



Data & Art Therapy for Mental Health Challenges

A case of creative artists during the COVID-19 lockdown in Uganda.

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Contents

i Acknowledgements

1 Executive Summary

2 Background and Introduction

3 COVID-19 and Mental Health

4 Research Objectives

5 Methodology

Study site, participants and sampling procedures.

Data analysis.

6 Results

Mental health issues faced by creatives during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Effect of COVID-19 lockdown measures on the creative mental health status.

Coping with mental health challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Using artistry to create awareness on mental health.

11 Discussion

13 Way Forward

16 Conclusion

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Authors: Report led by Nyamwire Bonnita and Ayazika Phillip

Local Partners:

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Executive Summary

This report is by Pollicy and it explores the effect of the COVID-19 lockdown on mental health of creatives in Uganda. It documents their knowledge, attitudes and perception on mental health issues and shines a light on existing support systems that creatives can use to get mental health support.

Addressing the coronavirus pandemic required governments to put in place effective responses to curb the spread of the virus. Among the measures employed by the Ugandan government was the temporary ban on following public gatherings, meetings and activities;

- Schools and institutions of higher learning.
- Bars and cinema halls.
- Prayers in churches, mosques and open air prayers.
- Marriage ceremonies, wedding parties, vigils and funerals except those in which no more than 10 people were gathered.
- Public meetings, including political rallies; conferences; and cultural meetings.
- Indoor, outdoor concerts and sports events.
- Trading in live animals at places designated for this purpose by a local authority.

Whereas these measures had many ripple effects, we acknowledge that they had a massive effect specifically on the creative sector whose major source of livelihood was dependent on in-person engagements like indoor and outdoor concerts. As a result creatives battled a series of mental health disorders including anxiety, depression, stress and suicidal thoughts.

Creatives were found to have insufficient knowledge on mental health issues especially how to deal with it and where to seek support. The attitude towards mental health was positively reflected in how they remained cheerful and happy and willing to work within themselves to create support systems that work for them. Through this research we also found out that creatives perceived mental health in different ways depending on mainly social class.

We hope that this report will be a useful resource for government policy makers, creative groups, activists, and mental health institutions in Uganda in their work of streamlining the creative sector as well as improving mental health services.

Background and Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. Any abnormal deviations from a positive mental health state is a problem that needs to be addressed on a local, national, and global level. The WHO further estimates that 80% of people living with mental disorders live in countries of low resource settings¹. Additional statistics from WHO show that mental illness accounts for 30% of the non-fatal disease burden and 10% of the overall disease burden worldwide, including death and disability². In 2018 the global mental health disability magnitude was estimated to be a 10.7% and this has profound effects on individuals' quality of life, physical and social wellbeing as well as economic productivity³.

Despite the high prevalence, mental health remains an area that is given low priority in Africa with services for people with mental illness under- resourced, inadequate and inequitably distributed⁴.

Although there are people who are at higher risk of developing a mental health or behavioral disorder, every person is prone to developing a mental or behavioral disorder, no matter their background⁵. In addition, just like any disorder, a person can have more than one; it is estimated that one in seven people (11-18%) worldwide are diagnosed with more than one mental disorder⁶.

Uganda, is ranked among the top six African countries with high rates of depressive disorders at 4.6% and anxiety disorders at 2.9%. Additionally, 60% of the population suffers some form of mental illness including depression, anxiety disorders, and elevated stress levels⁷.

¹. WHO, Depression and other common mental disorders: Global health estimates. 2017.

². <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/mental-health>

³. WHO, 2001 https://www.who.int/mental_health/advocacy/en/Call_for_Action_MoH_Intro.pdf

⁴. Phillipa Bird et.al, Increasing the priority of mental health in Africa: findings from qualitative research in Ghana, South Africa, and Zambia. Health policy planning, September 2011, Vol 26, Issue 5, pages 357-365.

⁵. Dorsey Shannon et.al, A qualitative study of mental Health problems among orphaned children and adolescents in Tanzania. Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease: November 2015 - Volume 203 - Issue 11 - p 864-870.

⁶. Hannah Ritchie, Global Mental health: five key insights which emerge from the data May 16, 2018.

