists must be in the scene

emotionally and physically, bringing about unique psychological challenges. Wilson (2002) identifies factors such as perfectionism, fear of negative evaluation, inadequate preparation, and unrealistic expectations that contribute to performance anxiety in undergraduate theatre programmes. Papageorgi (2021) discovers that 74% of theatre students reported experiencing moderate to severe performance anxiety that affected their artistic expression. Henriksen et al. (2022) remark that the idea of performance anxiety in Theatre Arts varies from other forms of public or private performances for the reason that it involves not just executing technical skills but also doses of emotional authenticity and character embodiment (Stephen-Adesina, 2024).

The resultant effects of performance anxiety can significantly impact the educational experience of undergraduate theatre artists (Cadet, 2021). On the other hand, Mor et al. (1995) show that high levels of performance anxiety are associated with perfectionist tendencies that can hinder creative risk-taking and artistic growth. To cope with this, students may avoid taking on challenging roles or performance opportunities, which ultimately limits their educational development. Chronic performance anxiety can also lead to physical symptoms, including rapid heartbeat, sweating, trembling, and memory lapses (Irie et al., 2023).

Therapy Unit Need

Chow et al. (2022) identify many factors that predispose theatre artists to mental health challenges. The weight of expectations and the need for intense emotional expressions and character exploration can blur the lines between personal and professional identity. In their study on mental health needs in conservatory training programmes, Okan and Usta (2021) find that theatre students reported higher rates of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders compared to the general student population. They reported that student counselling services in institutions of learning are often not equipped to address the peculiar pressures and challenges faced by performing arts students.

Drama therapy, popularised by Jones (2007), uses theatrical techniques to address the needs of theatre students who may find traditional talk therapy insufficient. CBT has also shown effectiveness in addressing performance-related anxiety and perfectionism common among theatre students (Craske and Barlow, 2022). CBT techniques help students identify and challenge negative

thought patterns while developing practical coping strategies for performance situations.

Despite the evident need for therapy, theatre artists often face barriers to accessing mental health services, one of which is stigma. Theatre artists fear that seeking help might be perceived as a weakness or inability to handle the demands of their chosen profession. The concerns about confidentiality in close-knit theatre programmes can deter them from seeking help (Ahad et al., 2023).

Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is of critical concern in theatre education, where students engage in emotional labour through character development, rehearsal processes, and performance (Kuric and Arenales, 2023). Emotional labour involves the regulation of feelings and expression to create publicly observable facial and bodily displays (Walsh and Baker, 2022). In Hochschild's (1983) work on emotional labour, she gives a theoretical foundation to understanding the emotional demands on theatre artists. This process is further intensified in rehearsals and theatre performances as students must not only manage their own emotions but also embody and express the emotions of their characters. Brotheridge and Grandey (2017) note the difference between surface acting and deep acting in emotional labour. Surface acting, on one hand, is evidenced in the display of emotions without actually feeling them; while deep acting, on the other, requires genuine emotional engagement. And more often than not, theatre training typically goes the way of deep acting, which can be more psychologically demanding and contribute to emotional exhaustion.

There is a paucity of studies on emotional exhaustion, specifically among theatre students, but the ones carried out on professional actors give some clarity on this phenomenon. One such study is by Brown (2019), who discovers that actors reported high levels of emotional exhaustion related to the constant emotional regulation required in their work.

The key indicators of emotional exhaustion are chronic fatigue, irritability, cynicism, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach and Jackson 1981). These symptoms may be problematic due to the interference with the emotional availability required for effective performance. Emotional labour can also result

in emotional dissonance, where people experience conflict between their own felt emotions and the required emotional expressions (Stephen-Adesina, 2019). This dissonance can cause burnout and may impact students' long-term relationship with acting (Bakker and Heuven, 2006).

To effectively manage emotional exhaustion, there is a need for both individual coping strategies and institutional support. Grandey (2000) identifies some emotion regulation strategies that can help mitigate emotional exhaustion, such as cognitive reappraisal and emotional expression. Departments of theatre arts across various institutions can incorporate training on these strategies to help students manage the emotional demands of their work.

