



Perceived Influence of Cohabitation on Psychological Well-Being among Students of Public Tertiary Institutions in Benue State, Nigeria: Implications for Counseling

Dominica Shanpepe Nyityo¹, Prof. Jean Ada Ako², Prof. Phoebe O. James³ & Prof. G.W. Akuto⁴

¹Federal College of Education Odugbo Benue State Nigeria, shanpepenyityo77@gmail.com ORCID 0009-0009-0092-4207

²Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University Makurdi Benue State, Nigeria, akoadaj@gmail.com

³Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University Makurdi Benue State, Nigeria ojonomaphoebe@gmail.com

⁴Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University Makurdi Benue State, Nigeria, graceyesu2016@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examined the perceived influence of cohabitation on the psychological well-being of students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State, Nigeria. The increasing visibility of cohabitation among students has generated concern regarding its possible psychological implications, particularly in relation to anxiety, depression, and aggression. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted for the study. The population comprised 74,335 students, from which a sample of 398 respondents was selected using the Taro Yamane formula and a multi-stage sampling technique. Data were collected using the Psychosocial Influence of Cohabitation Questionnaire (PICQ), which was validated by experts and yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.93 using Cronbach's alpha. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and chi-square statistics at a 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that students perceive cohabitation as being motivated by factors such as companionship, emotional attachment, desire for intimacy, and financial considerations. The results further showed that cohabitation is perceived to have a significant influence on anxiety, depression, and aggression among students, as all null hypotheses were rejected. Specifically, respondents indicated that cohabitation is associated with experiences such as persistent worry, sleep disturbances, sadness, low self-esteem, irritability, and aggressive behaviours. The study concludes that, although cohabitation is perceived to meet certain emotional and practical needs, it is also associated with psychological concerns that may affect students' well-being and academic engagement. It is therefore recommended that tertiary institutions strengthen mental health services, implement regular psychological screening, and provide targeted counselling interventions to support students' emotional well-being.

Keywords: Cohabitation; Psychological well-being; Anxiety; Depression; Aggression; Counselling

INTRODUCTION

Cohabitation, often described as a consensual union or de facto marital arrangement, refers to a situation in which unmarried individuals live together in an intimate relationship without formal or legal recognition (Onoyase, 2020; Unachukwu & Iloakasia, 2018). In recent years, this practice has become increasingly common among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. This shift reflects not only changing social attitudes but also the everyday realities students face, including financial constraints, the search for emotional support, and the desire for independence. Within the Nigerian context—where cultural values and Christian moral teachings have traditionally discouraged premarital co-residence—the growing normalization of cohabitation represents a significant transformation in students' lifestyles. For many undergraduates, cohabitation is perceived as both practical and emotionally meaningful. It offers companionship, intimacy, and, in some cases, a sense of stability in what can be a demanding phase of life. It may also serve as a coping strategy in response to rising accommodation costs and economic pressures.

However, beyond these perceived benefits lies a more complex psychological reality. Living in close, often unstructured relationships requires a level of emotional maturity, communication skills, and stability that many students are still developing. As a result, cohabiting relationships may become sources of stress rather than support. Students may struggle with unmet expectations, relational conflicts,

emotional dependency, and the challenge of balancing academic responsibilities with intimate relationship demands. Existing studies suggest that cohabitation is associated with psychological outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and aggression (Aborisade, 2021; Kasim & Falola, 2017; Mouradian, 2011). Anxiety may manifest through persistent worry, emotional tension, and uncertainty about the future of the relationship. Depression may emerge in the form of sadness, low self-esteem, and feelings of hopelessness when emotional expectations are not met. Aggressive behaviours may also arise as students attempt to cope with unresolved conflicts and emotional strain within cohabiting arrangements. These psychological experiences are often interconnected and may significantly affect students' well-being and academic engagement.

