

2026



NIGERIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Online ISSN: 2682-6151 Print
ISSN: 2682-6143

Volume 9, Issue 1, 2026

Editor-in-Chief

Prof. S.O. Adebayo

Managing Editor

Prof. B.E. Nwankwo

Published by

Nigerian Association of Social Psychologists
www.nigerianjasp.com

Social Support and Coping Mechanisms as Predictors of Depressive Symptoms among Undergraduate Students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State

Ikemefuna Henry Eweni
***Chidiebere Emmanuel Udensi**
Kingsley Onyekachukwu Anene
Daniel Chukwuebuka Ajaegbu
Chukwuemeka Christopher Chinwuko

Department of Psychology
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

*Correspondence: ce.udensi@unizik.edu.ng;

***ORCID: 0009000982607802**

Abstract

Psychological theories of depression and cognitive theories of depression assumed that social support and coping mechanism may explain depressive symptoms. In the present study, the assumption was tested among 200 undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. Ages of the participants were 18-25 years ($M = 30.5$, $SD = 4.65$). Three scales were used to collect data for the study: Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), Multi-dimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) and Brief Coping Orientation Problems Experienced Inventory (B-COPE). The study adopted correlational design and the hypotheses was tested with multiple regression analysis. The results indicated that social support significantly predicted depressive symptoms while coping mechanism did not. The outcome of the study suggested for a framework for understanding the role of social support and coping mechanism on depressive symptoms. It was recommended that social support and coping mechanism should be encouraged and included in the University's programs as part of general studies, routine seminars, conferences and orientation of new students.

Keywords: *Depressive symptoms, social support, coping mechanism and undergraduate students.*

Introduction

Social support is basically needed in every area of human life and existence. In other words, without social support systems, then coping mechanisms can only be nothing but a mirage when it comes to the issue of handling depressive symptoms especially among students who are daily faced with the challenges of meeting up with deadlines in submission of assignments and/or class works, regular attendance to lectures, writing semester examinations, etc., which may actually be overwhelming, frustrating and demoralizing. In recent years, depressive symptoms among college students have displayed a concerning upward curved path, which has accumulated significant scholarly and societal concern. A nationwide meta-analysis revealed that 28.4% of Chinese university students display clinically relevant depressive manifestations (Gao et al., 2020).

Online ISSN: 2682-6151

The term “social support” refers to the perception and actuality that one is cared for, has assistance available from other people, and most famously, that one is part of a supportive social network. Social support can be ascertained as the perception that one has assistance available, the real received assistance, or the extent to which an individual is plunged into a social network. Support can come from various sources, such as family, friends, pets, neighbours, coworkers, organizations, etc. Social support, however, encompasses emotional, informational, and instrumental assistance from family, friends, or communities and has also been shown to mitigate depressive symptoms by enhancing resilience and reducing stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). For instance, undergraduates who face unique stressors like academic pressure and social transitions, have shown increased reliance on peer support networks and online interventions, highlighting the need for tailored approaches within specific populations (Ibrahim et al., 2022).

Coping mechanism can be defined as a habit, thought process, or physical strategy that people use to manage stress, emotional pain, or difficult life events. Coping mechanisms also viewed as the methods individuals use to stabilize their emotions when they experience stress. It is a term used distinctively for conscious and voluntary mobilization of acts, different from ‘defense mechanisms’ that are subconscious or unconscious adaptive responses, both of which aim to reduce or tolerate stress (Venner, 1988). Similarly, Algorani and Gupta (2023) define coping mechanism as the intentional thoughts and behaviours mobilized specifically to manage both internal and external stressful situations.

Social support and coping mechanisms are two necessary psychological constructs that have been studied extensively in the field of psychology. These constructs have also been linked to a variety of positive outcomes, such as depression, depressive symptoms, mental health and overall well-being. In other words, the gap that this work intends to fill is in the area of depressive symptoms students face in their studies; ranging from their area of reading coverage in preparation for their exams, credit load of courses they are expected to pass in a semester and other crowded activities militating against their academic pursuit and programs in school, as the current researchers intends to find out whether social support and coping mechanisms are actual predictors for all these, which may not have reflected in the findings of previous researchers in the same area.

