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Incorporating Trauma Literacy in Nigerian Journalism Curriculum: Views from Ebonyi Rookie Journalists

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Abstract
This study examined the integration of trauma literacy into the Nigerian journalism curriculum, drawing on in-depth interviews with 22 rookie journalists (final-year mass communication students) from Ebonyi State University. Guided by Constructivist Learning Theory and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the research assessed awareness of trauma literacy, evaluated the benefits of integrating trauma literacy into the journalism curriculum, identified the barrier affecting the implementation among others. Thematic analysis revealed low explicit awareness of trauma literacy despite experiential familiarity with emotional distress from covering violence, accidents, and conflicts. Participants perceived significant benefits for personal resilience, ethical source protection, and employability in Nigeria's insecurity-laden media landscape. Key barriers included curriculum rigidity, lecturer expertise gaps, and cultural stigma around vulnerability. Proposed strategies emphasized embedding trauma content across core courses via experiential pedagogies, partnerships with mental health experts, and policy advocacy. Findings indicate that students construct fragmented trauma knowledge through informal experiences but require guided reflection, simulations, and mentorship to achieve trauma-informed competence. Integrating trauma literacy emerges as essential for ethical, sustainable journalism education in conflict-prone contexts as is the case in Nigeria today. This helps to transform intuitive awareness into professional mastery. This study underscores the urgency of curriculum reform to equip Nigerian journalists to report responsibly while safeguarding their wellbeing.

Keywords*:* Trauma literacy, Trauma journalism, Journalism education, Constructivism, Zone of Proximal Development, Nigeria media,

Introduction

Journalism remains a cornerstone of democratic societies by informing the public, shaping civic discourse, and holding those in power accountable. Yet, behind the essential role journalists play lies significant emotional risk. Reporters often confront disturbing scenes of violence, disasters, and human rights abuses in the line of duty. Repeated exposure to such events can lead to emotional strain, moral conflict, and even long-term trauma (Feinstein, 2006; Newman et al., 2003). Despite these realities, many journalism training programmes in Nigeria lack structured education on trauma literacy, leaving future journalists poorly prepared to manage these professional and psychological challenges.

Trauma literacy refers to the ability to understand, recognize, and respond to trauma in ways that reduce harm to both victims and journalists themselves (McMahon and McLellan, 2008).

It encompasses knowledge of trauma's psychological effects, ethical practices for sensitive reporting, and strategies for emotional self-care. The absence of trauma literacy in journalism curricula can lead to insensitive reporting, retraumatization of victims, and inadequate mental health support for journalists who cover distressing stories (Adjin-Tettey and Asuman, 2025; Hight and Smyth, 2002).

Integrating trauma literacy into the Nigerian journalism curriculum is vital for journalism students, media organizations, and the public at large. Nigerian journalists routinely cover stories involving terrorism, insurgency, natural disasters, and communal violence. Training in trauma literacy helps journalists approach such coverage with greater empathy and professionalism. It enables reporters to handle interviews with survivors sensitively, to protect victims' dignity and privacy, and to avoid sensationalizing their experiences (Simpson & Coté, 2006). Beyond improving individual ethics, trauma literacy can help restore public trust in journalism through more humane and balanced reporting.

Trauma-informed education also safeguards the mental health of journalists. Coverage of tragedies and violent conflict is emotionally taxing and can lead to burnout or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Feinstein, Audet and Waknine, 2014). Within Nigerian newsrooms—where journalists frequently work under high-risk conditions—few institutions provide structured psychological support or debriefing opportunities. Integrating trauma literacy into training helps journalists develop coping skills such as peer support, self-reflection, and timely professional intervention (Dworznik & Grubb, 2007). These practices can build long-term resilience and reduce emotional exhaustion.

Moreover, trauma literacy enhances accuracy and credibility in news coverage. Trauma-related stories require nuanced understanding and careful framing to avoid perpetuating stereotypes or misinformation. Journalists with training in trauma literacy are better able to interpret emotional contexts and convey events truthfully without exploiting victims' pain (McMahon and McLellan, 2008). By emphasizing empathy, context, and factual integrity, trauma-literate journalists contribute to more informed and responsible public dialogue.

In the Nigerian context, where conflict and hardship are frequent news subjects, trauma literacy also strengthens ethical crisis reporting. Reporters covering insurgency or communal clashes must navigate ethical and safety challenges while avoiding narratives that fuel further tension. Trauma-informed journalism equips them with tools to conduct fair interviews, protect sources, and frame stories in ways that support peace and understanding (Akintayo & Abati, 2022; Miye et al., 2024).