Despite these concerns, much of the existing literature has focused on adult populations or on the broader social and moral implications of cohabitation, with limited attention to the specific psychological experiences of undergraduate students in Nigerian public tertiary institutions. This gap highlights the need for context-specific research that captures how students themselves perceive the psychological implications of cohabitation. It is against this background that the problem of this study emerges. While cohabitation continues to increase among students, there is growing concern that many of those involved may not possess the emotional readiness required to manage the psychological demands associated with such relationships. Consequently, students may be exposed to anxiety, depression, and aggressive tendencies that can negatively affect their academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being. Without adequate counselling support, these challenges may remain unaddressed, leading to long-term psychological consequences. In response to this concern, the present study seeks to examine the perceived influence of cohabitation on the psychological well-being of students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study is guided by the following objectives:

1. to ascertain the perceived reasons why students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State engage in cohabitation;
2. to determine the perceived influence of cohabitation on anxiety among students;
3. to examine the perceived influence of cohabitation on depression among students;
4. to assess the perceived influence of cohabitation on aggression among students.

In line with these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the perceived reasons why students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State engage in cohabitation?
2. What is the perceived influence of cohabitation on anxiety among students?
3. What is the perceived influence of cohabitation on depression among students?
4. What is the perceived influence of cohabitation on aggression among students?

To provide empirical direction, the study also tests the following null hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance:

1. Cohabitation has no significant perceived influence on anxiety among students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State.
2. Cohabitation has no significant perceived influence on depression among students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State.
3. Cohabitation has no significant perceived influence on aggression among students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State.

By addressing these questions and hypotheses, the study aims to provide a clearer understanding of how cohabitation shapes students' psychological experiences and to generate insights that can inform counselling interventions and institutional support systems within tertiary education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Arnett's (2000) Emerging Adulthood Theory and Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, both of which provide a useful lens for understanding why students engage in cohabitation and how such experiences may influence their psychological well-being. Arnett's (2000) Emerging Adulthood Theory describes the period between late adolescence and full adulthood—typically between the ages of 18 and 25—as a distinct and often unstable phase of life. During this period, young people are actively exploring their identities, forming relationships, and making decisions that shape their future. For students in tertiary institutions, this stage is often marked by a mix of freedom and uncertainty. They are no longer under strict parental control, yet they may not have fully developed the emotional maturity required to manage complex life situations. Within this context, cohabitation can be seen as part of this process of exploration. Many students enter cohabiting relationships in search of intimacy, companionship, or a sense of belonging. However, the same characteristics that define emerging adulthood—instability, emotional fluctuation, and ongoing identity formation—can also make these relationships difficult to manage. When expectations are unmet or when conflicts arise, students may experience heightened emotional reactions.

This helps explain why cohabitation may be associated with anxiety, as students worry about relationship stability or struggle to balance academic and relational demands. It also sheds light on depression, particularly when relationships fail to provide the emotional support students anticipate. Feelings of disappointment, rejection, or uncertainty can easily translate into sadness, low self-esteem, and withdrawal. Similarly, aggression may emerge as a response to unresolved conflict, poor communication, or emotional frustration within the relationship. In this way, Arnett's theory helps to situate cohabitation within a broader developmental process, where psychological vulnerability is already present. Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs further complements this understanding by focusing on the motivations behind human behaviour. According to Maslow, individuals are driven by the need to satisfy different levels of needs, ranging from basic physiological needs to higher-level psychological needs such as love, belonging, and esteem. For students, cohabitation often appears to address these higher-level needs—particularly the desire for emotional connection, acceptance, and companionship.

However, when these needs are not adequately met within cohabiting relationships, the outcome may be psychological distress rather than fulfilment. For instance, when the need for love and belonging is frustrated—perhaps due to conflict, neglect, or emotional instability—students may begin to experience anxiety and emotional insecurity. When repeated disappointments occur, this may deepen into depression, characterized by feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, or lack of motivation. In situations where frustration builds without healthy coping mechanisms, it may also lead to aggressive behaviours, as individuals react to perceived threats to their emotional or psychological needs.

