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PREVALENCE OF STRESS AND DEPRESSION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FIRST YEAR AND FINAL YEAR UNDERGRADUATES

Okechukwu Christian Onuoha[1, 2], Harry Obi-Nwosu[1, 2], Chukwuemeka Felix Okoye[1, 2], Chukwuemeka Gabriel Azuh[1], Adaobi Ogochukwu Ugwu[3]

[1]Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka.
[2]Centre for Counselling and Career Development, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka.
[3]Department of Educational Management and Policy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

Corresponding author: Okechukwu Christian Onuoha; Email: okechukwuonuoha564@yahoo.com, https//orcid.org/0009-0001-7227-6247

Abstract

This study investigated the prevalence of stress, and depression among undergraduates. It further compared the first year and final year undergraduates on stress, and depression. One thousand (1000) undergraduates participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 18 to 35 years; with a mean age of 22.0, and standard deviation of 2.8. The participants were selected using convenience sampling method. For data collection, responses of the participants on depression, and stress sub-scales of DASS were generated from the online platform for psychological assessment, developed by the Centre for Counselling and Career development of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. Cross sectional research design was utilized in this study; while data analyses was done, using descriptive statistics and independent t-test. From the analyses, the prevalence of stress among undergraduates was found to be 25.1%; while depression was 30.5%. More so, the prevalence of stress among first year undergraduates was 26.3%; while depression was 32.5%. However, among final year undergraduates, it was 21.3% for stress, and 32.3% for depression. Furthermore, there was no significant difference between first year and final year undergraduates on stress, and depression at F (408) =16.11, P>.05, and F (408) =.804, P>.05 for stress, and depression respectively. Hence, the researchers recommended that school psychologist should be proactive on the management of stress, and depression among undergraduates by ensuring that their unit is functional, and accessible by students.

Keywords: Prevalence, Stress, Depression, First year, Final year, Undergraduates

Author biographies

Onuoha O. C; Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka & Centre for Counselling and Career Development, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

Onuoha Okechukwu Christian is a Clinical Psychologist working with Centre for Counseling and Career Development of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. He is a licensed Clinical Psychologist, Substance addiction Counselor, and a researcher; with interest in addictive behaviors, clinical trials, and promotion of psychological wellbeing. He has publish numerous studies, both in clinical, and forensic psychology in reputable journals, both in International and local out-let, and has written a book chapter. Onuoha O. C. is passionate in reducing maladaptive behaviors, and improving mental wellbeing through psychotherapy, and publication of research findings. Email: okechukwuonuoha564@yahoo.com

Obi-Nwosu H.; Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka & Centre for Counselling and Career Development, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

Harry **Obi-Nwosu** is a Professor of Clinical-Forensic Psychology. He is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria, and the Director of Centre for Counseling and Career Development of the University. He is a Fellow of Nigerian Psychological Association, Fellow of Nigerian Association of Clinical Psychology, and a Fellow of Nigerian Association of Forensic Psychologist. Obi-Nwosu H. is a consummate researcher, Editor in Chief of two reputable Journals, belongs to editorial board of many other Journals. He has over 150 publications in both International and local out-let that cut across Clinical, Forensic, and Human Resource Psychology, and edited six books. Among these are: Fundamentals of Psychotherapeutic Practice, Clinical Psychopharmacology, the BCE Leadership Paradigm, Psychobiology of love and its implications, and Psychological and Socioeconomic Wellbeing of Cameroonians in Black fly infested Areas. He is a research, and administrative mentor, Doctoral external examiner, and Professorial Assessor to five different Universities in Nigeria. Email: ho.nwosu@unizik.edu.ng

Okoye C.A.F., Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria.

Chukwuemeka A.F. Okoye is a professor of Clinical Psychology at the Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. His area of research focuses on Psychological science and its application in individual wellbeing. He has co-authored numerous articles and book chapters, published in international and local reputable outlets. Okoye is an astute administrator and mentor. Email: caf.okoye@unizik.edu.ng

Azuh C.G., Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria.

