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## EDITORIAL DESK

I wish to express my profound gratitude to Almighty God for the grace to successfully complete the volume 2 of the West African Journal of Educational Administration and Planning (WAJEAP).

The twelve articles were the products of well researched papers that were presented at the international conference held in May 2024 at the Presbyterian University of East Africa in Kikuyu, Nairobi, Kenya. The conference was well attended by over 25 universities across the globe. These published articles have been peer reviewed and plagiarism checks conducted on them before publication.

I, therefore, want to deeply appreciate the management team of the Presbyterian University of East Africa for making this publication a reality. All the writers and authors are congratulated for passing the stringent measures set by the guild of editors.

Congratulations to everyone.

**Prof. M. O. B. Mohammed** FNAEAP

*Head, Editorial Team*

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# THE DUAL BURDEN: ACADEMIC STRESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION AS PREDICTORS OF DEPRESSION AND SUICIDAL THOUGHTS AMONG NIGERIAN TERTIARY STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*Mental health challenges among Nigerian tertiary students, exacerbated by academic stress and social isolation, are critically examined in this study. The prevalence of depression and suicidal thoughts in this demographic underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions. A descriptive survey design was employed to investigate the relationships between academic stress, depression, social isolation, and suicidal thoughts among 234 students from various tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Findings reveal a significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.60$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) between academic stress and depression, highlighting that increased academic stress corresponds to higher rates of depression symptoms. Similarly, a moderate positive correlation ( $\rho = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) was found between social isolation and suicidal thoughts, indicating that heightened social isolation is associated with an increased prevalence of suicidal ideation. These results underscore the profound impact of academic stress and social isolation on mental health outcomes among Nigerian students and emphasize the need for comprehensive support systems within educational settings. Recommendations include expanding mental health services, promoting peer support networks, and integrating stress management techniques to foster student well-being and academic success. Addressing these issues is crucial for enhancing student mental health and academic performance in Nigerian tertiary institutions.*

**Keywords:** Academic stress; Depression; Suicidal thought; Social isolation, Mental health

## INTRODUCTION

Mental health issues among students in tertiary institutions are increasingly recognized as critical concerns worldwide. In Nigeria, the situation is particularly alarming due to the high levels of academic stress and social isolation faced by students. These mental health challenges often manifest as depression and suicidal ideation, which can have devastating consequences for individuals and their communities. Addressing these issues is essential for improving student well-being and academic performance.

Depression and suicide are global public health issues, affecting 264 million people worldwide. Depression is a leading cause of disability and disease, while suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds. In Nigeria, the increasing prevalence of depression and suicidal thoughts among tertiary students has emerged as a critical public health issue. Olumide et al. (2019) indicate that depressive symptoms affect approximately 20% to 30% of Nigerian university students, with Onigbinjo-Williams and Akande (2021) reporting even higher rates. This concerning trend highlights the immediate necessity for targeted interventions and robust support systems to address the mental health struggles experienced by this vulnerable population.

Academic stress is a significant factor affecting Nigerian tertiary students and it stems from a variety of sources, primarily rooted in the high expectations placed on students by themselves, their families, and society (Olumide et al., 2019). These expectations are often unrealistic and place a significant burden on students to achieve excellent academic results. The pressure to excel is compounded by the competitive nature of the Nigerian education system, where high grades are seen as essential for securing future opportunities such as scholarships, employment, and further studies. This relentless pursuit of academic excellence can create a stressful environment that is difficult for students to navigate.

In addition to high expectations, the educational infrastructure in Nigeria often exacerbates academic stress. Onigbinjo-Williams and Akande (2021) submitted that many tertiary institutions face significant resource limitations, including insufficient access to textbooks, laboratories, and other essential learning materials. Overcrowded classrooms further strain these resources, leading to a less effective learning environment where individual attention from instructors is limited. This can leave students feeling unsupported and overwhelmed, as they struggle to keep up with the academic demands without adequate resources. The lack of proper academic support systems, such as tutoring and counselling services, further intensifies the stress experienced by students.

The psychological impact of academic stress on Nigerian tertiary students is profound. The constant pressure to perform well and the fear of failure can lead to significant psychological distress, manifesting as anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. Ogunsemi et al., (2020) underscore this, demonstrating a strong association between academic stress and depression among Nigerian university students. This highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to alleviate academic stress. Implementing academic support programs, such as stress management workshops, counselling services, and mentorship programs, can help students cope with their academic pressures. Additionally, improving the educational infrastructure and reducing class sizes can create a more conducive learning environment, ultimately supporting students' mental health and academic success.

