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Determinants of Suicidal Behaviours in Nigerian Universities

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*Suicide,
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Student's year of study,
Student's Gender.*

The study investigated the factors that could influence suicidal behaviours among university students in Edo State. The descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study comprised all full-time undergraduates (79, 813) in public and privately owned universities in Edo State. Using a multistage sampling procedure, a sample of 720 students was drawn for the study. The results of the study revealed, among others that a student's year (100 level, 200 level, 300 level and 400 level) of study and gender (Male and female) have no influence on the prevalence rate of suicide among university students. Based on the findings of this study, it was recommended among others, that there should be effective social networking support within communities, institutions, and individual resilience to help protect vulnerable persons from suicide by building and improving social relationships and skills to cope with difficulties.

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INTRODUCTION

Suicidal behaviour is any deliberate action and/or inaction intended to end one's life to escape unbearable suffering or to help change adverse conditions of living. It is the intentional act of

taking one's own life or the destruction of one's own interests or prospects. Suicidal behaviour demonstrates that something seems to be fundamentally wrong either with the individual or

with the situation in which the individual exists or with both the individual and the situation.

Suicide appears to have unique epidemiological characteristics that makes it an important public concern. This is why stakeholders in the education system such as the government, parents, guardians, teachers, counsellors, and sociologists, among others, are so much concerned about the perceived prevalence of suicide and suicidal behaviour among university students in Nigeria. One of the concerns that higher institutions in Nigeria have to deal with is suicidal behaviour.

Suicide (from Latin *suicidare* means to kill oneself or self-murder) means the act of a person intentionally causing his or her death. It is death from injury, poisoning, or suffocation where there is evidence (either explicit or implicit) that the injury was self-inflicted and that the person intended to kill himself/herself. Suicide is the act of killing oneself, deliberately initiated and performed by the person concerned in the full knowledge of its total outcome (World Health Organization, 2014).

The prevalence and characteristics of suicidal behaviour appeared to vary widely between the male and female gender, as well as between different communities, in different demographic groups, and over time. Across the globe, students' involvement in suicide and suicidal behaviours could be predicated on the year (level) of study and gender/sex.

Sex appears to be an important factor that could cause variation in students' involvement in suicidal behaviours. Suicide attempts and suicide behaviours are existential problems that seem to vary between the genders. Generally speaking, suicidal attempts appear to be more frequent among females, but rates of completed suicides appear to be higher among males. Typically, male suicide attempters usually fall into the following categories: unemployed, single, living alone, and they tend to use violent methods, while female attempters display high odd ratios in the following cases: divorced or widowed, economically inactive, or dispersed. Female attempters of

suicide also seem to be repeaters of suicide, exhibiting multiple unsuccessful attempts, especially using the method of self-poisoning mostly with drugs (Khalid, 2012).

Another factor to be considered in the prevalence rate and causes of suicidal behaviours among university students is the year (level) of study. The year of study is classified into four: 100 level, 200 level, 300 level, and 400 level students. Students' year of study seems to influence the prevalence rate, and causes of suicidal behaviours among university students in Edo State, Nigeria. Suicide was and still is widely regarded as a highly individual act. For example, it is often explained in terms of an individual's depression. It therefore appeared to be a likely candidate for sociological analysis, with its emphasis on the social rather than the individual (Durkheim *et al.*, 2013). This study assumed that all students, irrespective of level of study seem to face similar challenges concerning some excruciating economic difficulties such as the inability to pay their school fees, purchase essential textbooks for their courses, feed and clothe themselves, or cope with academic work and obtain good medical care while on campus. It follows therefore that the existence of suicide phenomenon in our universities appears to be a major issue that needs to be investigated with a lot of concern and creating effective preventive measures as a matter of urgency.

Several cases of suicide and suicidal behaviours have been reported at the University of Benin, Benin City; Niger Delta University, Bayelsa State; University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State; University of Nigeria, Nsukka; Kogi State University, Kogi State; Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. This perceived prevalence of university students' involvement in suicide and suicidal behaviour is indeed worrisome as the effect on families, friends, and societies seems to be devastating and far-reaching. For instance, Olai (2018) reported that a 30-year-old Nigeria, an Abuja law school student committed suicide in Taraba State. Also, a final year student of the Department of Religion and Culture, University

of Nigeria, Nsukka committed suicide by taking an insecticide, popularly called Sniper on Monday, June 17, 2019. Earlier, on 19th April 2019, a 100-level student of Kogi State University, also died by suicide after she was reportedly jilted by her boyfriend. Only ten days later, on 29th April 2019, news broke that another undergraduate, a 100-level student of Chemical Engineering at the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State ended his life after drinking two bottles of Sniper. On the 15th of May 2019, a 17-year-old student in Jos was reported to have drunk Sniper to end his life when he learned that he had failed the 2019 Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) examination.

