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Food insecurity and psychosocial behaviour among undergraduate students in Public Universities in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Ajake, Uchenna Egodi

0706 854 0583

Email-ucheajake @ gmail.com

Institute of Education,

University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria.

&

Kalu, Goodness Uka

08060216670

Email- kalugoodya15@gmail.com

Department of Educational Foundations,

University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to investigate food insecurity and psychosocial behaviour among undergraduates in public Universities in Cross River State, Nigeria. To achieve the purpose of this study, one hypothesis was formulated to guide the study. The literature review was done according to the variable under study. A correlational survey research design was adopted for the study. A sample of 403 respondents was used for the study. The selection was done through the stratified random sampling technique. The questionnaire titled Food insecurity and Psychosocial Behaviour Questionnaire (FIPBQ) was the main instrument used for data collection. The instrument was subjected to face and content validity by a supervisor and two experts in the Department of Educational Foundations. The instrument was also assessed by two experts in Measurement and Evaluation, at the University of Calabar, Calabar who vetted the items for face and content validity. The reliability estimate of the instrument was established through the Cronbach alpha reliability method. The reliability estimate ranges from .76 -.84 Population t-test and Regression Analysis was the statistical analysis technique adopted to test the hypothesis under study. This statistical tool was used because of the nature of the variable involved in the study. The hypothesis was subjected to testing at a .05 level of significance with relative degrees of freedom. The results of the analysis revealed that food insecurity significantly predicted the psychosocial behaviour of undergraduates in public Universities in Cross River State. Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended among others that implement or expand food assistance programs on campus, such as food banks or meal programs for students facing food insecurity. Collaborate with local food banks and community organizations to provide resources.

Keywords: *Food Insecurity, Psychosocial Behaviour*

INTRODUCTION

The problem of students' social decay has become a pressing contemporary issue in Nigeria, garnering the attention of researchers and scholars across various fields. Psychosocial behaviour refers to how individuals interact with and respond to the social and psychological aspects of their environment (Becerra & Becerra, 2020). This behaviour can be positive, demonstrating adaptability and resilience, or negative, showing maladaptation and difficulty in coping with stressors (Eckberg, Pidgeon, & Magyar, 2017). The term encompasses how students develop, behave, and respond within their social contexts, often unconsciously.

Students facing various insecurities exhibit a range of psychosocial behaviours. These behaviours, from isolation and depression to social anxiety and aggression, reflect their internal struggles (Bello, 2016). Affected students might avoid social and academic engagements, experience low self-worth, and doubt their capabilities, leading to self-deprecating behaviours and diminished confidence. Such distress can have harmful effects on both individuals and their communities. For example, students grappling with depression or anxiety might withdraw from social interactions, worsening their emotional challenges and limiting their support network. Aggressive behaviour, often a sign of unresolved emotional issues, can result in violence, substance abuse, and even self-harm, including suicidal tendencies.

Entering university is a significant transition that can be both joyous and stressful, especially for first-year students who face new academic and social demands. This period of adjustment, coupled with the existing high levels of insecurity in Nigerian universities, poses a considerable challenge. Recent events like the "End SARS" protests police brutality and other systemic issues, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have further intensified these insecurities (Ruth, 2016). Insecure students might develop social anxiety, fearing judgment or rejection, which hinders their ability to participate in social and academic activities. In some cases, students may exhibit aggressive behaviours to mask their insecurities, engaging in bullying or confrontational acts as a defence mechanism.

Insecurity encompasses negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and uncertainty (Akintunde & Selzing–Musa, 2015). It disrupts peace of mind and hinders effective functioning in society or school. In tertiary institutions, various forms of insecurity can significantly impact students' psychosocial behaviour. For example, Rita, David, Jarett, and Jacquelyn (2021) define food insecurity as inconsistent access to nutritious food—which can lead to significant distress and

affect students' academic and social lives. The transition to university life, characterized by new challenges and stressors, can lead to depression, anxiety, and stress among students, adversely affecting their academic performance and well-being (Adewuya, 2016). Institutions have attempted to mitigate these issues by creating supportive environments, but students continue to face significant psychosocial problems despite these efforts. University life is a crucial developmental period, essential for personal and professional growth. However, it is also a time fraught with psychosocial challenges that can impact students' overall success and well-being. This research examines the effects of insecurity on the psychosocial behaviour of students in Cross River State's tertiary institutions.

Statement of the Problem

Nigerian tertiary institutions aim to provide a high-quality education that enables students to thrive in any environment. Creating a supportive and inclusive school environment that fosters communication and self-esteem is vital. However, many students withdraw from social interactions, avoid class participation, and feel uncomfortable in social situations. Aggressive behaviours, such as cultism, drug use, and violence, are prevalent in Nigerian universities (Bewick et al., 2017). Anxiety and depression are common, leading to academic struggles and maladaptive coping mechanisms (Eckberg, Pidgeon, & Magyar, 2020).

Despite institutional efforts to address these issues through policies, counseling services, and mental health awareness, problems persist. The ongoing challenges have led to blame being placed on parents, lecturers, and the educational system. Unaddressed psychosocial challenges can severely impact students' functioning and mental health. This research explores whether food insecurity contributes to the psychosocial behaviour of students in Cross River State's universities.

