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Perceived Social Class, Appearance-Based Self-Esteem and Assertiveness as Predictors of Psychological Distress Following Police Harassment among Emerging Adults in Rivers State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Police harassment is a familiar part of life for many young Nigerians, yet little is known about who is most vulnerable to its aftermath. This study examined perceived social class, appearance-based self-esteem and assertiveness as predictors of psychological distress following police harassment among emerging adults in Rivers State, Nigeria. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted. Two hundred and twelve undergraduates (99 men and 113 women) aged 18 to 29 years (M = 22.59, SD = 2.52) were drawn purposively from the University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University; each had experienced at least one incident of police harassment in the preceding 12 months. Participants completed the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status, the Appearance subscale of the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale, the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21). Mean distress was 61.12 (SD = 22.90). Perceived social class predicted distress negatively ($\beta = -.40$, $p < .001$), appearance-based self-esteem predicted it positively ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$) and assertiveness predicted it negatively ($\beta = -.34$, $p < .001$). Together the three variables explained 35.9% of the variance in distress, $F(3, 208) = 38.83$, $p < .001$, and each made a significant unique contribution, with appearance-contingent self-worth the strongest. University and hospital counselling units should screen for these attributes after police encounters, and curbing appearance-based profiling should be treated as a mental health priority as well as a matter of rights.

KEYWORDS Police harassment • Psychological distress • Subjective social status • Contingencies of self-worth • Assertiveness • Emerging adults

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1. INTRODUCTION

Across the world, the quality of contact between police and citizens has become a visible marker of community wellbeing, and a growing body of research links adversarial police contact to depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress in young people (DeVylder et al., 2020; Geller et al., 2014; Oppenheim et al., 2024). Where encounters are respectful and procedurally fair, citizens tend to keep a sense of safety and civic trust. Where they are hostile, humiliating or extractive, the psychological costs can extend well beyond the moment of contact and touch on self-worth, social identity and the felt capacity to deal with institutional power (Jackson et al., 2025). In Nigeria, the disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) became the public face of a policing culture that many young people experienced as predatory rather than protective, and the #EndSARS protests of October 2020 drew national and international attention to extortion, unlawful detention and violence against youths (Ecoma, 2023; Iwuoha & Aniche, 2022).

Psychological distress, the co-occurrence of depressive, anxious and stress-related symptoms that impair daily functioning (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), is best understood as the product of a transaction between a person and the environment, shaped by how threats are appraised and what resources are judged to be available for coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Hobfoll (1989) added that stress reactions are grounded in the availability and loss of resources, so that people who enter adverse encounters with depleted social, material and psychological reserves are more likely to be destabilised by them.

Within Nigeria, distress is both common and socially patterned. Ochonye et al. (2024), drawing on a multi-state sample of more than 22,000 adults, reported an overall distress prevalence of 9.7%, with higher rates among women and socially marginalised groups. The Lagos State Mental Health Survey found that lower socioeconomic status was associated with symptoms of both depression and generalised anxiety (Adewuya et al., 2018). In a cross-national study of university staff and students, Ike et al. (2025) found that levels of depression, anxiety and stress varied considerably across Sub-Saharan African countries, which suggests that the economic conditions of a country may themselves form part of the background against which any later stressor is experienced.

Emerging adulthood, the period from roughly 18 to 29 years, is marked by identity exploration, unsettled adult roles and heightened sensitivity to social evaluation (Arnett, 2000). In Nigeria, young people in this phase have been the group most often targeted by police on the basis of appearance, with young men in particular accused of internet fraud or robbery because of their dress, hairstyles or phones (Ecoma, 2023; Iwuoha & Aniche, 2022). Ayinde et al. (2022) reported elevated depression, anxiety and probable post-traumatic stress among #EndSARS protesters compared with non-protesters, and found that direct exposure to police violence was among the predictors of psychiatric morbidity.