Azuh Chukwuemeka Gabriel is a Catholic Priest of Issele Uku Diocese, Delta State. He is also a Forensic Psychologist, trained in the Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. Azuh, C. G. is interested in Forensic research; aimed at identifying psychological factors that predisposes individual's to criminal behaviours, and factors that when

enhanced or reduced, would bring about reduction in crime, and delinquency in the society, as well as overall mental wellbeing.

Ugwu A. O., Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria.

Ugwu Adaobi Ogochukwu is an Educational Manager, and a researcher. She is currently undertaking a Ph.D in the Department of Educational Management and Policy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. She is a United Nations accredited climate change accredited teacher, Salesforce Education Cloud Administrator, and health educator. Ugwu A.O. has published some articles in both local and international outlets; and is inspired to take actions that improve mental health of individuals through research and advocacy. Email: adaobiugwu49@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Issues regarding stress among undergraduates is on the increase, and could be as a result of the stressors associated with task, expectations and challenges of undergraduate period. The unpredictability associated with their developmental stage, inability to meet up with financial requirements, and uncertainty in interpersonal relationship associated with socialization; which could be frustrating, and could worsen the stress situations of some undergraduates. According to Obi-Nwosu et al. (2024), family crises, intrapersonal difficulties and disappointments from peers complicates undergraduates' stress issue, leading to maladaptive behaviour. Such complications could be distressful, resulting to depressive emotions, and could also lead to suicidality in occasion of overwhelming depression (Tobih et al., 2024; Onuoha et al., 2024; Onuoha, 2024). To some undergraduates that lacks the potential for self-harm, the overwhelming impact of stress could be exasperating on their academic expectations, resulting to depressive emotion and could lead to poor academic performance, and high dropout of undergraduates (Obi-Nwosu et al., 2024).

Depression is also among the psychopathology observed among undergraduates; and could be ensuing from overwhelming stress associated with failures on the forgoing expectations and goals. According to Isara et al. (2022), depression is on the increase among undergraduates and its impact on one's daily activities is dependent on the level of the severity of the individual's diagnoses. Severe depression could be detrimental to the overall goal of student-hood, as well as undergraduates' mental wellbeing; and could trigger suicidal ideation. Some of the prominent symptoms experienced among people suffering from depression include: withdrawal, anger and self-blame; which could hamper an undergraduate's effectiveness, leading to poor academic, social, and mental wellbeing. Chiang et al. (2022) and Onuoha et al. (2024) opined that depression among undergraduate poses a threat to the growth of undergraduates, and its impact could be devastating, and could result to suicidality in some situations where the depression becomes overwhelming. By implication, the impact of depression among undergraduates could lead to poor academic performance; resulting from one's inability to perform optimally in his or her daily academic tasks.

Tasks associated with the period of undergraduate, one's expectation of academic excellence, and influences from peers could be stressful, adding to the social expectations, developmental transition, as well as family dispute. Among some undergraduates, financial requirements and failed relationship could complicate their stress, making it unbearable; and could trigger some sense of hopelessness, and helplessness. These negative emotion (sense of hopelessness and helplessness) could influence the development of depressogenic schema (Parker, 2019; Onuoha et al., 2024); which could influence such undergraduate's perception, and interpretation of most, if not all life experiences from a negative point of view (Onuoha et al., 2024). Hence, the depressogenic schema of such undergraduate could further complicates both the stress situations, as well as the student's depressive state; and could have devastating effects.