Despite several efforts made by the Government, University authorities and university guidance counsellors, suicide cases and suicidal behaviours among university students especially undergraduates seem to be on the increase. The question asked is, could it be that causes of suicide and suicidal behaviour among university students vary by sex and year of study? The aim of the study therefore was to find out the determinants of suicidal behaviours among university students in Edo State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The study investigated the determinants of suicidal behaviours among university students in Edo State. Specifically, the study:

- Aimed to establish the suicidal behaviours prevalent among university students in Edo State
- Sought to find out the influence of students' gender on the rate of suicide among university students in Edo State
- Aimed to find out whether a student's gender significantly influence the causes of suicidal behaviour among university students
- ought to find out if there is a significant influence of students' year of study on the prevalence of suicidal behaviours among university students in Edo State

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

- What is the suicidal behaviour prevalent among university students in Edo State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at a 0.05 level of significance:

- There is no significant influence of students' gender on the rate of suicide among university students in Edo State
- There is no significant influence of students' gender in the causes of suicidal behaviour among university students
- There is no significant influence of students' year of study on the prevalence of suicidal behaviours among university students in Edo State

METHOD OF STUDY

The research design adopted for the study was descriptive survey design. The population of the study comprised all the seventy-nine thousand, eight hundred and thirteen (79,813) full-time undergraduates in public and privately owned universities in Edo State. The universities include the University of Benin, Benin City; Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma; Edo State University, Uzairue; Igbinedion University, Okada; Benson Idahosa University, Benin City; Wellspring University, Benin City, and Samuel Adegboyega University, Ogwa. The sample for this study was 720 full-time undergraduate students from universities in Edo State. The study employed a multi-stage sampling procedure.

The major research instruments used for this study were questionnaires titled: Suicidal Behaviour Questionnaire (SBQ) and a checklist titled: Documented Evidence of Suicide and Suicidal Attempts Checklist (DESSAC). The checklist was used mainly to assess the prevalence/rate of suicide and suicidal attempts by students in each sampled university from the 2011/2012 to

2020/2021 academic sessions. The face and content validity of the instrument (questionnaire) was validated by three other experts, one each in Measurement and Evaluation, Counselling Psychology, and Educational Management from the Faculty of Education, University of Benin. A reliability test of the instrument was done with thirty (30) subjects who did not form part of the population of the study. Essentially, a procedure of reliability testing using Cronbach’s Alpha was used to establish the reliability estimates of 0.81. The distribution and retrieval of the copies of the questionnaire was done by the researchers and research assistants. Descriptive statistics was used to answer the research question, while the independent Sample Chi-square statistic was employed to test the hypotheses.

RESULTS

Prevalence of Suicidal Behaviour Among University Students

Table 1 reveals the prevalence of suicidal behaviour among university students in Edo State.

Table 1: Rate of suicidal behaviour among university students in Edo State

Items	MOF	OFT	SOT	NEV
I have seriously contemplated killing myself when I was distressed	48 (6.7%)	102 (14.2%)	163 (22.6%)	407 (56.5%)
I have attempted killing myself when I felt life was hopeless	80 (8.3%)	143 (19.9%)	165 (22.9%)	352 (48.9%)
I once tried to kill myself when I failed my examination	54 (7.5%)	113 (15.7%)	72 (10.0%)	481 (66.8%)
I tried putting an end to my life when I met a major disappointment	96 (13.3%)	71 (9.9%)	114 (15.8%)	439 (61.0%)
I thought of killing myself as one of the ways of solving my problems	90 (12.5%)	137 (19.0%)	82 (11.4%)	411 (57.1%)
I considered hanging myself whenever I was overwhelmed by some situations	60 (8.3%)	185 (25.7%)	60 (8.3%)	415 (57.6%)
I have been involved in reckless driving deliberately under alcohol influence	111 (15.4%)	71 (9.9%)	102 (14.2%)	436 (60.6%)
I abuse substances (drugs) sometime	433 (60.1%)	64 (8.9%)	175 (24.3%)	48 (6.7%)

KEY: MOF= Most Often; OFT = Often; SOT= Sometimes, NEV = Never

Source: Fieldwork, 2023

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant influence of students’ gender on the rate of suicide among university students in Edo State

It shows that 56.5% of the respondents indicated that they never seriously contemplated killing themselves when they were stressed. 48.9% of the respondents stated that they never attempted killing themselves when they felt life was hopeless and 66.8% also stated that they never tried to kill themselves when they failed their examination. In the same vein, a majority of the respondents (61.0%) also indicated that they never attempted to put an end to their lives when they experienced some major disappointment. However, 57.1%, contemplated suicide as one of the ways of solving their problems, while 57.6%, considered hanging themselves whenever they experienced overwhelming situations. Also, 60.6% and 60.1% of the respondents have been involved in reckless driving deliberately and abused substances (drugs) most times respectively. Thus, it can be deduced that a majority of the respondents indicated that they never engaged in suicidal behaviours.