Rivers State, in the South-South geopolitical zone and anchored by Port Harcourt, has a long record of youth restiveness and police-community tension. The population of interest here comprises emerging adults who came of age during the SARS era and continue to meet successor units and plain-clothes operatives. For them, police harassment is a recurring feature of public life rather than a rare event, which makes their distress a fitting site for examining which individual differences increase or reduce vulnerability.

Three such differences are of particular interest. The first is perceived social class, a person's felt standing in the social hierarchy, usually measured with the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al., 2000). Perceived standing predicts health and psychological outcomes over and above objective indicators such as income or education (Galvan et al., 2023; Manstead, 2018; Quon & McGrath, 2014). The second is appearance-based self-esteem. Contingencies of self-worth theory holds that the domains on which people stake their self-worth matter more than global self-esteem, and that people whose worth depends on external domains such as appearance are more vulnerable to distress when those domains are threatened (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Sargent et al., 2006). Because police profiling in Nigeria has relied on appearance cues, appearance contingency may be especially relevant to harassment-related distress. The third is assertiveness, the capacity to express one's rights, feelings and opinions in socially appropriate ways (Rathus, 1973), which has been linked to better wellbeing and is the target of an established therapeutic technique (Sarkova et al., 2013; Speed et al., 2018).

Statement of the Problem

Evidence on the mental health toll of police harassment in Nigeria remains limited in several respects. The most influential Nigerian quantitative study to date focused on social media users who took part in the #EndSARS protests (Ayinde et al., 2022) rather than on young people exposed to the routine, non-protest harassment that continues in everyday life. Most quantitative evidence on police contact and mental health

comes from the United States (DeVylder et al., 2020; Geller et al., 2014; Jackson et al., 2025), where racial stratification is central; in Nigeria, class position, youth identity and appearance-based profiling appear to carry greater weight. Few Nigerian studies have tested individual-difference predictors of vulnerability to post-harassment distress.

More specifically, perceived social class, appearance-based self-esteem and assertiveness have been examined separately in relation to distress, but no known Nigerian study has combined all three in a single model in a police-harassment context. Without such a test, clinicians and policymakers cannot know which variable carries the most weight or how much of the variation in distress they explain together. Mental health services for young people in Rivers State are under-resourced, and university counselling units lack local evidence on which psychological attributes merit closest attention after a police encounter. Police reform has been described as a mental health intervention (DeVylder et al., 2020); without local evidence on who is most vulnerable, both reform and support services risk being poorly targeted.

Purpose of the Study

The study examined perceived social class, appearance-based self-esteem and assertiveness as predictors of psychological distress following police harassment among emerging adults in Rivers State. Specifically, it sought to:

i. examine whether perceived social class predicts psychological distress following police harassment;
ii. determine whether appearance-based self-esteem predicts psychological distress following police harassment;
iii. investigate whether assertiveness predicts psychological distress following police harassment; and
iv. ascertain the joint predictive influence of the three variables on psychological distress following police harassment.

Hypotheses

1. Perceived social class will significantly predict psychological distress following police harassment among emerging adults in Rivers State.
2. Appearance-based self-esteem will significantly predict psychological distress following police harassment among emerging adults in Rivers State.
3. Assertiveness will significantly predict psychological distress following police harassment among emerging adults in Rivers State.
4. Perceived social class, appearance-based self-esteem and assertiveness will jointly and significantly predict psychological distress following police harassment among emerging adults in Rivers State.

Operational Definitions

Perceived social class is the rung a participant selected on the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al., 2000). *Appearance-based self-esteem* is the score on the Appearance subscale of the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker et al., 2003), with higher scores indicating greater contingency of self-worth on appearance. *Assertiveness* is the total score on the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (Rathus, 1973). *Psychological distress* is the total DASS-21 score (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). *Police harassment* is any personally experienced incident in the preceding 12 months in which a police officer or other law enforcement agent stopped the participant without stated cause, insulted or humiliated them, threatened or assaulted them, extorted money, detained them arbitrarily, searched them in a degrading manner or seized property without justification. *Emerging adults* are persons aged 18 to 29 years (Arnett, 2000).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping, which locates stress in the relationship between person and environment rather than in events themselves. In primary appraisal, a person judges whether an encounter is irrelevant, benign or stressful, and, if stressful, whether it represents harm, threat or challenge. In secondary appraisal, the person judges what can be done and what resources are available. Distress follows when demands are appraised as exceeding resources, and coping, whether problem-focused or emotion-focused, is the ongoing effort to manage those demands.