<https://ourworldindata.org/global-mental-health#:~:text=Around%201%2Din%2D7%20people,4%20percent%20of%20the%20population.>

⁷. <https://www.apa.org/international/global-insights/uganda-mental-health>

COVID-19 & Mental Health

The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic in the early months of 2020 and classed it a major disaster⁸. Uganda registered its first COVID-19 case on March 21st 2020 and national containment measures including travel restrictions, physical distancing, a ban on social gatherings, closure of non-essential services and businesses were put in place to prevent the spread of the coronavirus⁹. On this backdrop one of the measures taken was cancellation of all public music and dance festivals and live concerts, closure of exhibition places, galleries, recreation centers, studios among others. These inexorable circumstances which are beyond normal experience, led to stress, anxiety, fear and a feeling of helplessness in all and significantly have an impact on mental health of creative artists in Uganda¹⁰.

In Uganda, like most African countries, mental healthcare was already weak with 310 personnel working in mental health facilities (1.13 per 100,000) with only 1% of the health expenditure going to mental health and only 0.8% of the medical doctors and 4% of the nurses with specialisation in psychiatry¹¹. The pandemic exacerbated this already limited mental health services in Uganda with patients avoiding seeking mental health services from health facilities for fear of contracting the virus but also due to the already existing stigma associated with mental illness. Coupled with this was the elimination of elective medical services and restricted movements that hindered people from going to health facilities¹².

Understanding existing community perceptions of mental health is vital to establishing successful practices to address mental health challenges. There is a dearth of data about mental disorders among creatives including writers, actors, dancers, craftsmen, fashion designers, painters, poets among others in low resource settings despite the growing numbers of these creatives.

⁸ Cucinotta D, Vanelli M. WHO Declares COVID-19 a Pandemic. *Acta Biomed.* 2020 Mar 19;91(1):157-160. doi: 10.23750/abm.v91i1.9397. PMID: 32191675; PMCID: PMC7569573.

⁹ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/uganda-declares-curfew-to-curb-spread-of-covid-19/1785775>

¹⁰ <https://thisisafrica.me/arts-and-culture/peace-exhibit-african-artists-fighting-depression-covid-19/>

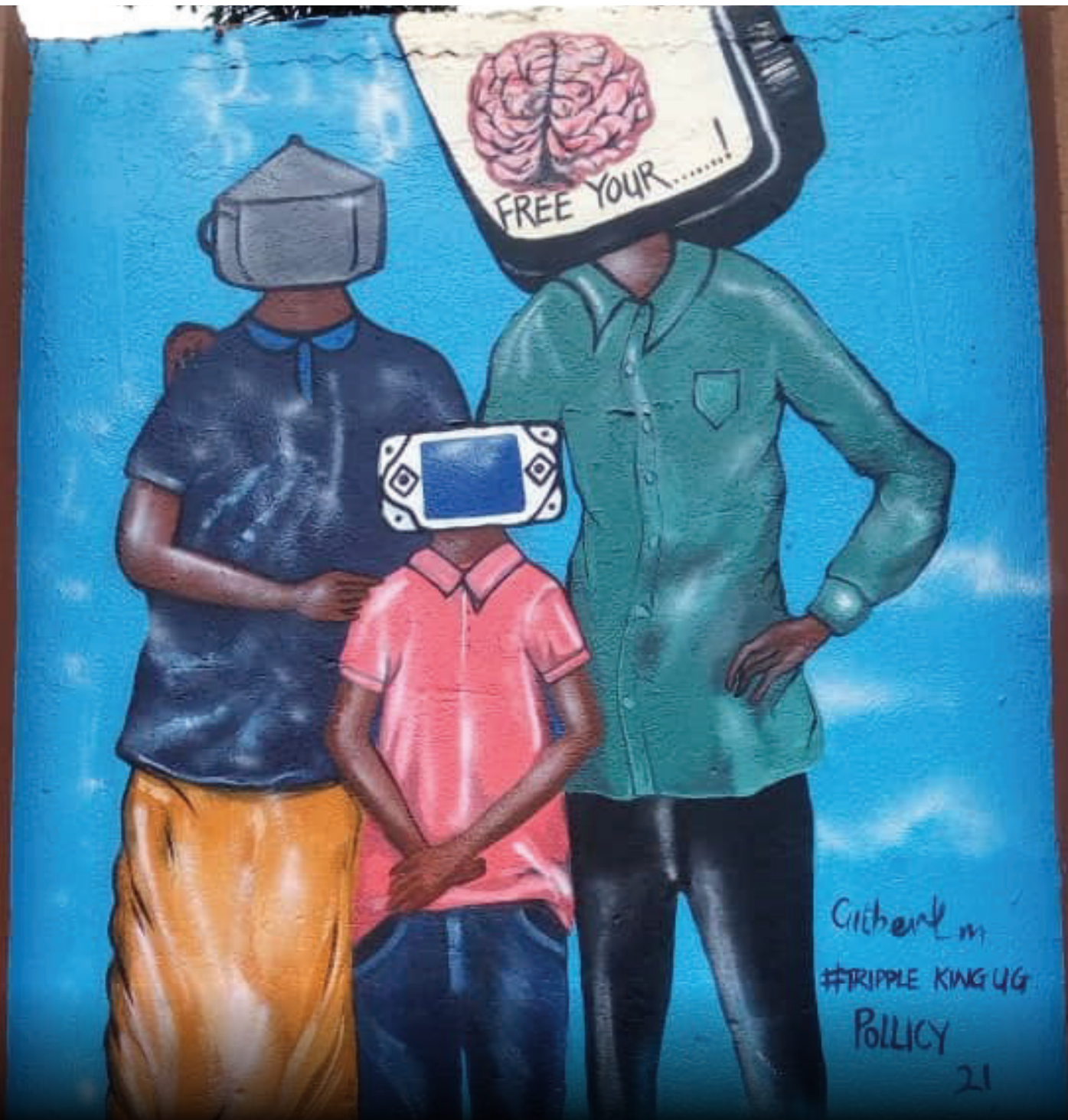
¹¹ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/41561281_An_overview_of_Uganda's_mental_health_care_system_results_from_an_assessment_using_the_World_Health_Organization's_Assessment_Instrument_for_Mental_Health_Systems_WHO-AIMS

