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Understanding the Socio-Cultural Barriers to Professional Mental Health and Help-Seeking among Postgraduate Students: Evidence From a Nigerian University

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated barriers to accessing of professional mental health support and its effect on seeking help among the graduate students of the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. The research was driven by the observation that postgraduate students do undergo so much mental stress especially in countries with limited resources like Nigeria, they do not seek professional help. The research employed a quantitative survey research design, utilizing a structured questionnaire administered to a simple random sample of 381 postgraduate students. The dataset was analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson Product Moment Correlation at a 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that 73.0% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they abstained from seeking professional help due to low perceived severity of their problems. Furthermore, 61.4% expressed discomfort discussing emotional challenges with unfamiliar professionals, and 85.0% indicated that cultural or religious beliefs influenced their help-seeking decisions. Pearson Product Moment Correlation demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between barriers to accessing professional mental health services and help-seeking behavior ($r = 0.251$, $p = 0.001$), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The study concludes that socio-cultural barriers significantly impede formal help-seeking among postgraduate students, highlighting the need for multi-tiered campus social work strategies, anti-stigma campaigns, and culturally sensitive referral pathways.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health is an essential component of health and well-being of individuals and societies (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). University students, especially postgraduate students, might suffer from psychological and emotional stresses caused by academic workloads, pressure related to research and dissertation work, financial stressors, family obligations, job requirements, and uncertainties regarding their career futures. Research involving Nigerian postgraduate students indicates that stressors relating to academic, financial, and environmental issues play a crucial role in the onset of psychological stress, which impacts brain chemistry and raises cortisol levels, resulting in symptoms like insomnia and mood swings. Psychological factors such as anxiety, depression, low self-confidence, relationship and family problems, and suicidal thoughts affect mental well-being of postgraduate students in Nigeria, and they constitute a considerable amount of variance in mental well-being of postgraduate students. There is no doubt that this issue affects graduate students worldwide: a study involving 2,279 graduate students from 26 different countries indicates that around 39% of participants have experienced moderate-to-severe depression and over 40% of participants have moderate-to-severe anxiety, which is about six times the rate in the general population. Distress has even been found to be higher among students with poor work life balance or work without academic mentorship (Evans *et al.*, 2018).

However, the authors felt self-selection into the survey may have increased these figures, so it is better to see them as indicative rather than to be taken as definite values.

While stress at some degree is part and parcel of any difficult situation, stress that is persistent and inadequately handled may have detrimental effects on students' emotional state, academic functioning, social interactions, and quality of life in general (Gulliver *et al.*, 2010). On a global scale, mental stress has emerged as one of the major health concerns of the 21st century (WHO, 2022). According to the World Health Organization, over a billion people across the globe suffer from mental disorders with depression and anxiety being the most prevalent ones (WHO, 2022). The lifetime prevalence rates for mental disorders vary from 12.2% to 48.6% while point prevalence rate stands at 10% (Auerbach *et al.*, 2016). The share of mental stress in the global burden of diseases is increasing with negative impacts on health outcomes, academic productivity, social integration, and economic development of nations (WHO, 2022). Years at university occur at a time when there is an increase in prevalence of common mental disorders. These conditions have a negative impact on academic performance (Auerbach *et al.*, 2018). Mental depression of university students in Nigeria is also reported as a major concern (Adewuya *et al.*, 2006).

Help-seeking behavior can be described as the means through which individuals identify that there is a mental illness issue and then move on to seek help from proper

