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Gender Differences In Perceived School Support, Self-Esteem, Academic Fatigue, And Engagement Among Nigerian Undergraduates

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Abstract

Keywords:

academic
engagement;
academic fatigue;
gender; school
support; self-esteem

Various studies have found differences in perceived social support, self-esteem, academic fatigue, and academic engagement between men and women. Yet, at this current research location, preliminary data shows the contrary. This study examined undergraduates' perceived school support, self-esteem, academic fatigue, and engagement in two public Nigerian universities. The cross-sectional quantitative research using the non-experimental design was employed in the study, implementing self-concordance and demands-resources theories. The population of the study was undergraduate students undertaking degree courses at two public universities in Southwest Nigeria, and participants were selected using purposive and simple random sampling techniques. An instrument tagged "School Support and Undergraduates' Self-esteem, Academic Engagement, and Fatigue Questionnaire" was used for data collection. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and a t-test. The study's findings have shown that undergraduates' gender influences their perceived school support and academic fatigue, with higher scores seen in male students. However, there was no significant difference in self-esteem and academic engagement between male and female undergraduates. The study recommends that efforts be concentrated on ensuring continued gender equality and gender-balanced dynamics within the school context. Implications of the study and future research suggestions are proffered.

Kata kunci:	Abstrak
keterlibatan akademis; kelelahan akademis; jenis kelamin; dukungan sekolah; harga diri	<p>Berbagai penelitian menunjukkan bahwa terdapat perbedaan persepsi dukungan sosial, harga diri, kelelahan akademik, dan keterlibatan akademik berdasarkan gender. Namun, di lokasi penelitian saat ini, data prapenelitian menunjukkan hal sebaliknya. Studi ini menguji persepsi dukungan sekolah, harga diri, kelelahan akademik, dan keterlibatan mahasiswa di dua universitas negeri di Nigeria. Penelitian kuantitatif <i>cross-sectional</i> dengan desain noneksperimental diterapkan dalam penelitian menggunakan lensa teori <i>self-concordance</i> dan <i>demands-resources</i>. Populasi penelitian ini adalah mahasiswa sarjana di dua universitas negeri di Nigeria Barat Daya dan partisipan dipilih menggunakan teknik <i>purposive</i> dan simple random <i>sampling</i>. Instrumen yang bernama dukungan sekolah dan harga diri mahasiswa, keterlibatan akademik, dan kuesioner kelelahan digunakan untuk pengumpulan data. Data dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif (hitungan frekuensi dan persentase), dan uji-t. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa jenis kelamin mahasiswa memengaruhi persepsi mereka terhadap dukungan sekolah dan kelelahan akademik, dengan skor lebih tinggi pada mahasiswa laki-laki. Namun, tidak ada perbedaan yang signifikan dalam harga diri dan keterlibatan akademik mahasiswa laki-laki dan perempuan. Studi ini merekomendasikan agar upaya dikonsentrasikan untuk memastikan kesetaraan gender dan dinamika gender yang seimbang dalam konteks sekolah. Peneliti juga mendeskripsikan implikasi penelitian dan saran penelitian di masa depan.</p>

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INTRODUCTION

Background Of The Study

Research on gender differences within the context of education is growing (Lesperance, Hofer, Retelsdorf, & Holzberger, 2022; Osiesi et al., 2023; Osiesi et al., 2024; Sanni et al., 2023), with gender-related issues, e.g., biases, discrepancies, prejudice, or fear of prejudice, remaining prevalent in schools and academia (Osiesi et al., 2022; Sanni et al., 2023; Seroussi et al., 2023). A wide range of highly relevant group functioning factors, including behavioral patterns, peer interaction, and emotional expression, are influenced by gender. These factors impact academic engagement, classroom

interaction, collaborative learning efficacy and experience, and test results (Ali, Nasreen, & Wajdi, 2019; Bayeck, Hristova, Jablokow, & Bonafini, 2018; Gallus & Bhatia, 2020; Jiang, Li, Zhen, & Han, 2017; Osiesi et al., 2023). Some studies indicated that male students are more academically inclined than their female counterparts in the classroom, whether during lessons or discussions (Lee & McCabe, 2021), while others claimed that females are more engaged in academics (Curşeu, Chappin, & Jansen, 2018), necessitating further inquiry into the subject. Therefore, this study, set at two Nigerian state universities, aimed to examine gender differences in undergraduates' perceived school support, self-esteem, academic fatigue, and engagement.

The Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria (FUOYE) and the Ekiti State University (EKSU) were the universities sampled in this current study. Both are government-run universities (the former is owned by the federal government and the latter by the state government). FUOYE, as a newly established university, has two campuses with ten faculties and over 20,000 students (undergraduates and postgraduates). EKSU has about 25,000 students (undergraduates and postgraduates) across 11 faculties. Both universities are located in the Southwest region of Nigeria. This study was initiated by the understanding that learners at higher education institutions are currently a vulnerable group dealing with psychological issues (as well as institutional issues), considering the educational and socioeconomic crises that are plaguing many nations, including Nigeria, particularly in the wake of COVID-19 (Makelele, 2024).

School support is pivotal to students' well-being and learning outcomes. Students in supportive learning environments can obtain resources, motivation, and opportunities to attain the desired level of achievement. Studies have indicated that students' self-esteem, academic engagement, and fatigue can be considerably improved by their perception of support from peers, teachers, and the institution (Hoferichter, Kulakow, & Hufenbach, 2021; Tennant et al., 2015; Wang, Yang, Chen, & Zheng, 2024; Zhang, Yin, & Ren, 2024). According to Liu, Zhou, & Guo (2023), higher education students mostly derive their perceived social support from their teachers and peers. For example, Jia & Cheng's (2024) research found a positive correlation between students' classroom engagement and school support. Consequently, this can potentially enhance academic performance and lessen students' fatigue levels.

Fatigue is a state of helplessness caused by prolonged stress, resulting in a decline of mental, emotional, and physical health (Novianty, Said, & Nambiar, 2023). In recent decades, fatigue, also known as burnout, has garnered the attention of scientists and the public and has been associated with workplace and schooling conditions (Herrmann, Koeppen, & Kessels, 2019; Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Pietikäinen, & Jokela, 2008; Schulte-Markwort, 2015). Students' physical, psychological, and academic conditions are impacted by the protracted stress arising from overlapping or overstretching their academic obligations, which are generally linked to fatigue. According to Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Pietikäinen, & Jokela (2008) and Vasalampi, Salmela-Aro, & Nurmi (2009), emotional fatigue, a decreased interest in learning (cynicism), and a sense of inadequacy as a student are thought to be signs of academic or school fatigue. According to research, students experience extreme academic or school-related fatigue (Salmela-Aro et al., 2016), which is associated with emotional drain, a sense of alienation, and being overwhelmed by the demands of their coursework.

Academic fatigue, which has three components: emotional tiredness, cynicism, and academic efficacy, indicates a decline in students' commitment (Cabras et al., 2023; Fiorilli et al., 2017). Most often, academic fatigue is said to result from high expectations and stress (Lin & Huang, 2014), with symptoms like exhaustion, an inability to continue studying, disinterest, and feelings of inadequacy and failure as a learner (Schaufeli et al., 2002). This construct has a negative relationship with student well-being as measured by their psychological health, quality of life, and academic success (Paloş, Maricuţoiu, & Costea, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2018). Fatigued students suffer from biological system abnormalities, which might impair their capacity to interact socially and trigger symptoms of emotional anguish, apathy, despair, impatience, boredom, and low self-esteem.

Self-esteem is vital to quality of life and is one of the powerful aspects determining confidence in oneself. A person's feelings, thoughts, and perspectives about themselves, indicating that they think they are capable, successful, and deserving, are all part of self-evaluation (de Dominicis & Molinario, 2022). Students' psychosocial behaviors are considered a dynamic part of conation that indicates their mental health condition, and self-esteem plays a role in this process (Makelele, 2024). Robust coping mechanisms, initiatives, dignity, self-confidence, resilience in adversity, and positive self-perception

have all been linked to high self-esteem (Li et al., 2023). Students with high self-esteem are confident that they can succeed in their education. In contrast, negatively oriented students are generally pessimistic and believe that any assigned task will be a significant burden. This can ultimately lead to academic fatigue and decreased academic engagement.