Recovery practices are equally essential for preventing chronic emotional exhaustion. Pensar and Mäkelä (2023) stress the importance of psychological detachment from work demands during recovery periods. For theatre students, this might involve developing clear boundaries between character work and personal identity.

Work-Life Balance

Greenhaus et al. (2003) define work-life balance as the equal distribution of time, energy, and commitment between work and personal life domains. What does this imply for theatre students? Achieving this balance is complicated by spontaneous and irregular schedules, evening and weekend commitments, and the passionate nature of artistic pursuit. Theatre education poses several challenges to work-life balance. Reid and Radhakrishnan (2003) note that theatre artists often work longer hours than students in other disciplines – their rehearsal schedules often extending into evenings and weekends. This kind of schedule can interfere with social relationships, family commitments, and self-care activities (Enelow, 2012).

Throsby and Zednik (2011) find that performing artists often struggle with work-life balance due to irregular income, unconventional schedules, and the need to maintain multiple revenue streams. These challenges often begin during educational training and can establish patterns that persist throughout careers. Bennet (2021) examines stress and well-being among performing arts students, finding that those with better work-life balance reported higher levels of satisfaction with their training and lower levels of burnout. Poor work-life balance can significantly impact both academic

performance and overall well-being among theatre students, as demonstrated by Grzywacz and Marks (2000). Amabile and Kramer (2007) also show that work-life imbalance can lead to decreased creativity and artistic expression. To promote a safe-haven where work-life balance is encouraged and promoted, techniques such as time management, as suggested by Kearns and Gardiner (2007), should be adopted.

Emotional Character Separation

Emotional character separation is the psychological duty of separating one's personal identity from what is meant to be the emotions, experiences, and characteristics needed to act out dramatic characters. This concept takes root in diverse psychological theories, such as identity theory proposed by Stryker (2008), which suggests that individuals possess multiple identities that can be activated in different scenarios. The challenge for theatre artists, however, is how to develop the ability needed to activate these character identities during performance without losing their personal identity.

Another concept, projective identification, propagated by Klein (1946), also creates a balance to the idea of character separation (Stephen-Adesina, 2017) as it involves temporarily taking on aspects of another person's psychological state. This, however, must be carefully managed to prevent psychological harm while enabling portrayal of authentic character.

On the psychological relationship between actors and their characters, Peng and Ye (2021) find that actors who deeply immerse themselves in character work may experience temporary identity confusion and emotional carryover. Botella et al. (2018) also studied the creative process of professional actors and identified several strategies essential for managing the actor-character relationship.

Difficulties arising from emotional character separation can significantly impact student well-being. Neely (2022) found that theatre students who struggled with character separation reported higher levels of anxiety, depression, and identity confusion. Emotional contamination from character work can also affect academic performance and personal relationships. Students may find themselves responding to personal situations with character-appropriate but personally inappropriate emotional responses,

creating confusion and interpersonal difficulties (Okwuduba et al., 2021).

Methodology

This study adopts a cross-sectional survey design to examine the psychological and emotional well-being of undergraduate theatre artists at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The choice of a cross-sectional survey design allows for the examination of variables at a single point in time, enabling a comprehensive assessment of the current psychological and emotional state of undergraduate theatre artists, with particular attention to gender differences (among male and female artists).

The quantitative approach was adopted to enable a systematic measurement and statistical analysis of psychological and emotional well-being. It also aided in the comparison across demographic variables such as gender and their responses.

It was carried out at the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria, being the first to be established in Nigeria in 1962, offers a comprehensive undergraduate program that spans four academic levels (100-400 level), and provides students with extensive training in acting, directing, playwriting, stagecraft, and theatre history. Choosing this setting was purposive, given the reputation of the department for rigorous theatre training and its diverse student population (representing various ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds). Also, the emphasis of the department on both traditional African theatre and contemporary Western theatre practices creates a unique blend that may present specific psychological and emotional challenges for students navigating between different cultural and artistic angles.