In addition, Maslow's emphasis on safety needs is particularly relevant. Cohabiting relationships that lack emotional stability or mutual respect may fail to provide a sense of psychological safety, thereby increasing stress and emotional tension. This further reinforces the link between cohabitation and adverse psychological outcomes. Taken together, these two theoretical perspectives provide a meaningful framework for understanding the findings of this study. While Arnett's theory explains the developmental context in which cohabitation occurs, Maslow's framework highlights the underlying needs that drive students into such relationships and the consequences when those needs are not fulfilled. Both theories therefore support the argument that cohabitation, although often pursued for emotional and practical reasons, may expose students to psychological challenges that manifest in anxiety, depression, and aggression.

Empirical framework

Empirical studies on cohabitation have consistently highlighted its complex relationship with psychological well-being, particularly among young adults. One of the most frequently examined dimensions in this regard is anxiety. For instance, Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2011) found that individuals in cohabiting relationships often experience higher levels of relational uncertainty compared to their married counterparts. This uncertainty, which may stem from unclear expectations and lack of long-term commitment, can contribute to persistent emotional tension. Similarly, Bello and Ogunsanwo (2013) observed that students involved in cohabitation reported elevated levels of stress, often linked to financial instability and the challenges of managing intimate relationships alongside academic responsibilities.

While these studies provide useful insights into the relationship between cohabitation and anxiety, they largely focus on general relational dynamics without adequately capturing how anxiety is experienced within the specific context of undergraduate life. In Nigerian tertiary institutions, where students are simultaneously navigating academic demands, economic pressures, and evolving social identities, the experience of anxiety within cohabiting relationships may take on unique dimensions that require closer examination.

Depression has also emerged as a significant psychological outcome associated with cohabitation. Urquia, O'Campo, and Ray (2013) reported that individuals in cohabiting unions were more likely to experience depressive symptoms compared to those in more stable marital arrangements. This finding suggests that the absence of formal commitment and the instability that may characterize cohabiting relationships can contribute to emotional distress. In a related study, Montesino, García, and Jiménez (2015) found that individuals in unstable intimate relationships exhibited higher levels of depressive tendencies, often accompanied by reduced motivation and emotional withdrawal. Although these findings establish a clear link between cohabitation and depression, they are largely situated outside the Nigerian context. Moreover, they do not specifically address the lived experiences of undergraduate students, whose emotional responses may be shaped by factors such as peer influence, academic stress, and limited coping resources. This underscores the need for context-specific studies that explore how depression is perceived and experienced among students engaged in cohabiting relationships within Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Another important dimension of psychological well-being in cohabiting relationships is aggression. Wiersma, Cleveland, Herrera, and Fischer (2010) found that aggression in intimate relationships is often associated with relational instability, economic stress, and unmet expectations. These factors can create an environment in which conflicts escalate quickly, leading to both verbal and physical expressions of aggression. Similarly, Brown and Bulanda (2013) observed that cohabiting young adults were more likely to experience conflict escalation compared to those in more stable unions, with such conflicts sometimes resulting in aggressive behaviours.

Despite these contributions, there remains limited research focusing specifically on how aggression manifests among students in cohabiting relationships within developing societies such as Nigeria. In many cases, aggressive behaviours may be normalized, minimized, or insufficiently addressed, particularly in environments where students lack access to effective counselling support. This gap is particularly important, given that aggression not only affects individual well-being but also has implications for interpersonal relationships and campus safety.

Taken together, the reviewed studies indicate that cohabitation is associated with anxiety, depression, and aggression. However, a closer look reveals important limitations. Much of the existing research is either conducted in non-Nigerian contexts or focuses on general adult populations rather than students. In addition, many studies examine these psychological outcomes in isolation, without considering how they interact within the lived experiences of cohabiting students. The present study addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State, Nigeria, and by examining anxiety, depression, and aggression as interconnected dimensions of psychological well-being. By doing so, it provides a more context-sensitive understanding of cohabitation and its perceived psychological implications, while also contributing to the development of targeted counselling interventions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to investigate the perceived psychological effects of cohabitation among students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State, Nigeria. The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the collection of data from a relatively large number of respondents at a single point in time, thereby allowing for the assessment of students' perceptions of cohabitation and its psychological implications. The population of the study comprised 74,335 students drawn from nine public tertiary institutions in Benue State. From this population, a sample size of 398 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula.