Rautanen, Soini, Pietarinen, & Pyhäntö (2022) reiterated that academic engagement has been linked to improved academic success, social well-being, and emotional well-being among students. Students' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components play a part in school or academic engagement (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Earl, Taylor, Meijen, & Passfield, 2023). Higher levels of engagement have been linked to later engagement in the classroom because engaged students put in more effort in their studies and maintain fortitude in the face of adversities (Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014). This encourages commitment to the given task and continued positive behavior (Engels, Pakarinen, Lerkkanen, & Verschueren, 2019; Havik & Westergård, 2019; Yang et al., 2021). Gender has also been indicated to influence students' academic engagement and other characteristics (Rautanen, Soini, Pietarinen, & Pyhäntö, 2022).

Limited studies have investigated the role of gender in students' academic engagement, self-esteem, academic fatigue, and perceived support in different contexts from this current study, and with inconsistent findings (Havik & Westergård, 2019; Gülşen & Şahin, 2023; Rautanen, Soini, Pietarinen, & Pyhäntö, 2022).

School Support

Students' ability to successfully develop throughout their lives is greatly influenced by their school experience and the available school support (Cartland, Ruch-Ross, & Henry, 2003). There is conflicting evidence on gender influence in school support (Markus, Rieser, & Schwab, 2022). School support comprises a range of initiatives and strategies designed to improve students' education experiences and outcomes. These could include comprehensive child assistance, academic support networks, specialized help for homework and emotion management, cooperative support groups, and adaptable learning settings. School support aims to provide children with the environment and tools they need to succeed academically and socially. It is a comprehensive concept that addresses the different requirements of learners (Flook,

2019). According to Liu, Mei, Tian, & Huebner (2016), teachers and fellow students are seen as the key players in one's academic life, particularly in terms of interpersonal interactions, and they serve as the primary social support providers at school. Since students spend a large portion of their time in school, interactions with instructors and peers, which are components of school support, are crucial to their personal development (Markus, Rieser, & Schwab, 2022).

Self-Esteem

According to de Dominicis & Molinario (2022), self-esteem has been a major theme in social psychology literature since the late eighteenth century. Research on self-esteem is necessary because the variable is connected to various aspects of human existence. It is difficult to define self-esteem since it involves several facets and depths of analysis linked to the context and its temporal stability (de Dominicis & Molinario, 2022). It is regarded as an evaluative psychological process that shows how much people accept who they are and how competent they think they are (Brown, 2014). The concept of self-esteem can be interpreted in terms of values, e.g., self-enhancement and willingness to modify values; Lönnqvist et al. (2009), feelings or affective dimensions, e.g., pride and shame; Brown & Marshall (2001); motivational factors, e.g., the desire to preserve and enhance feelings of self-worth; Crocker & Park (2004); cognitive factors, e.g., evaluative components of self; Greenwald et al. (2002), and behavioral factors, e.g., being more assertive or independent, or exercising for fitness rather than improving one's body image; Mruk (2013).

Academic Fatigue

Undergraduates frequently experience fatigue, impacting their general well-being, mental health, and academic performance (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Research highlights the critical role of school support in reducing undergraduate students' fatigue (Guse, Harvey, Leong, & Kennedy, 2022). Burnout is a common symptom of fatigue that includes mental and physical depletion. Other studies shed light on students' individual experiences and demonstrate how school support, which gives practical and emotional support, directly reduces fatigue (Larcombe et al., 2013). While Mohammadi, Heidari, Eftekhari, & Johari's (2023) study revealed no indication of a relationship between academic fatigue and academic support, Yin, Toom, & Parpala's (2022) study confirmed the negative relationship between school support and academic progress.