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channels (Rickwood & Thomas, 2012). Help can be either from professional resources like mental health providers, counselors and social workers or informal help from family, friends, peers and religious figures (Gulliver *et al.*, 2010). Factors influencing the choice for seeking help include not only the fact of suffering but also the interpretation of the problem, the individual's perception of costs and gains related to such behavior (Andersen, 1995; Ajzen, 1991). Stigma has been recognized as one of the main barriers in terms of both seeking and engaging in mental health care (Clement *et al.*, 2015; Corrigan *et al.*, 2014). One of the issues is that the existence of professional resources does not mean that these services will be used (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2007). In a study of undergraduate students at Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria, it was discovered that while 97.3% of respondents had knowledge about mental health problems and 84% were aware of mental health facilities, only 11% actually used mental health services. Stigma (39%), lack of knowledge (32%) and financial factors (28%) have been cited as major barriers in service utilization ([Authors], 2025). At Afe Babalola University, the majority of 450 undergraduate respondents were observed to have positive attitudes towards mental health services (87.5%) and good health-seeking behaviour (67.8%), yet service utilization is very low and poor social support has been reported by the majority (69.4%) (Kukoyi *et al.*, 2022). It appears that in Nigeria, undergraduates prefer discussing their mental health problems with their friends and relatives instead of seeking any psychotherapy or professional help (Muhammed *et al.*, 2024). Likewise, studies among Nigerian university students revealed that only 31.7% who were suffering from depression had sought for help and this help had come from friends and relatives. Students may avoid seeking help from professionals due to fear of stigmatization and discrimination, considering their issues non-serious, inability to confide in strangers, and that alternative methods of dealing with problems may be more fitting (Clement *et al.*, 2015; Gulliver *et al.*, 2010). Research conducted on Nigerian university students has found confidentiality concerns (79.1%), fear of being judged (78.7%), perceived inefficacy of available resources (77.4%), and lack of time (76.3%) to be commonly cited reasons for not seeking professional help. Concerns about accessibility, cost, and trust may also affect help-seeking decisions (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2007; Gulliver *et al.*, 2010). In Nigeria and other African nations, cultural and religious beliefs continue to affect how mental health issues are perceived. There is a major treatment gap in the Nigerian healthcare system, and this gap is worsened by culture, traditions and religions, which strengthens stigma that discourages students from seeking professional help (Pederson *et al.*, 2023). According to Pederson *et al.* (2020), in an epidemiological survey of mental disorders in Nigeria, only 1% of people with a DSM-IV disorder received specialist mental health services, and only 9% received any treatment

over the previous 12 months. Mental health difficulties may sometimes be interpreted through spiritual, moral, or cultural explanations. Research with Nigerian university health care students identified spirituality as one of the key themes associated with mental health stigma, finding that the co-existence of spiritual beliefs alongside biomedical and psychological models of mental health is a critical factor to consider in stigma-reduction interventions (Pederson *et al.*, 2020, 2023). In that research, religious themes were prominent among most respondents, and students with greater need for services, as indicated by mood symptoms, held more stigmatizing views (Pederson *et al.*, 2020). Focus-group findings further suggest that mental illness is sometimes viewed as a personal weakness or moral failing, and that some community members believe it can be transmitted through association with affected people (Pederson *et al.*, 2023). These interpretations can influence whether individuals seek professional assistance or rely primarily on informal sources of support. Among university students, peer opinions and anticipated social judgement may further influence decisions to disclose mental health concerns, with stigmatization being significantly correlated with suicidal ideation among higher institution students in Southwestern Nigeria. There are also related cultural differences on help-seeking which have been observed outside Nigeria; for example, Alsalman *et al.* (2024) observed religion, family background and social norms as factors affecting how medical students in Saudi Arabia relate with mental health issues.

Social work is pertinent as social workers practice at the individual, group and institutional levels. Some of their practices include counseling, psychosocial services, advocacy, education, referral and community-based interventions. One study conducted on community-based psychiatric social work in Kwara State, Nigeria revealed that community-based interventions were extremely helpful in decreasing stigma, increasing accessibility and helping clients become part of the society through counseling and advocacy. Studies carried out on the role of social work interventions among university students suggest that university counseling programs should be expanded with the involvement of social workers in order to advocate for a mental health policy from the policymakers. Social work interventions have proven to help students cope with stress both academically and emotionally. The education-based strategies, under the purview of social work, seem to have potential: according to a recent mixed methods study conducted in six public universities of Nigeria (one in each geopolitical zone), mental health literacy mitigated the effect of social determinants on stigmatization and helped increase students' help-seeking behavior (Abioye *et al.*, 2026).

Even in the face of these requirements, however, the efforts to address the issue of students' mental wellbeing in Nigeria have been rather fragmented. The

Nigerian Senate has appealed to the integration of the provision of mental wellbeing knowledge into the national academic curriculum, to the development of mental wellbeing desks in all tertiary institutions, and to training the counselors on emotional intelligence and crisis intervention. Nevertheless, there is a lack of provisions in the national school health policy as regards how to improve the psychosocial climate in schools, conduct pre-entry psychological assessment of students, and manage school counseling services. This situation exists against the backdrop of general issues related to the governance of Nigeria's mental health system (Abdulmalik *et al.*, 2016).