Stress, and depression among undergraduates is observed across the globe as its prevalence seems alarming. Syed et al. (2021) reported the prevalence of stress, and depression among physiotherapy undergraduate students in Pakistan as 53.2% and 48.0% respectively. Asif et al. (2020) reported the prevalence of stress, and depression among Pakistan university undergraduates as 84.4% for stress, and 75% for depression. Suleyiman and Zewdu (2018) reported the prevalence of stress among Ambo University undergraduates in Ethiopia as 24.5%. Among undergraduates in medical University in Malaysia, Fuad et al. (2016) reported the prevalence of stress as 62.4%, and that of depression as 60.8%. Ezeh et al. (2016) reported the prevalence of stress across different faculties, and departments in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria as 72.5% for nursing undergraduates, 68.9% for human physiology, 64% for human anatomy, and 62.4% for medical students. Yusoff et al. (2010) reported the prevalence of stress symptoms among Sains University medical students in Malaysia as 29.6%. Ko et al. (1999) rated the prevalence of stress among undergraduates in Singapore studying law, and those studying medicine as 47.2%, and 57% respectively.

From the above prevalence, it could be seen that the rate of stress, and depression among undergraduates is high; and poses a threat to the goal of student-hood, as well as the overall mental wellbeing of undergraduates (Chiang et al., 2022; Obi-Nwosu et al., 2024; Onuoha et al., 2024). Thus, understanding the prevalence of stress, and depression among undergraduate, as well as comparing the extent at which they impact first year and final year undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, will help in directing appropriate energy, and resources in dealing with the issue of stress, and depression among the undergraduates. Hence, will bring about improved academic performance, and mental wellbeing among undergraduates.

Stress refers to challenges that threatens an individual's well-being. According to Banerjee and Chatterjee (2012), stress means an individual's level of emotional or mental tension, and can affect any individual, irrespective of their developmental stage. Cohen et al. (2016), opined that stress is the resultant of the negative emotions that arises when one's level of adaptive ability fail to fit the expected demand, or task needed in present situation; leading to disturbance in the person's physiological, and psychological wellbeing. According to Nidup et al. (2022), stress can be seen as internal or external factors that hamper, or frustrate one's adaptability to his or her environment; demanding more effort from the individual in order to maintain his or her peace. Stress can also be seen as an individual's state of burden, or mental tension, resulting from demanding task or situation (WHO, 2023).

Among undergraduates, stress is however, an unavoidable thing. According to Alkhawaldeh et al. (2023) and McLean et al. (2022), factors that result to academic stress include: an undergraduate's inability to copy with their new environment, overwhelming workload and assignments, inability

to relate adequately with other students and teachers, poor parental relationship, and the level of academic expectations of such undergraduate. Stress can also be a resultant of the unpleasant situations that occur due to the many demands made on the students which could be in form of examinations, maintaining healthy, and academic lives, competing with peers, meeting the academic expectations of teachers and parents as well as one's own academic expectations (Aihie & Ohanaka, 2019).

According to Obi-Nwosu et al. (2024), and Yang and Yang (2022), exposing an individual to an amount of stress that is beyond their adaptive capacity could lead to maladaptation. Such maladaptive reactions could either be physical, psychological, or could be both, and the impact of such exposure on an individual's overall wellbeing could have debilitating effect, including mental health deficit. WHO (2012) opined that issues of mental health problems is among the significant global health challenges, and is rated one third as the global causes of disabilities. By implication, an undergraduate exposed to an overwhelming stressful situation; either via intra or interpersonal means, could derail into maladaptive behaviour; and such maladaptive behaviour could be expressed as negative emotions such as depression.

Depression is a mood disorder, experienced as uncontrollable feeling of sadness. According to WHO (2023), depression is a serious mental health problem which negatively impacts how a person feel, thinks and act. Depression practically influences how a person sees the world around them. According to National Institute of Mental Health (2022), depression is a mood disorder that is associated with mixed symptoms that hamper one's potency to work effectively. It negatively influences how an individual feels, their sleep pattern, eating habit, and can interfere with one's ability to enjoy pleasurable activities. It is a mental health challenge that is characterized by low mood, loss of sense of worth, and could be associated with sense of helplessness (WHO, 2017; Fabbri et al., 2021; Onuoha et al., 2021). Such negative emotions can hamper ones' ability to function effectively. Individual's that suffer from depression usually expresses negative emotions; with behaviour that shows decreased, or complete loss of interest in interpersonal activities. This negative emotion could result from significant level of depressive symptoms, associated with some stressful daily activities, or, could be as a result of clinical depression. However, depression negatively affect how an individual feels, how they think, as well as how they behave.

