Social Isolation and Perceived Self-Concept as Predictors of Psychological Distress among undergraduates in Adekunle Ajasin University

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Abstract

This study examined the role of social isolation and perceived self-concept as predictors of psychological distress among undergraduates in AAUA. The cross-sectional survey design was adopted. Purposive and accidental sampling techniques were used to select a total of 300 final undergraduates from Adekunle Ajasin University Akungba-Akoko in Ondo State. The participants age ranged between 16 to 40 years (Mean =22.44; SD=3.18). The participants responded to measures of social isolation (α=.76), perceived self-concept (α=.68), and psychological distress (α=.71). The study hypotheses were tested using a Multiple Regression Analysis. Findings showed that social isolation significantly predicted psychological distress (β = .56, t= 12.52, p < .01). Also, perceived self-concept significantly predicted psychological distress (β = .28, t= 6.26, p < .01). Finally, the study further showed that social isolation and perceived self-concept had a significant joint impact on psychological distress [F (2,297) =100.51, R^2= 40, p <.01] among undergraduate students in AAUA. The study concluded that social isolation and perceived self-concept were important factors that were associated with psychological distress of undergraduates. Based on this finding, the study recommended that schools should with the aid of psychologists, provide mental health resources for students and create an environment that encourage social interaction and positive self-concept building, as this will help in management of psychological distress among students.

Key words: social isolation; perceived self-concept; psychological distress; undergraduates; AAUA

Introduction

The impact of mental health is not mono-causal, as several collective factors have been well documented [1]. Social relationships are integral experience in campus life have been linked to mental health development and university experience promoting a sense of shared identity [1;2;3]. Several authors have widely recognized that while the attainment of tertiary education can enrich students' lives, studying at university can be a stressful experience for many students [4;5;6]. One of the most commonly occurring stressful experience is psychological distress. Psychological distress refers to non-specific symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression and high levels of psychological distress are indicative of impaired mental health and may reflect common mental disorders, like depressive and anxiety disorders [7].

Psychological distress is broad term used to describe detrimental mental health condition that negatively impacts individuals' mental health and other negative physical health issues [8]. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines psychological distress as a state of emotional or mental strain that can result from various factors, including nervousness, persistent sadness, irritability, difficulty concentrating, challenges in sleep patterns [9]. These symptoms can interfere with daily functioning in an individual's personal, social and psychological life [9]. Social isolation is considered a critical factor in this paper, due to the nature of university community which is mostly an academic/social setting.

Social isolation is a common phenomenon among university students [15;16] and it has emerged as a significant risk factor for adverse health outcomes and consistently linked to poor mental health and it is well-documented that social isolation is linked to a variety of serious mental and physical health conditions. This phenomenon can manifest in numerous ways, affecting individuals across different demographics and life circumstances [10]. Social isolation, is a multi-dimensional construct that can be defined as the inadequate quantity and/or quality of interactions with other people, including those interactions that occur at the individual, group, and/or community level [11;12;13]. Social isolation focuses on internal (person's perceptions of loneliness, trust, and satisfaction with their relationships) or

external isolation (frequency of contact or interactions with other people) [14]. Individuals who engage in social isolation often experience heightened feelings of negative self-constructs, that often associated with increased psychological distress and other comorbidity [17]. This sequence of events underscores the importance of addressing both self-perception and social connections in mental health interventions.

Perceived self-concept plays a significant role in psychological distress [18]. Self-concept is a multidimensional construct that defines how an individual perceives their personal competency or adequacy in different spheres of their lives e.g., social, behavioral, academic and athletic [19] either by social comparison and in communication with significant others [20]. Self-image is the understanding of oneself in the capacity to manage effectively with the surroundings, experience achievement, and handle failures appropriately, activating cognitive and emotional processes that encourage perseverance, effort, and the proactive pursuit of challenges to attain goals centered on learning [20]. It represents the comprehensive perception of what we believe we are, what we think we can accomplish, what we assume others perceive about us, and what we aspire to become [21]. It encompasses the individual's thoughts and assessment of themselves and their social context which are developed throughout the process of socialization, representing the totality of the individual's self-perception [22].

