Socio Cultural Causes of Suicide Among Nigerian Youth: A Myth or Reality

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Abstract

This study investigates the socio-cultural causes of suicide among Nigerian youth, addressing whether these causes are a myth or reality. Suicide is a significant global issue, ranking as the third leading cause of death among youth aged 15 to 30. In Nigeria, the phenomenon is particularly alarming, with societal stigma surrounding mental health, high familial expectations, and economic hardships contributing to rising suicide rates. The study employed a descriptive survey research design, the study examines young adults aged 18-35 in Ijebu communities of Ogun State. A sample of 300 respondents was selected using a multi-stage sampling technique, and data were collected via structured questionnaires. Findings reveal that cyberbullying, financial difficulties, and academic pressures significantly contribute to suicidal thoughts among Nigerian youth. Family dynamics, cultural beliefs, and social norms also play critical roles. The study concludes that the socio-cultural factors influencing suicide among Nigerian youth are both myth and reality, necessitating comprehensive strategies that integrate cultural sensitivity with accessible mental health resources. It is therefore recommended that government should increase public awareness about the socio-cultural factors contributing to youth suicide to dispel myths and highlight the realities of the issue.

Keywords: *Socio-cultural causes, Suicide, Nigerian youth, Mental health, Stigma, Economic hardship*

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Background to the Study

Suicide is a significant social problem worldwide, ranking as the third leading cause of death for youths aged 15 to 30 years (Izadina et al., 2010). It poses a global threat to peaceful existence due to its increasing occurrence in both developed and developing nations. This suggests widespread dissatisfaction with personal situations and environmental realities (Nwanyanwu and Okowa, 2017; Okoedion and Okolie, 2019). For instance, suicide accounts for 1.5% of deaths, with suicidal ideation often beginning in adolescence across various countries (Nock et al., 2008). The World Health Organization (WHO) reported in 2016 that over 800,000 people die by suicide each year, with the SUPRE program estimating this number to be around one million annually (Adedeji et al., 2019).

The Public Health Agency of Canada (2018) defines suicide as a fatal act with evidence of intent to die, with suicidal behavior ranging from suicidal thoughts to attempts and completed suicides. Identifying youths contemplating suicide is challenging because they often keep their struggles to themselves, avoiding discussions about their problems, thoughts, and feelings. This concealment means that those close to them, including parents, may be unaware of the severity of their distress or their suicidal thoughts (Blisen, 2018). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019), suicide is a deliberate act performed by a person with the full awareness of its fatal outcome. WHO (2012) reported that over one million people die by suicide each year. In 2013, WHO highlighted that the high prevalence of suicide is particularly concerning as it affects many young adolescents. By 2015, WHO noted that suicide occurs across all age groups and is the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 15 to 35. Early adolescence to young adulthood sees the largest increase in suicide deaths (WHO, 2017). Suicide is the second leading cause of death for adolescents worldwide (WHO, 2017). Each year, an average of 100,000 youths dies by suicide, making youth suicidal behavior a serious social problem in Nigeria and many other countries (WHO, 2018).

Suicide among teens and adolescents is a growing public health concern worldwide. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues due to the anxiety and uncertainty that accompany the transition to adulthood. This period often leaves them feeling isolated from family and peers, with the pressures of self-doubt, confusion, and the need to succeed or conform taking a heavy toll on troubled youths. Blisen (2018) noted that young people must make significant life decisions, build their identities, develop self-esteem, gain independence, and form new intimate relationships. They face psychological and physical changes and often encounter high expectations from family and peers, leading to feelings of helplessness, insecurity, stress, and a loss of control (Crattenn, Sawyer, Ross & Atten, 2016). Some may see suicide as a permanent solution to their problems (Collins, 2017). Denga (2015) observed that suicide attempts are becoming increasingly common in Nigeria and other African countries due to rising distress caused by unemployment, poverty, and other forms of frustration.

Nigeria, with its rich tapestry of ethnicities, traditions, and cultural practices, provides a unique backdrop for understanding the socio-cultural dimensions of suicide. The country's diverse cultural landscape influences the behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes of its youth.

Traditional norms, family structures, and community dynamics play significant roles in shaping the mental health and well-being of young Nigerians. One of the critical socio-cultural factors influencing suicide among Nigerian youth is the societal stigma surrounding mental health. In many Nigerian communities, mental health issues are often misunderstood and stigmatized, leading to a lack of support and resources for those in need. This stigma can prevent young people from seeking help, exacerbating their struggles and increasing the risk of suicide. Understanding the cultural perceptions of mental health is essential in addressing this barrier and providing appropriate support for vulnerable youth (Ngwu, Arop, Ntui & Oshima, 2023).