Academic Engagement

Students in tertiary institutions, including universities, will be more likely to experience academic fatigue. This is because they are expected to perform several mandatory tasks, course lectures, and tests simultaneously. Engagement is essential to learning quality in students, particularly concerning academic success, perseverance, and cognitive and personal growth (Gülşen & Sahin, 2023; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Osiesi et al., 2024). Researchers have described academic engagement as the excitement to participate in school activities, e.g., taking courses, completing assignments, and listening to directions in class (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016; Osiesi et al., 2024). There are two important components affecting student engagement, according to Kuh (2009), i.e., the effort and time spent studying or participating in other activities that result in academic outcomes, and how the university manages resources and sets up the campus environment to encourage student engagement.

An engaged student is more likely to demonstrate perseverance and academic success (Osiesi et al., 2024). Numerous favorable outcomes, e.g., increased perseverance, deeper learning, positive academic and learning outcomes, a decreased dropout rate, and a sense of belonging, have been connected to academic engagement in the literature (Gülşen & Sahin, 2023; Kiema-Junes, Hintsanen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2020). Academically engaged students are more likely to persevere in their studies and eventually graduate, according to research by Pascarella & Terenzini (2005), who also found a positive relationship between engagement and persistence in higher education. Carter et al. (2012), Masika & Jones (2016), Northey, Bucic, Chylinski, & Govind (2015), and Schaufeli et al. (2019) also found that academic success is more likely to occur in students who are highly involved in their education.

Gender And Perceived School Support

Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray (2008) examined how adolescents see their parents, instructors, classmates, and close friends as sources of social support and how this support is correlated with behavioral indices that measure student adjustment. When it comes to how girls perceive social assistance received at school, there are gender differences. Liu, Mei, Tian, & Huebner (2016) investigated the association between students' subjective well-being and school-related social support, examining the

variables according to age and gender. Results show that learners' experiences with school support vary by gender. Markus, Rieser, & Schwab (2022) studied how gender affects social interactions and academic well-being in elementary school. Results show that learners' perceptions of school support are influenced by gender, with a preference for girls. Bru, Virtanen, Kjetilstad, & Niemiec (2019) examined gender variations in the correlation strength between student engagement and teachers' perceived support, finding that the correlation is more significant among female students. Similar findings have been reported by Dismus & Kuja (2023).

Gender And Self-Esteem

Herrmann, Koeppen, & Kessels (2019) conducted a study on fatigue in relation to their self-esteem and schooling. Findings indicate that self-esteem scores were higher among female students. Schöne, Tandler, & Stiensmeier-Pelster (2015) stated that women have higher levels of self-esteem than men. Makelele's (2024) study on students' self-esteem showed that female students had higher self-esteem than their male counterparts. Girls were also found to exhibit higher self-esteem in a study conducted by Osiesi & Fajobi (2019). Agam, Tamir, & Golan (2015) explored the impact of gender roles on adolescents' self-esteem and body image. Findings revealed a significant gender difference, with male adolescents showing higher scores. Such findings were corroborated by Becerra, Arias, Cha, & Becerra (2021).

Gender And Fatigue

Herrmann, Koeppen, & Kessels (2019) found that poorer academic achievement is associated with higher levels of school fatigue, with higher levels seen among female students. Salmela-Aro's (2017) findings also affirm that female students have higher levels of fatigue than their male counterparts. Fiorilli et al. (2022) examined the role of gender on students' fatigue levels. Likewise, they found that girls exhibit higher levels of fatigue than boys. Additional research on the gender differences in academic fatigue confirms that in high school, girls scored higher in fatigue than boys (Walburg, 2014; Herrmann, Koeppen, & Kessels, 2019). However, another study found that male students had higher fatigue levels (Bikar, Marziyeh, Pourghaz, 2018), while others showed no gender-related variations in fatigue levels (Robins, Roberts, & Sarris, 2015; Martos et al., 2018; Zabuska, Ginsborg, & Wasley, 2018).

Gender And Academic Engagement

Gülşen & Şahin (2023) studied gender differences in Turkish undergraduates' engagement, personal growth initiative, and academic self-efficacy. The study's conclusions showed that these variables are not linked with gender differences among sampled undergraduates. Studies by Havik & Westergård (2019), Rautanen, Soini, Pietarinen, & Pyhältö (2022), Vinter, Aus, & Arro (2021), and Salmela-Aro et al. (2016) did show that female students have a higher academic engagement level than male students. However, the study by Osiesi et al. (2024) affirmed that boys have higher academic engagement than girls.