Institutionalizing trauma literacy in journalism programmes could also inspire more supportive newsroom cultures. When media organizations appreciate the emotional toll of reporting, they are more likely to offer counseling, implement ethical guidelines, and organize debriefings after traumatic assignments (Noor and Hameed, 2024). Such measures improve working conditions and uphold journalistic integrity.

Beyond journalists and institutions, trauma literacy benefits society as a whole. Ethical, sensitive reporting raises public awareness about mental health, human rights, and social justice. Rather than sensationalizing suffering, trauma-informed journalism highlights resilience and collective recovery, encouraging empathy and policy responsiveness (Hight and Smyth, 2002).

However, implementing trauma literacy in Nigerian universities faces multiple obstacles. These include inadequate awareness among educators, a shortage of qualified trainers, rigid

curricula, and enduring cultural stigma around mental health (Seely, 2020). Nigerian journalism education already contends with limited funding and outdated infrastructure, making new curricular inclusion challenging. In addition, resistance to pedagogical innovation and the undervaluation of mental well-being hinder progress. Even within media houses, formal mental health support and trauma debriefing policies remain rare (Feinstein, Audet and Waknine, 2014).

Preliminary observations suggest that mass communication students in universities such as Ebonyi State University have limited familiarity with trauma-informed reporting. While students may discuss ethics broadly, few receive systematic instruction on how trauma affects both sources and journalists. This reveals an urgent need to integrate trauma literacy into journalism education—so that future practitioners report with empathy, precision, and resilience in an increasingly complex media environment.

Statement of the Problem

Journalists frequently operate at the forefront of distressing and traumatic events; however, trauma literacy training remains largely absent from most journalism programmes in Nigeria. This educational deficiency exposes emerging journalists to heightened risks of emotional distress and leaves them unequipped to navigate the complex ethical issues inherent in reporting traumatic incidents (Aoki et al., 2013). Furthermore, the absence of trauma literacy increases the likelihood of inadvertent harm to victims through the perpetuation of stereotypes and the failure to practice trauma-sensitive journalism (Seely, 2020).

In light of Nigeria's growing incidence of crises—including terrorism, communal violence, and natural disasters—there is an urgent need to examine mass communication students' awareness of trauma literacy and the potential benefits of incorporating it into their curriculum. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the perceptions of mass communication students at Ebonyi State University regarding the relevance and necessity of trauma literacy within journalism education, ultimately assessing its role in enhancing their readiness for professional challenges.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to determine the importance of incorporating trauma literacy in Nigerian journalism curriculum. Specifically, this study:

1. Examines the awareness of trauma literacy among mass communication students in Ebonyi State University.
2. Assesses the benefits of incorporating trauma literacy into the Nigerian journalism curriculum.
3. Identifies the challenges and barriers to implementing trauma literacy in journalism education.
4. Ascertains the strategies for integrating trauma literacy into the mass communication curriculum in Nigerian institutions.

Conceptualizing Trauma in Journalism

In this study, the concept of trauma begins with the evidence that journalistic work frequently entails direct and indirect exposure to violence, disaster, and human suffering, with well-documented psychological consequences. Empirical research with war and conflict reporters has shown elevated rates of post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, and

substance use among journalists repeatedly exposed to armed conflict and atrocity, establishing trauma as a predictable occupational hazard rather than an exceptional outcome (Feinstein, 2006; Feinstein et al., 2018). Studies of newsroom workers and photojournalists further demonstrate that repeated viewing of graphic images and intense, deadline-driven coverage of distressing events can lead to intrusive memories, emotional numbing, and compassion fatigue, even among those who are not physically present at scenes of violence (Dworznik, 2011; Feinstein et al., 2014; Newman et al., 2003). Reviews of journalists' mental health in different regions, including low- and middle-income settings, confirm that these problems are global and often occur in environments where stigma and weak organisational support make help-seeking difficult (Aoki et al., 2013; Noor and Hameed, 2024).

Within this empirical landscape, the study conceptualises trauma literacy in journalism as a composite competence grounded in both psychological and ethical knowledge. Drawing on practice-oriented guides and empirical work on trauma-informed journalism, trauma literacy is defined as journalists' understanding of the nature of psychological trauma; their ability to apply trauma-sensitive interviewing and storytelling practices that respect dignity, consent, and context; and their capacity to recognise and manage their own emotional reactions through self-care and peer support (Hight and Smyth, 2002; Seely, 2020). Studies of trauma-focused training show that students exposed to structured content on PTSD, victim–survivor dynamics, and coping strategies report greater preparedness for emotionally demanding stories and demonstrate more critical attitudes toward sensationalist or exploitative coverage (Dworznik and Grubb, 2007). In African and Global South contexts, authors have argued that this literacy is particularly urgent, given the high prevalence of conflict and disaster reporting and the relative scarcity of institutional support mechanisms (Adjin-Tettey & Asuman, 2025; Osemobor, 2022; Ogunyemi and Price, 2023).