Several factors can be responsible for the development of depression. Though, among individuals with depressive symptoms, there is always a negative feeling of loss. Meaning that, negative life situations, as well as failure in one's endeavor could serve as a trigger for the development of depression. WHO (2023) stated that, people that experienced adversative life situations like; unstable employment, traumatic situation, and loss of loved one, are more disposed to depressive emotion. According to Onuoha (2024), stress is among the factors that could stimulate depressive symptoms; while the depressive symptoms could further complicate the individual's stress situation, leading to more dysfunctional, and worsen life experience.

Depression has been observed to be among the mental health challenges, experienced among university undergraduates, and plays a crucial part in hampering academic excellence of undergraduates (Jiang et al., 2022; Wagner et al., 2022). By implication, depression poses a threat to academic performance of undergraduates, and negatively effects their ability to perform effectively. According to Zou et al. (2022), there are frequent cases of depressive symptoms among university undergraduates, compared to the amount recorded among non-undergraduates, and the general populace. This could be accounted by the fact that many of the undergraduates are leaving

the closeness, and care of their parents, siblings and loved ones for the first time; which could negatively impact their emotional state, leading to depressive emotions.

Statement of the Problem

Educational stage of undergraduates is associated with lots of challenges and expectations; which if not met, could arouse negative emotions that could further complicate the stress level of such undergraduate, and may trigger suicidal ideation in occasions of overwhelming depression. According to Obi-Nwosu et al. (2024), crises in the family, intrapersonal problems, peer disappointments, and financial problem could worsen the stress situations of an undergraduate, and could result to maladaptation. Such maladaptive behaviour include but not limited to: gambling behaviour, cybercrime, and risky sexual behaviour; aimed at meeting up financially, or as a coping style (Onuoha et al., 2024; Okafor et al., 2024; Okeke et al. 2024 & Onuoha et al., 2025). These maladaptive behaviours could further complicate an undergraduate situation, and could lead suicidal ideation in occasion of overwhelming depression (Chiang et al., 2022; Onuoha et al., 2024). For some students that could not take their own life, the impact of stress, and depression could be so overwhelming, and could frustrate their academic expectations, resulting to numerous failure, and discouragement; and could lead to increased dropout rate among undergraduates (Obi-Nwosu et al., 2024).

Looking at the detrimental impact of stress, and depression among undergraduates, it is of great importance to examine the prevalence of stress, and depression among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka; aimed at understanding the extent to which undergraduates of the University are being affected by stress, and depression. There is also, need to investigate if stress, and depression affects first year and final year undergraduates differently. Since first year period accounts for the first exposure to the rigorous academic activities associated with university education; while final year accounts for both academic stressors and stressors associated with the transition into adulthood, and uncertainty with labor market, and life after school necessitated the need to comparatively examine first year and final year undergraduates on stress, and depression.

Nonetheless, several scholars have investigated, and with empirical evidence established the prevalence of stress, and depression among undergraduate students of some institutions. For instance, Syed et al. (2021), and Fuad et al. (2016) investigated the prevalence of stress, and depression among undergraduates in Pakistan, and Malaysia respectively. Also, Suleyiman and Zewdu (2018), and Ko et al. (1999) examined the prevalence of stress among Ethiopia, and Singapore undergraduates. Furthermore, Ezeh et al. (2016) examined the prevalence of stress among undergraduates of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. While Isara et al. (2022) examined prevalence of depression among medical students in University of Benin. However, none to the best of the researchers' knowledge examined the prevalence of stress, and depression among undergraduates in South Eastern Nigeria. Furthermore, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, there is no empirical study that comparatively examined first year and final year undergraduates on stress, and depression. Thus, the need for this present study, aimed at filling the observed gap by investigating the prevalence of stress, and depression among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. As well as comparatively examine first year, and final year undergraduates on stress, and depression.