¹² Kigozi et.al. An overview of Uganda's mental health systems: results from an assessment using the World Health Organization assessment instrument for mental health systems, 2020.

Research Objectives

The present study was conducted with creatives from communities in Kampala and Jinja to understand their experiences in relation to their mental health as precipitated by the measures that were put in place to control the spread of COVID-19. The goals of our project thus were to;

1. Establish the effect of the COVID-19 lockdown on the mental health of creatives.
2. Understand creatives' coping mechanisms to mental health challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown.
3. Understand how the creative arts can be used to create awareness on mental health.



Methodology

Study site, participants and sampling procedures

An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted to better understand experiences of creatives in relation to their mental health during the COVID-19 lockdown in Kampala and Jinja. This paradigm affords a rich and in-depth insight into this under-researched issue. Focus group discussions were undertaken with creatives from different communities in both Kampala and Jinja.

Purposive sampling informed participant recruitment. Creative artists living and working in Kampala and Jinja aged between 18 years and above were included in the study. A focus group discussion guide was developed based on a review of literature and in consultation with mental health experts. Open ended questions were used to explore four overarching topics, i.e. effect of COVID-19 lockdown measures on mental health of creatives, coping mechanisms for mental health challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown, pathways to create awareness on mental health using creative arts, and measures to better mental health among creatives. Focus group discussions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. At the end of each main section of the discussion, the researcher summarized the content to ensure the participants' perspectives were obtained and interpreted correctly. A verification process that enhanced the credibility of the findings was also done, whereby creatives that we interviewed were invited to validate the data.

Data analysis

Transcripts were read and re-read to obtain a broad understanding of participants' sharing their experiences of the COVID-19 lockdown measures on their mental health. Mindful of the overarching framework in which the questions were asked, we developed codes and themes inductively from the data that were used in writing the report.

Results

One hundred and twenty (120) creatives took part in 8 focus group discussions across Kampala and Jinja. More than a quarter (n=37, 31%) were female, and the majority (n=83, 69%) were male. All participants were creatives including painters, choreographers, poets, craft makers, dancers, musicians, writers, Disc Jockeys, fashion designers. The results are structured in sections that look at the effect of COVID-19 lockdown measures on the mental health of creatives, how creatives coped with mental health challenges during this same period, how creative arts can be a remedy to create awareness on mental health for a creative person, and finally measures to better mental health among creatives.