The study population comprises 134 students (56 males and 78 females) in the undergraduate theatre arts programme during the 2023/2024 academic session. They were made up of students across all four undergraduate levels (100-400 level); currently enrolled undergraduate students in the Theatre Arts Department, and present on campus during the data collection period. Graduate students (Master's and PhD levels), those on academic suspension or leave of absence, and students who declined to participate or did not provide complete responses were exempted from the study.

A structured questionnaire was developed specifically for this study, and it comprised several distinct sections designed to capture

information about participants' demographic characteristics and psychological well-being. The questionnaire consisted of 14 items designed to measure various aspects of psychological and emotional well-being specific to theatre artists. These items were developed based on the six key themes identified in the literature: Performance anxiety, therapy unit need, and motional exhaustion (from theatre performance). Other themes are emotional exhaustion (from rehearsals), work-life balance, and emotional character separation.

Each item was measured using a 4-point Likert scale with the following response options: Never (N), Rarely (R), Often (O), Every time (E). The 4-point scale was chosen to eliminate neutral responses and encourage participants to make definitive choices about their experiences, thereby providing more meaningful data for analysis.

Before data collection, the questionnaire underwent content validation through expert review. A pilot study was conducted with 15 theatre artists (not included in the main study) to test the questionnaire's clarity and identify any potential issues. Minor modifications were made based on pilot feedback, including clarification of certain items and adjustment of language for better comprehension. The questionnaire was administered online through Google Forms and shared with the targeted theatre artists.

Data collection was conducted over a three-week practical examination period. The questions, after being thoroughly vetted, were designed on a Google Form, with the link shared to gather responses, which were thereafter analysed using Microsoft Excel. All completed copies of the questionnaire were reviewed for completeness and clarity of responses, with no copies of the questionnaire requiring exclusion due to incomplete data.

Data from the completed copies of the questionnaire were entered into Microsoft Excel for initial processing and cleaning. Data entry accuracy was ensured through double-entry verification, where 10% of questionnaires were re-entered to check for input errors. Any discrepancies were identified and corrected by referring back to the original copies of the questionnaires.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables to provide a comprehensive overview of the sample characteristics and response patterns. These included frequency distributions for categorical variables (gender, academic level), measures of central tendency (mean) and variability (standard deviation) for continuous

variables, percentages and proportions for Likert scale responses, and cross-tabulations between demographic variables and well-being indicators.

The independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine differences in psychological well-being scores between male and female students, and students who believe theatre arts demands emotional health concern versus those who do not. The t-test was appropriate for comparing means between two groups and determining whether observed differences were statistically significant.

For ethical consideration, consent was obtained from the students during the course of data collection in line with the Social Sciences and Humanities Review Ethics Committee (SSHREC), University of Ibadan. The process involved review of the study protocol, questionnaire, informed consent procedures, and data management plans to ensure compliance with ethical standards for human subject research.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Spread across the Ages, Gender, and Academic Level

Percentage Distribution of Respondents' Demographic Characteristics			
		Frequency	Percent (%)
Age	17-20	65	49
	21-24	57	43
	25-28	5	4
	29 and above	7	5
Gender	Male	56	41
	Female	78	59
Level	100	47	35
	200	28	21
	300	34	25
	400	25	19

Discipline-Specific Perception

Table 2: Respondents' Perception of Theatre Arts as an Emotionally Demanding Discipline

Is Theatre Arts a discipline that demands concern over emotional health?	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	121	90
No	13	10

Of the entire study population, majority of respondents (90%, n=121) acknowledged that theatre arts is a discipline that demands concern over emotional health, while only 10% (n=13) disagreed with this statement. This shows a high level of awareness among theatre artists regarding the psychological and emotional demands inherent in their discipline. The near-consensus recognition of emotional health concerns suggests that students are cognizant of the unique psychological challenges associated with theatre training and practice.