Social isolation significantly impacts the mental health of Nigerian tertiary students, particularly during the transition from home to the academic environment. This transition often involves moving away from family and friends, which can disrupt established support networks that students rely on for emotional and psychological stability (Aluh et al., 2019). The abrupt change can lead to feelings of loneliness and detachment, making it challenging for students to adjust to their new surroundings. This sense of isolation can be especially profound for students who have never lived away from home, increasing their vulnerability to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Aluh et al., 2019; Alderwick et al., 2022).

Cultural and socio-economic factors further compound the effects of social isolation. Nigerian culture places a strong emphasis on communal living and familial support, which means that students might find it particularly hard to cope in an environment where they are expected to be more independent. Additionally, Ogunsemi et al., (2020) averred that socioeconomic disparities can exacerbate feelings of isolation. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds might face additional stressors, such as financial difficulties, that can limit their ability to engage in social activities or access support services. These factors create a sense of exclusion and helplessness, contributing to the deterioration of mental health.

Investigating the impact of social isolation on mental health is crucial for developing strategies to create more inclusive and supportive campus environments. Alderwick et al., (2022) submitted that universities can play a pivotal role by fostering a sense of community and belonging among students. Initiatives such as peer mentorship programs, support groups, and social activities can help mitigate feelings of isolation (Joo et al., 2018).

The simultaneous experience of academic stress and social isolation creates a dual burden that significantly impacts the mental health of Nigerian tertiary students. Academic stress, characterised by the pressure to achieve high grades, manage a heavy workload, and meet the expectations of parents and educators, can be overwhelming on its own. When coupled with social isolation, where students lack a supportive social network and feel disconnected from peers and family, the stress can become unbearable. This intersection intensifies the mental strain on students, making it more challenging to cope with their academic responsibilities and personal well-being (Yang et al., 2023).

The combination of academic stress and social isolation can lead to a spiral of negative emotions. Students who feel isolated may have fewer opportunities to share their academic struggles with friends or family, leading to feelings of loneliness and abandonment. This lack of social support can make the academic pressures seem even more insurmountable, exacerbating feelings of helplessness and despair (Aluh et al., 2019). As students struggle to manage both academic and social challenges, their mental health can deteriorate, increasing the risk of developing depression and suicidal thoughts. The compounded stress can result in a vicious cycle where poor mental health further impairs academic performance, leading to even greater stress and isolation (Misra & McKean, 2019).

There is a notable gap in research focusing specifically on the Nigerian context regarding these issues. Most existing studies on academic stress and social isolation have been conducted in Western countries, which may not fully capture the unique socio-cultural dynamics of Nigerian students. This study aims to fill this gap by providing context-specific insights that can inform policies and interventions tailored to the Nigerian tertiary education system. Although academic stress and social isolation are recognised as significant issues, there is a lack of comprehensive studies examining their combined effects on Nigerian tertiary students. Hence the purposes of the study are to:

1. Investigate the relationship between the level of academic stress and the prevalence of depression among Nigerian tertiary students.
2. Determine the correlation between social isolation and suicidal thoughts among Nigerian tertiary students.
- 3.

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following research questions

1. What is the relationship between the level of academic stress and the prevalence of depression among Nigerian tertiary students?
2. Is there a correlation between social isolation and suicidal thoughts among Nigerian tertiary students?

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a descriptive survey design to investigate the dual burden of academic stress and social isolation as predictors of depression and suicidal thoughts among Nigerian tertiary students. The descriptive survey design is appropriate for this study as it facilitates the collection of quantitative data that describe the existing conditions, attitudes, and



characteristics of the population. The population for this study includes all students enrolled in tertiary institutions across Nigeria. To obtain a representative sample, a stratified random sampling technique was employed. The sample size for this study was 234 students, which was determined based on the need to balance statistical power and logistical feasibility.

Tertiary institutions were stratified into three categories: universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. From each category, a random sample of institutions was selected. Within each selected institution, students were randomly chosen to participate in the study. Efforts were made to ensure an equal representation of students from different years of study and fields of discipline.