Research Gap

Various studies have shown that there are differences in perceived social support, self-esteem, academic fatigue, and academic engagement between male and female students. However, at the targeted research location, preliminary data showed no gender differences in variables under study, with little or no research focusing on Nigerian undergraduate pre-service teachers. This backdrop prompted the present study to investigate gender differences in undergraduates' perceived school support, self-esteem, academic fatigue, and engagement in Nigerian school settings.

Novelty Of The Study

Gender perspective has been applied in various studies examining school support, e.g., study of school support in early adolescents (Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2008), students' subjective well-being, school support, and gender (Liu, Mei, Tian, & Huebner, 2016), academic well-being, gender, and school support among primary school students (Markus, Rieser, & Schwab, 2022), student engagement, gender and school support (Bru, Virtanen, Kjetilstad, & Niemiec, 2019), cognitive engagement, school support and gender in secondary education (Dismus & Kuja, 2023), academic fatigue, self-esteem and gender (Herrmann, Koeppen, & Kessels, 2019), gender and academic fatigue levels (Martos et al., 2018; Salmela-Aro, 2017; Walburg, 2014; Zabuska, Ginsborg, & Wasley, 2018), academic engagement, gender and academic self-efficacy (Gülşen & Şahin, 2023; Havik & Westergård, 2019; Osiesi et al., 2024; Rautanen, Soini, Pietarinen, & Pyhältö, 2022; Vinter, Aus, & Arro, 2021). This current study offered novelty by examining gender differences in perceived school support, self-esteem, academic fatigue, and engagement

among pre-service teachers in two Nigerian public universities, which, based on a literature review conducted before the study, was limited.

Rationale Of The Study

Given that Nigeria is a patriarchal society, gender-based perspectives in examining psychology-related factors are paramount. In the schooling context, these factors play a vital role in driving academic success. In this study context, stakeholders, including university management and administrators, would need empirical evidence on the best way to boost the self-esteem and academic engagement of students and reduce or eliminate their academic fatigue through responsive support mechanisms. This current study would proffer this evidence.

Statement Of The Problem

Gender perspectives are essential psychological factors that can direct behavior. Given that school support varies across universities and campuses, mitigating academic fatigue as well as encouraging self-esteem and academic engagement are paramount. Yet, especially in the context of this study, students were found to experience reduced zeal to learn, poor engagement in their studies, and lower instances of social interaction, with little to no effort made to address this trend. Against this backdrop, this present study examined perceived school support, self-esteem, academic fatigue, and engagement among Nigerian undergraduates.

Theoretical Framework

Several theories have been proposed to explain personal fatigue, and some have also been applied to explain such a phenomenon within the academic context. Examples are the self-concordance theory (Vasalampi, Salmela-Aro, & Nurmi, 2009) and the demands-resources theory (Salmela-Aro, 2017). These theories focus more on the degree of fatigue that people experience and how it is influenced by their academic engagement, regardless of gender, and can be caused by various factors, including personal characteristics, needs, and the demands placed on them by their environment. Gender socialization has led to differences in self-esteem and views about one's abilities and motivations (Gülşen & Sahin, 2023). Research indicates that women are more likely than men to develop a positive self-perception and a desire to improve themselves (Robitschek et al., 2012). This makes females more likely to take proactive measures to meet academic objectives and increase academic engagement (Gülşen & Sahin, 2023).

Accordingly, it has been established that academic fatigue is influenced by gender, personal traits, and the actual or perceived availability of support from the educational system (Salmela-Aro, 2017).

Hypotheses Of The Study

The researchers proposed several hypotheses in this study: 1) H1: There is a significant gender difference in perceived school support among undergraduates. 2) H2: There is a significant gender difference in perceived self-esteem among undergraduates. 3) H3: There is a significant gender difference in perceived academic fatigue among undergraduates. 4) H4: There is a significant gender difference in perceived academic engagement among undergraduates.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted cross-sectional quantitative research approach with non-experimental design. This design was deemed appropriate as it entailed the collection and analysis of data from a population at a single point in time (Wang & Cheng, 2020).

