Contextual Stressors and Help-Seeking Barriers as Predictors of Anxiety Severity among Tertiary Students in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study assessed contextual stressors and help-seeking barriers as predictors of anxiety severity among tertiary students in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, Nigeria. The correlational research design was adopted for the study. The population for the study comprised 12,578 students in FCT, Abuja. The multistage sampling procedure was used to draw a sample size of 408 students. Contextual Stressors and Help-Seeking for Anxiety Questionnaire (CSHSBAQ) were used for data collection. The research questions were answered using point-biserial correlation (rbp), while multiple regression was used to test the null hypotheses at .05 alpha level. The findings showed that there were moderate positive relationships between anxiety and students' social/environmental challenges (rbp = .372), curriculum/academic expectations challenges (rbp = .329), and financial stress (rbp =.368), except for students' perceived academic achievement (rbp = .254) and time/balance challenges (rbp = .250), that had weak relationship with anxiety severity. Students' fear of therapy (rbp = .344), fear of self-discovery (rbp =.366), and fear of stigma (rbp = .389) showed positive moderate relationships between anxiety severity and help-seeking barriers. Contextual stressors (social/environment β = 1.091, p < .001; financial stress β = 1.079, p < .001) and help-seeking barriers (fear of therapy β = 0.173, p = .001<.05; fear of self-discovery β = 0.219, p < .001; fear of stigma β = 0.216, p < .001) were significant predictors of anxiety among tertiary students. However, early identification of students at high risk for anxiety and professional help should be made available to the students when needed.

Keywords: Anxiety severity, Contextual stressors, Predictors, Help-Seeking barriers, FCT

Introduction

Anxiety is a major public health concern among students of tertiary institutions. The prevalence of anxiety among students of tertiary institutions is relatively high globally, and the majority of students remain untreated. Furthermore, it is not clear what barriers are responsible for students not seeking help for anxiety severity. Recent reports by the American College Health Association (ACHA, 2018) showed out of 88,000 college students in America, 63.40 per cent experienced overwhelming anxiety at a point in their last twelve months; about 60 per cent of students suffer from high levels of anxiety (ACHA, 2019); one

in three (34.60%) clinically diagnosed with anxiety, while 35.10 per cent reported anxiety as an impeding factor to academic performance (ACHA, 2022). A meta-analysis conducted by Chang et al. (2021) found the prevalence of anxiety among college and university students residing in European, American, and Asia-Pacific regions to be 31.00 per cent (95 % CI: 23.00–39.00 %). In another systematic review and meta-analysis involving European students, Oliveira-Carvalla et al. (2022) found anxiety prevalence could be even higher, residing at 55.00 per cent (95 % CI: 45.00–64.00 %) instead. Also, one in three students drops out of tertiary education without attaining the degree for which they enrolled because of anxiety severity (Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development [OECD], 2019; Thomas, 2020).

While anxiety is a natural emotion characterized by alertness, vegetative autonomy, and behavioural responses, accompanied by subjective sensations, which are all important for survival, its occurrence at a high level interferes with concentration and memory, which are critical for academic success. It is an emotion that consists of feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes, (American Psychological Association, 2013). These components combine to create an unpleasant feeling that is typically associated with, uneasiness, fear, or worry.

Transitioning students to tertiary institutions is stressful (Dickson & Gullo, 2015; Lei et al., 2016), and one-third of these students are considered particularly vulnerable to increasing levels of anxiety as they navigate a new and challenging stage in their lives (Thomas, 2020). Some researchers have referred to these trends as an emerging "mental health crisis" in higher education (Arafat, 2019; Evans et al., 2018).

In Nigeria, students of tertiary institutions experience increasing levels of anxiety. The reported prevalence of anxiety among students ranges between 63.5 per cent (Aluh et al., 2020) and 61.7 per cent (Anosike et al., 2022). The living conditions in tertiary institutions and campuses in Nigeria are poor and capable of increasing students' anxiety levels. Enwuama et al. (2021) reported poor or lack of appropriate transportation system, financial pressures or brokenness, lack of support and care, unpleasant disruption of academic activities; cultism, and violence; workload and congested academic activities; and low sense of control, and poor academic performance, contribute to increasing levels of anxiety among students of tertiary institution in Nigeria.