Psychological and Emotional Well-being Scale

Table 3: Responses of Male and Female Participants to the Various Thematic Questions

General responses	Never (N)	Rarely (R)	Often (O)	Every time (E)
Performance anxiety	9 (7%)	44 (33%)	64 (48%)	17 (13%)
Therapy unit needs	34.6 (26%)	53.4 (40%)	33 (25%)	13 (10%)
Emotional exhaustion (performance)	29 (22%)	41.7 (31%)	46.7 (35%)	16.7 (12%)
Emotional exhaustion (rehearsal)	21 (16%)	36.5 (27%)	55 (41%)	21.5 (16%)
Work-life balance	16.5 (12%)	64 (48%)	44 (33%)	9.5 (7%)
Emotional character separation	32 (24%)	60 (45%)	33 (25%)	9 (7%)

Table 4: Comparison of the Responses obtained from Male and Female Respondents

Response Category		N	R	O	E	Total	Mean±SD	p-value
Performance anxiety	Males	4	22	27	3	56	2.52±2.08	0.285
	Females	5	22	37	14	78	2.77±2.36	
Therapy unit needs	Males	11	22	15	8	56	2.36±2.03	0.165
	Females	24	29	13	12	78	2.17±1.89	
Emotional exhaustion (performance)	Males	11	20	21	4	56	2.32±1.95	0.158
	Females	18	22	26	12	78	2.41±2.10	
Emotional exhaustion (rehearsal)	Male	6.5	18.5	24.5	6.5	56	2.55±2.16	0.189
	Females	14.5	18.5	30	15	78	2.58±2.26	
Work-life balance	Male	5	24	23	4	56	2.46±2.04	0.289
	Females	11.5	40	21	5.5	78	2.26±1.87	
Emotional character separation	Male	10	28	16	2	56	2.18±1.77	0.289
	Females	22	32	17	7	78	2.12±1.79	

Discussion

Recognition of Emotional Demands in Theatre Arts

A large number (90%) of respondents in this study admitted that theatre arts is an emotionally demanding discipline. This supports the findings of Bascomb (2018) on the emotional demands of theatrical training and practice. The high level of awareness among theatre students in Ibadan could be indicative of likely findings by other researchers across theatre programmes in Nigerian institutions. Some researchers have consistently acknowledged that individuals studying performing arts are more susceptible to mental health challenges than the general public. While this study has not contrasted the findings between theatre artists and the general student population, it makes a case for what is obtainable among the latter. Loveday et al. (2022) assert that those working in the music industry and, by inference, theatre artists often report levels of anxiety and depression significantly higher than the general population. The present findings in this study suggest that this vulnerability can be recognised early to help provide opportunities for proactive intervention.

Performance Anxiety

The discovery that 61% of theatre students experience performance anxiety “often” (48%) or “every time” (13%) satisfies a preconceived notion that resonates with other literature on performance anxiety by

Panoutsos (2021). Steptoe et al. (1995), in a study involving 178 students of dramatic arts in London, find that 9.6% considered stage fright to be a severe problem, while 36.7% regarded it as a moderate problem. Performance anxiety in theatre arts has been well-documented, with researchers saying that it stems from "a performer's fear of an adverse reaction or evaluation of their performance" (Bascomb, 2019). The prevalence observed in this study is consistent with international findings, where performance anxiety is recognised as a common experience among acting students across various cultural contexts (Bounds, 2017).

Interestingly, while females showed slightly higher rates of severe performance anxiety, the statistical analysis revealed no significant gender differences. This challenges some stereotypical assumptions about gender and anxiety in performance. The physiological basis of performance anxiety has been explained through the body's "fight-or-flight" mechanism, where stress and anxiety about performing trigger symptoms similar to those experienced in actual danger (Chow and Mercado, 2020). This understanding is crucial for developing appropriate interventions for theatre students experiencing these challenges.

Emotional Exhaustion

This study revealed concerning levels of emotional exhaustion, particularly during rehearsals compared to performances. This pattern suggests that the intensive and repetitive nature of rehearsal processes may be more emotionally demanding than the actual performance, corroborating Taylor's (2017) findings on the cost of heavy emotional strain that rehearsals and performance have on performers. The higher result in rehearsal-related emotional exhaustion might also be attributed to the extended periods of vulnerability coupled with repeated emotional toil and the iterative nature of character development.

