

Parental Expectations, Test Anxiety and Mental Health of First-Year Undergraduate Students in Tertiary Institutions in Gusau Metropolis, Zamfara State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the relationships among parental expectation, test anxiety on mental health among first-year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau Metropolis, Zamfara State, Nigeria. The research was guided by two objectives: to determine the relationship between parental expectations and mental health; and to determine the relationship between test anxiety and mental health. The study adopted a correlational research design and was underpinned by the Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Stress and Social Cognitive Theory. The study population consisted of 2,562 first-year students across all tertiary institutions in the Gusau metropolis of Zamfara State. A sample of 357 students was selected from the population using stratified random sampling across various public tertiary institutions in the metropolis. Three standardized instruments were used for data collection: the Parental Expectation Scale (PES), Student Test Anxiety Inventory (STAI) and Mental Health Inventory (MHI). The instruments possess content validity while the internal consistency of each instrument was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. The reliability coefficients obtained were 0.73 for the Parental Expectation Scale, 0.90 for the Student Test Anxiety Inventory and 0.75 for the Mental Health Inventory. The instrument was administered to a total of 357 students, who make up the sample for the study with the aid of trained research assistants at their respective institutions. Data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) Analysis. The findings of the study revealed that parental expectations did not show a significant influence on students' mental well-being. In contrast, the study found that test anxiety had a meaningful and noticeable impact on the mental health of students. Among the two, test anxiety emerged as the most influential and statistically significant factor contributing to variations in students' mental health. Based on these findings, the study concludes that parental expectations, despite often being perceived as pressure points for students, do not significantly affect their mental health in this study. However, test anxiety stands out as a crucial determinant of mental health among first-year students. One key recommendation from the study is that school

counsellors should engage parents through seminars to help them set realistic and supportive expectations that do not burden students emotionally.

Keywords: Parental, Anxiety, Mental Health, Tertiary Institutions

Introduction

The transition into higher education represents a pivotal stage in a student's life. For many first-year undergraduates, this period is typically marked by various psychological, academic, and emotional hurdles (Misra & Castillo, 2015). Key among these challenges are academic stress, parental expectations, and test anxiety, all of which have been recognized as significant factors influencing students' mental health (Putwain et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2019). Parental expectations significantly influence students' academic conduct and emotional health. When appropriately set, these expectations can motivate students to pursue academic goals and achieve success. However, when expectations are excessively high or unattainable, they can become a source of psychological strain. According to Luthar and Becker (2022), children under intense parental pressure are more susceptible to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Similarly, Ang and Huan (2016) observed that students facing heavy academic pressure from their parents are more likely to experience emotional difficulties, including anxiety and depression.

For first-year undergraduate students, this period is often characterized by numerous psychological, academic, and emotional challenges (Misra & Castillo, 2015). Among these challenges, parental expectations and test anxiety have been widely acknowledged as critical determinants of students' mental health (Putwain et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2019).

Parental expectations play a crucial role in shaping students' academic behavior and emotional well-being. While moderate expectations can serve as a source of motivation, helping students to set goals and strive for academic excellence, excessively high or unrealistic expectations may lead to significant psychological distress. Luthar and Becker (2022) emphasized that children exposed to high parental pressure are more prone to anxiety, depression, and diminished self-worth. Similarly, Ang and Huan (2016) found that students whose parents exert intense academic pressure are more likely to report emotional problems such as anxiety and depression.

Recent studies have confirmed these findings. According to Liu and Merritt (2020), excessive parental expectations, especially in highly competitive academic environments, are associated with increased academic stress and a higher prevalence of mental health issues among adolescents. Additionally, a study by Wang et al. (2021) showed that perceived parental pressure to achieve can lead to academic burnout and emotional exhaustion, particularly among high school students. The study concluded that while parents intend to motivate their children, unrealistic expectations often lead to counterproductive outcomes.

Moreover, Chen et al. (2019) found that students who internalize their parents' high expectations tend to develop performance-avoidant goals, which heighten fear of failure and reduce intrinsic motivation. This aligns with the work of Putwain and Symes (2018), who observed that fear appeals messages from parents that emphasize failure negatively influence students' academic self-concept and emotional regulation. In contrast, supportive parental involvement, characterized by realistic expectations and encouragement, has been linked to better academic adjustment and emotional resilience (Lee & Bowen, 2021). Therefore, while parental expectations

can function as a driving force for academic achievement, it is essential that these expectations remain balanced, developmentally appropriate, and accompanied by emotional support to promote both academic success and mental well-being.

