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Age, Perceived Social Support and Peer Relations as Predictors of Bullying Experience among Secondary School Adolescents in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Bullying remains a common feature of school life for many Nigerian adolescents, yet the social conditions that make some students more exposed than others have received limited attention in the South-East. This study examined whether age, perceived social support and the quality of peer relations predict bullying experience among secondary school adolescents in Owerri, Imo State. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 250 students (157 boys and 93 girls) aged 11 to 18 years (M = 14.69, SD = 1.65), drawn by convenience sampling from two secondary schools and screened for having been bullied in the previous 12 months. Participants completed the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, the Index of Peer Relations and the Rufus Bullying Behaviour Scale. Data were analysed with Pearson correlation and standard multiple regression. The three predictors together explained 83.5% of the variance in bullying experience, R^2 = .835, $F(3, 246) = 414.30$, $p < .001$. Perceived social support was the strongest predictor and was inversely related to bullying experience (β = −.82, $p < .001$), while poorer peer relations predicted more bullying experience (β = .14, $p < .001$). Age was weakly correlated with bullying experience but did not make a unique contribution once the social variables were controlled (β = −.05, p = .086). The findings suggest that the social world of the adolescent matters more than age in exposure to bullying. Schools should strengthen teacher, family and peer support, promote positive peer relations and apply anti-bullying measures across all age groups.

KEYWORDS Bullying experience • Perceived social support • Peer relations • Age • Adolescents • Owerri

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying is commonly defined as repeated, intentional aggression directed at a person who finds it difficult to defend himself or herself because of an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993). The imbalance may rest on physical size or strength, popularity, ability or numbers, and the aggression may be physical, verbal or relational (Nansel

et al., 2001; Volk et al., 2014). Bullying is therefore not ordinary conflict between equals. It is a sustained misuse of power within a relationship, and it usually takes place in front of, or with the knowledge of, other students.

The problem is widespread. UNICEF (2018) estimated that about 150 million students aged 13 to 15 years worldwide experience peer violence in and around school. Across the World Health Organization regions, Biswas et al. (2020) found that the prevalence of bullying victimisation among adolescents was highest in the Eastern Mediterranean (45.1%) and African (43.5%) regions and lowest in Europe (8.4%). A UNESCO (2019) synthesis of global surveys similarly reported that Sub-Saharan Africa had one of the highest rates of school bullying in the world. These figures suggest that adolescents in African schools face a particularly high risk.

The consequences are serious. Meta-analytic evidence links bullying victimisation with depression, anxiety, poor general health, self-harm and suicidal ideation (Holt et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2017). Children who are victimised over long periods tend to show lower school engagement and achievement (Ladd et al., 2017), and the effects may persist into adulthood (Moore et al., 2017). Bullying is therefore both a public health concern and an educational one.

In Nigeria, a national assessment by the Federal Ministry of Education and UNICEF (2007) found that physical and psychological violence were common experiences for children in basic education, with higher rates in the southern part of the country. More recent studies continue to report high levels. In Edo State, about half of the in-school adolescents surveyed by Ighaede-Edwards et al. (2023) had experienced at least one form of bullying, and in Sokoto, Raji et al. (2019) reported that nearly two-thirds of students had been victimised. In Imo State, Onyekuru and Ugwu (2017) found that bullying was associated with anxiety among secondary school students. Yet bullying is still often treated by parents and teachers as a normal part of growing up, which may discourage victims from seeking help.

Much of the Nigerian work has focused on prevalence and on the characteristics of perpetrators. Less attention has been given to the social resources that may protect adolescents from being bullied. Two such resources stand out in the international literature. The first is social support: the perception that one is cared for and can call on family, friends and other significant people in times of need (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Zimet et al., 1988). The second is the quality of peer relations. Adolescents spend much of their day with peers, and friendship, acceptance and peer influence shape both who is targeted and how others respond (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Brown & Larson, 2009). Age is a third factor of interest, since several studies report that the risk of being bullied falls as children grow older (Smith et al., 1999), although the pattern is not consistent across settings (Cook et al., 2010).