The present study aims to investigate the connections between social isolation, perceived self-concept, and psychological distress, and how social isolation and perceived self-concept exerts a predictive influence on psychological distress. The specific objectives of the present study are:

- ❖ To examine the level at which social isolation significantly predicts psychological distress of university students in Ondo State.
- ❖ To determine the extent to which perceived self-concept predicts psychological distress of university students in Ondo State.
- ❖ To investigate joint predictive influence of social isolation and perceived self-concept on psychological distress of university students in Ondo State**.**

The present study offers relevance and implications for research in psychology and higher institutions especially those in Nigeria. The outcomes from this study would contribute to policy making, implementation and improve on efforts by psychosocial measures in reducing psychological distress among students in the university. This study would serve as a foundation for future researchers interested in psychological distress and its related factors in students' population. This study will also contribute to literature on social isolation and perceived self-concept as crucial factors in psychological distress among university students.

Related Works

Social Isolation and Psychological Distress

[23] examined the relationship of social isolation and illness perception with posttraumatic growth and psychological distress among coronavirus affected individuals along with the moderating role of social support. A total of 300 individuals participated in the cross-sectional study. They responded to measures of social isolation and illness perception with posttraumatic growth and psychological distress. Findings from the study revealed that social isolation has a significant positive correlation with posttraumatic growth; however, it has non-significant correlation with psychological distress. Where social isolation positively predicted posttraumatic growth, social support did not significantly moderate between the study variables. [24] examined the connection between climate anxiety, psychological distress (loneliness) and perceived social isolation (also stratified by age group). Adults between the ages of 18 to 74 were selected for the study. Jong Gierveld tool [26] was used to quantify perceived self-concepts and the [25] tool was used to assess perceived social isolation. Findings from the study showed a connection between higher levels of anxiety and social isolation well as higher perceived social isolation among the total sample. A similar picture was identified in age-stratified regressions (i.e., among individuals

aged 18 to 29 years, 30 to 49 years, and among individuals aged 50 to 64 years).

[27] examined social isolation in mental health. They conducted a review of literature using Web of Science Database. The researchers found that (93) ninety-three percent of the papers reviewed found significant links between social isolation and psychological distress in university populations. Research indicates that university students are particularly vulnerable to the effects of social isolation. A study [28] involving nearly 800 university students in Toronto found that those without pre-existing mental health issues experienced greater psychological distress during the pandemic compared to their peers who had prior mental health concerns. This counterintuitive finding suggests that students who were previously healthy were less equipped to handle the sudden increase in social isolation brought on by lockdowns and remote learning environments. [29] examined the connections of social isolation, depression, and psychological distress in a survey among 1,439 adults. Findings from the study showed that social isolation from both family and friends and from friends only was associated with more depressive symptoms and subjective social isolation from friends only was linked with higher levels of psychological distress.

Self-Concept and Psychological Distress.

[20] examined the role of self-concept and mental on academic achievement among secondary school students in Calabar, Nigeria. The study utilized stratified and simple random sampling techniques to select a total of 1,212 students in senior class 1 and 2. These authors found that self-concept had significant influence on secondary school students' English language academic achievement as well as mental health. The study however, could not determine the impact of perceived self-concept on psychological distress. Besides, the study was conducted among secondary school students, which limits its generalization to students of higher education. The present study is an attempt to filling these gaps in knowledge, by investigating the predictive influence of perceived self-concept on psychological distress among university undergraduates. [30] conducted a study on the impact of psychological distress on 257 medical students' self-esteem. The psychological distress was assessed using the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) [31] while self-esteem was assessed using the adult form of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory [32]. Findings from the study showed that students with psychological distress had significantly lower mean self-esteem score compared to those who are not distressed (43.07 and 60.03 respectively).