The study also conceptualises trauma literacy through the lens of constructivist and experiential learning theories. From a constructivist perspective, learners actively build their understanding of trauma by integrating prior experiences such as exposure to distressing content, internship stories, and cultural narratives about "strong" journalists with new conceptual tools provided in the classroom (Fosnot, 2013; von Glasersfeld, 1995). Piaget and Inhelder's view of cognitive development as progressive reorganisation of schemas suggests that trauma literacy involves reworking naive ideas about toughness, objectivity, and risk into more nuanced frameworks that acknowledge vulnerability and ethical responsibility (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008). Bruner's emphasis on the cultural nature of education underscores that these meanings are negotiated within particular social and institutional contexts, including journalism schools and newsrooms that may valorise stoicism and silence (Bruner, 1996; Hanitzsch, 2007).

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) provides a further conceptual layer by positioning rookie journalists as operating just below the level of trauma-informed competence they will need in practice. They may already notice emotional strain and ethical tensions but lack the vocabulary, strategies, and support structures to respond constructively. In this framework, educators, trauma-aware practitioners, and peer groups act as "more knowledgeable others" who scaffold learning through case studies, role-plays, debriefings, and guided reflection (Tharp and Gallimore, 1991). Experiential learning theory reinforces this emphasis on practice: Kolb (2014) argues that deep learning arises from cycles of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation,

a pattern well suited to trauma literacy modules built around real or simulated coverage of traumatic events. Eraut's (2004) work on informal learning in the workplace and Wenger's (1999) notion of communities of practice suggest that much of journalists' trauma-related learning currently occurs informally and untheorised in newsrooms; embedding trauma literacy into formal curricula can therefore provide crucial conceptual anchors that shape how such informal learning is interpreted and internalised over time.

Finally, the study situates trauma literacy within debates on curriculum and educational change in journalism. Constructive alignment, as articulated by Biggs and Tang (2011), implies that if programmes claim to prepare students for demanding, trauma-laden reporting roles, intended learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment must explicitly reflect this goal. Schiro (2012) reminds us that curriculum designs embody particular value orientations: curricula that focus narrowly on technical skills risk marginalising emotional, ethical, and safety concerns, whereas a more critical, human-centred vision aligns better with trauma-informed aims. Fullan's (2016) work on educational change and Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2017) synthesis on effective teacher professional development both highlight that meaningful integration of trauma literacy will require not just new content but also sustained capacity-building for educators and institutional support for innovation. In sum, the study conceptualises trauma literacy as a multi-dimensional, learnable competence rooted in empirical evidence about journalists' psychological risks and theoretically anchored in constructivist, experiential, and sociocultural perspectives on how journalists learn, teach, and practice.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two key theories that highlight the importance of trauma literacy in journalism education: the Constructivist Learning Theory and Zone of Proximal Development. These theories provide a strong foundation for understanding how journalism students can acquire trauma literacy skills.

The Constructivist Learning Theory, developed by Piaget (1963) and expanded by Vygotsky (1978), posits that learning is an active, experiential process in which individuals construct knowledge based on their interactions with the world. In the context of journalism education, this theory underscores the importance of hands-on learning experiences, such as case studies, simulations, and practical fieldwork, in developing students' ability to handle trauma-sensitive reporting.

Applying constructivist principles to trauma literacy education means that students should not only learn theoretical concepts about trauma but also engage in interactive learning experiences that expose them to real-life scenarios. For instance, journalism students can benefit from role-playing exercises where they practice interviewing trauma survivors, analyzing ethical dilemmas, and applying self-care strategies. By engaging in such active learning processes, students gain a deeper understanding of the emotional, ethical, and psychological complexities of reporting on traumatic events.

Furthermore, Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests that learners progress when guided by mentors or more knowledgeable peers. In trauma literacy education, this implies that journalism students can develop their skills more effectively when they receive mentorship from experienced journalists who have covered distressing events. By integrating trauma literacy into the journalism curriculum through practical experiences and expert mentorship, students are better equipped to navigate the

challenges of trauma reporting in their future careers. Therefore, given the identified gaps in Nigerian journalism education, there is a strong need for curriculum reforms to incorporate trauma literacy.