The model explains why police harassment is distressing and also clarifies the role of each predictor. Perceived social class operates at secondary appraisal: young people who see themselves as low in the social order are likely to judge their access to legal help, influential contacts and institutional redress as weak, which inflates threat and lowers coping efficacy. Appearance-based self-esteem shapes primary appraisal: when profiling targets dress, hairstyles or tattoos, people whose self-worth rests on appearance experience the encounter as a direct threat to identity rather than an inconvenience (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Assertiveness is a coping resource at secondary appraisal: assertive people perceive more response options, such as calmly invoking their rights or de-escalating verbally, which may shift appraisal from threat towards challenge.

Two complementary perspectives support this account. Conservation of resources theory proposes that stress results from the threat or loss of valued resources and that those with fewer resources are more vulnerable to further loss (Hobfoll, 1989). Diathesis-stress models hold that psychological disorder emerges when a stressor meets a pre-existing vulnerability (Monroe & Simons, 1991). In the present study, harassment is the stressor and the three individual differences are potential vulnerabilities or protective resources.

Perceived Social Class and Psychological Distress

Ochonye et al. (2024) examined psychological distress among more than 22,000 members of key populations across Nigerian states using the Kessler scale. The overall prevalence was 9.7%, and social and economic marginalisation, along with gender-based violence, were associated with distress. Adewuya et al. (2018), using data from the Lagos State Mental Health Survey, found that lower socioeconomic status was associated with symptoms of depression and generalised anxiety. Adeleke et al. (2025) studied university employees in South-West Nigeria and found that perceived stress, anxiety and depression were common and varied with socioeconomic and work-related factors. Doyle et al. (2023), in a population-based study of young people in Zimbabwe, reported that 37.4% screened positive for probable common mental disorders and that the odds were higher among those who were out of school and not working.

Studies of subjective status add an important refinement. Quon and McGrath (2014) showed in a meta-analysis that subjective socioeconomic status is associated with health in young people, and Galvan et al. (2023) found that the MacArthur ladder captures both economic circumstances and a sense of social standing, each of which predicts health. Manstead (2018) argued that social class shapes thought, feeling and behaviour through people's sense of their place in the hierarchy. Together these studies suggest that felt standing may matter for distress following a humiliating encounter with the police.

Appearance-Based Self-Esteem and Psychological Distress

Crocker and Wolfe (2001) proposed that self-esteem is staked on particular domains and that external contingencies, such as appearance and others' approval, leave self-worth unstable. Crocker et al. (2003) developed the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale to measure these domains among college students, and Sargent et al. (2006) found that contingencies on external domains, including appearance, predicted increases in depressive symptoms over time. Crocker and Park (2004) argued more broadly that the pursuit of self-esteem through externally validated domains carries emotional costs.

Nigerian studies point in the same direction. Akinyemi et al. (2025), in a study of 501 students at a Nigerian university, found that body image concerns were associated with a significantly higher likelihood of self-reported depression. Olatona et al. (2024) reported body image dissatisfaction in more than half of a large sample of female undergraduates in Lagos. These findings show that appearance is a salient and emotionally charged domain for Nigerian students, which strengthens the case for examining appearance-contingent self-worth in a setting where police have used appearance as a marker of suspected criminality.