Mental health issues faced by creatives during the COVID-19 lockdown

The many restrictions imposed to control the spread of coronavirus including social distancing, travel restrictions, closure of non-essential services increased to more than three months which led to a rise in mental health challenges like stress, anxiety, and depression among creatives.

Creatives reported loss of sleep, anxiety and anguish, revealing that because of the pressure to provide for their households amidst a curtailing of their sources of income like performances and concerts pushed them to become violent in their homes. They would try to create art products as days went by and work for long hours but the distress persisted as one participant narrated:

“ At first when they stopped public transport, airports closed. I thought it was for one month, but it went on, and I lost hope because I had dreams and plans that were shattered. Our biggest market as creatives was closed, because most of us Ugandans work for daily income, without work you can't eat that day. So the little money we had was used up during that time, I became distressed, hopeless, confused, anxious, my attitude changed, I could not interact with people, I isolated myself a lot and I got angry with everybody and quarrel with them and I am no longer focused like before.

Fgd participant Jinja.



Effect of COVID-19 lockdown measures on the creative mental health status

“ You reach a point and you just can't do anything, you get to know you've become a total waste. You try to paint a picture and nothing is coming up and you can't tell what you are doing, and the fact that you can't create you feel you are trapped, you are just there existing.

FGD Participant, Kampala.

From the business side of things, some of the creatives are still being affected; Almost a year later, the arts and performing sector is still under lockdown locked; they have not been allowed to operate. Among these are the nightclubs, live concerts held by musicians, theatres are still closed and companies and individuals they used to collaborate with, that used to give them work some have closed down, while others are operating at lower costs thus not giving them work like before. Since most creatives draw the inspiration to create from their surrounding environment, most of them found themselves not creating anymore because they were not going out anymore, there was nothing to inspire them to create which triggered emotional moments, stress, and depression among other mental health challenges. Others revealed that they experienced weight loss as one focus group discussion participant recounted his experience:

“ I had a friend I used to talk to on a daily basis during lockdown about the different challenges he was facing since he was not working. And then at some point things became too much for him and he had a mental breakdown. Later on I got a call from his family indicating his situation had escalated, till now he is in a psychiatric hospital trying to get treatment.

Fgd Participant Kampala.

However on the positive side, some creatives saw this as something that triggered them to work more and devise other means of survival. For example some of them reported learning other ways of selling their products as one participant revealed that most of them had not embraced online platforms to market themselves and their products but did adopt them during this time. Others learnt that they can create products which can be sold to the people around where they live but at lower cost and this meant looking at the current situation and creating what relates to the situation like for instance skits and dances that created awareness on early marriages, ending domestic violence since these were also effects that came with the lockdown measures. Also creatives revealed that they also learnt they need to diversify their livelihoods to not only depend on creative products. So some of them began other income generating activities like selling clothes, farming, bakeries etc.

“ The Covid thing from my perspective as a musician, we had no music, we used to make shows and everything was down. Things moved fast and it taught us how to be creative so we have to prepare ourselves for anything that would happen, creating or thinking about other ways of getting money, boredom made us learn other ways of selling our products online like live streaming which was not common in Uganda. So we tried to be more creative.

Fgd participant Kampala.

For many creatives, there isn't a consistent flow of income, the kind of employment is largely informal and so the financial status at times is not steady and so was the period during the lockdown as most creatives looked back on their finances and going through this period was hard.

Coping with mental health challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown

It was revealed that most creatives we talked to do not quickly realize that they are facing mental health challenges. A few creatives we talked to reported talking with some people around them who seemed to care to give a listening ear despite that they would not know what to tell them on how to go through the mental health challenge. Such people they would talk to include friends and fellow creatives and it was further added that those who did talk to such people in most cases did not have families, parents, relatives that understand the mental health issues they were going through. As a way of fighting depression, they experienced during the COVID-19 lockdown, some creatives reported that they created arts /products that depicted their situation; pieces of art, music. Others reported they resorted to drinking alcohol and

substance use.

Despite that some individuals were able to talk and open up to some people around them, most of them found a hard time opening up to people because of the stigma related to mental health and the fear of being judged by the community. It was revealed that the community tends to think that those with mental health issues have been bewitched or have some other traditional issues which has them carry their shame and move on.

