

Perceived Importance of Social Support on Undergraduates' Academic Resilience in a Nigerian University: Where do Social Workers come in?

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Abstract

Academic success is critical for young people's effective development. Students who perform well in school are better prepared to enter adulthood and attain occupational, social, and economic success. The study aimed to provide fresh insights into how social support might assist university students in sustaining their interest in academics, and more importantly, drive them to excel academically while dealing with psychosocial difficulties at a Nigerian university. A qualitative research methodology was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 students from varying departments. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings of the study indicated that social support is highly valued among Nigerian undergraduates, with practical benefits of increased motivation and better grades. Furthermore, it was observed that family tradition, students' attitudes towards learning, as well as social support, were seen as important factors to consider while attempting to improve undergraduates' academic success. The study recommended that interventions targeted at boosting undergraduates' academic resilience should emphasize the relationship between social support and the learners' attitude towards the learning processes. We also urge various university administrations, social workers, and other stakeholders to provide more opportunities for students' socialization, expand support services, and ensure that students have access to mental health counselling and other forms of psychological support.

Keywords: academic success, economic success, effective development, increased motivation, social support

Introduction

Education is a strong agent of change that develops qualified human capital, improves health and livelihoods, promotes economic development, and solves a community's actual problems (Sothan, 2019). Acquiring knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills through education, on the other hand, is a time-consuming and challenging process. Students are expected to devote a significant amount of their time to their studies and to graduate with excellent performance.

Academically bright students have better employment opportunities, earn more, have more self-esteem and self-confidence, have lower levels of anxiety and depression, and are less likely to engage in substance abuse (Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). For this reason, social support is an essential component in the lives of learners. It was found to be one of the factors that can influence students' academic achievement, considering their academic experiences.

Studying at the university may be challenging for students as they adjust to changes in their environment, relationships, and way of life (Ibrahim et al., 2013) exposing them to stressful situations. According to Onuoha and Idemudia (2020), academic stress can manifest in a variety of ways, including missed deadlines, late project completion, unrealistic task expectations, and difficulty collaborating with lecturers. Alsubaie et al. (2019) observed that as people transition from adolescence to early adulthood, they encounter difficulties managing their lives and adjusting to increasing independence demands. Financial challenges and marginalization can have a poor influence on academic achievement and the transition from school to work (Allensworth & Clark, 2020; Duffy et al., 2022). Regardless of the significance of a student's acquaintances, experiences, and setting, research (Bethell et al., 2017; Reyes et al., 2020) reveals that undergraduate study experiences have a major influence on long-term goals, ambitions, academic accomplishments, and life quality. As a result, it is critical to look at a person's whole educational experience in order to properly comprehend their educational progress over time.

Social support can take various forms. According to Vargas-Madriz and Konishi (2021), it could be as simple as spending quality time together or it could be as complex as providing assistance that is only distantly relevant to the current situation or issue faced by the student; it helps someone deal with unpleasant events or challenges related to their academic performance and well-being. Academically, it is crucial to consider the roles of social support since it is regarded as both a buffer against life stresses and an agent of promoting well-being and development. Supportive relationships with peers, parents, lecturers, and the academic community, including community groups and faith-based organizations, improve students' educational experiences and boost students' involvement (Xerri et al., 2018; Brailovskaia et al., 2018; Maymon et al., 2019 ; Scanlon et al., 2020). There are three levels of support obtainable through family and friends: warmth, behavioural control, and psychological autonomy. These three traits foster the formation of positive self-concepts and interpersonal connections, responsibility and competence, emotional control, and discouragement of deviance, all of which contribute to students' high levels of academic performance (Li et al., 2018; Nelson, 2019).

This support system has also been demonstrated to be critical for achieving an optimum degree of development.