Statement of the Problem

Reports from Nigerian schools point to a high and possibly rising level of bullying, with effects on students' emotional health, school attendance and academic performance (Ighaede-Edwards et al., 2023; Onyekuru & Ugwu, 2017). School rules and disciplinary procedures exist in most secondary schools, yet bullying continues, which suggests that rules alone do not address the conditions that leave some students exposed. Weaker students, those with few friends and those who lack adult support appear to be particularly vulnerable.

Despite this, few studies in the South-East of Nigeria have examined how social support and peer relations relate to the experience of being bullied, and whether age makes a separate contribution once these social factors are taken into account. Most available work in the region has concentrated on perpetration or on prevalence. Evidence of this kind is needed to design interventions that go beyond punishment and strengthen the protective resources around students. The present study therefore examined age, perceived social support and peer relations as predictors of bullying experience among secondary school adolescents in Owerri, Imo State.

Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of the study was to examine whether age, perceived social support and peer relations predict bullying experience among secondary school adolescents in Owerri. Specifically, the study sought to determine whether:

1. perceived social support predicts bullying experience among adolescents;
2. peer relations predict bullying experience among adolescents; and
3. age predicts bullying experience among adolescents.

Operational Definition of Terms

Bullying experience refers to the frequency and impact of being the target of deliberate and repeated aggressive behaviour by one or more peers against whom the student has difficulty defending himself or herself. It was measured with the Rufus Bullying Behaviour Scale, and higher scores indicate more bullying experience.

Perceived social support refers to the student's perception of being cared for by, and able to rely on, family, friends and significant others. It was measured with the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988), and higher scores indicate greater perceived support.

Peer relations refers to the quality of the student's relationships with schoolmates and other peers. It was measured with the Index of Peer Relations (Hudson, 1982). Higher scores indicate more problems in peer relations, that is, poorer peer relations.

Age refers to the student's chronological age in completed years, as reported by the participant.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Cognitive Theory

The study draws on Bandura's (1977, 1986) social cognitive theory, which extended earlier social learning theory. The theory holds that people learn not only through direct experience but also by observing others and the consequences that follow their behaviour. For learning to occur, the person must attend to the model, retain what was observed, be able to reproduce it and be motivated to do so. Motivation depends on expected outcomes: behaviour that is seen to be rewarded is more likely to be imitated, while behaviour that is seen to be punished tends to be avoided (Bandura, 1986).

Social cognitive theory also emphasises reciprocal determinism, the continuous interaction among the social environment, personal factors such as beliefs and feelings, and behaviour (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Classic studies showed that children readily imitate aggressive models (Bandura et al., 1961). Within schools, observational studies have found that peers are present in most bullying episodes and that their reactions often reinforce the bully, whether by joining in, watching or failing to intervene (Hawkins et al., 2001; O'Connell et al., 1999).

The theory is useful for understanding victimisation as well as perpetration. If the peer group rewards bullying and offers little defence to the target, students who are isolated or poorly accepted become easy targets, because attacking them carries little social cost. By contrast, students who are well supported by family, teachers and friends are more likely to have defenders, to report incidents and to be seen by would-be bullies as costly targets. Social cognitive theory therefore leads to the expectation that perceived social support will be associated with less bullying experience and that poor peer relations will be associated with more.

The Stress-Buffering Model of Social Support

The stress-buffering model proposes that social support protects people from the harmful effects of stressful events, both by changing how a threat is appraised and by providing practical and emotional resources for coping (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cohen, 2004). Support may be emotional (comfort and care), informational (advice and guidance), companionship-based or tangible (material help). Applied to bullying, the model suggests that supported adolescents are less likely to be singled out, more likely to seek help when they are targeted and better able to recover from incidents (Healy et al., 2024). The model complements social cognitive theory by explaining why the presence of supportive others can reduce both exposure to and the impact of bullying.

3. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Perceived Social Support and Bullying Experience

A consistent body of research links social support to lower bullying victimisation. In a multi-country analysis of school-based surveys, Biswas et al. (2020) found that adolescents who reported support from peers and parents were less likely to be bullied, and that these supports helped to explain regional differences in prevalence. Among Jordanian adolescents, Shaheen et al. (2019) reported that perceived support from family and friends was inversely related to bullying victimisation. Lee et al. (2022) identified distinct patterns of victimisation among school-aged adolescents and found that students with higher social support were less likely to belong to the more severely victimised groups.

Longitudinal evidence points in the same direction. Kendrick et al. (2012) found that supportive friends protected Swedish adolescents against both bullying perpetration and victimisation over time. In a study of 1,425 Australian adolescents followed for six months, Healy et al. (2024) reported that support from classmates and parents reduced the risk of continued victimisation and weakened the link between victimisation and later psychological distress. These findings suggest that social support may act both as a shield against being targeted and as a buffer when bullying does occur.

Peer Relations and Bullying Experience

Peer relations are the relationships formed among people of similar age and status, characterised by interaction, mutual influence and, in their closer forms, friendship (La Greca & Harrison, 2005). In adolescence, the peer group becomes a central source of identity and belonging, and susceptibility to peer influence is at its height (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Brown & Larson, 2009). Poor peer relations, including rejection, few friendships and feelings of alienation, are among the most consistent correlates of victimisation (Cook et al., 2010).

Recent studies support this view. Among German adolescents, Bäker et al. (2023) found that trust in peers reduced the risk of victimisation, while alienation from peers was associated with greater involvement in bullying through poorer emotion regulation. In a two-wave study of low-income Italian adolescents, Bianchi et al. (2021) reported that friendship protected against both bullying and victimisation, whereas general peer acceptance did not. Nigerian studies also point to the importance of peers. In Sokoto, having friends who influenced one's decisions was an independent predictor of victimisation (Raji et al., 2019). In Ilorin, Tinuke et al. (2023) found that peer pressure was significantly related to bullying among private secondary school students, and in Lagos, Adeyemi et al. (2024) reported that peer influence was among the strongest predictors of bullying.

Age and Bullying Experience

Age differences in bullying have been studied for several decades. Smith et al. (1999) observed that self-reports of being bullied decline with age and proposed that younger students are exposed to more potential bullies who are older and stronger, and have not yet developed the social skills needed to deal with them. Children's understanding of bullying also changes with age: younger children tend to define it simply as aggression, while older children and adolescents distinguish its physical and relational forms and recognise the role of power (Monks & Smith, 2006). Using data from 46 countries in the 2017/2018 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey, Cosma et al. (2022) found that traditional bullying victimisation was generally lower among older adolescents.

Nigerian findings are broadly similar. Ighaede-Edwards et al. (2023) reported that students in junior classes were more likely than those in senior classes to be bullied, and Raji et al. (2019) found that being in a junior class predicted victimisation. However, meta-analytic evidence indicates that age is at best a weak predictor once other individual and contextual factors are considered (Cook et al., 2010). It is therefore an open question whether age makes a unique contribution to bullying experience in the presence of social support and peer relations.

Summary of the Literature

The literature reviewed shows that perceived social support and positive peer relations are generally associated with lower victimisation, while the effect of age appears to depend on the setting and on which other variables are considered. Most of this evidence comes from Asia, Europe, Australia and North America. Nigerian studies have mainly described prevalence or examined perpetration, and few have tested social support and peer relations together as predictors of victimisation among adolescents in the South-East. The present study addresses this gap.

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the .05 level of significance:

1. Perceived social support will not significantly predict bullying experience among adolescents in Owerri.
2. Peer relations will not significantly predict bullying experience among adolescents in Owerri.
3. Age will not significantly predict bullying experience among adolescents in Owerri.

4. METHOD

Participants

Participants were 250 students of Owerri City Secondary School and Imo City Girls, Owerri, Imo State. They comprised 157 boys and 93 girls aged 11 to 18 years (M = 14.69, SD = 1.65). Participants were selected by convenience sampling. Because the study focused on the experience of being bullied, only students who reported having been bullied at least once in the 12 months before data collection were included.