Anxiety is usually examined in clinical and non-clinical samples in terms of severity. Severity is the degree of something undesirable or hard to endure (SA Technologies, 2020). Anxiety is not a definite phenomenon. Instead, there is a continuous grading in severity, from its absence to severe anxiety. The degree of severity of anxiety constitutes its most significant aspect, and its dimensional nature is not an issue from a conceptual perspective.

Until recently, poor attention has been paid to identifying mental anxiety and its predictive factors among students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Such needed attention was mostly given elsewhere, such as in the United States (Kendler et al., 2015; Mojtabai et al., 2015). Students of tertiary institutions can be at added risk of experiencing increasing levels of

anxiety relative to other young adults due to a combination of predictors which Linden and Jurdi-Hage (2017) identified as relating to contextual stressors, and help-seeking barriers.

Predictors are factors that can predict health outcomes (Gidron, 2013) which this study considers as contextual stressors and help-seeking barriers for anxiety severity. In this study, contextual stressors are social/environmental challenges, curriculum/academic expectations challenges, time/balance challenges, time/balance challenges, and financial stress challenges. while help-seeking barriers are fear of therapy, fear of stigma, and fear of self-discovery.

The study was conducted among tertiary students in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. The FCT is a cosmopolitan centre; an educational hub for young adults from diverse backgrounds with students at risk for experiencing anxiety relative to financial difficulties (Tolu & Keskis, 2015), ignorance, academic-induced frustration, and lack of parental care (Agwogie, 2016). Also, there are students' unmet needs for management of anxiety due to fear of therapy, fear of self-discovery, and fear of stigma that society attaches to individuals receiving mental health/psychiatric care (Dabana & Gobir, 2018; Wada et al., 2021).

Although anxiety severity levels have been continually recognized among the student population of tertiary institutions elsewhere, gaps remain in the Nigerian literature. The available Nigerian studies (Adewuya et al., 2018; Amoko et al., 2021; Gureje et al., 2010; ;Nzeakah et al., 2022; Wada et al., 2021) either rely on population-level data (i.e., not specific to students of tertiary institutions) or narrowly focus on individual factors, lacking the scope to consider multiple factors at the same time. However, there is virtually no published study that has examined contextual stressors and help-seeking barriers as predictors of anxiety severity among tertiary students in FCT, Abuja. This is the gap this study has addressed.

Research Questions
The following research questions were posed to guide this study:
1. What is the relationship between anxiety severity level and contextual stressors of tertiary students in FCT, Abuja?
2. What is the relationship between anxiety severity level and help-seeking barriers of tertiary students in FCT, Abuja?

Hypotheses
The following null hypotheses were postulated and tested at .05 alpha level.
1. Contextual stressors are not significant predictors of anxiety severity level among tertiary students in FCT, Abuja.
2. Help-seeking barriers are not significant predictors of anxiety severity level among tertiary students in FCT, Abuja.

Methods and Materials

The correlational research design was adopted for this study. Correlational design is a non-experimental design in which the researcher measures two variables and assesses the statistical relationships between them without controlling for extraneous variables (Price et al., 2020). This study was conducted in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, Nigeria,

which has many educational institutions representing different levels of education. In the FCT, the accredited tertiary institutions include Veritas University, Nile University of Nigeria, Baze University, African University of Science and Technology, Aspire College of Technology, University of Abuja, and FCT College of Education, Zuba.

The population for this study consisted of tertiary students in FCT, Abuja. The population comprised 12,578 students during the 2019/2020 academic session. The breakdown shows student enrollment for the University of Abuja to be 3,255 males and 3,161 females, giving a total of 6,416 students. The 2019/2020 academic session student enrollment for Baze University was 2,190 males and 1,795 females, giving a total student enrollment of 3,985. The student enrollment for the College of Education, Zuba was 1,484 full-time and 693 part-time, giving a total of 2,177 students (Academic Planning Units and Office of the Registrar, 2020).