Moreover, social support provides a sense of gratitude, respect, being cared for, and being loved by the people in one's life. Social support can take the form of practical assistance provided by others when necessary, such as an assessment of various situations, effective coping techniques, and emotional support. According to Pianta, Hamre, and Stuhlman (2003), and Kilday and Ryan (2019), if there are cordial relationships between lecturers and students, the students will build their own opinions of their Lecturer as caring, warm, compassionate, and willing to help. Quin (2016) discovered that the lecturer-student relationship has a significant impact on student's academic engagement and achievements. While peer groups provide students with intellectual and psychological needs, which improve their academic engagement and achievement (Kilday & Ryan, 2019; Mishra, 2020; Charalambus, 2020), family or religious groups provide close-knit support, which is associated with a decrease in psychological distress and increased psychological well-being (Diaz & Bui, 2017; Onuoha & Akintola, 2018). It has long been recognized that the nature and quality of social support are critical to an individual's adjustment. According to Bronfenbrenner (In Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021), the quality of support from important individuals in diversified social contexts does impact someone's growth and correlates more positively with mental health than the amount of assistance received. This is especially crucial during the undergraduate period when social ties shape the student experience.

The study adopted Erikson's (1966) theory of psychosocial development to explain how social interactions and relationships play a role in undergraduates' development and academic performance. The theory of psychosocial development posits that there are eight phases in a person's psychosocial development during which they must face several problems. The phases are based on the idea that as students mature, they go through a number of developmental stages. Each stage places them in a condition of struggle, which they either conquer, or develop into a desirable psychological quality, or they do not overcome and do not develop. The qualities they acquire or do not develop have an influence on the rest of their lives, including how they learn. Because undergraduates are mostly young people, many of them are still in the fifth and sixth stages of psychological development. Identity vs. role uncertainty is the fifth stage of psychological growth, while closeness vs. isolation is the sixth stage. This suggests that university students are developing their sense of self as well as their capacity to connect and engage with others. Social interactions and experiences may transform the students' beliefs, attitudes, and goals by changing and reshaping their identity (Brook & Willoughby, 2015; Baria & Gomez, 2022). The wide

range of special needs among today's undergraduates requires more complex multidimensional, carefully coordinated, assertive help without which students drop out.

Social workers are change agents with the goal of resolving the social, psychological, or economic difficulties of individuals, their families, and any other action and target systems that may have an impact on students' academic capacity and overall development. Okah et al. (2017) argued that undergraduates' psychosocial difficulties might emerge as poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, poor adjustment outside of the family environment, and other behavioural problems, including deviance. While economic concerns indicate a lack of cash to address school demands. Based on the foregoing, social workers, with the well-being of undergraduates at the forefront of their activity, deal with undergraduates' psychosocial difficulties by counselling, mediating, advocating, programming, teaching, and even agitating (Dupper, 2007). The purpose is to provide students with the best possible learning environment.

A social work viewpoint that stresses bio-psychosocial assessment, multicultural sensitivity, and social justice might be beneficial to university administrators. By connecting on-campus support resources like disability services, counselling centres, health facilities, and tutoring, a multidisciplinary strategy can be developed for each student at risk (Lambert & Siegel, 2018). This method has the potential to improve student resilience, continuity, and tuition income. According to Schlossberg (1989), "mattering" is important for academic accomplishment; a study by Rayle and Chung (2007) shows that students who feel their needs and ambitions are important to school authorities are more likely to graduate. Social work interventions on campus can be beneficial, as social workers are trained in engagement, empowerment, and motivational interviewing techniques that improve service users' choice and resilience. They may provide comprehensive case management, investigate university policy, identify impediments to aid, conduct needs assessments, establish programs, and track progress. They enable students to organize as advocates and collaborate with campus and community organizations to provide a well-articulated continuum of services that includes on- and off-campus resources.

Earlier studies (e.g., Alsubaie et al., 2019; Diaz & Bui, 2017; Onuoha & Akintola, 2018; Xerri et al., 2018), demonstrate that social support from family and friends can have a major impact on students' academic achievement. However, their research failed to account for the impact of family tradition, especially educational aptitude or background, on students, which might explain their lack of interest in educational learning. Undergraduate students who have excellent social support and a family

inclination in education outperform those who have little social support and a poor family inclination. This study investigates the impact of social support and family tradition on undergraduate students' academic resilience at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, showing why some students grow disinterested in their academic efforts, resulting in low academic performance. Understanding the impact of social support and family tradition on university students' academic functioning can aid in managing psychological issues and enhancing their academic resilience.