Another variable of the study was test anxiety, test anxiety defined as a set of physiological, emotional, and cognitive responses to exam-related stressors, has been found to significantly affect students' mental health and academic performance (Zeidner, 2018). It is characterized by symptoms such as increased heart rate, worry, negative thoughts, and impaired concentration. Excessive test anxiety can disrupt cognitive functioning, reduce self-confidence, and heighten emotional distress, ultimately diminishing academic outcomes. Rana and Mahmood (2020) found that students with high levels of test anxiety not only performed poorly but also exhibited elevated stress and anxiety levels, indicating a strong link between test-related stress and mental health. Recent studies have further validated these findings. Putwain and Daly (2019) demonstrated that high test anxiety is associated with maladaptive coping strategies, which exacerbate psychological distress and hinder academic performance. Similarly, Seipp and Schwarzer (2020) noted that students experiencing persistent test anxiety are more prone to depression, low self-esteem, and avoidance behaviors, particularly in high-stakes examination environments. Furthermore, the work of Von der Embse et al. (2020) highlighted the role of school climate and teacher support in moderating the effects of test anxiety. Their findings suggest that a positive and supportive learning environment can reduce anxiety levels and enhance emotional well-being. In addition, Owens et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of emotion regulation and self-efficacy as protective factors, which help students manage test-related stress more effectively and improve academic outcomes. Moreover, recent neurocognitive studies have shown that chronic test anxiety activates the brain's stress-response system, which impairs working memory and attentional control, both of which are crucial for academic tasks (Beilock & Ramirez, 2020). Therefore, it is evident that test anxiety is not only a psychological challenge but also a neurocognitive barrier to academic achievement and emotional health.

The theoretical underpinning of this study is provided by the Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Stress proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which posits that an individual's response to stress is mediated by their cognitive evaluation of the stressor and available coping resources. This model emphasizes the transactional nature of stress, which is particularly relevant when considering how students perceive and respond to academic demands, parental pressures, and exam challenges. Additionally, Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory contributes to understanding how environmental, cognitive, and behavioral factors interact to influence an individual's mental health. According to this theory, perceived self-efficacy and the individual's interpretation of social expectations significantly impact their emotional and psychological states. Mental health challenges among students have become an increasing concern in educational systems worldwide. These challenges manifest in various forms, including anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, low self-esteem, and in extreme cases, suicidal ideation. Among the major contributing factors to these psychological problems are academic stress, parental expectations, and test anxiety. Students are often burdened with excessive academic workloads, pressured to meet high parental standards, and subjected to high-stakes examinations that induce intense fear and self-doubt. These pressures collectively hinder their ability to function optimally, both

academically and emotionally, resulting in poor academic performance, school absenteeism, social withdrawal, and in severe cases, dropout or suicidal tendencies.

Although a growing body of literature has examined the psychological consequences of test anxiety, much of this research has been concentrated in Western and urban contexts. There remains a significant gap in empirical data within many developing regions, particularly in Northern Nigeria. In Zamfara State, where educational challenges such as inadequate school infrastructure, socio-economic constraints, and cultural influences on academic expectations persist, students may be particularly vulnerable to mental health issues. The cultural emphasis on academic success, coupled with limited mental health awareness and support systems in schools, may exacerbate the psychological burden on students.

Despite these realities, there is a paucity of empirical research exploring the interconnected effects of academic stress, parental expectations, and test anxiety on the mental health of students in this region. Without context-specific studies, educators, parents, and policymakers may lack the evidence-based insights necessary to design targeted interventions that support students' mental well-being. Therefore, there is a critical need to investigate how these psychosocial variables interact to influence the mental health of students in Zamfara State.

Objectives of the Study

The study sought to:

1. Determine the influence of parental expectations on mental health of first year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau metropolis, Zamfara state.
2. Assess the effect of test anxiety on mental health of first year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau metropolis, Zamfara state

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between parental expectations and the mental health of first year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau metropolis, Zamfara state?
2. What is the relationship between test anxiety and the mental health of first year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau metropolis, Zamfara state?

Hypotheses

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

H0₁: There is no significant relationship between parental expectations and the mental health of first year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau metropolis, Zamfara state.

H0₂: There is no significant relationship between test anxiety and the mental health of first year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau metropolis, Zamfara state.