“ I developed sickness for two weeks and the first week I was like it would end, but it went on so I went into a depressive mode very uncomfortable. Then to make matters worse, when I realized I could not manage staying in Kampala, I had to go to the village. So I go to the place, I don't know anybody there and I have trust issues. So I was like it's crazy, I was in a room alone, I started losing weight, like ah...I was going to die. It was a really bad experience. I took time to get used to people around me and fortunately where I was living there was a place which had a bar so I could enter close by and serve myself alcohol to help me forget the challenges I was facing.

Fgd Participant Kampala.

Creatives also shared that there are some structures within the community where they would go for support but most of the people they would go to are not empathetic which further discouraged them from seeking support from outside their circles. They revealed that one being empathetic helps them to understand the person with a mental health challenge, because if they do not understand you it will be difficult for them to help you. Additionally participants revealed that this is because mental health is more practical thus talking to someone with mental health challenges requires you to relate to their problem and understand the cause, despite not having gone through it but which will help you to sort it.

So even if there are structures like Village Health Teams (VHTs)¹³ charged with strengthening delivery of health services at household level in the community, it was revealed that they do not understand the weight of mental health challenges creatives are dealing with. Coupled with this is that where

¹³[http://library.health.go.ug/download/file/2218#:~:text=Village%20Health%20Teams%20\(VHTs\)%20were,services%20at%20house%2Dhold%20level](http://library.health.go.ug/download/file/2218#:~:text=Village%20Health%20Teams%20(VHTs)%20were,services%20at%20house%2Dhold%20level)

creatives tried to go for mental health support, the services were expensive. A practitioner would go for about 100USD for an hour session for any mental health challenge.

Using artistry to create awareness on mental health

Ensuring that the mental health of creatives is stable is of utmost importance because creatives depend on their mental well being to be able to create and deliver. Any deviation in their mental well being leads to pressure and stress that affect them mentally. All this coupled with the pressure to create quality work products, is the everyday struggle of a creative.

It was established that most of the creatives have tried to use creative arts to heal when faced with mental health challenges. Some of the creatives suggested use of music with a matching dance style and costume. They went on to add that music has been known to have a healing effect on an individual's mental health.

“ I feel like people have come to appreciate art, our generation, we know people are appreciating Art, people have come to appreciate music, dance, poetry, and through all these things people actually get a relief kind of feeling. They relate to these people. There is a writer I know of and something that pushes her to write the way she does is she went through alot of mental health challenges, she went through a lot of things. So because of that she started writing her music. When people listened to it they started to understand and it has helped people to heal mentally.

Fgd participant Jinja.

On the other hand, painting and other sculptural work was thought to be intense and engaging thus an individual ends up diverting their energy, concentration, thoughts to this activity, to what they are creating thus dealing with the mental health issues they are facing. All the energy is used to create something other than thinking about issues that could disrupt their good mental health state. The fact that one is occupied means they don't have time to stress and get depressed. Creative arts help one to open up and those around them realize the problem thus look for a solution to that challenge.

Art is used to depict what is going on. Additionally it was revealed that creative arts can create awareness better to creatives because they relate to it.

“ Creativity and mental health tend to go hand in hand. You look at a painting and it speaks to you, when you read a story one has written and in fact you’re probably one of the characters and in doing so there’s a way we relate, there’s a way we merge with what we are reading, the music we are creating, the pictures we are painting. So as creatives we are a remedy, art is a way of healing, it pleases us, it takes away the negativity, it is a way of healing. As you heal you are talking to people and keep telling them your experiences and they also open up to you, you find that you are not alone.

Fgd participant Jinja.

Discussion

In this exploratory study we reviewed the experiences of creatives in relation to their mental health during the COVID-19 lockdown. We found that most of the creatives we talked to experienced stress, depression, anxiety, hopelessness, loss of sleep and other emotional moments. We further found out that there was a lack of mental health services for those that experienced mental health challenges and to go through these experiences most of them turned to friends and family for support while others resorted to alcohol and substance use. Self-stigma and society inflicted stigma associated with mental illness was mentioned as hindering the desire to seek mental health services or support when they were faced with mental health challenges. Possible reasons that may have led to these groups being at a higher risk of developing a mental health condition could involve having greater loads of stress, feelings of exclusion, and the inability to connect and to create outside their homes, a lack of available treatments and resources. This is in agreement with a study to examine the mental health of music artists where 30% of participants experienced symptoms of depression, anxiety and sleep disturbances¹⁴.