Table 2: Influence of gender on the rate of suicide among university students

		Suicide		Df	χ^2	(p-value) Sig.	Remark
		No	Yes				
Gender	Male	344	2	1	1.61	0.29	Ho Accepted
	Female	376	6				
	Total	720	8				

Table 2 reveals the influence of gender on the prevalence of suicide among university students in Edo State. The calculated value is 1.61, the degree of freedom is 1, and the level of significance is 0.29 which is greater than the *set alpha* level of 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis which states that gender does not significantly influence the prevalence of suicide among university students in Edo State is accepted. This

shows that gender does not influence the rate of suicide among university students in Edo State.

Causes Of Suicidal Behaviours Among University Students Based on Gender

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant influence of students' gender in the causes of suicidal behaviour among university students.

Table 3: Causes of suicidal behaviours among university students based on gender

Influence of gender on causes of suicide behaviour		LC	MC	HC	χ^2	Df	Sig.
Poor relationship with family members	Male	126	57	160	12.35	2	0.00
	Female	94	66	217			
Poor academic performance	Male	101	100	142	7.29	2	0.02
	Female	141	82	154			
Substance abuse	Male	136	76	131	7.45	2	0.02
	Female	165	54	158			
Pain and hopelessness	Male	195	41	107	24.50	2	0.00
	Female	147	78	152			
Relationship problems such as being jilted by a lover	Male	155	51	137	55.08	2	0.00
	Female	90	136	151			
Burdensomeness	Male	155	94	94	13.80	2	0.00
	Female	147	78	152			
Low belongingness	Male	124	94	125	0.88	2	0.65
	Female	149	99	129			
Issues with course adviser	Male	222	63	58	4.31	2	0.11
	Female	270	60	47			

HC – High Cause, MC – Moderate Cause, LC – Low Cause, **Source:** Field Work, 2023

Table 3 shows the causes of suicidal behaviours among university students based on gender. It can be seen that with a p-value less than 0.05, it can be deduced that gender influenced poor relationships with family (p=0.02); poor academic performance (p=0.02); substance abuse (p=0.02); pain and hopelessness (p=0.00); relationship problems such as being jilted by a lover (p=0.00); burdensomeness (p=0.01) as causes of suicide

respectively. However, there was no significant influence of low belongingness (p=0.65) and issues with course adviser (p=0.11) as causes of suicide in the study.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant influence of students' year of study on the prevalence of suicide among university students in Edo State

Table 4: Influence of students' year of study on the prevalence of suicide among university students in Edo State

		Suicide		Df	χ^2	Sig.	Remark
		no	Yes				
Year of Study	100	235	4	3	1.16	0.76	Ho Accept
	200	87	1				
	300	144	1				
	400 and above	254	2				

Table 4 shows the influence of students' year of study on the prevalence of suicide among university students in Edo State. It can be seen that the degree of freedom is 3, calculated chi-square value is 1.16 and the level of significance is 0.76. Thus, the p-value is greater than the set alpha level of 0.05. This shows that the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant influence of year of study on the prevalence of suicide among university students in Edo State is accepted. Hence the year of study does not significantly influence the prevalence of suicide among university students in Edo State.

DISCUSSION

The findings of research question One indicate that a majority of the respondents never engaged in most of the suicidal behaviours. However, 433 respondents representing 60.1% indicated that they abused substances (drugs) most times. This finding agrees with some earlier studies of Mba (2010), Robert (2008), Evans *et al.* (2005), and Mocolin (2002) who stated that self-destructive behaviours such as alcoholism, substance abuse, sex abuse, cultism, possession of lethal weapons have been identified as suicidal behaviours found among university students. Roberts *et al.*, (2002) further maintained that alcoholism is linked to hopelessness for inducing suicidal behaviour.

Substance abuse which may involve over-dose of drugs, swallowing of poisons, pesticide use and the use of other chemicals to end one's life is a major form of suicidal behaviour found among university students in this study. This could be explained by the fact that there is easy access to these chemicals or substances. This finding is also in agreement with other studies by Bae *et al.* (2005) and Shaffer (2001) who opined and demonstrated that suicidal behaviours are more

likely to occur among adolescents who abuse alcohol and substances. Thus, numerous studies report a significant correlation between substance use and suicidal behaviours in adolescents and youths.