Unlike performances, which are designed with stop-points, rehearsals are prolonged and excessively engaging without that cathartic release that accompanies audience interaction and completion of the latter. Barbayannis et al. (2022) identify academic stress as a significant factor affecting mental health among university students, with homework overload and assessment pressure being

primary stressors. These academic pressures are even complicated by the emotional demands of character work and public performance.

Therapy Needs and Mental Health Support

The 35% of respondents reporting the need for therapy services shows a significant gap between the mental health needs of most students and the availability of these services to cater to them. This goes further to elucidate the broader concern about mental health support in higher education, where academic stress has been shown to have serious effects on the physical, psychological, and behavioural well-being of students (Barbayannis et al. 2022). The gender differences, though not statistically significant, show males with higher rates of frequent therapy needs compared to females. This challenges stereotypes about help-seeking behaviour among both genders. It could potentially reflect a shift in male students' attitudes toward mental health support, or could, in fact, indicate that they experience certain pressures that create high therapy needs.

Work-Life Balance and Character Separation

In response to challenges of work-life balance, 40% of the respondents said they feel overwhelmed by the intense nature of theatre education. They admitted that the boundaries between academic work, personal development, and artistic expression often get blurred. The relatively lower prevalence (32% experiencing problems "often" or "every time") in their response to character separation indicates that most students develop adequate psychological boundaries or "coping mechanisms" during character work. However, the others who struggle with this face a peculiar challenge, as difficulties in separation character can have lasting effects on personal identity and emotional stability. Brown (2019) and Taylor (2017) showed that acting can put enormous mental strain on performers, especially when emotional boundaries become unclear.

Implications for Theatre Education

It is noteworthy that performing arts have positive effects on mental health, such as reducing anxiety through improved sociability and provision of stability in new situations, but the intensive nature of the professional training creates specific vulnerabilities that require targeted intervention (Fancourt and Finn, 2019). Kosma et al. (2023) demonstrate that structured performing arts programs can

significantly improve mental health, quality of life, and creativity in university students. However, these benefits appear to be hinged on appropriate support systems and recognition of the potential challenges inherent in intensive artistic training.

Conclusion

In this study, when the respondents were asked about their mental health, a remarkable finding emerged. The students demonstrated a clear awareness of the emotional toll associated with their craft. This is not naive idealism; rather, it reflects a notable level of awareness among young artists regarding the significant emotional and mental demands of their craft. Such awareness may enhance their openness to support through counselling services and the adoption of practical coping strategies. But knowing the problem is not enough if there are no solutions and support systems created. The data tell a sobering story: more than six out of ten students constantly struggle with performance anxiety. While this echoes what researchers found in other climes, it hits differently in a Nigerian educational setting, where the attitude toward mental health adds layers of complexity to the mix. The response to emotional exhaustion during rehearsals and performances was equally challenging, suggesting that the approach to rehearsal schedules might need an overhaul to protect their emotional and psychological well-being. Perhaps most concerning is that some of the respondents admit to requiring professional therapy. In a country where mental health services are scarce on university campuses and seeking psychological help still carries some form of stigma, this represents a genuine concern. Interestingly, male students were slightly more likely to express this need, which challenges the popular stereotypical assumptions about who asks for help. While fewer students reported struggling with character separation or balancing their academic and personal lives, these issues still matter. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made: First, universities need to establish mental health support systems tailored to the unique needs of creative students, rather than relying solely on generic counselling approaches that treat Theatre Arts like any other discipline. Second, emotional skills should be taught alongside acting techniques. Theatre artists should graduate knowing how to manage stress, separate from difficult characters, and regulate their emotions. Finally, theatre educators must be trained to

identify and support struggling students, adopting a holistic approach that values theatre artists beyond their creative or artistic expression or output.

Notes on contributor

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