Methodology

The study adopted a correlational research design to examine relationships between the independent variables (academic stress, parental expectations, and test anxiety) and the dependent variable (mental health). The study population consisted of 2,562 first-year students across all tertiary institutions in the Gusau metropolis of Zamfara State. The study population consisted of 2,562 first-year students across all tertiary institutions in the Gusau metropolis of Zamfara State.

A total of 357 respondents were selected using stratified random sampling. The study employed three standardized and adopted instruments to collect data, each carefully selected to measure key variables: parental expectations, test anxiety and mental health among students.

To assess students' perceptions of parental expectations, the study utilized the Parental Expectation Scale (PES), adapted from Abdulkadir (2020). This instrument includes 20 items rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (4), with total scores ranging from 20 to 80. Higher scores reflect greater perceived academic expectations from parents.

The Student Test Anxiety Inventory (STAI), also adapted from Solomon (2020), comprises 20 items rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from "Not At All" (1) to "Very Much" (4). The total score can range from 20 to 80, with scores above the midpoint indicating higher levels of test anxiety. Lastly, the Mental Health Inventory (MHI), adapted from Solomon (2020), was used to assess the mental health status of students. The instrument includes 54 items and is rated on a four-point scale from "Never" (1) to "Always" (4). The total score ranges from 54 to 216, with higher scores reflecting better mental well-being.

To ensure the validity of these instruments, expert reviewers from the Faculty of Education at Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, examined each instrument's content. Their assessments and recommendations were incorporated, affirming the content validity of all tools and confirming that the instruments comprehensively measured the constructs under study. The reliability of the instruments was established by administering them to a pilot sample of fifty students at Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto. The internal consistency of each instrument was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. The reliability coefficients obtained were 0.73 for the Parental Expectation Scale, 0.90 for the Student Test Anxiety Inventory and 0.75 for the Mental Health Inventory. These values indicate that all instruments exhibit acceptable to high reliability and are suitable for use in the study. Data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) and Multiple Regression Analysis with SPSS version 27.

Hypotheses Testing

H0₁: There is no significant relationship between parental expectations and the mental health of first year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau metropolis, Zamfara state.

Table 1: Relationship between Parental Expectations and Mental Health

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	r-Cal	P- value	Decision
Parental Expectations	357	49.31	17.210	.043	.417	Not Significant
Mental Health	357	157.83	46.340			

From table 1, it can be seen that relationship between parental expectations and the mental health was positive, Pearson's $r = .043$; $p > .05$. Thus, the hypothesis is retained. This indicates that there is no significant relationship between parental expectations and mental health of first year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau metropolis, Zamfara state because the p-value is greater than the .05 level of significance. This implies that, within this particular group of students, parental expectations may not be a major factor influencing their mental health.

H0₂: There is no significant relationship between test anxiety and the mental health of first year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau metropolis, Zamfara state.

Table 2: Relationship between Test Anxiety and Mental Health

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	r-Cal	P- value	Decision
Test Anxiety	357	48.11	17.394	.121	.069	Not Significant
Mental Health	357	157.83	46.340			

From table 2, it can be seen that relationship between test anxiety and the mental health was positive, Pearson's $r = .121$; $p > .05$. Thus, the hypothesis is retained. This indicates that there is no significant relationship between test anxiety and mental health of first year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau metropolis, Zamfara state because the p-value is greater than the .05 level of significance. This implies that, within this particular group of students, test anxiety may not be a major factor influencing their mental health.

Summary of Findings

The following Summaries were generated from the study:

1. There is no significant relationship between parental expectations and mental health of first year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau metropolis, Zamfara.
2. There is no significant relationship between test anxiety and mental health of first year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau metropolis, Zamfara state.

Discussion of Findings

The findings in hypothesis one revealed that there was no significant relationship between parental expectations and the mental health of first-year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau metropolis, Zamfara State. This outcome suggests that parental expectations, whether high or low, do not directly influence the mental well-being of students within the study area. Despite literature that often links parental pressure with increased psychological distress, the result of this study retained the null hypothesis, indicating that parental expectations are not a significant predictor of students' mental health. To contextualize this result, Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986) provides a relevant theoretical lens. The theory emphasizes self-efficacy and the reciprocal interaction between individual cognition, behavior, and environmental influences. Students with high self-efficacy may interpret parental expectations not as pressure but as motivational support. Thus, even when parents have high academic expectations, students with confidence in their academic abilities are less likely to perceive such expectations as stressful or detrimental to their mental health.