Review of Empirical Literature

Trauma, Mental Health and Journalistic Practice

A substantial body of empirical work documents the psychological costs of covering violence and disaster. Feinstein's long-term research with war correspondents shows elevated rates of post-traumatic stress, depression and substance use among journalists repeatedly exposed to armed conflict and human suffering, demonstrating that such exposure constitutes a serious occupational hazard rather than incidental stress (Feinstein, 2006; Feinstein et al., 2018). Browne et al. (2012) found strong associations between trauma-related guilt and PTSD symptoms among journalists. Their study indicate that moral emotions such as guilt and self-blame play a key role in trauma outcomes, not only fear responses. Newman et al. (2003) reported that photojournalists routinely exposed to graphic images of violence showed significant levels of post-traumatic stress, underscoring that vicarious exposure via images can be as damaging as physical proximity.

Broader reviews confirm that mental health problems among journalists are neither rare nor marginal. Aoki et al. (2013), in a systematic review, concluded that journalists who cover conflict, crime and disaster are at heightened risk of PTSD, depression and substance misuse, often in the absence of adequate organisational support. Studies of compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress reinforce this picture: Figley (2013) conceptualises compassion fatigue as a cost of caring for traumatised others, and Dworznik (2011) empirically identified work intensity, repeated exposure to distressing stories and limited support as predictors of PTSD symptoms and compassion fatigue among television news workers. These findings are echoed in newsroom research; Feinstein et al. (2014) found that journalists who repeatedly viewed extreme violent imagery in newsrooms exhibited clinically significant emotional disturbance.

More recently, context-specific studies have widened the geographic lens beyond Euro-American environments. Noor and Hameed (2024) documented high levels of stress, intrusive memories and emotional numbing among Pakistani journalists, but also noted the role of informal coping strategies and peer support. In the African context, Akintayo and Abati (2022) showed how problematic media frames around suicide and mental health in Nigeria may both reflect and reinforce stigma, with implications for journalists' own willingness to disclose distress or seek help. Together, these studies establish a clear empirical case that trauma exposure and its psychological consequences are common in journalistic work, and that the problem is global rather than confined to Western conflict correspondents.

Against this backdrop, scholars and practitioners have argued for integrating trauma literacy and safety training into journalism education. The Dart Center/Global Center for Journalism & Trauma guide outlines practical principles for trauma-informed journalism, emphasising psychological safety for both sources and journalists, empathetic interviewing, and careful visual choices when covering violence and tragedy (Global Center for Journalism & Trauma, 2020; Hight and Smyth, 2002). Although these guides are primarily practice-oriented, they increasingly inform curricular discussions and provide concrete frameworks for classroom use.

Empirically, Dworznik and Grubb (2007) made an early and influential case for trauma training in the journalism classroom, arguing that students who receive systematic instruction on trauma, PTSD and self-care feel better prepared to handle distressing stories and to recognise signs of trouble in themselves and colleagues. Seely (2020), in a more recent study, examined trauma-literacy initiatives that span classroom and newsroom, finding that structured exposure to trauma-related content during training through case studies, reflective writing and practitioner talks helped students develop better understandings of victimhood, resilience and ethical boundaries. These students reported feeling more confident about asking for help and more critical of sensationalist coverage.

Cross-national work further supports the need for early socialisation around ethics, vulnerability and professional identity. Mellado et al. (2013), studying journalism students in seven countries, found that students' professional views and role conceptions are shaped long before they enter newsrooms; where curricula emphasise watchdog roles without equal attention to human impact and safety, students may normalise adversarial and heroic self-images that leave little room for acknowledging distress. Quinn (2018), examining ethics education in Cambodia, showed that curriculum content, pedagogical approaches and institutional context jointly influence how students understand responsibility, harm and power. This suggests that similar dynamics would apply to trauma-related ethics.

In African contexts, Adjin-Tettey and Asuman (2025) argue that safety and trauma education are central to "safeguarding journalism" in high-risk environments, recommending that African journalism schools embed safety, risk assessment and trauma literacy alongside core reporting skills. Osemobor (2022) makes a complementary argument in the Nigerian context, calling for trauma-literate journalists who can navigate an environment marked by chronic violence, insecurity and mental-health stigma. Ogunyemi and Price (2023), introducing a special issue on trauma literacy in global journalism education, contend that trauma literacy should be treated as a core competence akin to ethics or law, and not an optional add-on.

The move toward trauma-informed journalism education aligns with broader shifts in learning theory and curriculum design. Constructivist theorists argue that learners actively build knowledge by linking new experiences to prior understandings, through social interaction and reflection (von Glasersfeld, 1995; Fosnot, 2013). Piaget and Inhelder (2008) frame learning as progressive reorganisation of cognitive structures, while Bruner (1996) emphasises the cultural and narrative nature of learning. Vygotsky (1978) introduces the Zone of Proximal Development, highlighting the role of scaffolding by more knowledgeable others in helping learners perform tasks they could not yet accomplish alone.