Methods

Study Design

A qualitative research design was employed for this study. This makes it possible for the study to comprehensively examine how undergraduates at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, perceive social support and how it affects their academic achievement (Bryman, 2016). The emphasis on undergraduates was made because they have undergone many academic stress situations at the institution and have been there for a long period of time. As a result, students are considered suitable for the study since they can provide specific insights on how they dealt with academic stress. Academically motivated students are more likely to show up to class, pay attention, participate, sign up for further courses, learn well, and ultimately do well. By thematically evaluating data from such sources, the study seeks to offer new insights on how social support may enable students to succeed academically and manage psychological concerns, as well as the roles of social workers in ensuring that students have access to the support they need.

Study Area

This research was carried out at the Nsukka campus of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), one of Nigeria's federal universities. UNN was the first indigenous university established in 1955 and formally inaugurated in 1960 (Onuoha, 2016). The university has two main campuses (Nsukka and Enugu, popularly known as UNEC) with 16 faculties and 102 academic departments. There are ten faculties in the Nsukka campus and six in the Enugu campus. It has 82 postgraduate programs and 211 undergraduate programs. We chose UNN for the study because most students are mentally stressed and lack the skills to handle difficulties, solve problems, improve self-worth, and possibly manage health problems and stress. As a result, there is a high rate of school dropout as well as poor performance among students, particularly those who fend for themselves.

Sample size and Selection of respondents

The study used a sample size of 16 undergraduates, including both male and female students, to ensure fair representation. Because of recent suicides at UNN, the researchers decided to undergraduate students were chosen—four males and four females—while for FA, the same number was chosen. These students had been enrolled at the institution for some time and were most likely stressed by their academic duties. The researchers utilized the assistance of class representatives (CRs) to assist them in selecting participants. The CRs supplied contact information for potential participants so that we could clarify the aim of the study and agree on the day, time, and location of the interview. However, because the study was qualitative, there was enough information to achieve data saturation (Nelson, 2017).

Data collection

The researchers used In-depth Interviews (IDI). The IDI guide, which included semi-structured questions, was employed as a data collection tool. This allowed the researcher to elicit more responses while still within the scope of the study. The study instrument was written in English for a better understanding. All the interviews with undergraduates were conducted on different days and at different times in the libraries of the Departments of Social Work and Music. These settings were chosen to assure their privacy and conduciveness. The participants were also informed about the study's objectives and guaranteed their confidentiality and anonymity, as well as the option to quit at any point if they felt uncomfortable. The interviews, which lasted an average of 35 minutes each, were recorded on smart-phones. Informed oral consent and willingness to participate in the discussion, as well as permission to use a phone recorder, were obtained from the participants prior to the discussions.

Data analysis

The researcher adopted the inductive thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) in the data analyses including the transcripts and field notes. We used a phone recorder to capture the IDIs' responses, along with notes. The data were transcribed verbatim in English to ensure that the meaning was preserved. The researchers reviewed the transcript analysis independently to establish endless categories that facilitated the first coding. The transcript was read repeatedly by researchers for familiarity in the second coding, allowing the researchers to delete, combine, or split the themes established in the original coding, allowing us to determine the topics on which our reporting was based. The participants were given pseudonyms, therefore "Ify, F, 21" refers to a 21-year-old female participant with the pseudonym Ify.

Results

The data obtained in this study were structured, analyzed, and explained across two sections. The initial segment examines the socio-demographic traits of participants, encompassing factors like gender, age, residence, faculty, and level of study. The second section delves into the substantive themes explored in the study, which included factors that promote indifference in academic pursuit among Nigerian undergraduates, sources of social support for undergraduates in Nigerian universities, and the effects of multidimensional support for undergraduates on their academic performance.

Table 1 summarizes the demographic features of participants. The data in the table shows that there are an equal representation of males and females. The participants were between the ages of 19 and 24. The table presents further details about the participants.