This finding is partially consistent with studies like that of Kaur and Kaur (2020), who argued that the impact of parental expectations on mental health varies depending on how students internalize these expectations. Some students may feel encouraged and supported, while others may perceive the same expectations as overwhelming. In the case of students in Gusau, it is possible that cultural norms surrounding respect for parental authority, combined with strong familial bonds, reduce the psychological impact of such expectations. Similarly, Rokach and Neto

(2017) observed that in collectivist societies, children often align with family goals and values, seeing high expectations as expressions of trust and confidence rather than sources of anxiety. This cultural dimension may help explain the non-significant relationship found in this study. Students may feel emotionally connected to family aspirations and, therefore, do not experience mental distress when expected to meet academic benchmarks.

Contrary to this, several other empirical studies have highlighted the negative implications of excessive parental expectations. For instance, Cheung and Pomerantz (2015) found that overly high expectations correlated with increased anxiety and depressive symptoms among adolescents in competitive academic environments. Similarly, Wang and Heppner (2016) found that unrealistic parental expectations significantly contributed to poor mental health among college students, particularly when combined with a lack of autonomy. However, these contrasting findings may stem from differences in context, sample characteristics, and socio-cultural factors. Students in urban and highly competitive educational settings may be more vulnerable to mental health issues due to performance-related stress, while students in more communal and less academically pressurized environments may not interpret parental expectations in the same way.

The hypothesis two finding of the study revealed that there is no significant relationship between test anxiety and the mental health of first-year undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Gusau metropolis, Zamfara State. This finding stands in contrast to much of the existing literature which often shows a strong association between high levels of test anxiety and poor mental health outcomes such as stress, depression, and low self-esteem. In this study, however, the lack of statistical significance suggests that test anxiety does not play a critical role in determining the mental health status of the students. To understand this outcome, the Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Stress developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) provides a useful framework. According to this theory, it is not the stressor itself (in this case, test anxiety) that causes psychological strain, but rather the individual's appraisal of the stressor and their perceived ability to cope. Thus, if students perceive test anxiety as a normal and manageable part of academic life, they may not experience significant negative mental health outcomes as a result.

This explanation is consistent with studies such as that by Putwain et al. (2016), who argue that students with high levels of academic self-efficacy are better able to regulate their emotional responses to exam-related pressure, and as such, test anxiety does not necessarily lead to poor mental health. Students in Gusau may possess protective psychological traits such as resilience, religious faith, strong family support, or coping strategies that buffer the effects of test-related stress. Further support for this finding can be drawn from Zeidner (2018), who noted that in some educational contexts, mild to moderate levels of test anxiety can be motivating rather than debilitating, helping students to prepare better and perform more efficiently. In such cases, test anxiety might actually function as a form of eustress, which encourages rather than impairs performance or mental stability.

However, this finding contrasts with other widely cited studies, such as that by Owens et al. (2021), who found a significant correlation between test anxiety and increased symptoms of depression, sleep disorders, and decreased academic motivation among university students. Similarly, Segool et al. (2013) emphasized that high levels of test anxiety often co-occur with clinical symptoms of anxiety and depression, particularly among first-year students adjusting to the demands of higher education. The divergence of findings may be attributed to cultural and

contextual differences. Students in Zamfara may have different cultural attitudes toward exams and academic performance, possibly viewing assessments with less fear and more acceptance compared to students in high-pressure academic systems. It is also possible that mental health issues may be underreported or culturally internalized, thereby diluting any visible link between test anxiety and mental well-being in this population.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, conclusions were drawn regarding the relationship between parental expectations, test anxiety and the mental health of first-year students in the study area. Firstly, the study revealed that parental expectations are often perceived by students as a form of pressure, the study found that these expectations do not significantly predict mental health outcomes. Finally, test anxiety was considered to have significantly predict mental health outcomes. Thus, test anxiety emerged as the most influential contributor.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

1. Parents and guardians should balance academic expectations with emotional support, encouragement, and open communication to build students' resilience.
2. Tertiary institutions should strengthen counselling units to provide stress management workshops, peer-support systems, and orientation programmes tailored to first-year students

Implications for Counselling

The findings have the following implications for counselling:

1. Guidance programs should be developed to train students in effective time management and relaxation strategies to mitigate test-related stress.
2. Counsellors should collaborate with parents and educators to create a balanced environment that encourages academic achievement while supporting mental wellness.

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