The sample size of this study consisted of 408 tertiary students in FCT, Abuja, using Taro Yamane's (1967) sample size formula. Multi-stage sampling procedure was used to select the study sample. The first stage involved the use of a simple random sampling of balloting without replacement to draw two universities and one college of education. There are five universities and two colleges of education within the FCT, Abuja which gave a ratio of 5:2. The Second stage involved the categorization of the universities under public and private universities. A simple random sampling technique of balloting without replacement was used to draw one public university and one private university. This produced three tertiary institutions (the University of Abuja, Baze University, and College of Education, Zuba). Stage three involved the use of a simple random sampling technique of balloting without replacement to select two faculties from two universities and two schools from the College of Education (COE), Zuba. This gave rise to four faculties and two schools (six groups in all). The fourth stage involved the use of a systematic sampling technique to draw five departments from each of the selected faculties and four units from the selected schools, which gave rise to 24 (20 departments & 4 units). The fifth stage involved the use of simple random sampling of balloting without replacement to select 17 students from each of the sampled departments and units. Thus, a total of 408 students were selected from three tertiary institutions in FCT, Abuja for the study.

The researcher-adapted 'Contextual Stressors and Help-Seeking Barriers for Anxiety Questionnaire' (CSHSBAQ) was used for data collection. The CSHSBAQ contained sections A and B. Section A contained five items that generated responses on contextual stressors. The section was assigned a 4-point Likert-type response optiosn of 'Not at all (0 points),' 'Several days (1 Point),' 'More than half the days (2 Points),' and 'Nearly every day (3 points).' Section B comprised three items that elicited information on help-seeking barriers for anxiety. This section was assigned a 4-point Likert-type response option similar to Section A. The participants were asked to indicate their experiences by placing a tick (√) in the box against each of the items.

The face validity of the CSHSBAQ was established by giving the draft copies of the instrument, the study's specific objectives, research questions, and the hypotheses to five experts in the Department of Human Kinetics and Health Education, University of Nigeria,

Nsukka. The reliability coefficients of the CSBHSBAQ were established using Cronbach's alpha. In this study, the reliability coefficients of 0.71, and 0.74 were obtained for sections A and B respectively. The completed questionnaires were collected on the spot after they had been filled out by the students. A total of 390 copies (95.59%) of the CSHSBAQ were duly filled out and returned and were used for analyses. The retrieved copies of the CSHSBAQ were cross-checked for completeness of responses before data analyses. Copies with incomplete information were discarded.

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS version 25) was used for data analyses. The data were analyzed on an item-by-item basis. The point-biserial correlation was employed to determine the relationship between the level of anxiety and contextual stressors and help-seeking barriers of the students. Subsequently, Nwagu and Agbaje's (2017) guidelines for the interpretation of the degree or strength of the relationship between two or more variables were employed. The guidelines recommended that a correlation coefficient of ± .00 to ± .29 should be interpreted as none to a weak relationship; correlation coefficients between ± .30 to ± .59 and ±.60 to ±.99 should be interpreted as moderate and strong relationships, respectively. In addition, a correlation coefficient of ± 1.00 should be interpreted as a perfect relationship between two or more variables. Multiple regression analyses were used to test the null hypotheses at a 0.05 alpha level.. A null hypothesis was rejected if the p-value is less than or equal to 0.05. However, when the p-value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

Results

Table 1: **Point-Biserial Correlation Showing the Relationship between Level of Anxiety Severity and Students' Contextual Stressors (n=390)**

S/n	Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1.	Anxiety severity	1.00					
2.	Social/environment challenges	.372	1.00				
3.	Perceived academic achievement	.254	.324	1.00			
4.	Curriculum/Academic Expectations	.329	.423	.521	1.00		
5.	Time/Balance challenges	.250	.394	.349	.510	1.00	
6.	Financial stress	.368	.350	.301	.412	.401	1.00

Results in Table 1 show moderate positive relationships between anxiety severity and students' social/environmental challenges (rbp = .372), curriculum/academic expectations challenges (rbp = .329), and financial stress (rbp =.368). This implies that level of anxiety severity increases with students' increased social/environmental challenges, curriculum/expectations challenges, and financial stress. Also, there was a weak positive relationship between anxiety severity and students' perceived academic achievement (rbp = .254) and time/balance challenges (rbp = .250). This implies that level of anxiety severity

increases with students' increased perceived academic achievement and time/balance challenges.