Table 1.1: Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

S/N	Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Residence	Faculty	Level of study
1	UM	M	20	Off-campus	Arts	200
2	OD	M	19	Hostel	Arts	300
3	DV	M	19	Hostel	Arts	300
4	MV	M	22	Off-campus	Arts	300
5	SR	M	24	Off-campus	Arts	200
6	EC	M	22	Hostel	Arts	200
7	OP	M	21	Off-campus	Arts	300
8	ET	M	23	Off-campus	Arts	200
9	UC	F	20	Hostel	Social sciences	200
10	NG	F	20	Hostel	Social sciences	300
11	NK	F	22	Off-campus	Social sciences	200
12	BB	F	21	Hostel	Social sciences	200
13	IF	F	24	Hostel	Social sciences	300
14	RM	F	19	Off-campus	Social sciences	300
15	DM	F	20	Off-campus	Social sciences	300
16	CH	F	19	Hostel	Social sciences	200

Source: Researchers' fieldwork, 2023.

Reasons for undergraduates' indifference to academic pursuits

The study highlighted the causes of some undergraduates' apathy toward academic pursuits as well as the necessity for support that will motivate and ensure their commitment for best performance. Some participants aired the following views:

Some students consider admission an opportunity to do anything they want, which may lead to their joining bad friends. Sometimes the difficulty stems from the family; some people are compelled to attend school, and when they arrive, they show no commitment to their studies because they believe they are doing it for their family rather than themselves. These undergraduates may rely on the support of family and lecturers, who can always check on them to see how they are doing academically [DM, F, 20].

Finance is one of the factors that cause students to lose interest in their studies. Some students have parents who were buoyant when they were admitted to study but are now financially handicapped due to death or other factors. Some students received scholarships to study, yet they still miss them and are struggling to keep up academically. To deal academically, these groups need both material and psychological assistance from close-knit groups, faith-based organizations, and lecturers [CH, F, 19].

Sources of social support for undergraduates' academic performance

There is a wide perception among participants that social support does not just serve as a buffer to stress experiences, but also, a catalyst that promotes their well being. The participants therefore, identified varying sources of social support; family, peers or friends, and community organisations were perceived to be predominant sources.

Family

Results showed that the support obtainable through family gives the student feelings of being loved and cared for. Majority of the participant revealed that supportive assistance from home challenge them to be focused in their study as they cannot afford to undermine their family' effort. A good number of the participants were of the view that when they remember that they have people who encourage them both financially and emotionally, they will keep struggling to succeed even in the midst of all odds. Supportive family relationships help in the formation of positive self-concepts, emotional control, and discourage them from all form of deviant behaviour. The following statements were participants' views:

As far as I'm concerned, I have a reason for being here, and nothing will distract me since I cannot afford to fail the people who brought

me here after giving me everything I need to study properly [NG, F, 20].

Despite the fact that my mother was the only one providing me with what little she had, I sought to supplement myself by doing other small businesses using the skills I obtained soon after my WAEC. It has not been easy, however, to balance my studies with other menial jobs such as cleaning and preparing some snacks. I do them to ensure my academic success and to make my mother proud [RM, F, 19].

It was also observed that parental support influences student satisfaction in school. Undergraduates who have positive parental support have a feeling of belonging since they can meet all of the expectations placed on them. As a result, they are more likely to be committed to their academic pursuits. This is supported by an excerpt from one of the participants' narratives:

"Due to a lack of parental support, one of my classmates is struggling academically. The father delegated care to an uncle, who rarely visited with complaints, resulting in inadequate feeding and difficulties keeping up with school activities [OP, M, 21]."

Peers

The findings also showed that positive peer relationships enhance students' academic engagement as well as school satisfaction. This is because good friends with similar interests may engage in study discussions, emotionally support each other in terms of exchanging ideas in difficult situations, and influence each other's attitudes toward learning in a positive way, ensuring study commitment for improved performance. This is supported by one of the participants' viewpoints:

Students sometimes experience financial issues, such as buying textbooks and feeding themselves. I nearly dropped out because I couldn't measure up. My friends considered starting a small business for me with a cleaning job to support myself. Friends' counsel and support have been invaluable, as they have offered a stable environment and career prospects, allowing me to persevere and avoid depression [ET, M, 23].