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire designed specifically for this study. The questionnaire will comprise four sections: (A) Demographic Information collects data on age, gender, year of study, type of institution, and field of study. (B) Academic Stress Scale, a validated scale measuring the level of academic stress. Items cover areas such as coursework load, exam pressure, and academic expectations, with responses on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). (C) Depression Inventory for assessing the prevalence and severity of depression. (D) Social Isolation Scale (SIS): This scale measures the degree of social isolation. Items assess the frequency of social interactions and feelings of loneliness, (E) Suicidal Thoughts Scale: This scale measures the occurrence of suicidal ideation. Items assess the agreement and intensity of suicidal thoughts. Sections B to D had five items each, making a total of 20 items.

To ensure content validity, the items in the questionnaire were developed based on an extensive review of the literature and existing validated instruments. Subject matter experts in psychology and educational research reviewed the items to ensure they comprehensively cover the constructs of academic stress, social isolation, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Internal consistency reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to be 0.87. A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70 or higher is generally considered acceptable, indicating that the items within each scale are consistently measuring the same construct. By ensuring both validity and reliability, the study aims to produce accurate and consistent results that can effectively inform interventions and policies aimed at reducing academic stress, social isolation, depression, and suicidal thoughts among Nigerian tertiary students.

Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained and informed consent was also secured from all participants. The questionnaire was administered in person during class sessions. Data collection took place over two months. Percentages were computed to describe the demographic characteristics of the sample and the main study variables. Pearson's Correlation Coefficient was to examine the relationship between the level of academic stress and the prevalence of depression and Spearman's Rank Correlation to determine the correlation between social isolation and suicidal thoughts.

## **FINDINGS**

The main objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between the level of academic stress and the prevalence of depression among Nigerian tertiary students and determine the correlation between social isolation and suicidal thoughts among Nigerian tertiary students. The demographic data was subjected to descriptive statistics and the result is presented accordingly.

**Table 1: Age Distribution**

<b>Age group</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
18 – 20 years	70	29.91
21 – 23 years	110	47.01
24 – 26 years	40	17.01
27+ years	14	5.98
Total	234	100

**Table 2: Gender Distribution**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Male	120	51.28
Female	114	48.72
Total	234	100

**Table 3: Distribution of Year of Study**

<b>Year of Study</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Year 1	60	25.64
Year 2	80	34.19
Year 3	54	23.08
Year 4	40	17.09
Total	234	100

**Table 4: Type of Institution**

<b>Type of Institution</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
University	150	64.10
Polytechnic	50	21.37
College of Education	34	14.53
Total	234	100

**Table 5: Field of Study**

<b>Field of Study</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Sciences	80	34.19
Arts and Humanities	60	25.64
Social Sciences	54	23.08
Engineering	40	17.09
Total	234	100

These tables provide a clear and organized representation of the demographic characteristics of the sample, making it easier to interpret and analyze the data. To analyze the relationship between the level of academic stress and the prevalence of depression, Pearson's Correlation Coefficient was used to analyze the quantitative data. The Pearson correlation coefficient, denoted as  $r$ , assesses the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables.

**Table 6: Summary of Pearson's Correlation Coefficient**

Variables	Pearson's $r$	p-value
Academic Stress	0.60	< 0.05
Prevalence of Depression		

From Table 6, the correlation coefficient  $r$  is 0.60. This value indicates a moderate to strong positive correlation between academic stress and the prevalence of depression among students. A correlation coefficient of 0.60 suggests that as academic stress increases, there tends to be a corresponding increase in the prevalence of depression among students. This positive correlation indicates that higher levels of academic stress are associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing depression symptoms. The p-value is less than 0.05, this indicates that the correlation observed (0.60) is statistically significant. In other words, we can reject the null hypothesis that there is no correlation between academic stress and depression prevalence in the population.

To determine the correlation between social isolation and suicidal thoughts, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient assessed the strength and direction of monotonic relationships between two variables.