Hypothesis One sought to find out if gender significantly influences the rate of suicide among university students in Edo State. The finding shows that gender does not influence the prevalence rate of suicide among university students in the study areas. This implied that students' gender had no influence on the prevalence rate of suicide in the study. This finding does not agree with earlier studies of Evan *et al.* (2005) who opined that suicidal ideation is more common among girls than boys in their studies. However, this finding is in agreement with the findings of Ebohon (2023) whose studies found no difference in suicide ideation and attempts as well as completed suicide by sex.

In the same vein, this finding corroborates the findings of Garrison *et al.* (2003) that the prevalence of suicide attempts was about equal for African-American male and female adolescents. This finding also agrees with the studies of Alabi *et al.*, (2015) who in their studies found no significant gender differences in suicide attempts over the years spanning 2009 to 2015.

The findings of the Second hypothesis on the influence of gender on the causes of suicidal behaviour revealed that gender influenced poor relationships with family members, poor academic performance, substance abuse, pain and hopelessness, and relationship problems such as being jilted by a lover and burdensomeness as causes of suicide respectively. However, no significant influence of gender was found on low belongingness and issues with course advisers as

causes of suicide in the study. The latter (low belongingness and issues with the course adviser) implied that these causes are not significantly influenced by gender as both genders are affected equally by these causes, while the former (poor relationship with family members, poor academic performance, substance abuse, pain and hopelessness, relationship problems such as being jilted by a lover and burdensomeness) indicates that there are significant differences in the causes of suicidal behaviours based on students' gender.

These findings could be explained by the fact that people react differently to situations and life-threatening circumstances. Thus, typical events leading to the suicide acts suggest a sequence of interpersonal troubles that become progressively more pervasive in the individual's life. However, the findings of this study negate earlier studies of Lee et al., (2017), Lamis et al., (2016), and George (2007) who maintained that causes of suicidal ideations, self-destruction acts, suicide attempts and the actual suicide (completed suicide) have no gender difference.

The finding on the influence of students' year of study on the prevalence rate of suicide shows that the year of study does not significantly influence the prevalence of suicide among university students. This finding could be explained by the fact that suicide could occur across each university class level. Although the prevalence rate of suicide in the study is relatively very small, no one has the right to take his/her life because every suicide is a tragedy which causes families, friends, and society to be devastated. This finding aligns with the reports of Aliu (2019), Ugo (2019) and the News Agency of Nigeria (2019) that a 300-level student of the University of Benin committed suicide, a 400-level student of the Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) committed suicide and a 100-level student of Kogi State University also died by suicide, that is 300, 400, and 100 levels respectively. Thus, students' year of study has no significant influence on suicide rate among undergraduates.

Another reason for this non-influence of students' year of study on the prevalence rate of suicide

among university students in Edo State could be explained by the fact that all students seem to face similar challenges concerning some excruciating economic difficulties such as the inability to pay their school charges, purchase essential textbooks for their courses, feed and clothe themselves or cope with academic work, and obtain good medical care while on campus. This finding also aligned with Eneh (2008) who posits that these economic difficulties could predispose the students of various Universities in Nigeria to suicidal behaviours irrespective of the year of study.

Lastly, this finding is in agreement with the views of Ebohon (2023) and Njoku (2010) who opined that societal pressures and influence, the desire to pass examination at all costs through any means, and the pressures from parents and peers are factors that play pivotal roles on students' engagement in suicidal behaviour irrespective of their levels of study.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The study was designed to examine suicidal behaviours among university students in Edo State. It was aimed at investigating the influence of gender, and students' year of study on the degree of suicide and suicidal behaviours among university students in Edo State. Four research questions guided the study. The first one was answered, while the other three were turned into hypotheses and tested at 0.05 alpha level.

The descriptive research design was employed in the study. The population of the study was made up of all the seventy-nine thousand, eight hundred and thirteen (79,813) full-time undergraduates in public and privately owned universities in Edo State. A sample size of seven hundred and twenty (720) out of the seventy-nine thousand, eight hundred and thirteen (79,813) full-time undergraduate students from universities in Edo State was selected using the multi-stage sampling procedure. Two research instruments were used for the study. The first was a structured

questionnaire designed by the researchers titled: Suicidal Behaviour Questionnaire (SBQ), while the second instrument was a checklist titled: Documented Evidence of Suicide and Suicidal Attempts Checklist (DESSAC).

From the findings of this study, it is concluded that substance abuse is the most prevalent suicidal behaviour among university students. However, the sex of the students and students' year of study have no significant influence on suicide and suicidal behaviours among university students.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of this study:

- The Government and relevant authorities should make relevant policies to control substance abuse among the youth and university students in Nigeria.
- Access to the means for suicide especially the sale of pesticides/insecticides (Sniper) should be strictly controlled. This means that such substance (s) should be sold based only on prescriptions and authorization by relevant regulatory bodies.
- To control, prevent and manage suicide and suicidal behaviours among university students, there should be an effective and efficient guidance and counselling services and programmes within educational institutions.

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