

MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between mental health literacy and the academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State. Two research questions guided the study and two hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. The correlational survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study comprised 148 third-year students in the Department of Health Education and Health Promotion Education in two public universities in Anambra State in the 2024/2025 academic session. The entire population was used because it was manageable. Two structured instruments were used to collect data for the study. The reliability of the instrument was established using the Cronbach Alpha method. The Student Mental Health Literacy Questionnaire (SMHLQ) yielded coefficient value of 0.88 while the Students Academic Performance Questionnaire (SAPQ) yielded reliability coefficient value of 0.85. Furthermore, data for the study were analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis. Finding of the study revealed that there is a high positive relationship between mental health literacy and the academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State. Furthermore, finding also reported that there is a high positive relationship between mental health literacy and the academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State. Based on these findings, the researchers recommended among others that Administrators of universities should establish partnerships with hospitals, mental health organisations and NGOs to enhance students' access to professional mental health care.

Keywords: Mental health literacy, academic performance, students, universities, public

Introduction

The growing concern over students' mental well-being and its impact on academic performance has become a central issue in higher education discourse. Mental health literacy, which encompasses knowledge, attitudes, and help-seeking abilities related to mental health, is increasingly recognized as a critical factor influencing students' capacity to manage academic demands effectively. In public universities, where students often face intense academic pressure, financial hardship, and limited access to mental health resources, the level of mental health literacy may significantly determine their academic outcomes.

Academic performance refers to the highest level of achievement attained by students in school after undergoing a period of training. Steinberg and Merriam, as cited by Odanga (2018), describe performance as encompassing students' abilities and achievements. It is a multidimensional construct closely linked to cognitive, emotional, social and physical development, reflecting the holistic growth of an individual. Academic performance is not limited to a single moment but unfolds over time, spanning a student's educational journey from primary school to post-secondary education and professional life. At this stage, academic performance determines students' ability to transition to higher education or make meaningful contributions to society (Onyekwelu, 2024a). In recent times, poor academic performance among university students has become a significant concern among educators and researchers. In recent times, poor academic

performance among university students has emerged as a significant concern for educators and researchers in Nigeria. This issue is visible by the rising unemployment rate among graduates, which suggests a disconnect between academic achievement and the skills required in the job market (Edinyang et al., 2015). Many graduates struggle to meet the expectations of employers, often failing to perform tasks that are considered standard for their qualifications. Reports indicate that students frequently encounter difficulties in submitting assignments and meeting project deadlines, further highlighting their challenges in managing academic responsibilities (Ozoemena & Nwobodo, 2024; Aminu, 2019). These issues seem to be related with students' mental health.

Several studies have pointed to the mental health status of students as a contributing factor to these academic struggles. Mental health issues such as anxiety and depression can severely impact students' ability to focus, complete assignments and engage effectively in their studies (Buhari Alatishse, Ajokpaniovo, Ogunmodede, & Bolarinwa, 2024; Aminu, 2019). The pressure to perform academically, combined with inadequate support systems, can exacerbate these conditions, leading to a cycle of poor performance and increased mental health challenges (Buhari et al. 2024). Individuals experiencing mental health issues like depression often tend to blame themselves, feel confused and struggle with a sense of hopelessness. Elsenberg in Ozoemena and Nwobodo (2024) stated that various aspects of depression are closely linked to lower grade point averages, heightened anxiety and poor academic performance.

The mental well-being of university students has increasingly become a critical global public health issue. Research highlights that a range of mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, phobias, suicidal ideation and substance abuse, often emerge between the ages of 15 and 25 (Buhari et al., 2024; Gulliver, Grifffiths, Mackinnon, Batterham, Stanimirovic & Bennett 2019)). Buhari et al. (2024) further stated that approximately 20–50% of university students experience such challenges, which stem from a combination of personal, institutional and societal factors. Empirical evidence suggested that students grappling with mental health difficulties are at a heightened risk of discontinuing their education before completing their programmes (Ozoemena & Nwobodo, 2024). However, those who receive adequate psychological support often achieve better career outcomes, secure higher lifetime earnings and contribute more effectively to economic development at both individual and societal levels (Aluh et al., 2018). The researcher wonders if mental health literacy could have any relationship with students' academic performance.

Mental health literacy refers to individuals' knowledge and understanding of mental health conditions, their symptoms and available support systems (Aluh et al., 2018). Mental health literacy is defined as the knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders that aid in their recognition, management and prevention. Mental health literacy comprises seven key components, including the ability to recognize specific mental health conditions, seek relevant information, identify risk factors and causes, understand self-treatment options, access professional assistance and adopt attitudes that encourage awareness and appropriate help-seeking behaviours (Victor-Aigbodion, 2024). Simply put, mental health literacy refers to knowledge and beliefs about mental health disorders that facilitate their identification, management, or prevention (Al-Yateem et al., 2022). Giosan & Cosmoiu (2024) defined mental health literacy as the ability to recognize, address and prevent mental health disorders. Buhari, Alatishse, Ajokpaniovo, Ogunmodede, & Bolarinwa (2024) averred that health literacy can foster support networks involving parents, friends and other community members, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of

mental health services. Gorczynski, Sims-Schouten & Wilson (2017) reported that inadequate mental health literacy is linked to a higher prevalence of psychological conditions such as depression, anxiety and stress, alongside other negative mental health outcomes. Giosan et al. (2024); Gorczynski et al. (2017) averred that mental health literacy presents a valuable intervention strategy for mitigating the onset of psychological disorders and their related effects, including declines in academic performance. Furthermore, gender could play a role in moderating the influence of mental health literacy on academic performance.