Table 2: **Point-Biserial Correlation showing the Relationship between Level of Anxiety Severity and Student's Help-Seeking Barriers (*n*=390)**

S/n	Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.
1.	Anxiety severity	1.00			
2.	Fear of therapy	.344	1.00		
3.	Fear of self-discovery	.366	.323	1.00	
4.	Fear of stigma	.389	.466	.423	1.00

Results in Table 2 show moderate positive relationships between anxiety severity and students' fear of therapy (rbp = .344), fear of self-discovery (rbp =.366), and fear of stigma (rbp = .389) respectively. This implies that the level of anxiety severity increases with students' increased fear of therapy, fear of self-discovery, and fear of stigma.

Table 3: **Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis Showing Contextual Factors as Predictors of Anxiety Severity among Tertiary Students in FCT, Abuja (*n* = 390)**

Model	R	R²	Adj R²	F	β	T	p	95% CI for B LB	UB
(constant)	0.218	0.048	0.208	21.491		-5.293	.000	1.915	4.180
Social/environmental challenges					0.228	4.378	0.000	0.601	1.581
Perceived academic achievement					0.053	0.993	0.321	0.240	0.730
Curriculum/ Academic Expectations challenges					0.111	1.839	0.967	0.039	1.165
Time/Balance challenges					0.003	0.056	0.955	0.533	0.565
Financial stress					0.225	4.339	0.000	0.590	1.568

Significant at p≤0.05

The results in Table 3 show that social/environment challenges (β = 1.091, p < 0.001) and financial stress (β = 1.079, p < .001) were statistically significant predictors of anxiety among tertiary students. This implies that .level of anxiety severity increases with students' increased social/environmental challenges and financial stress.

Table 4: **Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis Showing Help-Seeking Barriers as Predictors of Anxiety Severity among Tertiary Students in FCT, Abuja (*n* = 390)**

Model	R	R²	Adj R²	F	B	T	p	95% CI for B LB	UB
(constant)	0.224	0.050	0.218	37.080	-19.915	0.000	5.483	6.684	0.224
Fear of therapy					0.173	3.363	0.001	0.526	2.008

Fear of self-discovery	0.219	4.377	0,000	0.752	1.979
Fear of stigma	0.216	4.028	0.000	0.650	1.890

Significant at p≤0.05

The results in Table 4 show that fear of therapy ($\beta = 0.173$, $p = .001 < .05$), fear of self-discovery ($\beta = 0.219$, $p < 0.001$) and fear of stigma ($\beta = 0.216$, $p < .001$) were statistically significant predictors of anxiety among tertiary students. This implies that .level of anxiety severity increases with students' increased fear of therapy, fear of self-discovery, and fear of stigma.

Discussion

Findings showed a moderate positive relationship between anxiety severity and students' social/environmental challenges, curriculum/academic expectations challenges, and financial stress (Table 1). This implies that level of anxiety severity increases with students' increased social/environmental challenges, curriculum/expectations challenges, financial stress, perceived academic achievement, and time/balance challenges. This finding supports the expectation that as social interactions among students and lecturers become more sophisticated or complicated and the stress involved in the manipulation of the school environment increases, the level of anxiety severity also increases. The everyday stresses of tertiary institution life peculiar to the cosmopolitan area such as FCT, Abuja, can trigger symptomatology such as anxiety in those students with a predisposition (ACHA, 2014; NIMH, 2015) which supports this finding.

Students' interaction with various aspects of the curriculum and their perception of the expectations placed upon them such as meeting all aspects of the curriculum increases their anxiety severity level. Pressure to achieve academic success is reported as a significant stressor for students who are not prepared for the increase in academic expectations at the level of tertiary education (Jerema, 2010). To achieve academic productivity tertiary institutions greatly rely on indicators such as facilities available and other support services in the hostels. This implies that consideration must be given to the physical environment and opportunities for social interaction such as clubs, recreational facilities, and group work by students by tertiary institution administrators in FCT, Abuja.