One of the main objectives of the current study is to identify the barriers that hinder the access of students to professional help with their mental problems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of Empirical Studies on Barriers to Professional Mental Health and Help-Seeking

A qualitative study conducted by Coker *et al.* (2018) even though his study was among adults and not students, investigated barriers to professional help-seeking behavior and the effect of stigma and discrimination on mental health services usage among individuals with mental illnesses in Lagos, Nigeria. It is clear that the decision of the researcher to conduct such a study was driven by the increasing disparity between mental health services availability and usage when the effects of social cultural beliefs are significant concerning mental stress. The study employed qualitative research design and used in-depth interviews to collect information from 40 respondents experiencing mental stress and psychological well-being.

Stigma was found to have multiple forms and all of them are related and include stigma of exclusion, fear of being labeled, discrimination, and stereotypes in family, peers, education, and workplace settings. Stigma was also identified to be not just interpersonal but also structural because the respondents experienced discrimination and were silenced when seeking professional help in regard to mental stress. Stigma and discrimination have been seen to negatively impact the help-seeking behavior as there are many people who do not seek help due to fear of being judged, labeled and rejected.

In solving the issues which they faced, participants sought other avenues of help like self-medication, using the informal social networks as well as receiving help from the religious leaders instead of seeking professional help from the mental health field. While in some cases, this avenue for seeking help helped temporarily, there were instances where it was a barrier to the access of participants to clinical help or even contributed to worsening the mental state of participants. It should be noted that while in some cases there was access to the services, the issue of stigma influenced the decisions more than the actual availability. Therefore, Coker *et al.*

(2018) concluded that a multi-faceted approach will be required in addressing the issue of stigma with regards to mental health and mere creation of awareness may not be enough.

According to Olayiwola-Adedola *et al.* (2025), factors such as stigma, social judgment, and other barriers could prevent students from seeking professional help. Also, Owokotomo (2024) conducted research involving students at the University of Ibadan on mental illness perception and its treatment. These works highlight the importance of taking barriers into consideration for each university individually since just because the services exist does not mean that people will make use of them.

The review of the literatures reveals that barriers to professional mental help-seeking are multidimensional in nature and can be related to individual attitudes, stigma, social judgment, cultural and religious beliefs, confidentiality issues, accessibility issues, and trust towards professional services. In this regard, the current study investigates barriers to professional mental help-seeking among postgraduate students at the University of Ibadan and determines their correlation with help-seeking behavior.

Theoretical Framework

Health Belief Model

The theoretical underpinning adopted for this study is the Health Belief Model (HBM) that explains why people choose or refrain from engaging in health-related behaviors (Rosenstock *et al.*, 1988). The HBM holds that the decision-making process related to health-seeking is guided by six main constructs namely perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers, cues to action, and self-efficacy (Rosenstock *et al.*, 1988). Within the context of mental health of the university students, the help-seeking is dependent on the students' perception of their susceptibility to mental distress, perceived severity, and effectiveness of the professional intervention.

The model is consistent with the research objectives that seek to explore the socio-cultural barriers to professional intervention of the postgraduate students. Constructs such as perceived barriers which include social stigma, embarrassment, confidentiality issues, and cultural/religious beliefs, as well as low perceived severity, directly explain why students refrain from seeking professional psychological assistance despite facing academic stress (Vidourek *et al.*, 2014)..

Research Hypothesis

H01: There is no significant relationship between barriers to accessing professional mental health support and help-seeking behaviour at the University of Ibadan.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted a quantitative research design using the survey method as represented in figure 1. The

survey design was considered appropriate because it enables the researcher to collect data from a relatively large number of respondents within their natural setting without manipulating any variables.

The total number of respondents in the sample is 381. Simple random sampling method was used to select the respondents for this study. In simple random sampling, all the postgraduate students forming the study