Gender differences play a significant role in mental health literacy among university students, influencing their ability to recognize symptoms and seek appropriate support. Female students generally demonstrate higher mental health literacy levels, making them more likely to identify mental health challenges and access professional assistance, which contributes to better overall management of psychological well-being (Kutcher et al, 2021). In contrast, male students often encounter societal stigma that discourages help-seeking behaviors, leading to untreated mental health concerns that can negatively impact their academic performance. Various risk factors, such as substance abuse, financial difficulties and a family history of mental illness, tend to affect male students more significantly, further hindering their MHL and academic performance (Rickwod et al., (2020). Meanwhile, female students frequently experience higher levels of anxiety and depression related to academic stress but is typically more proactive in utilizing mental health resources. Ngubane (2023) reported that cultural expectations surrounding masculinity may pressure male students to conceal or underreport their struggles, whereas female students often benefit from stronger peer support networks, which can enhance their ability to cope with mental health challenges effectively. However, these assertions have not been empirically proven in Anambra State. This study, therefore, sought to examine the relationship between mental health literacy and the academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State.

Statement of the Problem

The mental health of university students has become a pressing concern globally, with studies indicating a high prevalence of mental health issues among this population. Despite the importance of mental health literacy in recognizing, managing, and preventing mental health issues, many students in the universities lack adequate knowledge and skills to address health needs. The pressures of academic demands, financial difficulties, peer influence and personal struggles contribute to heightened levels of stress, anxiety and depression among students. Instances of mental health challenges among university students are evident in cases of prolonged absenteeism, lack of concentration, emotional instability and, in extreme cases, suicidal tendencies. Many students grapple with academic stress, yet they lack the necessary knowledge and resources to manage their mental well-being effectively. The stigma surrounding mental health issues further discourages students from seeking professional help, leaving them to battle psychological distress alone. The researchers are increasingly worried that if this trend continues, the consequences could be severe, leading to higher dropout rates, diminished career prospects and a decline in overall educational quality. The problem is that many students in public universities lack adequate mental health literacy, which negatively impacts their academic performance and overall well-being. This study sought to investigate the relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to determine the relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State. Specifically, the study ascertained the relationship between:

1. mental health literacy and academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State.
2. mental health literacy and academic performance of male and female students in public universities in Anambra State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State?
2. What is the relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of male and female students in public universities in Anambra State?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of male and female students in public universities in Anambra State.

Methods

This study adopted a correlational survey design. The population of the study comprised 148 third-year students in the Department of Health Education and Health Promotion in two public universities in Anambra State in the 2024/2025 academic session. The entire population was used because it was manageable. Two structured instruments were used to collect data for the study. The first instrument is titled “Students Mental Health Literacy Questionnaire (SMHLQ)”. The instrument contained 18 items on students mental health literacy. The Students’ Academic Performance Questionnaire (SAPQ) contained 15 items on students’ academic performance. Both instruments are structured on 4-point rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Agree (SA). To ensure validity, the instrument underwent face and content validation by three experts. One from the Department Educational Management and Policy and two from Health Promotion and Public Health Education in Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Additionally, a pilot study was conducted with 20 third-year students in health education programmes in universities in Enugu State. The reliability of the instrument was established using the Cronbach Alpha method. The SMHLQ yielded coefficient value of 0.88 while the SAPQ yielded reliability co-efficient value of 0.85. The questionnaire was administered directly by the researchers with the assistance of three lecturers. The instruments were distributed and retrieved on the spot and in cases where immediate retrieval was not possible, appointments were scheduled for collection. This process lasted for two weeks. Out of the 148 questionnaires administered, 123 were successfully retrieved in good condition, resulting in an 83% response rate. The 123 valid responses were used for data analysis. Furthermore, data for the study were analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis. The decision rule for interpreting correlation coefficients was on a scale from very low (0.00–0.20) to very high (0.80 and above), with positive values indicating a direct relationship and negative values showing

an inverse relationship. Hypotheses were assessed based on p-values: if $p \leq 0.05$, the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating a significant relationship; if $p > 0.05$, it was retained, suggesting no significant correlation.

Results

Research Question One: What is the relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State?

Table 1: Pearson's Correlation between Mental Health Literacy and Academic Performance of Students in Public Universities in Anambra State

Variables	N	R	Remarks
Mental Health Literacy Students Academic Performance	123	0.77	High Positive relationship

The result of the Pearson's correlation (r) presented in Table 1 shows that the correlation between mental health literacy and academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State was 0.77. This value indicates a high positive correlation. This suggests that as students' mental health literacy increases, their academic performance will also increase at a high rate. Thus, there is a high positive relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State.