These ideas have clear implications for trauma literacy. If students are already encountering distressing content in media and practice, constructivist theory would suggest that curricula should help them re-interpret these experiences, articulate emotional reactions and co-construct more adaptive coping and ethical frameworks. Rogoff (2003) and Wenger (1999) extend this to sociocultural and community-of-practice perspectives, suggesting that learning is embedded in participation in communities with shared practices and values such as newsrooms or student media organisations. Eraut (2004) shows that much professional knowledge is acquired informally at work; without explicit trauma-informed frameworks, students may internalise maladaptive newsroom norms that valorise toughness and silence over help-seeking.

In higher education, Biggs and Tang (2011) advocate "constructive alignment," where teaching methods, learning activities and assessment are aligned with intended learning

outcomes. For trauma literacy, this implies that if programmes claim to prepare students for emotionally challenging reporting, then assessments, activities and resources must explicitly address trauma, safety and wellbeing. Schiro (2012) reminds us that curriculum visions embody particular values and assumptions; a purely technical or vocational curriculum may marginalise emotional and ethical dimensions critical for trauma-informed practice.

Experiential learning theory further supports trauma-informed pedagogies. Kolb (2014) conceptualises learning as a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. In trauma literacy, this could translate into students analysing real or simulated coverage of traumatic events, reflecting on emotional and ethical dimensions, drawing out conceptual lessons, and applying these in role-plays or newsroom simulations. Tharp and Gallimore (1991) link such guided practice directly to Vygotsky's ZPD, arguing that structured assistance can gradually be withdrawn as learners internalise new skills. McMahon and McLellan (2008) show that resilience and growth can emerge from trauma when individuals have access to supportive relationships and meaningful frameworks. This insight underpins many trauma-informed educational designs.

Any attempt to integrate trauma literacy must also contend with existing journalism cultures. Hanitzsch (2007) describes journalism as a "shared occupational ideology" with cross-national patterns but also significant cultural variation. The study also found that journalists' willingness to adopt trauma-sensitive practices depended on both professional norms and wider cultural attitudes toward suffering and vulnerability. Where objectivity and toughness are strongly valorised, journalists may perceive trauma-focused practices as "soft" or unprofessional.

Media representations of mental health also matter. Knifton and Quinn (2008) show that stereotypical and sensationalist portrayals of mental illness can reinforce discrimination and stigma, influencing public attitudes and potentially journalists' own self-understanding. In Nigeria, Akintayo and Abati (2022) found epistemological problems in suicide and mental-health reporting, including sensationalism and lack of context, which may discourage journalists from seeking help for their own mental-health challenges. Herman (2015) emphasises that recovery from trauma requires safety, remembrance and reconnection, suggesting that journalism cultures that trivialise or pathologise distress may hinder help-seeking and resilience.

Implementing trauma-informed curricula depends not only on student readiness but also on teacher capacity and institutional change. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) synthesise evidence on effective teacher professional development, highlighting features such as content focus, active learning, collaboration, and sustained duration. These principles are directly relevant for building lecturers' trauma literacy and pedagogical skill: one-off workshops are unlikely to suffice; instead, educators need ongoing opportunities to learn trauma-related content, practise facilitation of sensitive discussions, and reflect on their own beliefs and experiences.

Fullan (2016) argues that educational change is complex, requiring alignment of beliefs, structures and practices. In journalism education, this means that trauma literacy cannot be bolted on superficially; it calls for re-thinking course outcomes, assessment, partnerships with news organisations and support services. Wenger's (1999) communities-of-practice framework also points to the value of peer learning among educators who can share strategies and resources for teaching trauma-related content.

Support structures matter at the level of learners too. Marante (2021), though working in a different professional domain, demonstrates that peer support reduces stress and burnout among school-based speech-language pathologists, suggesting that similar structured peer-support models could benefit journalism students facing emotionally demanding content. Miyer et al. (2024) show that trauma-informed training can stabilise the negative psychological impact of war on future specialists, indicating that carefully designed training interventions can have measurable protective effects. Seely (2020) similarly concludes that trauma-literacy initiatives can bridge classroom and newsroom, fostering more supportive professional cultures.

In the Nigerian context, Odunlami (2014) critiques journalism and mass communication education for relying on outdated, lecture-centred pedagogies that do not fully prepare students for contemporary challenges. Adjin-Tettey and Asuman (2025) and Osemobor (2022) argue that safety and trauma education are now indispensable in African journalism training, given high levels of exposure to violence, disaster and political conflict. Zelizer and Allan (2011) highlight how global events such as September 11 have reshaped debates about journalism, trauma and public memory, underscoring the urgency of equipping journalists with both technical and emotional competencies.