Hypothesis

Food insecurity does not significantly predict the psychosocial behaviour of undergraduates in public universities in Cross River State.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food Insecurity and Psychosocial Behaviour

Rita et al. (2021) investigated the impact of food insecurity on college students' well-being and academic success. Their survey of 1,743 students revealed that 46.8% experienced food

insecurity, which correlated with academic challenges, psychological distress, and lower resilience. The study highlights the significant impact of food insecurity on students' lives and suggests areas for intervention and support.

Meza (2019) conducted interviews with 25 undergraduate students, identifying themes such as the stress of food insecurity, fear of disappointing families, and difficulty forming social relationships. Becerra and Becerra (2020) found that food insecurity was associated with higher psychological distress and poor mental health, with gender differences indicating that women were more affected. Diamond, Stebleton, and delMas (2019) also found significant associations between food insecurity and depression among 1,229 undergraduate students.

Margaret, Rodrigo, and Armijos (2018) explored the impact of household food insecurity on psychosocial dysfunction in Ecuadorian elementary schoolchildren. They found that food insecurity was linked to higher psychosocial dysfunction scores, indicating significant mental health challenges for affected children. Ntu (2020) evaluated the prevalence of psychosocial disorders among university students in Cross River State, finding a high prevalence of mental health issues that affected academic performance and behaviour. Recommendations included improving student nutrition, and housing conditions, and banning addictive substances. These studies collectively highlight the pervasive impact of food insecurity on psychosocial well-being and academic success, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and support.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in public universities in Cross River State using a correlational survey design. The population comprised 400-level students from the University of Calabar and the University of Cross River State, totaling 7,020 students. A sample of 403 students was selected using stratified random sampling, ensuring representation from different faculties and genders. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled "Insecurity and Psychosocial Behaviour Questionnaire (IPBQ)" with 42 items.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Hypothesis one

The hypothesis that food insecurity does not significantly predict the psychosocial behaviour of undergraduates was tested using simple regression analysis. The analysis revealed a

statistically significant F-ratio, indicating that food insecurity significantly predicts psychosocial behaviour, accounting for 45.7% of the variation. The remaining 54.3% is explained by other factors.

This result underscores the significant impact of food insecurity on students' psychosocial behaviour, highlighting the need for effective interventions to address this issue.

TABLE 2

Simple regression result of the prediction of food insecurity on psychosocial behaviour

Model	Sum of square	Df	Mean square	F	p-value	R	R ²	AdjR ²
Regression	1871.216	1	1871.216	354.032	.000(a)	.677(a)	.459	.457
Residual	2209.318	401	5.285					
Total	4080.533	402						

* Significant at .05 level.

Discussion of findings

The result of the first hypothesis indicated that financial insecurity does not significantly predict the psychosocial behaviour of undergraduates in public universities in Cross River State. This finding aligns with Britt et al. (2016), who highlighted that financial stress ranks among the top five stressors for college students, linking it to increased anxiety, depression, and decreased academic performance. Similarly, Kenny and Nor (2021) observed moderate levels of financial distress and perceived stress among university students in Health Sciences, noting a correlation between greater financial distress and higher perceived stress. They recommend future research to explore factors impacting students' financial distress and potential solutions.

Moore et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study on financial stress among college students at a large private institution, revealing two main themes: financial stress hinders academic success and affects students' social lives. Students facing financial stress often struggle to connect with wealthier peers, leading to feelings of isolation and embarrassment. Danielle et al. (2016) found that perceived stress, related to financial strain, is crucial for addressing psychological symptoms and enhancing academic and social integration among undergraduates.

The hypothesis regarding food insecurity suggested it does not significantly predict the psychosocial behaviour of undergraduates in public universities in Cross River State. This finding is consistent with Henry (2020), who noted a growing body of literature linking college food insecurity to poor nutrition and adverse health outcomes. For instance, at the University of North Texas, food insecurity was associated with low energy and physical fatigue among students. Additionally, food insecurity has psychosocial implications for college students.

Rita et al. (2021) studied food insecurity, well-being, and academic success among college students during the post-COVID-19 pandemic, finding that students facing any level of food insecurity reported higher psychological distress, loneliness, and suicidal behaviour, alongside lower scores for flourishing and resiliency compared to their food-secure counterparts. Meza (2019) identified several key themes related to the psychosocial effects of food insecurity through in-depth interviews with undergraduate students, including daily stress, fear of disappointing family, resentment towards peers with stable food and financial situations, and difficulties in forming meaningful social relationships. Becerra and Becerra (2020) also found that food-insecure students were more likely to report psychological distress and poor mental health status, with women reporting these conditions more frequently than men. Ntu (2020) discovered a high prevalence of psychosocial or mental health disorders among university undergraduates in Cross River State, with no significant differences between male and female students.

Conclusion

Based on the study's results, it is concluded that the extent of psychosocial behaviour among undergraduates in public universities in Cross River State is significantly high. The findings further indicate that food insecurity significantly predicts the psychosocial behaviour of undergraduates in these institutions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendation was made:

1. Implement or expand food assistance programs on campus, such as food banks or meal programs for students facing food insecurity. Collaborate with local food banks and community organizations to provide resources.

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