Assertiveness and Psychological Distress

Assertiveness has long been regarded as a protective interpersonal resource. Speed et al. (2018) reviewed the evidence for assertiveness training and described it as an effective but neglected treatment for problems including depression and social anxiety. Sarkova et al. (2013) found that assertiveness was associated with higher self-esteem and better psychological wellbeing among adolescents. In Nigeria, Madu et al. (2023) reported an association between self-esteem and assertiveness among basic nursing students in the South-East, and Anyebe et al. (2022) documented the levels and predictors of assertiveness among nursing students in North-Central Nigeria. Evidence linking assertiveness to distress in the specific context of police encounters is, however, lacking.

Joint Predictors of Distress

Some Nigerian studies have tested combined models of distress. Quadri et al. (2025) examined depression, self-esteem, coping, social support and hopelessness as predictors of distress among unemployed graduates in Lagos, and Ibigbami et al. (2024) examined resilience and self-esteem as mediators between early adversity and depressive symptoms among Nigerian adolescents. None of these studies combined perceived social class, appearance-contingent self-worth and assertiveness, and none was set in a policing context. The present study addresses that gap.

3. METHOD

Participants

Participants were 212 undergraduates (99 men, 46.7%; 113 women, 53.3%) aged 18 to 29 years (M = 22.59, SD = 2.52), drawn from the University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University. Most (90.1%) were single. Purposive sampling was used because eligibility depended on specific experiential criteria. To be included, participants had to be aged 18 to 29 years, to reside in Rivers State and to have personally experienced at least one incident of police harassment in the 12 months before data collection. The 12-month window was chosen so that reported distress could reasonably be linked to recent harassment. Following Ayinde et al. (2022), people who reported a psychiatric diagnosis made before their most recent harassment encounter were excluded, as were those who declined consent.

Instruments

Police Harassment Experience Questionnaire (PHEQ)

A researcher-developed screening questionnaire asked whether the respondent had personally experienced police harassment in the preceding 12 months. Those who answered yes completed a checklist of harassment events, adapted from Remch et al. (2021), covering stops without stated reason, physical intimidation or assault, extortion, arbitrary detention and public humiliation, and estimated the number of separate incidents. The PHEQ served as a screening and descriptive tool and was not a scored predictor. Its face validity was reviewed by two academic psychologists with expertise in policing and community mental health.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21)

Distress was measured with the 21-item DASS-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), which has three seven-item subscales for depression, anxiety and stress. Items are rated from 0 (did not apply to me at all) to 3 (applied to me very much or most of the time) for the past week. Subscale scores are summed and multiplied by two, and a total score (range 0 to 126) was used, with higher scores indicating greater distress. The DASS-21 has good construct validity in non-clinical samples (Henry & Crawford, 2005) and has been used with university samples in Nigeria and other Sub-Saharan African countries (Ike et al., 2025).

MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status

Perceived social class was measured with the MacArthur ladder (Adler et al., 2000), a drawing of a ten-rung ladder representing Nigerian society, with people who have the most money, education and respected jobs at the top. Participants marked the rung that best represented their position, scored from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest). The ladder was preferred to objective indicators because the study is concerned with felt social position, which predicts health over and above economic circumstances (Galvan et al., 2023).

Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale, Appearance subscale

Appearance-based self-esteem was measured with the five-item Appearance subscale of the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker et al., 2003), for example “My self-esteem is influenced by how attractive I think my face or facial features are.” In this study the items were rated on a five-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), giving scores from 5 to 25, with higher scores indicating greater contingency of self-worth on appearance.

Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS)

Assertiveness was measured with the 30-item RAS (Rathus, 1973). Items are rated from −3 (very uncharacteristic of me) to +3 (very characteristic of me), with reverse scoring where appropriate, giving totals from −90 to +90; higher scores indicate greater assertiveness. Items cover situations such as refusing

unreasonable requests and expressing disagreement with people in authority, which are relevant to police encounters.