**Table 7: Summary of Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient**

Variables	Spearman's Rank	p-value
Social Isolation	0.45	< 0.05
Suicidal Thought		

Results from Table 7 show the Spearman  $\rho$  is 0.45. This value indicates a moderate positive monotonic correlation between social isolation and the prevalence of suicidal thoughts. A Spearman's rank correlation coefficient of 0.45 suggests that there is a tendency for individuals who report higher levels of social isolation to also report higher levels of suicidal thoughts. This positive correlation implies that as social isolation increases, there tends to be an increase in suicidal thoughts, albeit not necessarily in a linear fashion, but in a consistently upward trend. The p-value (here less than 0.05) indicates that the observed correlation coefficient is statistically significant. This suggests that the relationship between social isolation and suicidal thoughts in the sample is unlikely to have occurred by chance alone.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis using Pearson's correlation coefficient ( $r = 0.60$ ) suggest a moderate to strong positive correlation between academic stress and the prevalence of depression among students which agrees with the findings of Fawzy, and Hamed (2017), and Yang et al., (2023); This finding indicates that as academic stress levels increase, there is a corresponding tendency for higher rates of depression symptoms among students. A correlation coefficient of 0.60 is significant because it falls within a range that is generally considered moderate to strong, implying a robust relationship between these two variables in the context of this study. In the field of psychology and education, the link between academic stress and mental health outcomes has been extensively studied and documented. High academic stress can manifest in various forms, including pressure to perform well academically, fear of failure, competition among peers, and the burden of expectations from oneself and others. These stressors can significantly impact students' emotional well-being, potentially leading to symptoms of depression and anxiety. The correlation coefficient of 0.60 aligns with existing literature that often reports positive associations between stress related to academic performance and adverse mental health outcomes.

Moreover, the statistically significant p-value (less than 0.05) indicates that the observed correlation is unlikely to be due to random chance. This reinforces the validity of the finding that higher academic stress levels are indeed associated with a higher prevalence of depression among students. By rejecting the null hypothesis, which suggests no relationship between academic stress and depression, the study provides evidence that supports the existence of a meaningful connection between these variables in the population studied.

To contextualize these results further, it is essential to consider the potential mechanisms underlying this correlation. Academic stressors can trigger physiological responses such as increased cortisol levels, which in turn may contribute to mood disturbances and depressive symptoms over time. Additionally, chronic stress from academic demands can disrupt sleep patterns, decrease motivation, and lead to feelings of overwhelm and hopelessness, all of which are common symptoms of depression. The correlation coefficient of 0.60 underscores the magnitude of this relationship, indicating that changes in academic stress levels are reasonably predictive of changes in depression prevalence among students.

From a practical standpoint, these findings highlight the importance of addressing and managing academic stress effectively within educational settings. Interventions aimed at reducing stressors related to academic performance, promoting coping strategies, and enhancing mental health support services can potentially mitigate the negative impact on students' mental well-being. Implementing stress management programs, counselling services, and creating supportive learning environments are strategies that have been advocated in the literature to help students cope with academic stress and reduce the incidence of associated mental health issues.

Furthermore, the correlation observed in this study emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to student well-being that considers both academic and mental health dimensions. Educators, policymakers, and healthcare professionals can use this evidence to advocate for policies and practices that prioritize mental health support alongside academic achievement. By recognizing and addressing the factors contributing to academic stress and depression, educational institutions can foster healthier learning environments that promote both academic success and emotional resilience among students.

In conclusion, the correlation coefficient of 0.60 between academic stress and depression prevalence, supported by a statistically significant p-value, provides compelling evidence of a meaningful relationship in the studied population. This finding aligns with existing literature and underscores the importance of addressing academic stress as a potential risk factor for depression among students. Moving forward, continued research and implementation of targeted interventions are crucial in mitigating the adverse effects of academic stress on mental health and promoting student well-being in educational settings.

On the second objective of the study, the results indicate a Spearman's rank correlation coefficient ( $\rho$ ) of 0.45 between social isolation and the prevalence of suicidal thoughts, suggesting a moderate positive monotonic relationship. This finding implies that individuals who experience higher levels of social isolation are more likely to report higher levels of suicidal thoughts. Unlike Pearson's correlation coefficient, Spearman's  $\rho$  assesses the strength and direction of monotonic relationships, which are relationships where the variables move in the same general direction but not necessarily at a constant rate.

The moderate positive correlation coefficient of 0.45 aligns with previous research linking social isolation to mental health outcomes, particularly suicidal ideation. Social isolation is characterized by a lack of social connections, loneliness, and perceived social alienation, which are known risk factors for poor mental health. Studies have consistently found that individuals who feel socially isolated are more susceptible to depression, anxiety, and suicidal behaviours. The correlation coefficient of 0.45 suggests that social isolation contributes significantly to the prevalence of suicidal thoughts among the sample studied, highlighting the importance of addressing social connectedness in suicide prevention efforts.