Instruments

Three instruments were used: the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, the Index of Peer Relations and the Rufus Bullying Behaviour Scale.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988) is a 12-item measure of perceived support from three sources: family, friends and a significant other. Items are rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 7 (*very strongly agree*). Sample items include "There is a special person who is around when I am in need" and "I can talk about my problems with my friends". The total score is the mean of the 12 items, so scores range from 1 to 7, and higher scores indicate greater perceived support. Zimet et al. (1988) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .88 for the total scale and .85 to .91 for the subscales. Among Nigerian adolescents, Aloba et al. (2019) found that the MSPSS had good internal consistency and the same factor structure for boys and girls.

Index of Peer Relations

The Index of Peer Relations (IPR; Hudson, 1982) is a 25-item measure of the degree, severity or magnitude of problems a person experiences in relationships with peers, such as schoolmates, neighbourhood friends and members of social groups. Items 1, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21 and 22 are reverse-scored, and the remaining items are scored directly. Hudson (1982) reported an alpha coefficient of .94. Higher scores indicate poorer peer relations. Norms reported for Nigerian samples are 29.31 for males and 26.83 for females, and scores above these values indicate problematic peer relations.

Rufus Bullying Behaviour Scale

The Rufus Bullying Behaviour Scale (R-BBS) was developed in 2022 at Model College, Lagos, to provide a culturally relevant assessment of bullying among Nigerian secondary school students. It contains 20 questions in five sections: (a) experience and frequency of bullying; (b) observation of and reactions to bullying among peers; (c) impact on emotional, physical and academic well-being; (d) reporting and responses from authority figures; and (e) attitudes and suggestions for intervention. Frequency items are scored from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating more frequent experience. The developer reported a Cronbach's alpha of .88 across several Nigerian schools. In this study, the scale also served as the screening measure for bullying experience in the previous 12 months.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the Department of Psychology, Imo State University, Owerri. Written permission was also obtained from the Head of the Department and from the vice principals in charge of student affairs in the two schools. The student affairs units were briefed on the aims and procedures of the study, and data were collected during break and free periods to avoid disrupting lessons.

Students were approached individually and in small groups. Each received a brief verbal explanation of the study, and those who showed interest were given a printed information sheet describing the purpose of the research, the type of questions, the voluntary and confidential nature of participation and how the data would be used. Students were told that they could withdraw at any time without penalty and without giving a reason. Those who agreed to take part completed a consent form before receiving the questionnaire pack.

The questionnaires were self-administered. The pack began with the R-BBS, and only students who confirmed that they had been bullied within the previous 12 months went on to complete the remaining instruments. Those who did not meet this criterion were thanked and excused. Questionnaires that were not properly completed were removed during coding, and the final sample consisted of 250 participants.

Design and Statistics

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design, which allows data to be collected from a relatively large group at one point in time. Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationships among the variables, and standard multiple regression, with all three predictors entered together, was used to test the hypotheses. Analyses were conducted at the .05 level of significance.

5. RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of the study variables.

Table 1. *Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of the study variables (N = 250)*

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Bullying experience	11.12	4.83	—			
2. Age	14.69	1.65	−.19**	—		
3. Perceived social support	4.08	2.06	−.91**	.16*	—	
4. Peer relations	45.04	16.25	.63**	−.13*	−.59**	—

Higher peer relations scores indicate poorer peer relations. Single asterisk, p < .05; double asterisk, p < .01.

The mean bullying experience score of 11.12 was above the scale norm of 7, which indicates that participants, all of whom had been bullied in the previous year, reported a relatively high level of bullying experience. The mean perceived social support score of 4.08 lies near the middle of the 1 to 7 range and suggests a moderate level of support. The mean peer relations score of 45.04 was well above the Nigerian norms, which indicates that participants, on average, reported poor peer relations.