A multi-stage sampling technique was adopted for the study. At the first stage, the population was stratified based on the nine public tertiary institutions to ensure that each institution was adequately represented. At the second stage, proportionate sampling was used to allocate the sample size to each institution according to their respective student populations. At the final stage, simple random sampling

technique was employed within each institution to select the respondents. This approach ensured both representativeness and fairness in the selection process while maintaining the element of randomness. Data were collected using a researcher-designed instrument titled the *Psychosocial Influence of Cohabitation Questionnaire (PICQ)*. The instrument consisted of structured items designed to capture students' perceptions of cohabitation and its influence on psychological well-being. Section C of the questionnaire contained 15 items measuring indicators of anxiety, depression, and aggression. Responses were rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by experts in educational psychology, guidance, and counselling to ensure its adequacy in measuring the variables under study. To establish reliability, a pilot test was conducted using 40 students from a public tertiary institution in Nasarawa State. The data obtained were analyzed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.93, indicating a high level of internal consistency. Data collection was carried out by the researcher with the assistance of trained research assistants. The questionnaires were administered and retrieved directly, resulting in a high return rate. Ethical considerations were duly observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, respondents were assured of confidentiality, and all information provided was used strictly for academic purposes.

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while chi-square statistics were employed to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. A decision rule of 2.50 was adopted as the cut-off point for interpreting mean scores, such that any item with a mean score of 2.50 and above was regarded as agreed, while items with mean scores below 2.50 were considered disagreed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the descriptive and inferential analysis are presented as follows:

Research Question 1:

What are the perceived reasons students of public Tertiary institutions in Benue State Cohabit?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Respondents on the Perceived Reasons Students Cohabit in Public Tertiary Institution in Benue State.

S/N	Item Description	Mean	Std	Remark
4	To test compatibility of the couple	3.60	0.52	Agreed
5	To spend more time together	2.88	0.80	Agreed
6	For security reasons	3.32	0.70	Agreed
7	To save money	2.80	0.99	Agreed
8	Hope of marriage	3.01	1.01	Agreed
9	Companionship	2.90	0.81	Agreed
10	Love	2.84	0.99	Agreed
11	Other are doing it	3.08	0.85	Agreed
12	For privacy	2.66	1.07	Agreed
Cluster Mean and Standard Deviation		3.01	0.86	Agreed

Source: Field Work 2022

The analysis in Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of respondents' perceptions regarding the reasons students engage in cohabitation. Using the decision rule (mean \geq 2.50 = Agreed), all the listed items were accepted as valid reasons for cohabitation. The highest-rated reason was "to test compatibility of the couple" (M = 3.60, SD = 0.52), suggesting that many students view cohabitation as a preparatory stage for possible marriage. Security reasons (M = 3.32, SD = 0.70) and hope of marriage (M = 3.01, SD = 1.01) also recorded relatively high mean scores, indicating that both safety concerns and long-term expectations influence students' decisions. Peer influence, reflected in "others are doing it" (M = 3.08, SD = 0.85), further highlights the role of social environment. Emotional factors such as companionship (M = 2.90, SD = 0.81) and love (M = 2.84, SD = 0.99) were also acknowledged. In addition, practical considerations such as saving money (M = 2.80, SD = 0.99) and the need for privacy (M = 2.66, SD = 1.07) were identified. The overall cluster mean (M = 3.01, SD = 0.86) indicates general agreement among respondents that these factors collectively explain why students engage in cohabitation.