Theoretical Framework

Two of the three traditional theories of depression: Psychological theories of depression and Cognitive theories of depression formed the theoretical framework that guided this study hypothesis. Psychological theories of depression states that depression is triggered by an actual or symbolic loss as people unconsciously turn their repressed anger and hostility toward the lost object inwardly onto themselves, leading to severe guilt and self-hatred (Freud, 1917). Depression can be explained thus, using this theory, individuals who receive timely social support may not become actual or symbolic victims of the anger and hostility which could have easily been taken care of from its original source as culminated in the inward loss of an object, which eventually results in feelings of severe guilt and self-hatred within them. Therefore, it can be deduced that social support can assist to play a crucial role in getting rid of individuals’ depressive symptoms by impacting their thought patterns, coping strategies and perception of the world around them.

Online ISSN: 2682-6151

Conversely, cognitive theories of depression (Beck, 1963) hold that depression is caused and maintained by distorted, negative ways of thinking about oneself, the world, and the future. These negative thoughts, often automatic and ingrained, create a cycle of distorted perceptions and emotions that perpetuate depressive symptoms. Empirically, cross-sectional studies supported the above theories by revealing that there is overall provision of evidence on the positive relationship between social support and depressive symptoms.

Moreover, Chukwuorji and Nwoke's (2022) study of 400 Nigerian undergraduates and revealed that social support significantly moderated the relationship between stress and depression, suggesting that students who lack adequate social support are most likely going to be stressed out and overwhelmed with the challenges of school life which may consequently lead to burnout and eventually give rise to the development of depressive symptoms within them.

Furthermore, Compas et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of coping and depression among adolescents and young adults, analyzing over 200 studies and found that avoidant coping strategies, such as denial, withdrawal, and substance use, were strongly associated with elevated depressive symptoms, while problem-focused strategies such as planning and seeking instrumental support were protective.

Similarly, Alshehri and Alotaibi (2023) conducted a study among Saudi Arabian undergraduates exploring the mediating role of coping strategies between academic stress and depression. Using regression analysis on data from 600 students, they found that coping fully mediated the relationship between stress and depressive symptoms.

Therefore, this work tested the following hypotheses:

- i. Social support will significantly predict depressive symptoms among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
- ii. Coping mechanisms will significantly predict depressive symptoms among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Method

Participants

Two hundred (200) participants were purposively selected from one hundred (100) and two hundred (200) level students of Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka for the study. The participants comprised 110 females and 90 males (with demographics of intelligent, average and dull). Age ranged from eighteen to twenty-five (18-25) years ($M = 30.5$, $SD = 4.65$). Only regular students were sampled for the study.

Instruments

Three instruments were used for the study: Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) was developed by Beck (1961). The internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) for the scale typically ranges from 0.73 to 0.92, with a mean of 0.86 across various studies. For the BDI-IA revision

Online ISSN: 2682-6151

(1978), the Cronbach alpha is approximately 0.85. For psychiatric populations, the alpha is typically around 0.86, and for non-psychiatric populations, it is around 0.81; Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was developed by Zimet et al. (1988) to assess subjective social support and also to measure perceived availability and adequacy of support from three distinct sources: family, friends, and significant others (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The MSPSS consists of 12 items, each representing one of the three subscales: support from family (4 items), support from friend (4 items), and support from significant others (4 items). The instrument has demonstrated excellent psychometric properties across a wide variety of populations and cultures as it was reported to have high internal reliability with Cronbach alpha coefficient ranging from 0.85 to 0.91 across the three subscales and the total scale; Brief Coping Orientation Problems Experienced Inventory (B-COPE) was developed by Carver (1997) to assess the various coping strategies individuals use when confronted with stress. The Brief COPE inventory consists of 28 items, each corresponding to one of 14 subscales, with two items per subscale. The instrument has consistently demonstrated strong psychometric properties and was reported to have acceptable internal consistencies for most subscales with Cronbach alpha values ranging from 0.50 to 0.90.