Population, Sampling Technique, And Research Sample

The population of this study was 949 undergraduates (fourth-year pre-service teachers at the Faculty of Education) at two public universities in Southwest Nigeria (the Federal University Oye-Ekiti, and the Ekiti State University) in the 2023–2024 academic year. The purposive sampling technique was used to select two out of the three public universities in the state, as these universities were considered to offer better school support and services. The judgmental sampling technique was employed to select 314 undergraduate students (238 women, 76 men) from the various departments of target population. The selection was done using a Google Form, which was distributed to only fourth-year students via Telegram and WhatsApp groups. The researchers used Slovin's formula ($\text{Sample Size} = N / (1 + N \cdot e^2)$) to ensure adequate sample size. Respondents voluntarily participated in the research after being informed of the study's goals. During the second semester of the 2023–2024 academic session, an online survey was administered to them. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 21 at the time of data collection.

Instruments Of Measurement

An instrument named "School Support and Undergraduates' Self-esteem, Academic Engagement, and Fatigue Questionnaire" was used for data collection. It comprised five sections: A, B, C, D, and E. These sections captured the respondents' gender, ages, self-esteem, academic engagement, and fatigue levels. The 10-item Rosenberg (1965) and Rosenberg (1979) self-esteem scale, which measures how one values themselves as a human being, was employed in this study. On this scale, there are the same number of positive and negative questions. For example, "I feel like I don't have much to be proud of" is a negative question, whereas "Overall, I am satisfied with myself" is a positive one. The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). The measure was pilot-tested and found reliable in this context ($\alpha=0.78$), with an item discrimination index of 0.62, and has been extensively examined in several past research, demonstrating strong psychometric qualities.

The Academic Engagement Questionnaire (AEQ), developed by Osiesi et al. (2024), was used in the present study as well. The questionnaire examines students' participation in social and intellectual activities. The scale was assessed using a 5-point Likert scale to determine the frequencies of the activities, ranging from very frequently (5) to never (1). The reliability of the scale was also found to be satisfactory ($\alpha=0.81$), with an item discrimination index of 0.70.

The study also employed the School Support Questionnaire (SSQ), modified by Reyes et al. (2022). The three dimensions of teacher, peer, and family support are used in the questionnaire to quantify school support. A 5-point Likert scale was employed, with responses ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). The reliability of the scale was satisfactory ($\alpha=0.88$), with an item discrimination index of 0.72.

Students' academic weariness was assessed using the Academic Fatigue Scale (AFS), modified from Chalder et al. (1993). It consisted of seven items designed to gauge undergraduate students' levels of fatigue. The instrument's response was based on a 5-point Likert scale, with responses varying from strongly agree (5) and strongly disagree (1). Based on reliability analysis, the scale was found to be reliable ($\alpha=0.89$). The scale's item discrimination index was 0.75.

Data Analysis Technique

Data obtained in the study were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentages), and t-test. We used the t-test statistical tool in testing the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance based on the assumption that unequal variance met. Similarly, the effect size was examined using Cohen's *d* on the premises that the effect could be small ($d < 0.2$), moderate ($0.2 \leq d < 0.5$), or large ($d \geq 0.5$) (Cohen, 2013; Navarro, 2018). The data were analyzed using the SPSS 29 statistical package.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents Demographics

Table 1 shows the demographics of the students who responded to the survey. Most of the respondents (75.80%) were female undergraduates. The sampled universities were FUOYE (232) and EKSU (82). Participants were 19 to 21 years old at the time of data collection.

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	76	24.20
	Female	238	75.80
University	Federal University Oye-Ekiti (FUOYE)	232	73.89
	Ekiti State University (EKSU)	82	26.11
Age	19	174	55.41
	20	108	34.39
	21	32	10.19

Gender Difference In Perceived School Support Among Undergraduates

Table 2 compares undergraduates' school support between male students ($M=36.05$, $SD=6.82$) and their female counterparts ($M=34.24$, $SD=7.93$). The table also indicates that when undergraduates' perceptions of school support were compared on a gender basis, a significant gender difference was present ($t(312)=1.79$; $p<0.05$). This means that the first hypothesis of the study was accepted. The effect size was found to be small ($d=0.236$).