Procedure

Data collection began after ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the Department of Psychology, Imo State University, Owerri. Permission was also obtained from the Deans of Student Affairs of the two institutions. Four research assistants, final-year students of psychology, social work and sociology at the two institutions, were trained in the study's aims, standardised administration, neutral responses to questions and the handling of emotional distress. Students were approached individually or in small groups during free periods, given a verbal summary and a printed information sheet, and told that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Those who agreed signed a consent form.

The questionnaire pack opened with the PHEQ screening item, and only those who confirmed harassment in the preceding 12 months continued. They then completed the DASS-21, the MacArthur ladder, the CSWS Appearance subscale and the RAS in that order. Distress was measured first so that it would not be primed by questions about self-worth and assertiveness. A short demographic section came last. Completion took 25 to 35 minutes. Packs were coded by number, contained no names and were collected immediately. Questionnaires with more than 10% of items missing on the scored scales were excluded before analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were told that withdrawal would carry no academic or personal consequence. Because recalling police harassment could be upsetting, each pack included a debriefing sheet explaining the study in plain language and giving the contact details of the on-campus counselling service and a mental health helpline. Completed questionnaires were stored in a locked cabinet and digital files were password-protected, with access limited to the research team.

Design and Statistics

The study used a cross-sectional survey design. Data were analysed with SPSS version 23. Pearson correlations described the bivariate relationships among the variables. Hypotheses 1 to 3 were tested with separate simple linear regressions, and Hypothesis 4 with a standard multiple regression in which the three predictors were entered simultaneously. Significance was set at $p < .05$.

4. RESULTS

Table 1. *Pearson correlations among perceived social class, appearance-based self-esteem, assertiveness and psychological distress (N = 212)*

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Perceived social class	—			
2. Appearance-based self-esteem	−.142*	—		
3. Assertiveness	.115	−.116	—	
4. Psychological distress	−.395**	.424**	−.335**	—

Single asterisk, p < .05; double asterisk, p < .01.

Table 1 shows that perceived social class correlated negatively with distress ($r = −.395$, $p < .001$), appearance-based self-esteem correlated positively with it ($r = .424$, $p < .001$) and assertiveness correlated negatively with it ($r = −.335$, $p < .001$). The predictors were only weakly related to one another (absolute $r = .12$ to $.14$), so multicollinearity was not a concern.

Table 2. *Simple linear regressions of psychological distress on each predictor (N = 212)*

Predictor	R^2	$F(1, 210)$	B	$SE\ B$	β	t	p
Perceived social class	.156	38.71	−5.44	0.88	−.395	−6.22	< .001
Appearance-based self-esteem	.180	45.98	3.42	0.50	.424	6.78	< .001
Assertiveness	.112	26.56	−0.18	0.04	−.335	−5.15	< .001

Each predictor was entered in a separate model with total DASS-21 score as the criterion.

Hypothesis 1 stated that perceived social class would significantly predict distress. As Table 2 shows, it did, $F(1, 210) = 38.71$, $p < .001$, explaining 15.6% of the variance. The relationship was negative ($\beta = -.395$, $t = -6.22$, $p < .001$): participants who placed themselves lower on the ladder reported more distress. The hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis 2 stated that appearance-based self-esteem would significantly predict distress. It did, $F(1, 210) = 45.98$, $p < .001$, explaining 18.0% of the variance. The relationship was positive ($\beta = .424$, $t = 6.78$, $p < .001$): participants whose self-worth depended more on appearance reported more distress. The hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis 3 stated that assertiveness would significantly predict distress. It did, $F(1, 210) = 26.56$, $p < .001$, explaining 11.2% of the variance. The relationship was negative ($\beta = -.335$, $t = -5.15$, $p < .001$): more assertive participants reported less distress. The hypothesis was supported.

Table 3. *Multiple regression of psychological distress on the three predictors (N = 212)*

Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	β	*t*	*p*
(Constant)	28.02				
Perceived social class	−4.35	0.78	−.315	−5.60	< .001
Appearance-based self-esteem	2.81	0.46	.349	6.19	< .001
Assertiveness	−0.14	0.03	−.258	−4.60	< .001

$R = .599$, $R^2 = .359$, adjusted $R^2 = .350$, $F(3, 208) = 38.83$, $p < .001$. Regression SS = 39,729.40; residual SS = 70,943.41 (df = 208); total SS = 110,672.81 (df = 211).