Overall, the reviewed studies revealed that social isolation and perceived self-concept are significantly associated with psychological distress. Nevertheless, the reviewed studies identified significant gaps in knowledge especially as it pertains to Nigerian literature.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to investigate the connections between social isolation, perceived self-concept, and psychological distress, and how social isolation and perceived self-concept exerts a predictive influence on psychological distress. The independent variables were social isolation and perceived self-concept, while the dependent variable was psychological distress. This research design was selected because the researcher was only interested in the existing relationship between these variables without manipulating any.

Setting

Undergraduate students from various faculties (Science, Art, Education, Environmental Design and Management, Law, Agriculture, The Social Sciences, Administration and Management) at Adekunle Ajasin University Akungba-Akoko (AAUA), Ondo State, were chosen for this study. The selection of this university was primarily due to the ease of accessing undergraduate students from various backgrounds, and the possibility to

reach a large number of participants. Research participants were selected using an accidental sampling technique.

Participants

Using a purposive and accidental sampling technique, a total number of three hundred (300) undergraduates were selected from Adekunle Ajasin University Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State. The participants were between the ages of 16 to 40 years (Mean =22.44; SD=3.18). The gender distribution of the participants showed that 143 (47.7%) were male, while 149 (49.7%) were female. However, 8 (2.7%) did not indicate their gender. Their religion affiliation indicated that 180 (60.0%) were Christians, 75 (25.0%) were Muslims and 22 (7.3%) traditionalists. However, 27 (7.7%) did not indicate their affiliation to any religion. Participants distribution on faculty of study showed Science = 48 (16%), Art = 75 (25.0%), Education = 44 (14.7%), Environmental Design and Management = 11 (3.7%), Law 27 (9.0%), Agriculture = 34 (11.3%), The Social Sciences = 34 (11.3%), and Administration and Management = 11 (3.7%). However, 16 (5.3%) did not report their faculty. The academic level of the participants showed that 49 (16.3%) were in 100 level, 77 (25.7%) were in 200 level, 76 (25.3%) were in 300 level, 62 (20.7%) were in 400 level, while 26 (8.7%) were in 500 level. However, 10 (3.3%) did not report their academic level.

Instruments

Data were gathered via the use of validated questionnaires which comprised of four sections (section A-D) Section A: Socio-Demographic Information. This section made use of questionnaire to gather information on the socio-demographics of the participants. The socio-demographics include age, gender, religious affiliation, faculty of study, and level of study. Section B: Psychological Distress In this study, students' level of psychological distress was measured using Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) developed by [33]. The scale consists of 10-items. Sample items include "*In the past 4 weeks, about how often did you feel tired out for no good reason?", "In the past 4 weeks, about how often did you feel so nervous that nothing could calm you down and "In the past 4 weeks, about how often did you feel so sad that nothing could cheer you up?*". All items were rated on a 5-point scale (1= None of the time to 5= All of the time). Using the current sample, a Cronbach's Alpha of .71 was recorded. Low scores indicate low levels of psychological distress and high scores indicate high levels of psychological distress. Section C: Social Isolation Scale (SIS) is a 10-item scale was used to measure social isolation developed by [34]. Sample items include "*I don't feel part of a group of friends*", "*I do not have any friends who understand me, but I hope I did*", "*When with other people, I felt separate from them*",

and "I feel lonely". All items were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0= Strongly disagree; to 3= Strongly agree. [34] reported a Cronbach's Alpha of .88. Based on the current sample, a Cronbach's Alpha of .76 was obtained. High scores on the scale indicate higher levels of social isolation and vice versa. Section D: Perceived Self-Concept Perceived self-concept in this study was measured using Personal Self-concept Questionnaire (PSC) developed by [35]. The 18-item PSC consists of 18 items that measures personal perceptions regarding Self-fulfillment (6 items), Honesty (3 items), Autonomy (4 items), and Emotional self-concept (5 items). Sample items include "*I am satisfied with what I am achieving in my life", "In order to do anything, I first need other people's approval", "I have always overcome any difficulties I have encountered in my life", "If I could start my life over again, I would not change very much", and I am an emotionally strong person*". All items were rated on 5-point scale (1= Totally disagree to 5= Totally agree). [35] reported a Cronbach's Alpha of .83. Based on the current sample, a Cronbach's Alpha of .68 was obtained. High score on the scale indicate to good perception of self and vice versa.

