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Psycho-demographic predictors of psychological help-seeking behaviour of undergraduates

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Abstract

The present study examined locus of control, self-esteem and gender as factors of professional psychological help-seeking behaviour of undergraduates. The study adopted an ex-post facto descriptive survey research design, and a total of 325 Participants were systematically randomly selected from the population of undergraduates in a state university in the western part of Nigeria. 178 of them were males and 147 females, 268 Christians, 52 Muslims and 5 belonging to other forms of religions. Age of participants ranged between 16 – 30 years with a mean age of 22.05 and a standard deviation of 2.275. Samples were limited to students who were either in their second or third year in the university (first year and final year students were left out). Validated self-reported measures were used for data collection and three hypotheses were tested in the study. Significant positive correlation existed among the variables ($p < .001$, $r = .216^{**}$, $.388^{**}$ and $.253^{**}$); Locus of control and self-esteem both significantly independently and jointly predicted psychological help-seeking among students ((locus of control: $\beta = .38$, $F = 56.75$, $p < .01$; self-esteem: $\beta = .34$, $F = 35.55$, $p < .01$; self-esteem and locus of control $\beta = .33$, $F = 46.45$, $p < .01$). However, gender was not a significant predictor of psychological help-seeking among students. (Mean = 51.39, 51.48; $df = 323$, $t = -.066$, $p > .05$).

Keywords: Help-seeking, Undergraduates, Professionals, Psychological help

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1. Introduction

From time immemorial, people have always sought for help with the view to getting rid of their life's challenges. University students are also not left out in this because they also face a lot of challenges that demand that they should seek for help. Some have financial needs, academic needs, psychological needs etc. The realisation of the need for help which is manifested has informed the decision of most institutions to provide psychological help-centres in their institutions to help students who may be facing one problem or the other. However, despite the availability of the help centres, not many students voluntarily go there for help.

The question arising from the above is 'what could have been responsible for this attitude?'. Scholars have reported that the attitude towards seeking help is a prominent factor affecting an individual's decision to accept professional psychological assistance and this attitude is influenced by personal, social, demographic, and other such factors (Atik and Yalcin, 2011). Interest in studying peoples' attitude toward seeking psychological help has increased in the last 20 years as indicated by the large body of research concerned with attitude towards professional psychological help-seeking. Attitude towards seeking psychological help is therefore conceptualized for the purpose of this study, as an individual's willingness to seek counsel from a professional psychologist, particularly when the individual is in a state (i.e. emotional, financial, economic, social or academic etc) that warrants it (Mackenzie et al., 2004).

Help seeking is complex and characterized by efforts that unfold in socio-environmental and situational contexts. In such contexts, help seeking is influenced by multiple factors, many of which have a significant impact on the outcomes of actions (Koldjeski et al., 2004). The concept of 'help-seeking behaviour' has gained popularity in recent years as an important vehicle for exploring and understanding both delay and prompt action across a variety of different human conditions.

Although attitudes toward seeking psychological and mental help have been studied generally, only few researchers have studied students' attitudes towards seeking professional psychological help and relatively little is known about Nigerian students' attitudes towards seeking professional help for psychological difficulties. Specifically, an examination of the literature addressing help-seeking attitudes suggests that Nigerian students prefer seeking help for their problems from informal sources (e.g. spiritual houses, immediate family members, friends, mentors etc.), other than professionals. In contrast to informal help-seeking, professional help seeking is widely recognized as providing protection against a variety of mental help-seeking which has a strong negative effect on the psychological distress of personal, social, and emotional problems.

To have a better understanding of the attitude of students toward seeking psychological help, one must look at the predicting factors. There are several psychological factors that can influence or predict an individual's attitude towards seeking help some of which are; openness to experience, mindfulness, awareness, locus of control, self esteem and other personality factors. Although several researchers have studied how some of these variables may predict attitude towards seeking psychological help, none has focused on examining how locus of control behaviour and self-esteem predict professional help-seeking behaviour of undergraduates. The present study therefore examines how locus of control behaviour, gender

and self-esteem predict professional psychological help-seeking behaviour of undergraduates in a university in Nigeria.

The motivation for the present study includes the fact that; though, several studies on help-seeking behaviour of students have been done in different parts of the world, there seems to be a dearth of indigenous researches on the issue, particularly as it relates to undergraduates. In addition, despite the availability of psychological help centre which was provided by the school to assist students, observations have shown that only very few students make use of the available resources. It has always been that it is only when the problem has gone out of hand or when there is a referral that the psychological help is sought.

Locus of Control refers to an individual's perception about the underlying causes of events in his life. It is the extent to which individuals believe that they can control events that affect them. Locus of Control is considered to be an important aspect of personality and a person's perception of the source of his or her fate (Robins, 2000). People who are externals believe that external forces and events dictate their actions, decisions, and behaviours. Internals on the other hand take responsibility for their actions (Grable et al., 2009). For example, if a student is externalising personal emotional problems by spiritualising them, he may avoid seeking professional psychological help because he believes that; 'powerful forces' beyond his control are responsible for the problems. On the other hand, a student with internal locus of control feels he is personally responsible for his problems and he does not blame others for whatever experience he is having.

Self esteem is an individual's generalized evaluation of the self, which has the potential of influencing such an individual's thoughts, moods and behaviours, hence, an individual who evaluates positively sees himself in a favourable manner and thus has a high self-esteem. Low self esteem results from a more negative appraisal in which the individual sees himself in an unfavourable manner. It has been posited that when individuals have low self-esteem, they lack self-confidence in general, and they have little faith that their psychological problems will be solved. As a result, they are less motivated to communicate because they expect to fail.

Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) theory of reasoned action and planned behaviour and Kelley (1967) attribution theory formed the theoretical basis for the present study.

2. Method

The study adopted a cross sectional survey research design. 325 Participants were systematically randomly selected from the population of undergraduates in a state university in the western part of Nigeria. 178 of them were males and 147 females, 268 Christians, 52 Muslims and 5 belonging to other forms of religions. Age of participants ranged between 16 – 30 years with a mean age of 22.05 and a standard deviation of 2.275. Samples were limited to students who were either in their second or third year in the university (first year and final year students were left out). This inclusion criterion was based on the assumption that; first year students are new in school and may not have been able to have a good grasp of what operates on campus. Final year students on the other hand may have made up their minds that they are almost out of school and may not see the need for seeking psychological help. It is worthy of note that, this is not to say that there is no

probability that new intakes as well as final year students do not seek psychological help, however, this study did not include them.

3. Measures

Psychological help-seeking behaviour was measured with an adaptation and extension of the attitude towards seeking professional psychological help scale by Fischer and Turner (1970), called the new inventory of attitude toward seeking mental health services (IASMHS) developed by Mackenzie et al. (2004). The IASMHS 24 item scale with likert response format ranging from 4, strongly agreed to 1, strongly disagreed. Authors' reported a Cronbach's alpha of .87. but for this study an Alpha reliability coefficient of .69. Individuals who scored below the mean were said not to seek professional help; while individuals who scored above the mean score were said to seek professional help.

Locus of control was measured using Franklin and Andrew (1984) 17-item likert format locus of control of behaviour (LCB) scale. Authors' reported co-efficient Alpha reliability was .79. While for the present study, the Alpha reliability was .65. For this study scores above the mean was interpreted as internal locus of control while scores below the mean was interpreted as the external locus of control.

Self-esteem was measured using the 15-item, self-report likert format scale, developed by Adanijo and Oyefeso (1986). Authors reported a split-half reliability coefficient of 0.79. While an Alpha reliability coefficient of .77 was recorded for the present study. An individual whose score is above the mean is regarded as having high self-esteem, while an individual whose score is below the mean is considered as having low self-esteem.

4. Results and discussion

Three hypotheses were tested in the study and the results presented in Tables 1 – 3. Table 1 shows the summary of result of analysis of the first hypothesis.

The first hypothesis stated that there will be a significant positive relationship among locus of control behaviour, self-esteem and psychological help-seeking behaviour. The result of analysis provided the basis for accepting the hypothesis i.e. there is a significant positive relationship among the variables (locus of control and self esteem: $r = .216, p < .001$); (locus of control of behaviour and psychological help seeking behaviour: $r = .388, p < .001$); (self esteem also has a significant positive relationship with psychological help seeking behaviour: $r = .253, p < .001$). In other words, an increase in one variable leads to a corresponding increase in the other variable.

The possible explanation for these findings lies in the fact that externals would most likely be ready to seek for help because they already believe that external forces are responsible for their experiences and it would be appropriate to seek external help to combat it as well. Of course such people do not believe in themselves or their ability to handle situations on their own. The reverse is the case for internals who may

want to look inwards and attempt providing solution to his predicaments. He may even perceive help-seeking as not necessary, since he would not want to bother other people with his problem.

Table 1. Summary table showing the relationship between locus of control of behaviour and help seeking behaviour

VARIABLES	M	SD	N	Locus of control behaviour	Self-esteem
Locus of control of behaviour	43.22	10.926	322		
Self -esteem	40.74	7.574	325	.216** .000	
Help seeking behaviour	51.43	11.319	325	.388** .000	.253** .000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level i.e. $p < .01$ (1-tailed).

An individual who is low on self-esteem may not want to seek psychological help since he may perceive it as a further lowering of his esteem. He may interpret his help-seeking behaviour as exposing himself to more 'ridicule'; he may rather prefer to suffer in silence. The opposite may be the case for the individual with high self-esteem, who may even perceive help-seeking as a way of further improving his esteem.

The second hypotheses stated that locus of control and self-esteem will significantly independently and jointly predict psychological help-seeking behaviour of undergraduates. This was tested using the step wise multiple regression analysis. The summary of the result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary showing the results of locus of control and self esteem as a predictor of professional psychological help seeking behaviour

Model	Variables	R	R ²	df	β	F	P	Sign
1	Locus of control	.388	.148	321	.388	56.759	< .01	Sig.
2	Locus of control	.427	.177	321	.349	35.552	< .01	Sig.
	Self-esteem			319	.182		< .01	Sig.

The result as presented in Table 2 shows a significant independent and joint prediction of the independent variables on the dependent variable. It thus implies that self-esteem and locus of control significantly independently and jointly predicted psychological help-seeking behaviour. ($\beta = 0.388, 0.349, p < .01$). The adjusted R² shows that the joint prediction of locus of control, and self esteem on psychological help-seeking behaviour of undergraduate student exerts higher change compared to the independent prediction of professional psychological help seeking behaviour ($R^2 = 0.177$).

The third hypotheses stated that gender will be a significant predictor of psychological help-seeking behaviour of undergraduate's and the result is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary showing gender as a predictor of professional psychological help seeking behaviour

Gender	N	Mean	Std deviation	Std error mean	t	df	p
Male	178	51.39	10.896	.817			
Female	147	51.48	11.847	.977	-.066	323	P > .05

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