Research Question 2:

What is the perceived influence of cohabitation on anxiety among students of Public Tertiary Institutions in Benue State?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Perceived Influence of Cohabitation on Anxiety among Students of Public Tertiary Institution in Benue State

S/N	Item Description	Mean	Std	Remark
13	Anxious mood e.g worries, anticipation of the worst, fearful anticipation and irritability	2.94	0.99	Agreed
14	Physical tension e.g. action muscle tension, startle response, moved to tears easily, trembling, feeling of restlessness, inability to relax	2.74	0.97	Agreed
15	Insomnia; difficulty falling asleep, broken sleep, unsatisfying sleep and fatigue on waking, dreams and nightmares.	3.61	0.57	Agreed
16	Automatic symptoms, dry mouth, fidgeting, sweaty hands, furrowed brow, sighing and rapid respiration.	2.89	0.61	Agreed
Cluster Mean and Standard Deviation		3.04	0.78	Agreed

Source: Field Work 2022

Table 2 shows respondents' perceptions of the influence of cohabitation on anxiety. All items recorded mean scores above 2.50, indicating agreement. The most prominent indicator was insomnia and sleep-related difficulties (M = 3.61, SD = 0.57), suggesting that cohabiting students are perceived to experience significant disturbances in sleep patterns. Anxious mood, including worry and irritability (M = 2.94, SD = 0.99), was also widely acknowledged. Physical tension, such as restlessness and muscle tightness (M = 2.74, SD = 0.97), and autonomic symptoms like sweating and rapid breathing (M = 2.89, SD = 0.61), were equally identified. The cluster mean (M = 3.04, SD = 0.78) indicates that respondents generally perceive cohabitation as being associated with increased anxiety among students.

Research Question 3:

What is the perceived influence of Cohabitation on depression among students of public tertiary institution in Benue State?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of Perceived Influence of Cohabitation on Depression among Students of Tertiary Institutions in Benue State

S/N	Item Description	Mean	Std	Remark
17	Sadness, low spirit, feeling of being beyond help and without hope.	3.25	0.88	Agreed
18	Loss of appetite, loss of desire for food or the need to force oneself to eat.	2.91	1.05	Agreed
19	Lassitude, difficulty getting started or slowness initiating and performing daily activities,	2.72	1.05	Agreed
20	Pessimistic thoughts; toughing guilt, inferiority, self-reproach, sinfulness and remorse.	2.86	1.23	Agreed
21	Suicide thoughts	3.53	0.62	Agreed
22	Low self-esteem.	3.20	0.64	Agreed
Cluster Mean and Standard Deviation		3.07	0.91	Agreed

Source: Field Work 2022

Table 3 indicates that all listed items were accepted as indicators of depression, as their mean scores were above the decision threshold of 2.50. The highest mean score was recorded for suicidal thoughts (M = 3.53, SD = 0.62), suggesting that respondents perceive severe emotional distress among some students in cohabiting relationships. Sadness and hopelessness (M = 3.25, SD = 0.88), as well as low self-esteem (M

= 3.20, SD = 0.64), were also strongly endorsed. Other indicators, including loss of appetite (M = 2.91, SD = 1.05), lassitude (M = 2.72, SD = 1.05), and pessimistic thoughts such as guilt and inferiority (M = 2.86, SD = 1.23), were similarly acknowledged.

The cluster mean (M = 3.07, SD = 0.91) reflects general agreement that cohabitation is associated with depressive symptoms among students.

Research Question 4:

What is the perceived influence of cohabitation on aggression among students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State?

Table: 4 Means and Standard Deviation of Perceived Influence of Cohabitation on Aggression among Students in Public Tertiary Institutions in Benue State

S/N	Item Description	Mean	Std	Remark
23	Shouts at partner angrily	3.08	0.90	Agreed
24	Threatening violence towards others and self	2.90	0.80	Agreed
25	Breaks objects around the house	2.93	0.94	agreed
26	Bangs head or hits fists into the wall	2.89	1.00	Agreed
27	Makes menacing gestures; swings at partner; grabs at clothing	3.22	1.17	Agreed
Custer Mean and Standard Deviation		3.00	0.76	Agreed

