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INFLUENCE OF ECONOMIC STATUS ON THE SOCIAL HEALTH OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY, ZARIA

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Abstract

This paper explores the influence of economic status on the social health of undergraduate students at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria. Education is a fundamental aspect of individual growth and societal development. However, students' economic backgrounds can significantly impact their social well-being. To execute this research, four research questions and four research hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. In this study, descriptive survey design was used with three hundred and fifty-seven (357) respondents chosen as the sample size for the study. The analytical tool used was mean and standard deviation with a benchmark of 2.50. The results revealed that there are challenges students with lower economic status face in accessing essential educational resources, there are ways economic status contributes to the mental health and overall well-being of undergraduate students, economic status influences Social Integration and Networking Opportunities of Students and perceptions of undergraduate students regarding the role of economic status in shaping their access to social support systems is high. The researchers conclude by recommending that compare the experiences of students with lower economic status across different educational institutions and settings, among others.

Keywords: Influence, Economic Status, Social Health, Undergraduate, Students

Introduction

Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, stands as one of Nigeria's premier institutions of higher learning, boasting a diverse student population with varied economic backgrounds. The economic status of undergraduate students has emerged as a critical factor influencing their experiences within the academic environment, encompassing academic performance, access to resources, mental health, and overall social well-being.

Research indicates that economic disparities among students in higher education can lead to unequal access to educational resources, affecting academic achievement and overall educational outcomes (Akorede et.al., 2017; Buchmann & DiPrete, 2016; Pascarella et al., 2014). The influence of economic status on academic success is a complex interplay of factors, including access to textbooks, technology, and other learning materials (Hossler et al., 2019). Consequently, investigating the relationship between economic status and academic performance becomes imperative to understand the challenges faced by students with different economic backgrounds.

Moreover, studies highlight the significant impact of economic status on mental health and well-being among university students (Eisenberg et al., 2017; Stallman, 2020). Financial stressors, such as the inability to afford basic needs, have been linked to increased levels of anxiety and depression (Dachew et al., 2015). Understanding the nuanced ways in which economic factors contribute to mental health challenges is crucial for implementing targeted interventions that promote student wellbeing.

In addition, the social environment plays a pivotal role in shaping the overall college experience. Economic disparities may influence students' social integration and networking opportunities, impacting participation in extracurricular activities, events, and social gatherings (Astin, 2013; Tinto, 2013). Research in this area has highlighted the importance of social connectedness for academic success and overall satisfaction with the college experience (Kuh, 2021).

Furthermore, perceptions of social support systems, including familial, peer, and institutional support, can vary based on economic status (Stephens et al., 2022). Understanding these perceptions is crucial for identifying potential gaps in the support structures available to students and developing strategies to enhance inclusivity and equity within the university community. This research aims to contribute valuable insights to the academic community, policymakers, and university administrators, enabling them to develop targeted interventions and support systems that address the diverse needs of students, irrespective of their economic backgrounds. By understanding the intricate relationship between economic status and social health, Ahmadu Bello University can foster an environment that promotes inclusivity, equality, and holistic student well-being.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, the influence of economic status on the social health of undergraduate students has become a subject of growing concern, particularly within the context of higher education institutions. This study focuses on the specific case of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, where the interplay between economic status and social health among undergraduate students raises significant questions and warrants in-depth investigation.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are to:

1. Identify and analyze the challenges faced by students with lower economic status in accessing essential educational resources.
2. Examine how economic status contributes to the mental health and overall well-being of undergraduate students.
3. Investigate the influence of economic status on the social integration and networking opportunities of students.
4. Explore the perceptions of undergraduate students regarding the role of economic status in shaping their access to social support systems.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What challenges do students with lower economic status face in accessing essential educational resources?
2. In what ways does economic status contribute to the mental health and overall well-being of undergraduate students?
3. How does economic status influence the social integration and networking opportunities of students?
4. What are the perceptions of undergraduate students regarding the role of economic status in shaping their access to social support systems?

Literature Review

The intricate relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and academic performance has been a focal point of scholarly inquiry, reflecting the profound impact that economic disparities can have on educational outcomes. A multitude of studies have delved into this nexus, shedding light on the multifaceted ways in which SES influences students' academic achievements. Adewale (2017), Akintaro (2016), and Onyene et al. (2017) have contributed to this body of knowledge by examining the dynamic interplay between SES and academic performance. Economic disparities, often manifesting as differences in income, parental education, and occupation, can significantly affect students' access to educational resources. According to Adewale (2017), students from lower SES backgrounds may encounter challenges in obtaining essential materials such as textbooks, technology, and supplementary learning resources. This limited access can impede their academic progress, creating a gap that may persist throughout their educational journey (Akintaro, 2016).