Research Question Two: What is the relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of male and female students in public universities in Anambra State?

Table 2: Pearson's Correlation between Mental Health Literacy and Academic Performance of Male and Female Students in Public Universities in Anambra State

Variables	N	r	Remarks
Male			
Mental Health Literacy Students Academic Performance	48	0.69	High positive relationship
Female			
Mental Health Literacy Students Academic Performance	75	0.74	Very high positive relationship

Table 2 presents the result of the Pearson's correlation between mental health literacy and academic performance of male and female students in public universities in Anambra State. The Pearson's correlation (r) obtained for the male sample was 0.69, which indicates a high positive relationship. For females, the r was 0.74. This value shows a very high positive relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of male and female students. When compared to the value obtained for the male students, the relationship between the two variables was stronger among the female students.

Hypothesis One

There is no significant relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State.

Table 3: Test of Significance between Mental Health Literacy and Academic Performance of Students in Public Universities in Anambra State

Variables	N	R	p	Remark
Mental Health Literacy Students Academic Performance	123	0.77	0.00	Significant

The results in Table 3 show that there was a significant positive relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State, $r = 0.77$, $p < 0.05$. Since the p-value was less than 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis Two

There is no significant relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of male and female students in public universities in Anambra State.

Table 4: Test of Significance between Mental Health Literacy and Academic Performance of Male and Female Students in Public Universities in Anambra State

Variables	N	R	p	Remarks
Male				
Mental Health Literacy Students Academic Performance	48	0.69	0.000	Significant
Female				
Mental Health Literacy Students Academic Performance	75	0.74	0.000	Significant

As shown in Table 4, there was a significant positive relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of male and female students in public universities in Anambra State, $r = 0.69$, $p < 0.05$ (for males) and it was $r = 0.74$, $p < 0.05$ (for female). Since the p-values for both groups were less than 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Discussions

The findings of this study revealed a strong positive relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance among students in public universities in Anambra State. This suggests that students with higher mental health literacy are more likely to perform well academically, while those with limited knowledge of mental health issues may struggle with their studies. This finding is in agreement with Kutcher et al. (2016) who reported that students with higher mental health literacy demonstrated better problem-solving skills, emotional regulation and academic engagement, all of which contributed to improved academic outcomes. Similarly, Aluh et al.(2019) found tht poor mental health awareness among students was associated with lower academic achievement, increased absenteeism and reduced motivation. Finding of the study further revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of students in public universities in Anambra State. This finding is in line with Gorczynski

et al. (2017) who revealed that mental health literacy plays a crucial role in reducing stigma and encouraging students to utilize mental health support services, which in turn positively affects their academic performance.

The finding of the study revealed a high positive relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance among male and female students in public universities in Anambra State. This significant relationship suggests that students with higher mental health literacy tend to perform better academically. This finding is in agreement with Gulliver et al. (2019) and Kutcher et al. (2021) who found that students with greater mental health awareness were more likely to manage stress effectively, maintain concentration and engage in academic activities with higher motivation. Similarly, Al-Yateem et al. (2022) reported that students with a strong understanding of mental health resources demonstrated better classroom participation and lower dropout rates. Furthermore, finding of the study revealed a significant relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance of male and female students in public universities in Anambra State. While female students have been found to exhibit higher levels of mental health literacy and proactive help-seeking behaviour, the positive relationship between mental health literacy and academic performance among male students suggests that when provided with adequate knowledge and support, both genders can benefit equally in terms of academic achievement. This is in agreement with Rickwood et al. (2020) who reported that mental health literacy has significant relationship with the academic performance of male and female students in universities in Anambra State

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers conclude that mental health literacy has significant relationship with the academic performance of students in universities in Anambra State. The finding of the study revealed that mental health literacy has significant relationship with academic performance of male and female students in universities in Anambra State. It is therefore necessary that measures are put in place to improve the level of mental health literacy among students in universities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study:

1. Administrators of universities should establish partnerships with hospitals, mental health organizations and NGOs to enhance students' access to professional mental health care. This can be achieved by signing memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with external mental health institutions to provide periodic counselling, screenings and therapy sessions for students at subsidized rates.
2. Administrators of universities should launch continuous mental health awareness campaigns to educate students on the importance of mental well-being and reduce stigma associated with seeking help. This can be achieved by 173ecognizin seminars, workshops and public lectures in collaboration with mental health professionals. Furthermore, peer support groups can be formed where trained student volunteers provide guidance and emotional support to their peers.
3. Administrators of universities in collaboration with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) should ensure students have access to mental health support by establishing well-equipped counselling centres staffed with trained mental health professionals.

4. Administrators of universities should embed mental health literacy programmes into general studies courses or as a standalone elective. This can be achieved by developing structured mental health education modules, training lecturers on mental health topics and incorporating assessments to ensure students acquire essential knowledge on recognizing symptoms, coping strategies and seeking professional help.

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