Taken together, the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed here strongly supports the case for integrating trauma literacy into journalism curricula using constructivist, experiential and community-oriented approaches. The evidence shows that journalists face significant psychological risks; that trauma-informed training can improve preparedness and ethical sensitivity; that learning theories provide robust models for designing such training; and that teacher development, peer support and institutional change are critical for sustained impact. For Nigerian and African institutions, these insights offer a research-grounded roadmap for reforming journalism education so that future journalists are better equipped to report on trauma and to survive it.

Method

The analysis is based on in-depth interviews with 22 rookie journalists (final-year mass communication students of Ebonyi State University) who had completed media ethics courses and had at least some exposure to field reporting through campus media and internships in different media outlets. The participants included both male and female students aged between 20 and 27 years. The interviews were analysed thematically, with codes clustered around the study objectives. These themes are interpreted in line with Constructivist Learning Theory, which sees learning as the active construction of meaning through experience and social interaction, and Vygotsky's ZPD, which emphasises the role of scaffolding by more knowledgeable others in moving learners from basic to more complex competencies. Participants were assigned pseudonyms such as RJ1, RJ2, RJ3 and so on to depict Rookie Journalist 1, 2, 3 etc.

Data Analysis

Awareness of Trauma Literacy and General Conceptual Confusion

Across the 22 respondents, explicit awareness of the term "trauma literacy" was generally low, even though many could vividly describe situations that clearly involved trauma exposure and emotional strain. For instance, RJ1, a male final-year student, remarked that "lecturers talk about dangers of the job and stress, but we have not really heard that word 'trauma literacy' as a topic." RJ2, a female student, explained that she "only started thinking about trauma when watching reports of killings and accidents on TV," adding that it seemed

like “just part of the work” rather than something that could be systematically taught or managed.
When asked to define “trauma” in journalistic work, most respondents associated it with emotional shock, fear, anxiety or a sense of helplessness arising from covering accidents, communal clashes, election violence, cult attacks or gender-based violence. RJ6 reflected that “if you cover stories in some accident scene or places where people’s means of livelihood are burnt, you will not sleep well for days,” while RJ4 described feeling “very disturbed” for weeks after watching a clip of fatal accident online. Yet, only a handful could link such experiences to any structured content on psychological safety, resilience or trauma-informed reporting. Their responses are in aggremenyt with different findings that, although journalists often work as de facto first responders, they are rarely given formal training in trauma or mental health compared with other frontline professions (Feinstein et al., 2018; Osemobor, 2022; Ogunyemi and Price, 2023).

When probed about curriculum exposure, trauma-related issues were recalled only in passing, usually buried under broader topic like “safety in conflict zones”. RJ15 noted that trauma “came up when our lecturer talked about dangers of war reporting, but it was just one illustration and we moved on.” RJ6 added that “sometimes they mention stress and risk, but there is no full class on how to handle emotional effects.” This aligns with scholarship that documents a slow and uneven incorporation of trauma education in journalism curricula globally, despite growing calls to foreground it (Dworznik, 2011).
From a constructivist standpoint, these students are not starting from zero; they already possess informal, experience-based understandings of trauma. RJ17, who had worked as a freelancer noted that “we usually gist about how some stories affect us, but it is like normal talk, not something we analyse in class. Indeed, the Constructivist Learning Theory suggests that such informal exchanges constitute a “hidden curriculum”, where meanings around trauma are shaped in corridors, newsrooms and online spaces rather than in structured learning environments (Giroux, 2024; Schiro, 2012).

When seen from the ZPD lens, most students appear to operate just below the threshold of explicit trauma-informed competence. They can describe sleeplessness, emotional numbness or guilt after distressing news, but struggle to name these reactions or connect them to professional strategies. RJ11 expressed this tension more succinctly. Thus, “We know it is stressful, but we do not know what to do apart from just moving on.” Without intentional ‘scaffolding’ such as guided class discussions, reflective assignments and feedback from trauma-aware educators, students remain in a zone of partial understanding, unable to transform intuitive awareness into deliberate, evidence-informed practice (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1997).

Benefits of Incorporating Trauma Literacy
When asked why trauma literacy might matter, participants largely framed it as crucial to journalists’ mental health and long-term wellbeing. Many had heard anecdotal stories of reporters “breaking down” after repeated exposure to violence, or turning to alcohol and withdrawal as coping mechanisms. RJ10 observed that “journalists see things that even police and soldiers see, but nobody prepares us how to handle it.” RJ11 added that “you can carry some stories in your mind for years and it will affect your life and family if you don’t know what to do.”