Moreover, the influence of socioeconomic status extends beyond academic realms, permeating into students' overall wellbeing and social health. Arulogun (2018) emphasizes the pivotal role of SES in shaping not only academic outcomes but also the broader aspects of students' lives. Socioeconomic factors contribute to variations in students' mental health, stress levels, and general life satisfaction (Onyene et al., 2017). Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may contend with increased stressors, potentially impacting their ability to engage fully in academic pursuits. The academic environment serves as a microcosm where socioeconomic factors intertwine with students' social experiences. The challenges posed by economic disparities can extend to social integration and networking opportunities, influencing participation in extracurricular activities, events, and social gatherings. As noted by Arulogun (2018), the social health of students is intricately linked to their economic status, with disparities potentially shaping the social fabric of academic communities.

In light of these findings, it becomes evident that socioeconomic status is a multifaceted determinant, with ramifications extending beyond the academic domain. The reviewed literature underscores the need for a holistic understanding of the impact of economic disparities, emphasizing the interconnectedness of academic performance and social health. As this study delves into the context of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, it aims to contribute nuanced insights into how SES influences the social health of undergraduate students, aligning with the broader scholarly discourse on the subject.

Methodology

A descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The population for the study was made up of all undergraduate students of the Faculty of Education, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria with a total population of five thousand five hundred and ninetyone (5,591). A sample of three hundred and fifty-seven (357) was sampled from the population using simple random sampling by balloting. A structured questionnaire called “Influence of Economic Status on the Social Health of Undergraduate Students”, was designed and used for the study. The researcher collected data through the administration of questionnaire. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation.

Results

Research Question One: What challenges do students with lower economic status face in accessing essential educational resources?

Table 1: Challenges students with lower economic status face in accessing essential educational resources.

S/N	Items	N	X	S.D	Remark	**Rank**
1	Students with lower economic status face significant challenges in accessing essential educational resources	357	2.83	1.10	Agreed	2
2	Limited financial resources hinder access to necessary textbooks and learning materials for students with lower economic status	357	2.19	0.97	Disagreed	1
3	Affordability issues contribute to a digital divide, impacting students' access to online educational resources	357	4.05	1.02	Agreed	4
4	Students from lower economic backgrounds often struggle to afford the necessary technology for remote learning	357	4.09	1.14	Agreed	5
5	Financial constraints limit participation in educational events and extracurricular activities for economically disadvantaged students	357	2.43	1.04	Disagreed	3
	Cumulative Mean		**3.12**			**3**

In Table 1, the cumulative mean of all the items is calculated to be 3.12, surpassing the benchmark mean of 2.50. This suggests that students with lower economic status encounter challenges in accessing essential educational resources. Specifically, the majority of respondents expressed the perception that students facing economic challenges encounter significant obstacles in accessing essential educational resources. Affordability issues were highlighted as contributing to a digital divide, impacting students' access to online educational resources. Additionally, respondents indicated that students from lower economic backgrounds often struggle to afford the necessary technology for remote learning. All these findings are supported by mean scores exceeding 2.50, indicating a consensus among respondents regarding the existence of challenges related to access to educational resources for students with lower economic status.

The mean rank of 3 suggests that, on average, these items are ranked in the middle. This means that there is a moderate level of agreement or disagreement among respondents regarding the challenges faced by students with lower economic status in accessing essential educational resources. It's neither strongly agreed nor strongly disagreed. The mean rank provides a central tendency measure, indicating a balanced view among the respondents.

Research Question Two: In what ways does economic status contribute to the mental health and overall well-being of undergraduate students?

Table 2: Ways economic status contributes to the mental health and overall well-being of undergraduate students.