Hypothesis 4 stated that the three variables would jointly predict distress. Table 3 shows that the model was significant, $F(3, 208) = 38.83$, $p < .001$, and explained 35.9% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .350$). Each predictor made a significant unique contribution: appearance-based self-esteem ($\beta = .349$, $p < .001$), perceived social class ($\beta = -.315$, $p < .001$) and assertiveness ($\beta = -.258$, $p < .001$). Appearance-based self-esteem was the strongest predictor. The hypothesis was supported.

5. DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis was supported: perceived social class explained about 16% of the variance in distress, and the relationship was negative. Participants who placed themselves on the lower rungs of the ladder reported heavier symptom loads, and this held in a sample in which every respondent had been harassed, which makes the gradient harder to dismiss as a product of differing exposure. Within the transactional model, the result is what one would expect. Secondary appraisal is where perceived class is likely to matter most: a young person who feels socially marginal has good reason to doubt that a lawyer, an influential relative or a sympathetic official will appear after an abusive encounter, and that doubt inflates appraised threat (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Conservation of resources theory offers a complementary interpretation, since lower perceived standing usually goes with thinner material and social reserves, so the same extortion or detention costs more (Hobfoll, 1989).

The finding is consistent with Nigerian evidence that social and economic marginalisation is associated with distress (Adewuya et al., 2018; Ochonye et al., 2024) and with research showing that subjective status predicts health independently of objective circumstances (Galvan et al., 2023; Quon & McGrath, 2014). Because the present measure captured felt position rather than income, the result supports the view that perceived standing carries psychological weight in its own right (Manstead, 2018). The cross-sectional design, however, leaves the direction of influence open, since distress may also colour how low people feel they stand.

The second hypothesis was also supported, and appearance-based self-esteem was the strongest single predictor, explaining about 18% of the variance. Higher contingency of self-worth on appearance went with greater distress, which means that staking one's worth on looks operated as a vulnerability rather than a buffer. This is consistent with contingencies of self-worth theory: when self-esteem is pinned to an externally judged domain, criticism of that domain lands hard (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), and appearance contingency has been linked to later depressive symptoms (Sargent et al., 2006). In the Nigerian policing context the result has particular meaning. Where officers treat dreadlocks, tattoos, a particular phone or a style of dress as signs of criminality (Ecoma, 2023; Iwuoha & Aniche, 2022), a young person whose self-worth rests on appearance experiences profiling as an attack on the very basis of their self-evaluation. The result also agrees with Nigerian evidence that body image concerns are associated with depression among students (Akinyemi et al., 2025).

Because much of the appearance literature concerns women, and women report higher rates of depression in general (Salk et al., 2017), future work should test whether this effect differs between men and women, which the present analysis did not do.

The third hypothesis was supported, although assertiveness had the smallest effect, explaining about 11% of the variance. More assertive participants reported less distress, which suggests that assertiveness acts as a coping resource at the point of secondary appraisal. A second interpretation is also possible. Young people who have been stopped, searched and extorted repeatedly, and who have learned that nothing they say changes the outcome, may stop asserting themselves; low assertiveness may then be partly a consequence of past harassment rather than only a predictor of distress, in line with accounts of learned helplessness (Maier & Seligman, 2016). The cross-sectional data cannot separate these interpretations. The relatively small effect may also reflect the reality that assertiveness gives little real influence over an armed officer, so that its benefit lies more in preserving a sense of agency than in changing the encounter. The finding is consistent with evidence linking assertiveness to self-esteem and wellbeing (Madu et al., 2023; Sarkova et al., 2013).