Further findings of this study revealed that Individuals avoided or delayed seeking professional help for mental health challenges and this was attributed largely to stigma associated with disclosure of mental health status which thus was seen as a key deterrent to help seeking or delay in seeking professional help for mental health problems. In addition, creatives are often reluctant to

¹⁴. Jolan Kegelaers et.al, Performers of the night: Examining the mental health of electronic music artists. Sage journals Jan 5, 2021.

approach mental health services within their own community because of shame and concern about breach of confidentiality. As a consequence, many creatives are caught in a paradoxical situation as they are often unwilling to access services within their own community and are reluctant to approach mainstream mental health services. A systematic review on the impact of mental health related stigma on help seeking revealed similar findings, where stigma on disclosure concerns ranked fourth highest among barriers to mental health help-seeking¹⁵.

Delay or avoiding seeking mental health services may significantly lead to worse outcomes like major depressive and anxiety disorders, bipolar disorders and adverse pathways to care.

In this present study we found out that artistry like music, dance, paintings, poetry, stories, have the ability to create awareness on mental health among creatives. Arts engagement within creative art communities is ubiquitous and previous research has suggested its benefits for mental health and wellbeing. It is considered as a health promoting model capable of improving emotional expression, social interaction, relaxation and cognitive stimulation. This finding is in consonance with what was found out in study on painters where frequent arts participation and display and cultural events, were found to be associated with lower levels of mental distress and higher levels of life satisfaction, with arts participation additionally associated with better mental health functioning¹⁶.

¹⁵. Clement S.et.al. What is the impact of mental health related stigma on help-seeking? Systematic review of quantitative and qualitative studies. *Journal of Psychological medicine*. 21 Feb, 2014 Vol 45, Issue 1.

¹⁶. Wang.s, Mak H.w & Fancourt,D. Arts, Mental distress, mental health functioning and life satisfaction: fixed effects analyses of a nationally representative panel study. *BMC Public Health*. 2020. Vol 20, Issue 208, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-8109-y>



Way Forward

Creative artists we talked to in this study suggested some measures that can be adopted to counteract the effects of the lockdown measures on the mental health of creative artists.

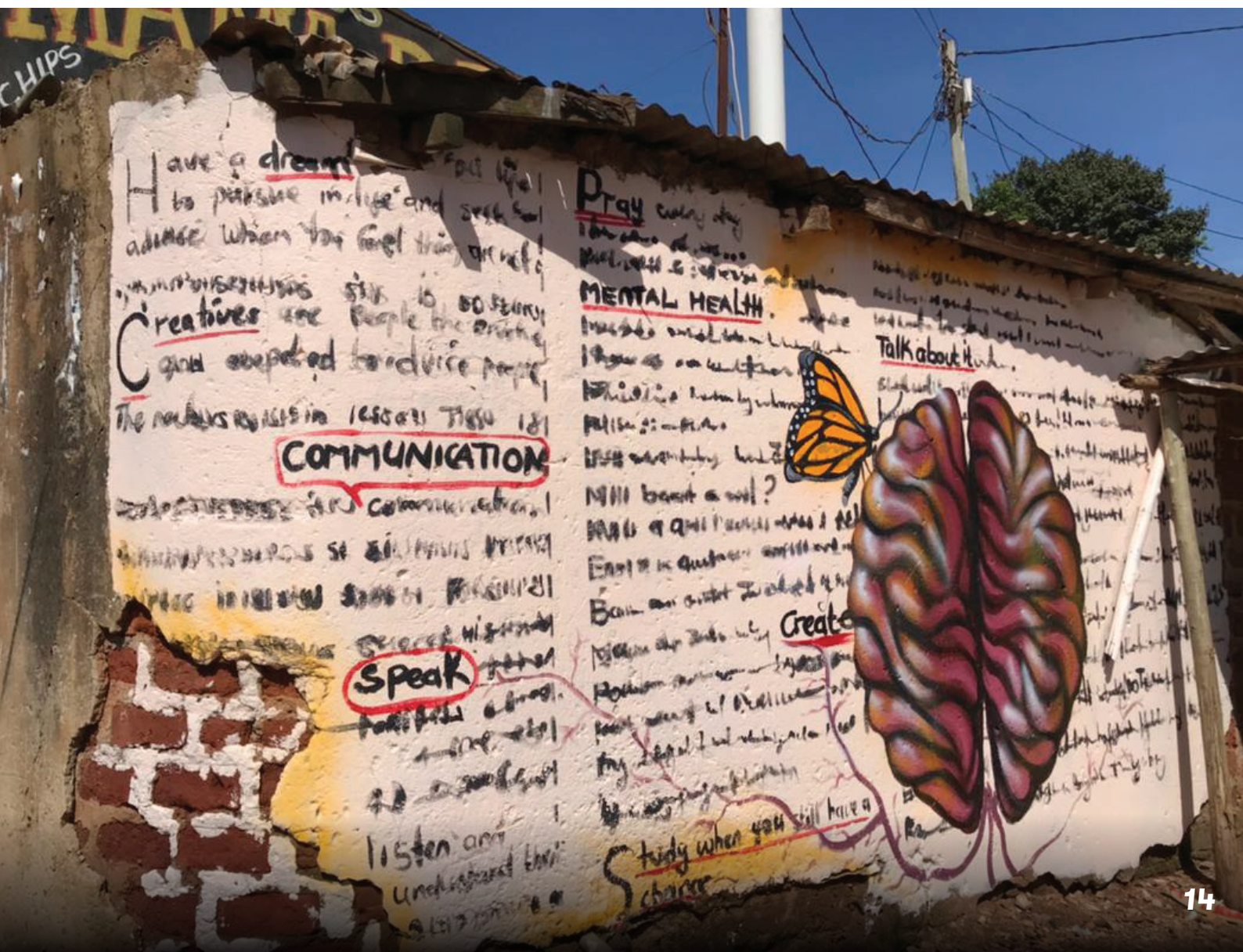
Holding meetings/getting together through social connections on a quarterly basis as creatives to talk about their mental health status, learn from each other and accept each other was one of the measures suggested. This would help to build resilience through social connection and create a more concrete platform, a foundation onto which to start helping themselves even before going to talk to mental health professionals. Such social connections can be online and offline in safe spaces where creative artists feel free to express themselves.