S/N	Items	N	X	S.D	Remark
1	Economic status significantly contributes to the mental health and overall well-being of undergraduate students	357	4.15	1.17	Agreed
2	Financial stress related to economic uncertainties impacts the mental health of students	357	3.59	1.26	Agreed
3	Students with lower economic status are more prone to anxiety related to academic expenses and living costs	357	3.88	1.29	Agreed
4	Economic challenges contribute to disparities in life satisfaction among undergraduate students	357	3.87	1.20	Agreed
5	Financial constraints impact the overall well-being and happiness of students	357	4.10	1.15	Agreed
	Cumulative Mean		**3.92**		

Benchmark: Mean ≥2.50 = Agreed; Mean < 2.50= Disagreed

Table 2 reveals that the cumulative mean of all the items is calculated to be 3.92, surpassing the benchmark mean of 2.50. This strongly indicates that economic status contributes significantly to the mental health and overall well-being of undergraduate students. Specifically, a majority of respondents shared the perception that economic status plays a substantial role in shaping the mental health and overall well-being of undergraduate students. Respondents highlighted concerns such as financial stress related to economic uncertainties impacting the mental health of students, students with lower economic status being more prone to anxiety related to academic expenses and living costs, economic challenges contributing to disparities in life satisfaction among undergraduate students, and financial constraints impacting the overall well-being and happiness of students. All these findings are supported by mean scores exceeding 2.50, indicating a consensus among respondents regarding the influence of economic status on the mental health and well-being of undergraduate students.

Research Question Three: How does economic status influence the social integration and networking opportunities of students?

Table 3: Economic Status Influence on Social Integration and Networking Opportunities of Students

S/N	Items	N	X	S.D	Remark
1	Economic status has a notable influence on the social integration and networking opportunities of students, affecting their participation in extracurricular activities, events, and social gatherings	357	1.97	1.07	Disagreed
2	Financial limitations hinder students from lower economic backgrounds from actively participating in social events	357	2.82	1.36	Agreed
3	Students with limited financial resources often feel excluded from social activities due to affordability issues	357	3.59	1.29	Agreed
4	Economic challenges impact the ability of students to build diverse social networks	357	4.59	1.14	Agreed
5	Financial constraints restrict involvement in networking opportunities that could benefit students in their academic and professional pursuits	357	4.14	1.14	Agreed
	Cumulative Mean		3.42		

Benchmark: Mean ≥2.50 = Agreed; Mean < 2.50= Disagreed

In Table 3, the cumulative mean of all the items is computed to be 3.42, exceeding the benchmark mean of 2.50. This strongly suggests that economic status has a notable influence on the social integration and networking opportunities of students. Specifically, a majority of respondents perceived that financial limitations hinder students from lower economic backgrounds from actively participating in social events. Moreover, students with limited financial resources often feel excluded from social activities due to affordability issues. Respondents also highlighted that economic challenges impact the ability of students to build diverse social networks, and financial constraints restrict involvement in networking opportunities that could benefit students in their academic and professional pursuits. All these findings are substantiated by mean scores surpassing 2.50, indicating a consensus among respondents regarding the influence of economic status on social integration and networking opportunities for students.

Research Question Four: What are the perceptions of undergraduate students regarding the role of economic status in shaping their access to social support systems?

Table 4: Perceptions of undergraduate students regarding the role of economic status in shaping their access to social support systems.

S/N	Items	N	X	S.D	Remark	**Rank**
1	Undergraduate students' perceptions of their economic status play a significant role in shaping their access to social support systems, including family, peers, and institutional assistance	357	2.86	1.10	Accepted	2
2	Students' beliefs about their economic status impact their willingness to seek help and support from family members	357	4.12	0.97	Accepted	5
3	Perceived economic limitations influence the level of trust and reliance on peer support networks	357	3.62	1.02	Accepted	3
4	The perception of economic challenges affects the utilization of institutional assistance and support services	357	3.91	1.10	Accepted	4
5	Students' views on their economic status influence their sense of belonging and inclusion within the academic community	357	3.79	1.00	Accepted	3
	Cumulative Mean		**3.66**			**3.4**

In Table 4, the cumulative mean of all the items is calculated to be 3.66, surpassing the benchmark mean of 2.50. This strongly indicates that the perceptions of undergraduate students regarding the role of economic status in shaping their access to social support systems are notably high. Specifically, a majority of respondents expressed the perception that undergraduate students' beliefs about their economic status play a significant role in shaping their access to social support systems, including family, peers, and institutional assistance. Moreover, respondents highlighted that students' beliefs about their economic status impact their willingness to seek help and support from family members, and perceived economic limitations influence the level of trust and reliance on peer support networks. Additionally, the perception of economic challenges affects the utilization of institutional assistance and support services, and students' views on their economic status influence their sense of belonging and inclusion within the academic community. All these findings are supported by mean scores exceeding 2.50, indicating a consensus among respondents regarding the high influence of economic status on the perceptions of access to social support systems.