Several respondents believed that a focused trauma-literacy component would teach them how to recognise early warning signs of burnout, differentiate between ordinary stress and more serious conditions, and adopt basic self-care and peer-support strategies. To this end, RJ15 suggested that "if we learn these things in class, we will not be ashamed to talk about how we feel after some assignments." Such concerns align with research on heightened rates of post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety among journalists covering conflict, crime and disasters, particularly where organisational support is limited (Feinstein, 2006; Browne et al., 2012).

In line with the tenets of the Constructivist theory, trauma literacy can help students reconstruct their understanding of risk and resilience. Rather than seeing emotional suffering as a private failing or the inevitable price of courage, they can reframe it as a normal human reaction that can be anticipated, named and managed. Research suggests that reflective, peer-based approaches can foster more resilient professional identities in high-stress occupations, including journalism and emergency services (Herman, 2015; Marante, 2021).

Participants also identified clear ethical advantages in integrating trauma literacy. Many worried that without guidance, rookie reporters might ask insensitive questions, push survivors beyond their limits, or publish graphic images that re-traumatise communities. RJ13 recalled watching a local news report where a grieving mother was "forced to talk on camera just after losing her child," concluding that "the way the reporter was asking questions was like she did not care about the woman's pain." RJ1 admitted that young reporters might "chase exclusive stories without realising that our questions are opening fresh wounds."

Respondents felt that trauma-informed teaching would help them cultivate empathy, obtain informed consent, avoid re-traumatising language, and make more careful decisions about visuals and detail. Indeed, RJ15 linked this directly to ethics: "They teach us objectivity and balance, but not really how to protect people emotionally in our reporting." These views align with emerging frameworks for trauma-informed journalism that stress dignity, consent and psychological safety when dealing with victims and survivors (Global Center for Journalism and Trauma, 2020; Zelizer and Allan, 2011).

From a ZPD perspective, trauma literacy acts as a scaffold between basic legal-ethical knowledge and more advanced, context-sensitive moral reasoning. Students may understand that they must not defame or invade privacy, but lack guidance on subtler issues such as timing, tone and silence in trauma interviews. Previous studies on journalism pedagogy emphasises that supervised simulations and case-based learning can help novices practise these fine-grained ethical judgments in a supported environment before facing real-world pressure (Hanitzsch, 2007; Quinn, 2018). Through such means, rook journalists can gradually internalise trauma-sensitive interviewing and storytelling practices, enabling them to perform them independently later on.

Another benefit perceived by respondents concerns professional competence and career prospects. Some argued that as global conversations on media, mental health and safety become more prominent, trauma literacy is emerging as a marker of a well-prepared journalist. RJ16 remarked that "with the way things are moving in today's world, if we do not have that knowledge, we are behind." RJ17 added that, in a country where conflict, banditry

and disasters dominate the news, “trauma literacy will make us more serious in conflict reporting.”

These views fit with calls in journalism-education literature for curricula, particularly in conflict-affected societies, to integrate trauma, resilience and emotional labour as core professional capacities rather than optional extras (Mellado et al., 2013; Odunlami, 2014). Constructivist work on professional learning also suggests that when students tackle realistic tasks, they build situated knowledge that travels more easily into the newsroom. Trauma literacy, approached in this way, strengthens students’ sense of readiness and demonstrates to employers that graduates can navigate both the ethical and emotional demands of contemporary reporting (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Eraut, 2004).

Challenges and Barriers to Implementation

When asked about barriers, participants repeatedly mentioned the crowded nature of the mass communication curriculum and the pressure to align with national regulatory templates. RJ10 argued that “we have so many courses already; lecturers are rushing to finish topics. If you add trauma literacy as a new course, they may see it as extra load.” These concerns echo critiques that Nigerian journalism curricula adapt slowly to emerging needs such as digital verification, solutions journalism and trauma education (Odunlami, 2014). From a constructivist viewpoint, rigid, overloaded curricula constrain the learner-centred, dialogic approaches that trauma literacy requires (Schiro, 2012; Fosnot, 2013).

Flexible curricula are better suited to integrating reflective discussions, simulations and cross-cutting themes that encourage students to co-construct understanding with peers and lecturers. This suggests that institutional inertia becomes a structural barrier to providing the scaffolds students need. Even if individual lecturers value trauma literacy, they may feel constrained by credit-hour limits, standardised assessment formats and expectations to “cover the scheme.” Without policy support for revising course outlines either by creating dedicated modules or embedding trauma content in existing ones, efforts to move students toward higher-order trauma-informed competence risk remaining elusive (Fullan, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978).

Such perceptions also requires lecturers be better equipped in trauma literacy. Indeed, research has shown that many journalism educators feel ill-equipped to handle trauma-related content or emotional disclosures in the classroom (Figley, 2013; Ogunyemi and Price, 2023). Yet, if lecturers do not see themselves as “more knowledgeable others” regarding trauma literacy, they cannot reliably scaffold students’ learning in that area. Constructivist perspectives emphasise that teacher professional development is therefore crucial: workshops, co-teaching arrangements with psychologists or counsellors, collaborations with trauma-focused NGOs and use of open teaching resources can all help educators grow their own understanding while guiding students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Fosnot, 2013).