Theoretical Framework / Empirical Review

This study anchored theoretically on Diathesis-Stress Theory by Rubinstein (1986); which holds that exposure to stressful life situations (stressors) are the trigger for depressive symptoms among individual's that are predisposed to depression. Thus, without negative life events, undergraduates with depressogenic schema will function properly like those without depressogenic schema. So to say, the negative mental schema is not potent enough to stimulate depressive symptoms in absence of stress, or negative life occurrence. Thus, for there to be depression among undergraduates, there must be equivalent level of stress that activates the depressogenic schema to for depression to manifest. This study aimed at establishing the prevalence of stress, and depression among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. As well as investigate if differences exist in the level of stress, and depression felt by first year and final year undergraduates. The findings in this study will help in understanding the incidents of stress, and depression among undergraduates; as well as show with empirical evidence, those (first year, and final year undergraduates) that needed more attention, in respect to stress and depression.

2. Method

Study Design

This study was a survey research that utilized a cross-sectional research design for the examination of the prevalence of stress, and depression among undergraduate of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. In other to test the research questions of this study, descriptive statistics, and independent T-test were adopted as the statistical tools for data analyses, using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.

Participants

One thousand (1000) undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, participated in the study. Their data were drawn from the platform for psychological assessment, developed by Centre for Counselling and Career Development (CCCD) of the institution, using convenience sampling method. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 35 years; with a mean age of 22.0, and standard deviation of 2.8. Among the 1000 participants, 268(26.8) were males while 732(73.2) were females. First years students were 209, while final year students were 201; the rest were from other levels.

Instruments

Stress, and Depression Sub Scales of Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21) were used in this study for data collection. Stress, and depression were measured using the stress, and depression sub-scale of DASS-21 which consist of 14 items (7 items for each of the dimensions), that measures an individual's stress, and depression, using a 4-point Likert scale; ranging from 0= did not apply to me at all to 3=Applied to me most of the time. Sample item for the stress sub-scale included: I just couldn't seem to get going. While sample item for depression included: I felt I wasn't worth much as a person.

Validity and Reliability

The authors reported the convergent validity of DASS anxiety with Beck's anxiety inventory (BAI), with high correlation of r=.81, and DASS depression inventory with BDI as r=74. Laranjera et al. (2023) reported the Cronbach's alpha for the depression, anxiety, and stress subscales as .83, .76, and .82 respectively. However, the Cronbach's alpha for the full scale was reported as .90 (Laranjera et al., 2023).

Ethical Consideration

In order to ensure that the ethical requirements of the Centre for Counselling and Career Development (CCCD) of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka were maintained, personal information that may breach the confidentiality clause of the Centre were excluded. Hence, only age, gender, and level of study were the demographic variables utilized in this study. Furthermore, all the people who scored high on stress, and depression were requested to see their career officers for counselling. While the severe cases was handled by the Clinical Psychologist of the Centre.

Procedure

Approval was sort, and obtained by the researchers to utilize the data on the database of the Centre for Counselling and Career Development (CCCD) of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka for a research purpose. After which, convenience sampling method was used in selecting 1000 responses of undergraduates from the data bank of the Centre on stress, and depression; and were coded in the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS); and used for data analyses.

Statistics

This study adopted descriptive statistics, and independent T-test as the statistical tools for data analysis using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Specifically, descriptive statistics was used to analyse the research questions number one, two, and three; while independent T-test was used to analyse research question number four and five.