Procedure

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Thereafter, informed consent and assent were obtained from the school authorities. The researchers conveniently selected the participants before the administration of the measuring instrument (questionnaires). The researchers were present to address the questions raised by the participants before they completed the items on the questionnaires. The 200 participants completed their questionnaires accurately, which were used for the final analysis. The three instruments: Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) and Brief Coping Orientation Problems Experienced Inventory (B-COPE) were administered to the consented participants at their lecture halls and were retrieved after about 30 minutes.

Design and Statistics

The study used survey research method. Its design was a correlational design, which allowed the use of multiple linear regression statistics for data analysis.

Results**Table 1****Descriptive table of value (Mean and Standard Deviation) of Studied Variables**

Variables Std. Deviation	N	Mean
Social Support 26.638	180	113.8056
Depressive Symptoms 9.3368	180	36.883
Coping Mechanism 6.7573	180	27.878

The findings of Table 1 above showed that social support had a mean of 113.8056 and a standard deviation of 26.638, depressive symptoms had a mean of 36.883 and a standard deviation of 9.3368, whereas coping mechanism had a mean of 27.878 and a standard deviation of 6.7573.

Table 2

This table shows the standardized beta coefficient result for independent prediction of Social support and Coping mechanism on Depressive symptoms:

Predictor Variables	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Df ¹ (df ²)	F	β	Sig
Model 1 Depressive Symptoms	.573	.568	1(177)	118.775		
a Social Support					.677*	.000
b Coping Mechanism					.102	.179

This table showed that when enter method was applied to Depressive Symptoms for Independent prediction on Social Support, the Adjusted R² was .568.

The ANOVA summary (F-ratio) showed that Adjusted R² value was significant at F (2, 177) =118.775, P<.05. Specifically, the unstandardized beta value for Social Support (β=.677*, P<.05) and Coping Mechanism was not significant at (β=.102, P>.05).

Summary of Findings

1. Social support predicted depressive symptoms at P<.05
2. Coping mechanism did not predict depressive symptoms P>.05

Discussion

Fundamentally, the main objective of this study was to investigate whether social support and coping mechanisms will significantly predict depressive symptoms among undergraduates. The findings revealed that social support significantly predicted depressive symptoms, while coping mechanisms did not predict depressive symptoms.

Social support significantly predicted depressive symptoms among undergraduates showed that when social support is increasing, depressive symptoms will be decreasing and vice versa. This finding supported the findings of Chukwuorji and Nwoke (2022) which holds that social support significantly moderated the relationship between stress and depression, suggesting that students who lack adequate social support are most likely going to be stressed out and overwhelmed with the challenges of school life which may consequently lead to burnout and eventually give rise to the development of depressive symptoms within them.

Furthermore, the study showed that coping mechanism did not significantly predict depressive symptoms among undergraduates which indicates that when coping mechanism is decreasing, depressive symptoms will be increasing and vice versa. The finding is also in a relationship with the finding of Compas et al. (2021) who examined the meta-analysis of coping and depression among adolescents and young adults and found that avoidant coping strategies, such as denial, withdrawal, and substance use, were strongly associated with elevated depressive symptoms, while problem-focused strategies such as planning and seeking instrumental support were protective. This finding also showed that coping mechanism may not contribute much on depressive symptoms among undergraduates. In other words, social support serves as a booster of students' innate psychological needs to handle depressive symptoms within themselves, whereas, coping mechanism in this context, can be challenged with students' erroneous beliefs that they have the abilities to cope with certain challenges that they are faced with all by themselves, which may fail them because they lack the adequate social support to do so. Therefore, social support is a good predictor of depressive symptoms, while coping mechanism is a predictor of depressive symptoms in a reverse direction.