Table 2.

Gender-Based Comparison of Undergraduates' School Support

Gender	N	M	SD	df	t	P	Cohen's d
Male	76	36.05	6.82	312	1.79	.037	.236
Female	238	34.24	7.93				

*Significant at $p < .05$ *Gender Difference In Perceived Self-Esteem Among Undergraduates*

Table 3 compares self-esteem between male undergraduates ($M=12.54$, $SD=2.98$) and their female counterparts ($M=11.92$, $SD=3.07$). The analysis showed insignificant difference in self-esteem based on the student's gender ($t(312)=1.56$; $p=0.061$). This means that the second hypothesis of the study was rejected. The effect size was found to be small ($d=0.205$).

Table 3.

Gender-Based Comparison of Undergraduates' Self-Esteem

Gender	N	M	SD	df	t	p	Cohen's d
Male	76	12.54	2.98	312	1.56	.061	.205
Female	238	11.92	3.07				

*Significant at $p < .05$ *Gender Difference In Perceived Academic Fatigue Among Undergraduates*

Table 4 shows the academic fatigue level of male ($M=11.74$, $SD=2.57$) and female undergraduates ($M=11.12$, $SD=2.76$). The analysis showed a significant difference in academic fatigue based on the student's gender ($t(312)=1.73$; $p<0.05$). This means that the third hypothesis of the study was accepted. The effect size was found to be small ($d=0.228$).

Table 4.

Gender-Based Comparison of Undergraduates' Academic Fatigue

Gender	N	M	SD	df	T	p	Cohen's d
Male	76	11.74	2.57	312	1.73	.042	.228
Female	238	11.12	2.76				

*Significant at $p < .05$

Gender Difference In Perceived Academic Engagement Among Undergraduates

Table 5 shows academic engagement scores of male ($M=24.16$, $SD=4.51$) and female undergraduates ($M=22.77$, $SD=6.94$). The analysis showed an insignificant difference in academic engagement based on the student's gender ($t(312)=1.64$; $p=.051$). This means that the fourth hypothesis of the study was rejected. The effect size was found to be small ($d=0.216$).

Table 5.

Gender-Based Comparison of Undergraduates' Academic Engagement

Gender	N	M	SD	df	t	p	Cohen's d
Male	76	24.16	4.51	312	1.64	.051	.216
Female	238	22.77	6.94				

*Significant at $p<.05$

Discussion About Gender Difference In Perceived School Support Among Undergraduates

The study's finding indicates a significant gender difference in perceived school support among undergraduates, with male students showing higher scores. Male undergraduates have higher-quality relationships, socialize better with school support mechanisms (Figueroa, Dabetić, Yuste, & Saeidzadeh, 2023), and strive better in a traditional male-dominated setting as in this study's context (Azeez et al., 2024; Olonade et al., 2021).

In the study's context, male undergraduates are more likely to fend for themselves and maneuver their way out of difficult situations within the school setting. In many cases, male students in the Nigerian universities are in charge of power dynamics, especially in the running of student government-related unions in the faculties and universities at large (Peter & Ebimobowei, 2015), deciding what support the university management should provide at one time or another. This finding supports the findings of Alsup & Moots (2021), who revealed that male students have higher perceptions of school support. The finding, however, contrasts those of Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray (2008), Liu, Mei, Tian, & Huebner (2016), Markus, Rieser, & Schwab (2022), Bru, Virtanen, Kjetilstad, & Niemiec (2019), and Dismus & Kuja (2023) that showed higher perceived school support in female students. These studies were carried out in places where gender equality is more prevalent.

Discussion About Gender Difference In Perceived Academic Fatigue Among Undergraduates

The finding shows a significant gender difference in perceived academic fatigue among undergraduates, also in favor of men. Nigeria, where traditional masculinity remains prevalent, men are expected to source for livelihood and support their families. This cause them be less involved or interested in academic-related endeavors or activities (Ekpenyong, Daniel, & Aribo, 2013). As such, male undergraduates, do pay more attention to other financial-related tasks outside their academic demands, and by involving themselves in these tasks, they are usually stressed, developing academic fatigued, and less engaged in the studies (Osiesi et al., 2024).