Bullying experience had a strong negative correlation with perceived social support, $r(248) = -.91$, $p < .01$, and a moderate positive correlation with peer relations scores, $r(248) = .63$, $p < .01$. Because higher IPR scores indicate poorer peer relations, the second correlation means that students with poorer peer relations reported more bullying experience. Age had a weak negative correlation with bullying experience, $r(248) = -.19$, $p < .01$. Age was also weakly and positively related to perceived social support, $r(248) = .16$, $p < .05$, and weakly and negatively related to peer relations scores, $r(248) = -.13$, $p < .05$. Perceived social support and peer relations scores were moderately and negatively correlated, $r(248) = -.59$, $p < .01$.

Table 2 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis.

Table 2. *Multiple regression of bullying experience on age, perceived social support and peer relations*

Predictor	β	*t*	*p*	VIF
Age	−.05	−1.72	.086	1.03
Perceived social support	−.82	−25.30	< .001	1.54
Peer relations	.14	4.42	< .001	1.53
$R = .914$; $R^2 = .835$; adjusted $R^2 = .833$				
$F(3, 246) = 414.30$, $p < .001$				

Dependent variable: bullying experience. β = standardised regression coefficient; VIF = variance inflation factor.

The three predictors together explained 83.5% of the variance in bullying experience, $R^2 = .835$, adjusted $R^2 = .833$, $F(3, 246) = 414.30$, $p < .001$. Variance inflation factors were between 1.03 and 1.54, which indicates that multicollinearity among the predictors was not a concern.

The first hypothesis, which stated that perceived social support would not significantly predict bullying experience, was rejected. Perceived social support was a significant negative predictor of bullying experience, $\beta = -.82$, $t = -25.30$, $p < .001$, and was the strongest of the three predictors. Students who perceived more support reported less bullying experience.

The second hypothesis, which stated that peer relations would not significantly predict bullying experience, was also rejected. Peer relations scores were a significant positive predictor, $\beta = .14$, $t = 4.42$, $p < .001$. Students

with poorer peer relations reported more bullying experience, even after perceived social support and age had been taken into account.

The third hypothesis, which stated that age would not significantly predict bullying experience, was retained. Although age had a weak zero-order correlation with bullying experience, it did not make a significant unique contribution when perceived social support and peer relations were controlled, $\beta = -.05$, $t = -1.72$, $p = .086$.

6. DISCUSSION

This study examined age, perceived social support and peer relations as predictors of bullying experience among adolescents in Owerri who had been bullied in the previous year. Taken together, the three variables accounted for a large share of the variance in bullying experience, and the two social variables carried almost all of this effect.

The first finding was that perceived social support was the strongest predictor: students who felt more supported by family, friends and significant others reported less bullying experience. This agrees with studies from several regions that have found lower victimisation among adolescents who report support from parents and peers (Biswas et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Shaheen et al., 2019), and with longitudinal work showing that support from classmates and parents reduces the risk of continued victimisation (Healy et al., 2024; Kendrick et al., 2012). From the standpoint of social cognitive theory, supported students are more likely to have defenders and less likely to be seen as targets whose mistreatment will go unchallenged. From the standpoint of the stress-buffering model, they are also more likely to seek help, to report incidents and to recover, which may reduce the frequency and impact of the bullying they experience (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

The size of the association deserves caution. A correlation of −.91 between perceived social support and bullying experience is much larger than the small to moderate associations usually reported in the literature (Cook et al., 2010; Shaheen et al., 2019). Part of this may reflect the use of self-reports collected at the same time, which can inflate associations, and part may reflect overlap in content, since the bullying measure includes items on reporting and on responses from authority figures, which are themselves forms of support. The relationship is also likely to run in both directions: victimised students may withdraw from others or be avoided by them, which reduces the support they perceive (Guo et al., 2022). The direction and true strength of the effect should therefore be examined in longitudinal studies with separate measures of support and victimisation.