Lecturers

Support from lecturers has also been found to be positively associated with student involvement, making it an essential predictor of classroom engagement as well as playing an important role in student motivation and belonging, which improve their academic successes. This is also supported by these participants' views:

Lecturers who are empathetic seek to understand students' reasons for absence, providing them with a sense of belonging, care, and freedom

to express themselves. This approach allows students to seek guidance and counselling when under pressure, thereby promoting their engagement in the classroom [DV, M, 19].

If you come late for class, especially on lockdown days when transportation is scarce, being denied access by the lecturer might have a severe influence on students' devotion to studies. The student will undoubtedly have bad opinions about the lecturer, and not being able to explain oneself might have a detrimental influence on the student's attendance and motivation [MV, M, 22].

Community organisation or any social group to which one belongs

According to the findings, support from a close-knit group (e.g., a religious group or family) indicated a decrease in emotional distress and an improvement in overall mental health. This suggests that resources (psychological, spiritual, and material) available through close-knit social groupings may be crucial sources for improving psychological wellbeing. It can come from family, friends, lecturers, the community, church, or mosque, among other sources. Some of the participants reiterated this:

Faith-based organizations are extremely beneficial to students, especially when they have lost guardians or sponsors. They rely on church members for tuition, food, and medical treatment and some get scholarships from various age groups in their community, like one of my friends. These connections provide a sense of belonging and support, even in the face of challenges [IF, F, 24].

These church members may occasionally stop by to check on you and offer prayers and counselling. As a student, you may be facing certain troubles that you are not comfortable addressing with family members; nevertheless, you can simply tell such issues to these people with whom you have a strong relationship and feel comforted [RM, F, 19].

Practice implications for social work.

The study also found that social workers, as change agents and problem solvers, have a lot of responsibilities in ensuring that students in distress situations have access to the necessary support systems that will provide them with the resources they need to thrive academically. Some excerpt from participant narratives supports this:

Social workers can engage in resource mapping by identifying accessible resource systems within the university community with the goal of connecting students in distress to the appropriate resource system that will offer the student support or help to enable them to cope academically. The social worker also acts as a broker, contacting

other interdisciplinary teams to provide students with essential support services such as material and psychological needs [SR, M, 24].

Social workers can engage students, educate them on how to cope with and manage academic stress, and provide counselling services to students with emotional needs. They can also mediate to strengthen weak relationships between students and their care providers. Social workers can link students to varying opportunities, obtaining grant for research, conferences, and workshops [EC, M, 22].

"Social workers may advocate for undergraduate welfare policies such as yearly bursary awards to supplement their financial situation, free housing, and inexpensive tuition costs"[OP, M, 21]

Discussion

The findings of the study indicated that one of the causes of students' indifference to academic pursuit is that some of them take advantage of the opportunity of being away from home for their university education to do whatever they want. The scenario as presented concurred with Bethell et al. (2017), whose study established unequivocally that the relationships, experiences, and environments to which a student is exposed are critical to their long-term learning and development. According to Erickson (1966), most students are still in a period of psychological development, building their sense of self and capacity to interact and engage with others. Such social interactions can change and reshape students' views, attitudes, and aspirations by modifying and remaking their identities (Brook & Willoughby, 2015). Their attitudes, habits, and skills are developed during adolescence and continue to influence them into adulthood (Baria & Gomez, 2022). Therefore, students' learning and development are influenced by physical, emotional, mental, and social factors, with quality support assisting in reducing unpleasant experiences that may hamper their future academic success.

Social support can have a direct influence on undergraduate students' academic experiences, improving their well-being and academic achievement (Brailovskaia et al., 2018; Maymon et al., 2019). Therefore, in order to improve their academic performance, students must be able to use the resources available to them both inside and outside of the academic community. This study examined the impact of perceived social support on undergraduate academic performance among Nigerian students as well as factors that encourage student indifference in academic pursuits. It also identified sources of social support networks that students can rely on to boost their morale and actively commit to their studies, which will result in better academic performance.