Source: Field Work 2022

Table 4 presents respondents’ perceptions of aggressive behaviours associated with cohabitation. All items recorded mean scores above 2.50, indicating agreement. The most prominent behaviour was making menacing gestures such as swinging at a partner or grabbing clothing (M = 3.22, SD = 1.17). Shouting angrily (M = 3.08, SD = 0.90) and breaking objects (M = 2.93, SD = 0.94) were also frequently reported. Threatening violence towards others or oneself (M = 2.90, SD = 0.80), as well as self-directed aggressive actions such as hitting walls (M = 2.89, SD = 1.00), were equally identified. The cluster mean (M = 3.00, SD = 0.76) suggests that respondents generally perceive cohabitation as being associated with increased aggression among students.

Test of Hypotheses

The results of the hypothesis testing revealed that all null hypotheses were rejected at the 0.05 level of significance. This indicates that cohabitation has a statistically significant perceived influence on anxiety, depression, and aggression among students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State.

Table 6: Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Variable	p-value	Decision
H01	Anxiety	0.00	Rejected
H02	Depression	0.00	Rejected
H03	Aggression	0.00	Rejected

The results of the hypothesis testing revealed that all null hypotheses were rejected at the 0.05 level of significance. This indicates that cohabitation has a statistically significant perceived influence on anxiety, depression, and aggression among students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State.

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study indicate that students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State perceive cohabitation as being influenced by a combination of emotional, social, and practical factors. These include companionship, emotional attachment, desire for intimacy, and the need to sustain relationships. This suggests that, from the students’ perspective, cohabitation is not viewed merely as a

casual arrangement but as one associated with meaningful emotional expectations and relational considerations. This pattern can be understood within Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, particularly the need for love and belonging, which appears to shape how students interpret the motivations behind cohabitation. In relation to perceived anxiety, this study indicates that students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State perceive cohabitation as having a significant influence on anxiety. This is reflected in the reported presence of worry, irritability, restlessness, and sleep disturbances. From the students' perspective, cohabitation appears to be associated with emotional strain arising from the demands of maintaining intimate relationships alongside academic responsibilities. This perception can be understood within Arnett's (2000) Emerging Adulthood Theory, which describes this stage of life as one marked by instability, identity exploration, and emotional fluctuation. Students are still developing the capacity to manage complex interpersonal relationships, and this developmental condition may heighten their vulnerability to anxiety when faced with relational uncertainty. This finding is consistent with Bello and Ogunsanwo (2013), who reported that cohabitation among students is often accompanied by emotional stress and instability. It also aligns with Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2011), who found that relational uncertainty in cohabiting relationships is associated with increased anxiety. The convergence of these findings suggests that anxiety is not only a personal experience but also a relational outcome shaped by the nature of cohabiting arrangements.

The findings also indicate that students perceive cohabitation as having a significant influence on depression. This is evident in the reported presence of sadness, low self-esteem, loss of motivation, and suicidal thoughts. These perceptions suggest that cohabiting relationships may not always meet the emotional expectations students associate with them, leading to feelings of disappointment and emotional withdrawal. This outcome can be explained using both Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and Arnett's (2000) Emerging Adulthood Theory. From Maslow's perspective, when the need for love and belonging is not adequately satisfied, individuals may experience psychological distress, including depression. At the same time, Arnett's framework highlights the emotional vulnerability associated with this developmental stage, where individuals are still forming identity and emotional stability. Empirically, this finding supports Urquia, O'Campo, and Ray (2013), who reported that individuals in cohabiting unions are more likely to experience depressive symptoms. It also aligns with Bello and Ogunsanwo (2013), who identified emotional instability as a key psychological outcome of cohabitation among students. These studies reinforce the view that depression, in this context, is closely linked to unmet expectations and relational strain.