It is not a surprise that Table 1 showed a moderate positive relationship between anxiety and students' financial stress. This supports what Derek et al. (2020) found in multivariate modelling that students' status was positively associated with financial anxiety. For example, in FCT, Abuja, students are confronted with factors that Franquilho et al. (2016) described as economic recession, income decline, and unimaginable debts which are significantly associated with symptoms of anxiety. The implication for tertiary institution administrators in FCT, Abuja, is to appreciate the conclusion by Mohammed and colleagues (2021) that students with financial support are associated with a lower prevalence risk of anxiety. It is pertinent, therefore, to increase and/or provide funding in all tertiary institutions in FCT, Abuja, dedicated to services that promote mental well-being and manage anxiety among the students.

Findings in Table 3 showed that social/environmental challenges and financial stress of students in FCT, Abuja, positively and significantly correlated with their level of anxiety. Students who experienced social and institutional environment challenges and financial stress had higher anxiety severity scores which were expected probably due to factors identified by Hill and colleagues (2018) such as insufficient feedback, negative relations with faculty or staff, and lack of peer support. Some studies have found associations between financial pressure and lack of social support with students' mental health problems (Beiter et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2016; Richards et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2017) which corroborates what this study found. Stakeholders such as tertiary institution administrators should promote social networks by facilitating social connections such as routine contact with students, faculty, and staff to help identify students in distress (Jed Foundation Mental Health Action Map, 2011).

Findings in Tables 2 and 4 showed that there is a moderate positive significant relationship between anxiety severity and students' fear of therapy, fear of self-discovery, and fear of stigma. This implies that .level of anxiety severity increases with students' increased fear of therapy, fear of self-discovery, and fear of stigma. This was expected because fear of stigma is one of the largest help-seeking barriers among students (Wilson & Deane, 2010; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). There is, therefore, a need to embark on stigma-reduction campaigns to create awareness around campuses and help remove stereotypes associated with mental health problems.

The WHO World Mental Health International College Student Initiative report found that students hesitate to seek help if needed (Eber et al., 2019). The lack of faith in treatment quality and effectiveness, concern for confidentiality, a lack of perceived need for help (Wilson & Deane, 2010; Whitehill et al., 2012), and concern for having to admit to struggling with a mental health issue (Park et al., 2012) are probably reasons for students' fear of therapy/treatment, fear of self-discovery and fear of stigma in FCT, Abuja et al. (2017) found a relationship between students' anxiety severity level and fear of therapy/treatment, fear of self-discovery and fear of stigma due to the fear of being stigmatized by society, trust in the mental health professional, difficulties in self-disclosure, perceived devaluation and lack of knowledge as students' help-seeking barriers.

The findings that student' fear of therapy, fear of self-discovery and fear of stigma positively and significantly correlated with their level of anxiety severity. This may suggest students who experienced the fear of therapy, self-discovery and the fear of stigma did not seek appropriate mental health care which exposed them to higher anxiety severity levels. Theurel and Witt (2022) found that 50 per cent of students in their study sample disliked talking about their feelings, emotions, or thoughts while the most highly-rated stigma barrier was concern about what their friends might think, say or do, with 26.37 per cent. There is a need to help students overcome these barriers by targeting reluctant students who may be willing to receive treatment for anxiety such as anonymous assessment and counselling via the Internet.

Conclusion

The findings have shown that there was a positive relationship between anxiety severity level and students' students' social/environmental challenges, curriculum/academic expectations

challenges, and financial stress, fear of therapy/treatment, fear of self-discovery, and fear of stigma in FCT, Abuja. However, mental health educators, public health educators and psychologists at FCT, Abuja should identify students at high risk for anxiety to prevent complications; Psychologists, public health educators, and mental health educators in FCT, Abuja, should promote social networks by facilitating social connections, such as routine contact with students, faculty, and staff, to help identify students in distress. Public health educators, psychologists, and tertiary institution administrators should improve the physical environment and provide opportunities for students' social interaction, such as clubs, recreational facilities, and group work.

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