The second finding was that poorer peer relations predicted more bullying experience, independently of perceived social support and age. This is consistent with evidence that friendship and trust in peers protect adolescents against victimisation, while alienation and rejection increase the risk (Bäker et al., 2023; Bianchi et al., 2021). It also fits Nigerian studies that point to the role of peers in bullying (Adeyemi et al., 2024; Raji et al., 2019; Tinuke et al., 2023). Students with few friends or weak standing in the peer group have fewer people who will defend them, and they may be singled out precisely because attacking them carries little risk. The mean peer relations score in this sample was well above the Nigerian norms, which suggests that poor peer relations were common among students who had been bullied. The unique effect of peer relations was smaller than that of social support, probably because the two overlap: friends are one of the sources of support measured by the MSPSS.

The third finding was that age did not make a unique contribution to bullying experience. Age had a weak negative correlation with bullying experience, which is in line with reports that younger students are more often bullied (Cosma et al., 2022; Ighaede-Edwards et al., 2023; Smith et al., 1999). However, this association largely disappeared once social support and peer relations were controlled. One possible explanation is that the age effect works through social factors: older students in this sample reported slightly more support and slightly better peer relations, and it may be these resources, rather than age itself, that reduce the risk. The result agrees with meta-analytic evidence that age is a weak predictor of victimisation (Cook et al., 2010). The restricted age range and the fact that only students who had been bullied were included may also have limited the variation available to detect an age effect.

Implications of the Study

The findings have several implications for schools, counsellors and parents. First, because age did not make a unique contribution, anti-bullying efforts should not be limited to junior classes but should reach students at all levels. Second, the strong link between perceived support and bullying experience suggests that schools should strengthen the networks of support around students. Warm teacher and student relationships, involved parents and accessible counselling services may make students less likely to be targeted and more likely to report

incidents. Third, the role of peer relations suggests that interventions should build positive peer connections. Social and emotional learning programmes, peer mentoring, cooperative learning and buddy systems can help isolated students form friendships and can encourage bystanders to defend rather than reinforce the bully.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow conclusions about cause and effect, and the relationship between support and bullying experience may run in both directions. Second, all variables were measured by self-report at one time, which may have inflated the associations, particularly the very large correlation between social support and bullying experience. Third, the sample was drawn by convenience from two schools in Owerri and included only students who had been bullied, so the findings may not apply to all adolescents in Imo State or to students who have not been bullied. Fourth, the bullying measure is relatively new, and further evidence of its validity is needed. Finally, other relevant variables, such as self-esteem, family background, school climate and cyberbullying, were not included.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Future studies should use longitudinal designs to establish the direction of the relationships among social support, peer relations and bullying experience. Larger random samples from public and private, urban and rural, and day and boarding schools would improve generalisation. Researchers should also include students who have not been bullied, use peer or teacher reports alongside self-reports, and examine other variables such as self-esteem, susceptibility to peer pressure, emotional intelligence, school climate and online victimisation.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined age, perceived social support and peer relations as predictors of bullying experience among secondary school adolescents in Owerri. Perceived social support was the strongest predictor and was associated with less bullying experience, and poorer peer relations were associated with more bullying experience. Age did not make a unique contribution once these social factors were considered. The findings suggest that exposure to bullying depends more on the social connections around the adolescent than on age. Strengthening support from teachers, families and peers, and building positive peer relations, may reduce bullying and improve the well-being of students.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Schools should strengthen support systems for students by encouraging close teacher and student relationships, involving parents in school life and making counselling services easy to reach.
2. School counsellors and psychologists should introduce social and emotional learning programmes that build students' interpersonal skills, coping abilities and confidence.
3. Peer mentoring and buddy systems should be established to help isolated students build positive peer relationships, and bystanders should be taught how to support victims safely.
4. School administrators should adopt clear anti-bullying policies that apply to all classes, provide safe and confidential reporting channels and respond consistently to reported incidents.
5. Parents should be encouraged to talk regularly with their children about their experiences in school and to report concerns to the school promptly.

DECLARATIONS

Ethical approval: The study was approved by the ethics committee of the Department of Psychology, Imo State University, Owerri. Permission was obtained from the participating schools, and participants gave informed consent.

Competing interests: The author declares no competing interests.

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