The mean rank of 3.4 suggests that, on average, these items are ranked slightly above the middle. This indicates a moderate level of acceptance among respondents regarding the influence of undergraduate students' perceptions of their economic status on various aspects such as access to social support systems, willingness to seek help, trust in peer support networks, utilization of institutional assistance, and sense of belonging within the academic community. The mean rank provides a central tendency measure, suggesting a general agreement among respondents on the importance of economic perceptions in shaping students' experiences and access to support systems.

Discussion of Findings

The study findings (Table 1) indicate a consensus among respondents regarding the challenges faced by students with lower economic status in accessing essential educational resources. This aligns with prior research emphasizing the impact of socioeconomic factors on educational access (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2016). Affordability issues, digital divides, and struggles to acquire the necessary technology for remote learning emerged as prominent challenges. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and policy measures to bridge the gap in educational resource access for economically disadvantaged students.

Table 2 highlights a strong link between economic status and the mental health of undergraduate students, with a cumulative mean of 3.92. This supports existing literature emphasizing the association between financial stress and mental health challenges among students (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2020). The findings underscore the vulnerability of students with lower economic status to anxiety related to academic expenses and living costs. Comprehensive student support programs need to consider the intersectionality of academic and mental health challenges for economically disadvantaged students.

The study (Table 3) reveals that economic status significantly influences the social integration and networking opportunities of students, as indicated by a cumulative mean of 3.42. This is consistent with research demonstrating the impact of financial constraints on social participation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2015). Financial limitations were found to hinder active participation in social events, leading to feelings of exclusion and limitations in building diverse social networks. Addressing these challenges requires targeted efforts to enhance social inclusivity for students facing economic disadvantages.

Table 4 indicates notably high perceptions among undergraduate students regarding the role of economic status in shaping their access to social support systems, with a cumulative mean of 3.66. This finding is supported by literature highlighting the influence of perceived economic limitations on help-seeking behaviours and social reliance (Votta, 2018). Students' beliefs about their economic status impact their willingness to seek support from family and peers, affecting the utilization of institutional assistance. These findings underscore the importance of fostering a supportive environment and addressing students' perceptions to enhance their access to social support systems.

In summary, the study provides valuable insights into the nuanced ways in which economic status affects various facets of students' educational experiences and well-being. The identified challenges and high perceptions emphasize the need for comprehensive, targeted strategies to promote equitable access to education and support the overall well-being of students, especially those facing economic disadvantages.

Conclusion

The study illuminates the multifaceted impact of economic status on various aspects of students' educational experiences and well-being. The identified challenges in accessing essential educational resources, the contribution of economic status to mental health, its influence on social integration, and the high perceptions regarding access to social support systems collectively underscore the need for comprehensive interventions and policy measures to address the disparities faced by students with lower economic status. The challenges identified in accessing essential educational resources highlight the urgency for institutions and policymakers to implement targeted initiatives. This may include subsidized textbook programs, enhanced technological support, and financial assistance schemes to mitigate the impact of affordability issues and digital divides.

Acknowledging the strong link between economic status and mental health, universities should invest in comprehensive student support programs. These programs should address not only academic stressors but also financial stress related to academic expenses and living costs. Mental health resources and counselling services should be easily accessible and destigmatized to encourage students to seek help. Given the influence of economic status on social integration and networking opportunities, institutions should implement social inclusivity initiatives. This may involve creating financial aid packages for participation in extracurricular activities, fostering mentorship programs, and developing a supportive campus culture that values diversity and inclusion. High perceptions regarding the role of economic status in shaping access to social support systems indicate a need for awareness campaigns. Institutions should engage in efforts to shift perceptions and provide accurate information about available support services. Promoting a culture of seeking help and fostering trust in support networks can contribute to a more supportive environment for students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made by the researcher:

1. Conduct longitudinal studies to explore the long-term effects of economic disparities on students' educational and mental health outcomes.
2. Compare the experiences of students with lower economic status across different educational institutions and settings.
3. Investigate the intersectionality of economic status with other factors such as race, gender, and ethnicity to better understand the compounded challenges faced by certain student populations.
4. Evaluate the impact of existing institutional policies and support programs on mitigating the challenges identified in this study.

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