3. Result

Table 1: Descriptive statistics (percentage) for the total participants, on the study variables (stress, and depression)

Variable	N	SD	M	Moderate	Severe	ES	OPre
Stress	1000	3.7	7.4	15.5%	7.8%	1.8%	25.1%
Depression	1000	3.9	5.2	20%	6%	4.5%	30.5%

Note: N=number, SD=standard deviation, M=mean, ES= extreme severe, OPre=overall prevalence

The result from table 1 showed that of the 1000 participants in this study, 25.1% experienced stress. Of the 25.1%, 15.5% experienced moderate stress, 7.8% had severe stress, while 1.8% had extreme stress. Moreover, among the total participants, 30.5% experienced depression. Of

the 30.5%, 20% had moderate depression, 6%, had severe depression, while 4.5% had extreme depression

Table 2: Descriptive statistics (percentage) for first year and final year undergraduates, on the study variables (stress and depression)

Variable	N	SD	M	Moderate	Severe	ES	OPre
FstStress	209	3.9	7.4	13.3%	11%	0.9%	26.3%
FinStress	201	2.9	7.7	16.9%	2.5%	1.9%	21.3%
FirstDep	209	3.8	5.2	21.5%	6.2%	4.8%	32.5%
FinalDep	201	3.5	5.3	23.8%	5.5%	2.3%	32.3%

Note: FstStress=first year stress, FinStress=final year stress, FirstDep=first year depression, FinalDep=final year depression, N=number, SD=standard deviation, M=mean, ES= extreme severe, and OPre=overall prevalence

The result from table 2 above showed that 209 respondents in this study were from first year, while 201 were final year undergraduates. Of the first year undergraduates, 26.3% experienced stress. Moreover, of the 26.3%, 13.3% had moderate stress, 11% had severe stress, while 0.9% had extreme severe stress. However, of the final year undergraduates, 21.3% experienced stress. Among the 21.3%, 16.9% had moderate stress, 2.5% had severe stress, while 1.9% had extreme severe stress.

From table 2 above, it was also observed that 32.5% of the first year participants experienced depression. Among the 32.5% that had depression, 21.5% had moderate depression, 6.2% had severe depression, while 4.8% had extreme depression. It was further observed that of the final year undergraduates, 32.3% of the participants experienced depression. Of the 32.3%, 23.8%, had moderate depression, 5.5% had severe depression, while 2.3% had extreme depression.

Table 3: Summary Table of the Independent T-test for comparing first year and final year on stress, and depression

Variables	F	T	Df	SED	Sig	Lower	Upper
Stress	16.11	-840	408	.38	.399	-9464	.3798
Depression	.804	-217	408	.36	.828	-7868	.6310

From the table 3 above, it was observed that there was no significant difference between first year and final year undergraduates on stress at F (408) =16.11, P>.05. Furthermore, table 4 also showed that no significant different existed between first year and final year undergraduates on depression at F (408) =.804, P>.05.

4. Discussion

This study examined the prevalence of stress, and depression among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, and found that a good number of undergraduates experience stress, and depression. It was found that the prevalence of stress among undergraduates was over twenty five percent. Among these number of undergraduates going through stress, over fifteen

percent of them had moderate stress, over seven percent had severe stress, while over one percent of them had extreme severe stress. This finding is similar to that of Ko et al. (1999) that reported the rate of stress among undergraduates in Singapore University as over forty percent for law students, and fifty seven percent for Medical students. Yusoff et al. (2010) reported the prevalence of stress among undergraduates of Universiti Sains, Malaysia Medical College as above twenty nine percent. Ezeh et al. (2016) rated the incidence of stress among undergraduates from the faculty of Medicine in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria as above seventy two percent for Nursing students, over sixty eight percent for Human Physiology, over sixty four percent for Human anatomy, and over sixty two percent for Medical students.