The findings of the study revealed that students' laissez-faire attitudes towards academic pursuits may be due to financial constraints caused by the loss of a guardian or care provider. These students are forced to engage in other activities to cope with academics, leading to poor performance and apathy towards academic pursuits. This supports Engle and Black's (In Duffy et al., 2022) assertion that students facing significant economic difficulties are more likely to have poor educational experiences, especially during the undergraduate period. The findings also state that students whose parents forced them to enrol in university often do not see the need to commit to academic activities for improved academic accomplishment, leading to the perception that they are at school because of their parents. This is consistent with Langenkamp and Shifrer's (2018) contention that first-generation undergraduates have a different cultural orientation toward academic involvement than those whose parents attended university. Rather than keeping on the family legacy, first-generation students see coming to university as a departure from their family of origin.

According to the study's findings, family or parental support helps students stay focused on their studies. This is congruent with the findings of the following authors (Nelson, 2019; Cage et al., 2021), who found that family support plays a critical role in increasing students' academic perseverance. It was also shown that peer support improves students' academic engagement and school satisfaction, resulting in good attitudes towards learning. The findings are also consistent with those of Mishra (2020) and Charalambus (2020), who found that peer support acts as a buffer in stressful situations, facilitating effective transition and integration.

Moreover, the findings discovered that lecturers' support improves students' classroom engagement, motivation, and sense of belonging, which drives them to strive for academic achievement. This finding was also consistent with Quin's (2016) research, which revealed that the lecturer-student connection had a major influence on students' academic engagement and accomplishment. Support (psychological, spiritual, and material) from a close-knit group, such as a religious group, age grade, or association, was also found to reduce emotional discomfort and increase overall mental health. This research supports the findings of these authors (Diaz & Bui, 2017; Onuoha & Akintola, 2018), who discovered that support from any group is connected with less psychological discomfort and higher psychological well-being.

In terms of professional implications, this study shows that social workers are responsible for ensuring that students in distress have access to the essential support networks that provide them with the resources they need to succeed academically. According to Okah et al. (2017), social workers are educated to tackle concerns about undergraduates' psychosocial challenges while keeping

their students' well-being in mind. According to Dupper (2007), social workers assist students with their problems through counselling, mediating, advocating, programming, educating, and connecting them to support systems that will provide them with the resources they require.

The researchers acknowledged a couple of limitations. First, participants were limited to students from a Nigerian university; alternatively, a larger representative sample from other universities would have been perfect for generalization, which necessitates conducting further studies that would include broader participants from different university, to authenticate generalizations. Nevertheless, because this is a qualitative study, the researchers focused on the entire narrative of the topic under study. Secondly, we only looked at positive aspects of students' relationship characteristics, but knowing both good and negative elements of students' connections (for example, conflict with peers or dependency on lecturers or family) would offer a more complete picture of students' academic adjustment (Hosan & Hoglund, 2017). According to research that included both positive and negative measures of students' relationship characteristics (e.g., off-task behaviour can be a barrier to academic performance) (Hosan & Hoglund, 2017), conflict can be more cyclical since it reduces students' commitment to their studies.

Conclusion

The study examined undergraduates' perceptions of social support and how this influences their academic performance. The emphasis on undergraduate academic success reflected the desire to improve students' academic performance while sustaining their interest. The study explored the causes of some students' indifference to their academic pursuits and the need for social support. Students who are enthusiastic about academics are more likely to attend class, pay attention, become engaged, enrol in more courses, learn well, and finally achieve well. The study aimed to provide fresh insights into how social support might assist university students in sustaining their interest in academics, and more importantly, drive them to excel academically while dealing with psychosocial difficulties. The findings of this study provide knowledge on the need for effective interventions and prevention strategies for both students and universities. Increasing students' awareness of specific sources of social support will improve their social and emotional well-being and their academic performance.

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