A recurring theme in the interviews was the influence of cultural beliefs and newsroom norms that discourage open discussion of mental health. RJ22 observed that “in our society, if you say a story is disturbing you, people will say you are not strong enough.” RJ1 (quoted earlier) echoed this from a professional angle, noting that “journalists are expected to be rugged; if you complain about trauma, people may think you cannot handle the job.” Such

accounts mirror evidence that journalism's long-standing "macho" culture, combined with broader stigma around mental illness, makes it difficult to normalise conversations about emotional impact (Knifton and Quinn, 2008).

This stigma extends to help-seeking. As RJ5 suggested, even if a media outfit provides counselling, "some people will hide to go there because they do not want others to know they are struggling." Constructivist theory reminds us that learning is embedded in social norms and shared meanings; if the dominant script equates emotional expression with weakness, students will internalise this and may resist trauma-literacy initiatives or engage only superficially. Yet, trainee journalists may benefit through protected classroom spaces for reflection, peer-support exercises, and visits from respected journalists who are open about their own struggles and coping strategies.

Strategies for Integrating Trauma Literacy

When asked how trauma literacy could realistically be integrated, most participants favoured embedding it in existing courses rather than creating a stand-alone course. Participants recommended that course outlines include explicit sessions such as "emotional impact of reporting," "interviewing survivors", or "ethical use of graphic images". This approach aligns with calls in extant literature for trauma literacy to be mainstreamed across journalism curricula rather than separated in a single optional module (Zelizer and Allan, 2011).

Participants also suggested that trauma literacy should be taught in an interactive and experiential way. They recommended case studies of Nigerian crises such as the Boko Haram ISWAP attacks, bandits attacks, kidnappings and other related scenarios paired with role-plays of interviews with bereaved families, simulated editorial decision-making about graphic material. RJ4 stated that "if we act these situations in, we will remember how to behave when it is real." These suggestions align with constructivist and experiential-learning approaches, which prioritise active participation, collaboration and real-world problem-solving to deepen understanding (Kolb, 2014; Biggs and Tang, 2011; Tharp and Gallimore, 1991). Over time, learners gain confidence in applying trauma-informed skills and judgements autonomously in actual newsroom contexts.

Finally, participants recognised that sustainable integration of trauma literacy will require partnerships and policy-level advocacy. They suggested collaborations with psychologists, psychiatric nurses, counsellors, NGOs and media-development organisations that specialise in trauma, mental health or conflict reporting. RJ7 proposed that "the department can partner with organisations that train journalists on trauma and bring those trainings to students." RJ8 recommended inviting practising journalists who have covered conflict or disasters to share their experiences in structured, reflective sessions.

Participants also felt that departments, professional bodies and scholars should collectively advocate for trauma literacy to be recognised in national and institutional curriculum frameworks, alongside newer priorities like solutions journalism and media-information literacy (Odunlami, 2014). Constructivist perspectives support this kind of networked, community-of-practice model, where students encounter multiple "more knowledgeable others" who each contribute to their evolving understanding (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999).

Conclusion

In all, rookie journalists in Ebonyi State appear to have been exposed directly or indirectly, to traumatic narratives and events, yet have limited access to structured knowledge and institutional support on how to process these experiences safely and ethically. Constructivist Learning Theory explains this as a problem of under-scaffolded meaning-making. This is because students construct partial understandings of trauma from everyday conversations, media exposure and field experiences, but the formal curriculum provides few opportunities for guided reflection, conceptual clarification and collaborative sense-making (Piaget and Inhelder, 2008; von Glasersfeld, 1995; Fosnot, 2013).

Zone of Proximal Development adds a developmental dimension to the foregoing discourse as it highlights students' current abilities. It recognises their emotional disturbance, sensing ethical tensions that are close to but not yet at the level of independent, trauma-informed practice demanded by Nigeria's insecurity-laden media environment. With deliberate efforts from lecturers, counsellors, practising journalists and institutional structures, trainee journalists can be supported to move through conducting trauma-sensitive interviews, protecting both sources and self, and challenging newsroom cultures that normalise emotional suppression. Framed this way, integrating trauma literacy into Nigerian journalism curricula emerges not as a peripheral innovation but as a foundational requirement for preparing journalists who can both "tell the story" and "live to tell the tale" in a context marked by persistent violence and human suffering (Feinstein, 2006; Browne et al., 2012; Zelizer and Allan, 2011).

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