From the second research question, the data analysis reviled that the prevalence of depression among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University was above thirty percent. Among those depressed students, twenty percent had moderate depression, six percent had severe, while over four percent had extreme severe depression. This finding is in line with that of Syed et al. (2018) that examined the frequency of depression, anxiety and stress among physiotherapy undergraduates in Pakistan and reported the rate of depression as forty eight percent. Asif et al. (2020) investigated the frequency of depression, anxiety and stress among undergraduates in Government College Women University, Sialkot, and rated the frequency of depression as seventy five percent. Karimi et al. (2022) examined the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress among Rehabilitation students from Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences, Iran; and rated the prevalence of depression as over fifty four percent. While Abed and Abd-Elraouf (2022) examined stress, anxiety and depression among undergraduates from Benha Faculty of Medicine; and reported the frequency of depression as over eighty two percent. Furthermore, Haqqani et al. (2024) investigated depression, anxiety, stress and wellbeing among psychology undergraduates in Pakistan; and rated the prevalence of depression as over fifty one percent. From the third research question, it was found that the prevalence of stress, and depression among first year undergraduates was over twenty six percent for stress, and over thirty two percent for depression. While among final year undergraduates, the prevalence of stress was over twenty one percent, and over thirty two percent for depression.

It was further found in this study, that there was no significant difference between first year and final year undergraduates on stress and depression. By implication, undergraduates are affected by stress and depression alike; irrespective of their year of study. However, the prevalence of stress and depression could differ, depending on the tedious nature of one's area of specialization as observed by Ezeh et al. (2016). They found a varying rate of stress among medical, and medical sciences students, from faculty of Medicine in Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, and reported these stress rate as over seventy two percent for nursing students, over sixty eight for those in Human Physiology, sixty four percent for those in Human anatomy, and over sixty two percent for Medical students.

Implications of the Study

This study investigated the prevalence of stress and depression among undergraduates. It further compared first year and final year undergraduates on stress and depression. From the findings, some implications were outlined:

1. It implied that there was incidence of stress, and depression among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
2. It also implied that first year, and final year undergraduates experience stress and depression alike.
3. This study further validated the theoretical framework of this study which holds that for there to be depression among undergraduates, there must be equivalent level of stress that activates the depressogenic schema; resulting to depression.

Limitations of the Study

This study utilized a survey mode of data collection that depended on self-reportage, using a questionnaire. Thus the observed prevalence might not be the true rating of stress, and depression among the undergraduates, as some respondents may not be so transparent with their responses; so as to avoid looking weak, or pathological. However, since this study made use of secondary data which was auto submitted, respondent would have responded in a way that depicts their true emotion. Furthermore, while generalizing the findings of this study, the peculiarity of the population of this study should be considered.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the prevalence of stress, and depression among undergraduates. It further compared first year and final year undergraduates on stress, and depression. Based on the objective of the study, five research questions were postulated and analyzed, using descriptive statistics, and independent T-test. The outcome of the result showed that stress and depression existed among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. It was further observed that no significant difference existed between first year and final year undergraduates on stress, and depression. Based on the findings of this study, it is safe to state that the year of study of an undergraduate is not among the factors that determines the extent that stress or depression affects them; but rather, stress, and depression are among the negative emotions undergraduates experience during this period of student-hood. Hence, there is need to expose them to effective strategies to cope with stress, and depression so as to be able to function effectively, as well as achieve their academic expectations .

6. Recommendations

The recommendations in this study were made in line with the research finding.

1. Since it was observed that stress and depression exist among undergraduate, the researchers recommended that school psychologist should be proactive on the management of stress, and depression among undergraduates by ensuring that their unit is functional, and accessible by students.
2. There is also, the need for periodic assessment, and psychological support for undergraduates that are high on stress, and depression; so as to avert the detrimental implications of overwhelming stress and depression among undergraduates.
3. There is need for the establishment of Centre for Counselling and Career development unit in all tertiary institutions in Nigeria; aimed at supporting undergraduates

psychologically; as well as being proactive in research that will help promote the mental wellbeing of undergraduates.

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