Procedure

The researcher gathered data from the participants through the use of a well-designed questionnaire. The consent of the participants was sought through instructions on the questionnaire. The purpose of the study was explained to all prospective participants. The researcher assured the participants of the confidentiality of information on the questionnaire. Participants were kept anonymous. The study adopted accidental sampling technique in selected available final undergraduate students in the university. A total of three hundred and fifty (350) questionnaires were administered but only three hundred (300) were retrieved and found useful for the analysis, which gives a response rate of 86%. Data collection spanned three (3) weeks.

Data Analysis

Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis was used in order to determine the extent and direction of the relationship among the study variables. Objectives 1 to 3 were tested using Multiple Regressions to test the prediction of social isolation and perceived self-concept on psychological distress. All analyses were conducted using SPSS 29.0.

Results and Discussion

Test of Relationship among the Study Variables

Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis was conducted to test the relationship among the variables of the study. The result is presented in Table 1.

Factors	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	22.44	3.18	1	-.20**	.05	.63**	.01	-.04	.09
2. Sex	-	-		1	-.05	-.13*	-.02	.10	-.00
3. Religious Affiliation	-	-			1	.11	.00	-.01	-.05
4. Academic Level	-	-				1	-.06	.04	.09
5. Social Isolation	11.90	5.45					1	.03	.57**
6. Perceived Self Concept	53.94	8.75						1	.30**
7. Psychological Distress	25.30	6.12							1

Table 1: Correlation Matrix Showing the Mean, Standard Deviation and Relationship among the Study Variables.

*Note: ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05, N= 300; Gender was coded: Male=1, Female=2.*

The result in Table 4.1 showed above that social isolation had a significant positive relationship with psychological distress [r (300) = .57; $p < .01$]. This ascertains that feeling alone and disconnected from others even they are around people likely connects with their possible intent of being overwhelmed, anxious, or unhappy due to stress or mental strain. Perceived self-concept as a psychological factor also significantly relates with psychological distress [r (300) = .30, $p < .01$]. This shows that students' view of who they are, including their qualities and they fit into the world

corresponds with possible intent of being overwhelmed, anxious, or unhappy due to stress or mental strain. The result in Table 4.1 in respect to the tested personal factors had revealed that age has no significant relationship with psychological distress [r (295) = .09, $p > .05$]. This indicates that been young or old has a student does not associate with their feeling of being overwhelmed, anxious, or unhappy due to stress or mental strain. Similarly, gender does not significantly relate with psychological distress [r (292) = -.00, $p > .05$]. This implies that students been male or female does affiliate

their possible feeling of being overwhelmed, anxious, or unhappy due to stress or mental strain. Religious affiliation does not have any significantly relationship with psychological distress [r (277) = -.05, p > .05]. This indicates that students' choice of affiliation with any religious sect is not establishing a linking with their feeling of being overwhelmed, anxious, or unhappy due to stress or mental strain. Academic level had also shown not to significantly relate with psychological distress [r (290) = .09, p > .05]. This implies that students' academic progress does not align with their

feeling of being overwhelmed, anxious, or unhappy due to stress or mental strain.

Test of Study Hypotheses

In testing the study hypotheses, a Multiple Regressions analysis was employed. This was done to test the independent and joint prediction of the independent variables (social isolation and perceived self-concept) on the dependent variable (psychological distress). The results are presented in the Table 2 below.

Predictors	β	t	Sig	R	R^2	df	F
				.64	.40	2,297	100.51**
Social Isolation	.56	12.52**	.000				
Perceived Self Concept	.28	6.26**	.000				

Table 2: Summary of a Multiple Regression Analysis Showing the Prediction of Social Isolation and Perceived Self-Concept on Psychological Distress Among AAUA Students *Note: * * p < 0.01, N= 300*