This is in line with the findings of Bikar, Marziyeh, Pourghaz (2018). However, the finding contradicts those of Fiorilli et al. (2022), Herrmann, Koeppen, & Kessels (2019), Salmela-Aro (2017), and Walburg (2014) that affirm that female students exhibit higher levels of fatigue than their male peers, while other studies found no gender-related variations in fatigue levels (Robins, Roberts, & Sarris, 2015; Martos et al., 2018; Zabuska, Ginsborg, & Wasley, 2018).

Discussion About Gender Difference In Perceived Self-Esteem And Academic Engagement Among Undergraduates

The present study also found no significant gender difference in undergraduates' perceived self-esteem and academic engagement. Humanised and feminist perspectives do defend equality between the male and female gender. An individual's esteem of self may unlikely be the direct result of their sex, but rather instigated by nurture (environmental factors). The same could be ascribed to students' academic engagement, which in this study context, may have been driven by factors related to school, home, and society (Osiesi et al., 2024). Regarding academic engagement, female students are equally as engaged as their male peers.

Gülşen & Şahin (2023) found no difference of academic engagement in male and female students. This finding contradicts the findings of Havik & Westergård (2019), Vinter, Aus, & Arro (2021), Rautanen, Soini, Pietarinen, & Pyhältö (2022), Herrmann, Koeppen, & Kessels (2019), Schöne, Tandler, & Stiensmeier-Pelster (2015), Makelele (2024), Osiesi & Fajobi (2019), Agam, Tamir, & Golan (2015) and Salmela-Aro et al. (2016) that indicate higher engagement levels in women; while Osiesi et al. (2024) and Becerra,

Arias, Cha, & Becerra (2021) found that male students are more engaged academically. The reasons for this difference could be attributed to the sample and context in question. Previous studies were conducted at different locations, some were done in non-academic contexts, while others focused on primary and secondary school learners. Also, most previous studies were conducted in countries with prevalent gender equality. These are different from the context of present study, Nigerian public universities, where gender stereotypes remain prevalent.

Implications Of The Study

Findings of the present study suggest the necessity for a deeper inquiry into gender perspectives in education research. Since gender influences students' perceived school support and academic fatigue, university management needs to provide and sustain school support for their pupils. Irrespective of students' gender, school support should be made free and easily accessible to students. Measures aimed at mitigating academic fatigue among students should be the top agenda of university management and support services committees. Educational psychologists and counselors should reinforce their efforts to mitigate academic fatigue phenomenon among students. University staff should be equipped on the best measures for fostering gender equality among students through professional development programs. Policymakers and curriculum experts should also factor gender perspective into their policy frameworks.

Limitations Of The Study

Due to its quantitative nature, this study might not fully reflect the subjective and contextual experiences of the target population, given that it does not represent a sample that can be considered representative. Self-reporting bias and the purposeful selection of just two public universities from among the many universities in Nigeria could have influenced the study's findings and their generalizability.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

This study provides further evidence on the role of gender in educational contexts. It found that gender influences perceived school support and academic fatigue among undergraduates, with higher significance seen in male students. It also revealed that gender does not significantly affect undergraduate self-esteem and academic fatigue.

Gender continues to play a vital role in students' perceptions and education-related outcomes, as such, efforts should be concentrated on ensuring continued gender equality and gender-balanced dynamics.

Suggestions

To gain deeper insights, we recommend that future studies adopt other research designs, such as mixed or qualitative approaches, which will allow an in-depth examination on the research variables. It is also recommended that this study's topic be investigated in broader contexts with a larger sample size. Finally, further empirical studies should look into the role of gender when it comes to access and utilization of school support.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Stella Oluwakemi Olatunbosun: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project Administration; Writing Original Draft.

Jace Pillay: Conceptualization; Funding Acquisition; Resources; Validation; Visualization; Writing Original Draft; Writing, Review & Editing.

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