A suicide attempt occurs when individuals harm themselves with the intention of ending their lives but do not succeed. Suicide, on the other hand, is when individuals inflict fatal violence upon themselves. It is recommended to avoid terms like "committing suicide" or "effective suicide" as they can be derogatory. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), men are more likely to die by suicide, while women are more likely to attempt it. Men tend to use more lethal methods such as firearms or suffocation, whereas women more often resort to methods like poisoning. Suicide is a major public health issue in the United States and a leading cause of death. The impact of suicide extends beyond the individual, leaving lasting effects on families, friends, and communities (National Mental Health Institute, 2019).

Family dynamics and expectations also play a pivotal role in the mental health of Nigerian youth. In many Nigerian families, there is immense pressure on young people to succeed academically and professionally. The high expectations placed on them can lead to feelings of inadequacy and failure, particularly when they are unable to meet these standards. The pressure to conform to familial and societal expectations can create a significant burden, contributing to feelings of hopelessness and despair. According to WHO data from 2018, an estimated 800,000 people die by suicide annually, and Nigeria ranks among the top suicide-prone countries. The World Population Review reports that Nigeria has a suicide rate of 9.5 per 100,000 population, ranking 10th in Africa and 67th globally. In Europe, suicide is the second leading cause of death among youths aged 15-19, and the most frequent cause of death among females aged 15-19 (WHO Mental Health, 2018). Kutie (2016) observed that girls attempt suicide more frequently than boys, and that gay and lesbian youths are more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.

Furthermore, the role of traditional beliefs and practices cannot be overlooked in the context of suicide among Nigerian youth. In some communities, there are cultural taboos and superstitions associated with suicide, which hinder open discussions and prevent effective intervention. Traditional healers and religious leaders often play influential roles in these communities, and their attitudes towards mental health and suicide can either support or impede efforts to address the issue (Abdu-Raheem & Alonge, 2021). The influence of peer pressure and social media is another crucial aspect to consider. In the digital age, Nigerian youth are increasingly exposed to global cultures and ideals through social media platforms. The pressure to conform to unrealistic standards of beauty, success, and lifestyle leads to

feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Cyberbullying and online harassment further exacerbate these issues, creating a toxic environment that pushs vulnerable youth towards suicidal thoughts and actions (Abdu-Raheem & Alonge, 2021).

In Nigeria, between January and August 2019, there were 13 reported suicide cases among students in tertiary institutions (Olufemi, 2019). One university alone recorded 13 suicides that year, and students in tertiary institutions accounted for the majority of 42 Nigerian youths who committed suicide within a six-month period. Methods included ingesting poison, hanging, self-inflicted wounds, drowning, and self-immolation. Denigwe, Eke, and Ngwu (2022) noted an increase in youth suicides in recent times, often making headlines with tragic stories of individuals taking their own lives due to various pressures and hardships. Economic factors also contribute to the socio-cultural causes of suicide among Nigerian youth. High levels of unemployment and poverty lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair. The lack of economic opportunities and the struggle to attain financial stability can weigh heavily on young people, leading them to perceive suicide as a way out of their dire circumstances. The intersection of economic hardship and mental health is a critical area that requires attention and intervention (Denigwe, Eke & Ngwu, 2022).

The phenomenon of suicide among Nigerian youth is increasingly alarming, raising urgent questions about its socio-cultural underpinnings. Despite Nigeria's rich tapestry of ethnicities, traditions, and cultural practices that are often seen as sources of strength and community cohesion, these same elements contribute to the pressures leading to suicidal behaviors. Traditional norms and high familial expectations impose significant psychological burdens on young individuals. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is fraught with challenges, and the stigmatization of mental health issues further exacerbates the situation, often leaving youths without adequate support. This study seeks to explore whether the socio-cultural factors in Nigeria are significant contributors to the rising rates of youth suicide, or if these occurrences are better understood through a different lens, thus questioning whether the perceived socio-cultural causes are a myth or a stark reality.

Objective of the Study
The objective of this study is to examine the socio-cultural causes of suicide among Nigerian youth: A myth or reality. Specially, objectives are:
  i. To investigate the relationship between sociocultural factors and suicide among Nigerian youth.
  ii. To explore whether cultural beliefs, social norms, and environmental factors are contributing to the incidence of suicide among Nigerian youth.

Research Questions
  i. What is the relationship between sociocultural factors and suicide among Nigerian youth?
  ii. How do cultural beliefs, social norms, and environmental factors contribute to the incidence of suicide among Nigerian youth?

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive survey research design to investigate the socio-cultural causes of suicide among Nigerian youth in the Ijebu axis, examining whether these causes are perceived as myth or reality. The population under study comprises young adults aged 18-35 years residing in the Ijebu communities of Ogun State. A multi-stage sampling technique was utilized. First, Ijebu communities within Ogun State were selected purposively based on their demographic representation. Second, random sampling was employed to select participants from each community.