Additionally they raised the importance of having creative artists peer networks that are trained in basic mental health so as to support the creative community. These can be linked to an established referral system where they can refer to severe mental health cases and those with persistent mental health challenges. Since the pandemic imposed restrictions that can lead to a loss of control, one way suggested by creative artists to claw back some of that control was to be more creative and flexible as well as find new ways of livelihood rather than just resigning to the situation. Livelihoods mentioned they could engage

in small-scale farming, bakery projects, selling clothes and other forms of merchandising.

Subsequently Pollicy worked closely with creatives from Kampala and Jinja through data artistry to shine a light on the mental health challenges that creatives have experienced as well as supporting them to understand how they can use data and art as an advocacy tool in the community on mental health issues.

Using a combination of the data that was collected from this research and the visual art, we jointly installed a series of murals around Kampala locations like Najjera, Mutungo-Biina slum and Gayaza as well as in Jinja on Main Street and Walukuba. These murals are educative and have brought citizens attention to the mental health issues that not only creatives but communities are battling with and how they can be handled. Additionally a song was created speaking to issues of mental health, de-campaigning the stigma that exists in communities and how social support structures can go a long way in tackling these issues.





Pollicy and partners; Mental Health focus Uganda also supported creatives to put in place social support structures that can handle mental health issues. Here several creatives were trained to be able to integrate issues of well being in the creative hubs like Vodo Art Society and the Creative Tribe, this way these conversations on mental health stop being looked at as alien but normalised to support those battling them.

Our study was not without limitations and one major one was the small sample of study areas thus results may not be generalizable to all the creative artists in Uganda. Future research may like to consider creative artists from other districts. However one of the strengths was that we considered different types of creative artists who do different types of arts or cultural activities.

Conclusion

Overall our results show that the COVID-19 lockdown measures had a huge effect on the mental health of creative artists. Importantly we found out that there is a gap in seeking help for mental health services as well as availability of these services. Additionally our results show that creative arts have the ability to create awareness on mental health among creatives. Further research is encouraged to explore the potential of creative arts as a public health intervention for mental health in Uganda as well as identify other initiatives that can be directed at safeguarding the mental health of creative artists. Findings can also be used to design interventions to increase help-seeking for creative arts individuals with mental health challenges.