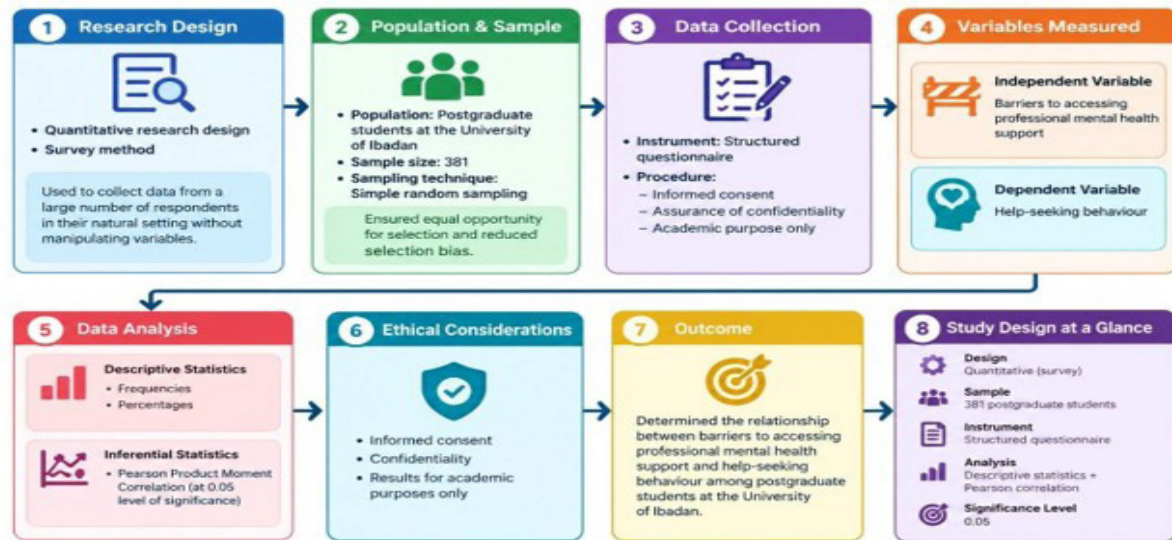


Figure 1: Block diagram representing the research methodology

population have an equal chance of being selected and thus minimize selection bias. A questionnaire was used as a data collecting tool in this study. Respondents were informed of the benefits of taking part in the study. They were assured of confidentiality and that the results

will be used for academic purposes only. Dataset was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The research workflow is further presented as a flow chat in figure 2 for better visualization.