The findings further show that students perceive cohabitation as having a significant influence on aggression. This is reflected in behaviours such as shouting, threats, destruction of property, and hostile gestures. From the respondents' perspective, cohabiting relationships appear to create situations in which conflicts escalate into aggressive responses. This perception is in line with both Maslow's (1943) and Arnett's (2000) frameworks. From Maslow's standpoint, aggression may arise when individuals feel that their psychological needs—particularly those related to love, belonging, and emotional security—are threatened or unmet. In addition, Arnett's Emerging Adulthood Theory suggests that individuals at this stage may have limited emotional regulation skills, which can lead to maladaptive responses such as aggression when faced with relational stress. It is also consistent with Wiersma, Cleveland, Herrera, and Fischer (2010), who noted that relational instability and unmet expectations often contribute to aggression in intimate relationships. It also aligns with Brown and Bulanda (2013), who observed that cohabiting young adults are more likely to experience conflict escalation, sometimes resulting in aggressive behaviours. These parallels strengthen the interpretation that aggression, in this context, is closely tied to relational dynamics and emotional strain.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the perceived psychological influence of cohabitation among students in public tertiary institutions in Benue State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that cohabitation significantly influences students' psychological wellbeing, particularly in terms of anxiety, depression, and aggression. These psychological outcomes were expressed through symptoms such as persistent worry, emotional instability, low self-esteem, irritability, and aggressive behaviours within intimate relationships. The findings suggest that while cohabitation may be perceived as fulfilling emotional and relational needs, it also exposes students to considerable psychological strain that may negatively affect their mental health

and academic engagement. The instability and demands associated with cohabiting relationships appear to contribute to emotional distress and maladaptive behavioural patterns among students.

Overall, the study contributes to existing knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the psychological risks associated with cohabitation in the Nigerian tertiary education context. It highlights the need for increased attention to students' mental health and the role of counselling in addressing the psychological challenges linked to cohabitation.

Implications for Counselling

The findings of this study have important implications for counselling practice in tertiary institutions. The significant influence of cohabitation on anxiety, depression, and aggression among students highlights the need for targeted psychological interventions and mental health support services. Counsellors should prioritize mental health assessment and early intervention strategies to identify students experiencing anxiety and depressive symptoms associated with cohabitation.

Regular screening and counselling sessions can help students manage stress, reduce emotional distress, and develop healthier coping mechanisms. In addition, there is a need for emotional regulation and anger management programmes. Given the prevalence of aggression among cohabiting students, counselling units should provide interventions that focus on conflict resolution, impulse control, and constructive expression of emotions. This will help reduce the incidence of hostility and violence in intimate relationships.

Furthermore, counsellors should implement cognitive and behavioural counselling approaches to address negative thought patterns associated with depression, such as low self-esteem, pessimism, and feelings of hopelessness. Helping students reframe their thoughts and build resilience can improve their psychological wellbeing.

The findings also underscore the importance of relationship counselling services, where students are guided to understand the emotional demands of intimate relationships and make informed decisions about cohabitation. Counsellors should help students develop self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and healthy interpersonal skills.

Finally, counselling services should adopt a preventive and developmental approach, including mental health awareness campaigns, workshops, and orientation programmes that educate students on the psychological risks associated with cohabitation and promote emotional wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Strengthening Mental Health Services:** Tertiary institutions should strengthen their counselling units by providing professional mental health services focused on anxiety, depression, and behavioural challenges among students.
2. **Regular Psychological Screening:** Institutions should implement routine mental health assessments to identify students experiencing psychological distress and provide early intervention.
3. **Emotional Regulation and Anger Management Programmes:** Counselling units should organize workshops and training sessions on emotional control, stress management, and conflict resolution.
4. **Awareness Campaigns on Mental Health:** Schools should conduct awareness programmes to educate students on the psychological implications of cohabitation and the importance of mental wellbeing.
5. **Relationship Counselling Services:** Counsellors should provide guidance on healthy relationships, helping students make informed decisions and avoid emotionally harmful situations.
6. **Peer Support Systems:** Institutions should establish peer counselling and support groups to provide emotional support and reduce feelings of isolation and distress among students.
7. **Integration of Counselling into Orientation Programmes:** Mental health education and counselling services should be integrated into student orientation programmes to equip students from the onset of their academic journey.

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