The result in Table 4.2 revealed that social isolation significantly predicts psychological distress (β = .56, t= 12.52, p < .01). This implies that students' feeling of being alone and disconnected from others even they are around people likely determines their intent of being overwhelmed, anxious, or unhappy due to stress or mental strain. This supported the formulated hypothesis 1, and it was then accepted. It was observed that perceived self-concept significantly predicts psychological distress (β = .28, t= 6.26, p < .01). This had shown that students' view of who they are, including their qualities and they fit into the world determines their possible intent of being overwhelmed, anxious, or unhappy due to stress or mental strain. This had also certified the formulated hypothesis 2, and it was then confirmed. It was further reported in this result that social isolation and perceived self-concept had significantly jointly predicted psychological distress [F (2,297) =100.51, p <.01] and these tested factors had contributed 40% variation (R^2=.40) to changes observed in student's experience of psychological distress. This result supports the formulated hypothesis 3 and it was then accepted.

Discussion

This study examined the connections between social isolation, perceived self-concept, and psychological distress, and how social isolation and perceived self-concept exerts a predictive influence on psychological distress among AAUA undergraduates. The results of this study showed that that social isolation significantly predicted psychological distress of AAUA undergraduates. This was with the indication that that student's feeling of being alone and disconnected from others even they are around people leads to increase in being overwhelmed, anxious, or unhappy due to stress or mental strain. This finding provides support for the position of past some past studies [23;24;36;37;38], who found that individuals who experience significant level of social isolation also experiences psychological distress. A similar report was given by [39], who also discovered that social isolation was a positive predictor of psychological distress.

The researcher of this study believe that social isolation predicted psychological distress of undergraduates because undergraduates often rely on their peers for emotional and academic support as a result, the lack of absence of this type of peer/social support, increasing feelings of loneliness and vulnerability. With this possibility, it is easy to believe that, without social interactions, students may find it harder to manage academic stress. Similarly, some studies have shown that peer interactions often provide a buffer against stress, and their absence can lead to heightened stress levels [40; 41]. Social isolation is linked to poorer cognitive performance and faster cognitive decline. It can also lead to more negative and depressive thoughts, making it harder for students to cope with academic and personal challenges [40;41].

Furthermore, the outcome of this study showed that self-concept significantly predicts psychological distress among undergraduates in AAUA. Plausible reason for this outcome could implied that undergraduates with a low self-concept often have low self-esteem, characterized by feelings

of inadequacy and worthlessness. This vulnerability can serve as window for these individuals to experience confusion and stress about their self-perceptions (identity) contributing to psychological distress. Also, the researcher believes that university environment is socially competitive setting where students thrive to do better compared to others frequently compare themselves to their peers. Those with a negative self-concept may feel they do not measure up, leading to feelings of inferiority and increased stress [42]. Furthermore, the third objective social isolation and perceived self-concept showed significant joint predictive influence on psychological distress among undergraduates in AAUA. This researcher believes that students who exhibit negative self-concept are likely to engage in social isolation which increase the chances of feelings of loneliness, which are comorbid of psychological distress. Similar study by [41] corroborate this supposition by revealing that the combination of social isolation and self-concept can intensify feelings of being unworthy or unloved, feel vulnerable and insecure, making them more susceptible to anxiety and depression, leading to greater psychological distress.

Conclusion

The present study examined the connections between social isolation, perceived self-concept, and psychological distress, and how social isolation and perceived self-concept exerts a predictive influence on psychological distress among AAUA undergraduates. Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that social isolation significantly predicts psychological distress. Also, perceived self-concept significantly predicts psychological distress. Lastly, social isolation and perceived self-concept exerted a significant joint predictive influence on psychological distress among AAUA undergraduates. The findings of this study have important implications for school managements, students, and relevant stakeholders. Psychosocial programs should be institutionalized in schools with aim of fostering social connections and providing support systems to help protect against psychological distress. Efforts should be geared towards promoting positive self-image and providing support systems to help students develop healthy coping mechanisms and social relationships. Universities can play a crucial role by providing mental health resources and creating environments that encourage social interaction and self-concept building. It should also be ensured that these resources are easily accessible to all students. By addressing these limitations, future research can build on the findings of this study and offer a more robust understanding of the factors influencing psychological distress among undergraduates.

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