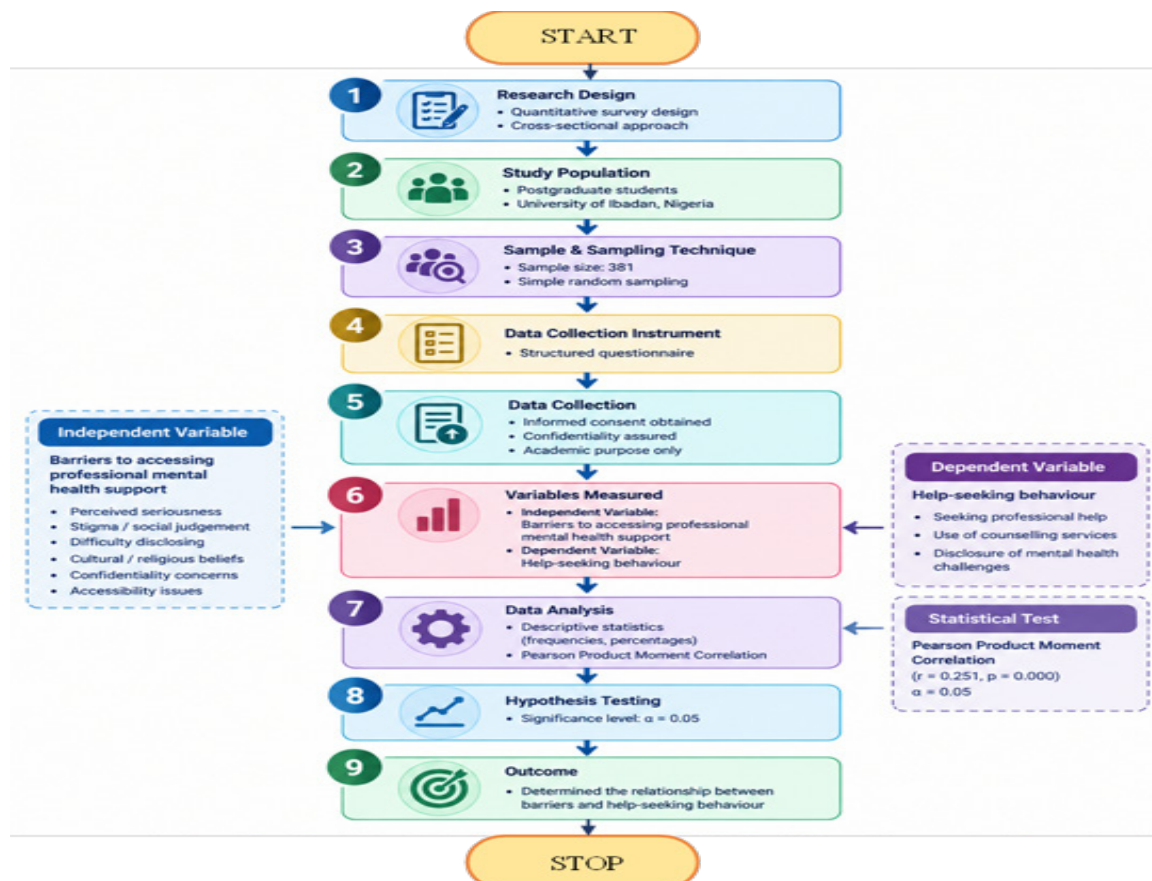


Figure 2: Flow Chat of Methodological Framework and Analytical Pathway of the Study

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hypothesis: There is no significant relationship between barriers to accessing professional mental health

support and help-seeking behaviour at the University of Ibadan.

Results of Pearson Product Moment Correlation indicated

Table1: Pearson Product Moment Correlation Showing the relationship between barriers to accessing professional mental health support and help-seeking behaviour.

Variable	R	P-value	Results
Barriers to accessing professional mental health support and help-seeking behaviour	0.251	0.001	Significant

$r = 0.251$ at $p = 0.001$. As the probability is less than 0.05, therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. It means that there exists a statistically significant relationship between the barrier to access professional mental health services and help seeking behavior of students of the University of Ibadan. Positive value of correlation coefficient indicates a weak and positive relationship.

Discussions

The statistical analyses show the existence of a significant positive correlation between socio-cultural barriers towards seeking professional mental health assistance and help-seeking behavior amongst postgraduate students at the University of Ibadan ($r = 0.251$, $p = 0.001$). This is an indication of the presence of structural, social, and cultural barriers that affect the way postgraduate students utilize professional mental health facilities. The fact that the null hypothesis is rejected is indicative of the fact that the perceived barriers are actually correlated with the decisions of the students regarding seeking help, thus confirming the research objectives.

In accordance with the Health Belief Model, the vast majority (73.0%) of the respondents claimed that they refrained from seeking professional help because of the fact that they did not consider their psychological problems severe enough to warrant such treatment. Due to the nature of postgraduate studies, stress is often seen as a normal part of the process and the students fail to evaluate their risk of suffering from a clinical anxiety or depression. Also, 61.4% of the participants were unwilling to reveal their problems with mental wellbeing to the unfamiliar professionals.

Other important considerations include the impact of sociocultural and religion-related elements, which were seen by 85.0% of respondents as key determinants in the selection of the mode of professional help-seeking. In agreement with earlier research into the preferences of Nigerian undergraduates (Muhammed *et al.*, 2024), many students opt for social networks, spiritual guidance, or self-reliance rather than clinical psychotherapy. The same pattern is evident across the sub-Saharan universities, as psychological coping mechanisms are predetermined by sociocultural traditions (Mowungishe & Eweke, 2024).

The results have important implications for the social work practice on campuses and the development of mental health policy of the University of Ibadan. Taking into consideration the fact that sociocultural stigma, spiritual re-interpretation of problems, and the unfamiliarity with

the clinical personnel prevent students from engaging in professional help, social work efforts cannot be limited to just having clinical personnel available all the time. Social workers should use multi-level approach and introduce psychoeducation and anti-stigma initiatives during postgraduate orientation process, as well as establish collaboration with informal social networks (faith-based counselors and peer mentors) (Anumaka *et al.*, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The findings in this study highlight, socio-cultural barriers such as low perception of severity, fear of stigma, disclosure issues, and religion/culture beliefs as the factors influencing the mental health seeking behavior of postgraduate students at the University of Ibadan ($r = 0.251$, $p = 0.001$). While the students possess an initial knowledge on mental health matters, issues like mistrust and stigma result in their very poor utilization of any psychological services.

To counteract these barriers, the university can conduct anti-stigma campaigns through multiple levels during postgraduate orientation, introduce mental health literacy into research programs, and also put up satellite social work desks within the faculties. Besides, the university social workers should also coordinate with informal help providers such as peers and clergy members to develop referral mechanisms for professional help.

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