Implications of the study

The implications of the study revealed that social support beta weight is highest in this study. This equally shows that social support contributes more to depressive symptoms than coping mechanism. The results revealed that social support should be encouraged to handle depressive symptoms among students. The findings of the present study will provide some important information for students on some of the likely factors that will reduce their depressive symptoms such as: regular physical exercise, behavioural activation and consistent sleep routines. Again, the findings highlighted that social support should be encouraged among students as this will increase their level of motivation, engagement and well-being, thereby, leading to reduction in depressive symptoms. This will also help in developing and channeling students' innate psychological needs in the right direction where they will become more useful and encourage them to crave for some skills that will harmonize the level of social support they get especially from significant others, giving rise to peace building among undergraduates and ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Online ISSN: 2682-6151

Limitations of the study

One of the limitations of the study is that as a survey research, participants may not have responded according to how they felt when administering the questionnaires. Moreover, data collected were only on few undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (NAU) who were willing to participate in the study, who were not the total representative of the general population of Nnamdi Azikiwe University undergraduates Awka campus. Lack of finance and time equally restricted the researchers only to undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka campus.

Suggestions for further study

The study should be viewed as a stepping stone to further research, and should not be restricted to Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka (NAU) alone. Efforts to examine social support and coping mechanism among married couples and military personnel may be of great value to our understanding of social support and coping mechanism as predictors of depressive symptoms.

Recommendations

The researchers recommended that social support and coping mechanism as it affects depressive symptoms should be included in the university's program as part of general studies, routine seminars, conferences, and orientations of new students.

The researchers also recommended that social support and coping mechanism should be encouraged both in higher institutions of learning and among ethnic groups for peaceful co-existence of different ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The present study examined whether social support and coping mechanism will significantly predict depressive symptoms among undergraduates. Evidence from the findings revealed that social support significantly predicted depressive symptoms while coping mechanism did not.

References

- Algorani, E. B. and Gupta, V. (2023). *Coping mechanisms*. StatPearls Publishers.
- Alshehri, A. H., & Alotaibi, N. S. (2023). Prospects and obstacles in using Artificial Intelligence in Saudi Arabi higher education institutions- The potential of AI-based learning outcomes. *Sustainability*, 15(13), 107-123.
- Beck, A. T. (1961). An inventory for measuring depression. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 4, 561-571.

Online ISSN: 2682-6151

Beck, A. T. (1963). *Depression, clinical, experimental, and theoretical aspects*. Harper & Row Publishers.

Carver, C. S. (1997). You want to measure coping but your protocol's too long: Consider the Brief COPE. *International Journal of Behavioural Medicine*, 4(1), 92-100.

Chukwuorji, J. C., & Nwoke, M. B. (2022). Stress, coping, and psychological health of university students in Nigeria. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 27(5), 393-397.

Cohen, S., & Willis, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98(2), 310-357.

Compas, B. E., Jaser, S. S., Bettis, A. H., Watson, K. H., Gruhn, M. A., Dunbar, J. P., Williams, E., & Thigpen, J. C. (2021). Coping, emotion regulation, and psychopathology in childhood and adolescence: A meta-analysis and narrative review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 143(9), 939-991.

Freud, S. (1917). *Mourning and melancholia*.

Gao, J. L., Zheng, P. P., Jia, Y. N., Chen, H., Mao, Y. M., Chen, S., Wang, D. H., Fu, H. J., &

Dai, J. M. (2020). Mental health problems and social media exposure during COVID-19 outbreak. *PLOS ONE*.

Ibrahim, A. K., Kelly, S. J., Adams, C. E., & Glazebrook, C. (2022). A systematic review of studies of depression prevalence in university students. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 150, 103- 112.

Venner, M. (1988). Adjustment, coping and defense mechanisms—deciding factors in the therapeutic process. *Zeitschrift fur die Gesamte Innere Medizin und Ihre Grenzgebiete*, 43(2), 40-43.

Zimet, G. D., Dahlem, N. W., Zimet, S. G., & Farley, G. K. (1988). The multidimensional scale of perceived social support. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 52(1), 30-41.