The fourth hypothesis was supported. Together, the three variables explained about 36% of the variance in distress, and each retained a significant unique contribution, with appearance-based self-esteem strongest, followed by perceived social class and assertiveness. Because the predictors were only weakly related to one another, they appear to tap distinct sources of vulnerability rather than a single underlying factor. This pattern fits a diathesis-stress account, in which harassment is the stressor and the three variables act as vulnerabilities or resources (Monroe & Simons, 1991). It extends earlier Nigerian multi-predictor studies (Ibigbami et al., 2024; Quadri et al., 2025) to the policing context. It is worth noting, however, that almost two-thirds of the variance remained unexplained, which is a reminder that the severity of the harassment, prior mental health, social support and other factors also matter.

Implications of the Study

For counsellors and clinicians who see young people after police encounters, the results suggest that distress is patterned rather than random and that a small set of markers can help identify those most at risk. Brief screening for perceived standing, appearance-contingent self-worth and assertiveness could improve triage in university clinics, where time and trained staff are limited. Assertiveness training is a feasible component of intervention (Speed et al., 2018), provided it is framed honestly: teaching young people to assert themselves against armed officers without acknowledging the real risks would be irresponsible.

At the policy level, the prominence of appearance-based vulnerability supports the argument that profiling on the basis of looks is a mental health problem as well as a civil liberties problem, and that police reform can be understood as a public health measure (DeVylder et al., 2020). Police training could usefully discourage officers from treating dreadlocks, tattoos or expensive phones as proxies for criminality. The finding that lower perceived class amplifies harm also strengthens the case for legal aid and community support aimed at young people least able to absorb the costs of an abusive encounter. Student affairs units and faith-based organisations, which already have the trust of young people in Rivers State, may be well placed to offer such support without the stigma that a psychiatric referral can carry.

Limitations of the Study

1. The cross-sectional design rules out causal conclusions, since predictors and distress were measured at the same time.
2. All measures were self-reported, which leaves the data open to common-method variance and social desirability, particularly on the assertiveness and harassment items.
3. The sample was drawn from two universities in Rivers State, so the findings may not transfer to non-student emerging adults or to other parts of Nigeria.
4. The single-item ladder captures perceived social class more coarsely than a multi-item measure would.
5. Prior mental health, social support and the objective severity of each encounter were not modelled, and their omission probably accounts for part of the unexplained variance.

Suggestions for Further Research

Longitudinal designs are needed to establish whether the relationships observed here are causal or reciprocal. Studies should test gender as a moderator, particularly for appearance-based self-esteem and assertiveness. Mixed-methods work that pairs a predictive model with interviews would add depth, and

replication with non-student and rural samples and in other Nigerian regions would show how far the findings generalise.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined whether perceived social class, appearance-based self-esteem and assertiveness predict psychological distress among emerging adults in Rivers State who had experienced police harassment. All three did. Lower perceived standing and lower assertiveness were each associated with greater distress, while self-worth that depends heavily on appearance was the most consequential vulnerability. Together the variables explained a substantial share of the variation in distress, and each held its own when the others were controlled, which suggests that they tap distinct pathways to harm. The findings will not, on their own, change how young people are treated at checkpoints, but they can help those who counsel, support and advocate for affected young people to recognise who is most at risk and to respond with more precision.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. University counselling units in Rivers State should include brief screening for perceived social standing, appearance-contingent self-worth and assertiveness in their intake procedures for students who report police encounters.
2. Mental health practitioners should combine assertiveness training with work on self-worth, since both contributed independently to distress.
3. Programmes that help young people build self-worth on internal rather than appearance-based foundations should be developed and evaluated.
4. Civil society organisations and legal aid providers should give priority to young people of lower perceived status, who appear least able to absorb the psychological costs of harassment.
5. Police authorities and policymakers should treat the elimination of appearance-based profiling as a mental health priority as well as a matter of rights.

DECLARATIONS

Ethical approval: The study was approved by the ethics committee of the Department of Psychology, Imo State University, Owerri. All participants gave written informed consent.

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