The statistically significant p-value (less than 0.05) indicates that the observed correlation is unlikely to be due to chance. This strengthens the validity of the finding that higher levels of social isolation are indeed associated with a higher prevalence of suicidal thoughts. Such findings are consistent with theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence that emphasize the critical role of social support and connectedness in promoting mental well-being and reducing suicide risk. Interventions aimed at mitigating social isolation, such as community engagement programs, support groups, and initiatives to enhance social networks, may thus play a crucial role in suicide prevention strategies.

To contextualize these results further, it is important to consider the underlying mechanisms linking social isolation to suicidal thoughts. Social isolation can lead to feelings of hopelessness, despair, and a lack of perceived meaning in life, all of which are significant risk factors for suicidal ideation. Additionally, socially isolated individuals may lack access to emotional support, practical assistance, and positive reinforcement, which are protective factors against suicidal behaviours. The correlation coefficient of 0.45 suggests a moderately strong relationship, indicating that changes in social isolation levels are associated with corresponding changes in the prevalence of suicidal thoughts among individuals.

From a practical standpoint, these findings underscore the need for targeted interventions that address social isolation as a preventable risk factor for suicidal ideation. Strategies that focus on building social skills, enhancing social networks, and fostering supportive relationships can potentially mitigate the negative impact of social isolation on mental health. Moreover, healthcare providers, policymakers, and community organizations can use this evidence to advocate for policies and initiatives that prioritize social connectedness and mental well-being across different age groups and populations.

In conclusion, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient of 0.45 between social isolation and the prevalence of suicidal thoughts, supported by a statistically significant p-value, highlights a meaningful relationship in the studied sample. This finding is consistent with existing literature that underscores the detrimental effects of social isolation on mental health outcomes, particularly regarding suicidal ideation. Moving forward, continued research and implementation of targeted interventions are crucial in addressing social isolation as a modifiable risk factor for suicidal thoughts and promoting holistic approaches to mental health and suicide prevention.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the findings from both Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis on academic stress and depression, and Spearman's rank correlation on social isolation and suicidal thoughts, underscore critical relationships between these variables in student populations. The moderate to strong positive correlations observed highlight the significant impact of academic stress and social isolation on mental health outcomes, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support systems within educational settings. These results reaffirm existing

literature and call for proactive measures to address stress management, promote social connectedness, and enhance mental health services to safeguard student well-being effectively.

Awareness campaigns play a crucial role in educating students about mental health and the importance of seeking help. These campaigns can provide information on recognizing the signs and symptoms of mental health issues, understanding the available resources, and promoting healthy coping mechanisms. Effective awareness campaigns use various media, including social media, posters, workshops, and seminars, to reach a broad audience. Dalky (2012) emphasised that awareness campaigns significantly improve knowledge and attitudes toward mental health, reducing the stigma and encouraging more people to seek help. Institutions play a crucial role in mitigating social isolation by providing opportunities for students to build supportive social networks. Universities can offer a variety of programs and activities designed to foster social interaction, such as peer mentoring programs, student clubs, and social events. These initiatives can help students form meaningful connections and feel more integrated into the university community. Elmer et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of social belonging for university students' mental health, showing that those who felt a sense of belonging were less likely to experience depression and anxiety.

Universities can also play a crucial role in reducing stigma by creating a supportive and inclusive campus environment. This can be achieved through peer support programs, mental health workshops, and training for staff and students on how to recognize and respond to mental health issues. Additionally, providing accessible mental health services and promoting their use can help normalize seeking help. For example, establishing counselling centres on campus and ensuring they are well-publicized can make it easier for students to access support without fear of judgment. By fostering an environment that prioritizes mental health and encourages open discussions, universities can help reduce the stigma that prevents students from seeking the help they need.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended:

1. Expand Mental Health Services: Increase accessibility to counselling and support for students facing academic stress and social isolation.
2. Promote Peer Support Networks: Create and foster peer support programs to enhance social connections among students.
3. Integrate Stress Management: Implement stress management workshops and techniques into the academic curriculum.

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