The sample size consists of 300 respondents, drawn proportionally from different age groups and gender within the selected communities. A structured questionnaire was developed specifically for this study. The questionnaire includes both closed-ended and Likert scale questions to explore perceptions on various socio-cultural factors contributing to suicidal behaviors among youth. The questionnaire undergoes face validity by experts in psychology and sociology to ensure it captures the intended variables. A pilot study was conducted with 30 respondents to assess clarity and understanding of the questionnaire items, followed by adjustments as necessary. Trained research assistants fluent in the local dialects administer the questionnaires to the selected respondents. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality and anonymity in their responses. Data collected were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency were used to summarize the data. Chi-square test was employed to examine relationships between socio-cultural variables and perceptions of suicide among youth in the Ijebu axis.

Presentation of Data Analysis and Results Discussion

Table 1: What is the relationship between sociocultural factors and suicide among Nigerian youth?

S/N	ITEMS	Agreed		Disagreed		Mean	S.D
		Freq (N)	Percent %	Freq (N)	Percent %	(x)	
1	Cyberbullying and negative interactions on social media contribute to suicidal thoughts in Nigerian youth.	208	69.3	92	30.7	3.8	.79
2	Financial difficulties and lack of job opportunities contribute to mental health issues in Nigerian youth.	181	60.3	119	39.7	3.5	.77
3	High expectations and stress associated with academic performance contribute to suicidal thoughts in Nigerian youth.	177	59	123	41	3.4	.75
Overall Total		Mean (x) = 3.57 and STD = 0.79					

Table 1 above shows the relationship between sociocultural factors and suicide among Nigerian youth. These findings indicate that cyberbullying and negative interactions on social

media contribute to suicidal thoughts in Nigerian youth (x = 3.8, SD = 0.79), financial difficulties and lack of job opportunities contribute to mental health issues in Nigerian youth (x = 3.5, SD = 0.77), and high expectations and stress associated with academic performance contribute to suicidal thoughts in Nigerian youth (x = 3.4, SD = 0.75). This reveals that the mean and standard deviation of the items listed above is very high (x = 3.57, SD = 0.79) showing there is relationship between sociocultural factors and suicide among Nigerian youth. Supporting these findings, Olumide et al. (2019) found that negative experiences on social media, such as cyberbullying, significantly increased the risk of suicidal thoughts among Nigerian youth. Their study highlighted the detrimental impact of online interactions on mental health. Additionally, Olawale and Adeyemi (2018) demonstrated that financial stress and unemployment were closely linked to mental health issues and suicidal behavior among Nigerian young adults, reinforcing the relationship between economic difficulties and suicide. Furthermore, Okeke and Nnamani (2020) reported that academic pressure and high expectations were significant contributors to stress and suicidal ideation among students, indicating that academic stress is a critical factor in youth suicide.

Table 2: How do Cultural beliefs, social norms, and Environmental Factors contribute to the Incidence of suicide among Nigerian youth?

S/N	ITEMS	YES		NO		Mean (x)	S.D
		Freq (N)	Percent %	Freq (N)	Percent %		
1	Family issues, including lack of communication and understanding, are seen as contributors to youth suicide in Nigeria.	101	67.3	49	32.7	3.7	.77
2	The desire to conform to peer expectations leads to mental distress and suicidal behaviour in Nigerian youth.	107	71.3	43	28.7	3.9	.78
3	Poor living conditions and economic hardships contribute to mental health issues in Nigerian youth.	98	65.3	52	34.7	3.8	.77
Overall Total		Mean (x) = 3.57 and STD = 0.77					

Table 2 above shows the how cultural beliefs, social norms, and environmental factors contribute to the incidence of suicide among Nigerian youth. These findings indicate that family issues, including lack of communication and understanding, are seen as contributors to youth suicide in Nigeria (x = 3.7, SD = 0.77), desire to conform to peer expectations leads to mental distress and suicidal behaviour in Nigerian youth (x = 3.9, SD = 0.78) and poor living conditions and economic hardships contribute to mental health issues in Nigerian youth (x = 3.8, SD = 0.77). This shows that cultural beliefs, social norms, and environmental factors contribute to the incidence of suicide among Nigerian youth. In line with these findings, Adebayo and Olorunfemi (2017) found that family dysfunction and poor communication significantly contributed to mental health problems and suicidal tendencies among Nigerian youth. Their research emphasized the importance of family support in preventing youth

suicide. Similarly, Babalola et al. (2019) highlighted that peer pressure and the desire to meet peer expectations were major sources of mental distress, leading to suicidal behavior among young Nigerians. Their study showed the influence of social norms and peer relationships on mental health. Additionally, Ibrahim and Ojediran (2020) demonstrated that poor living conditions and economic hardships were strongly associated with mental health issues and increased suicide risk among Nigerian youth, underscoring the impact of environmental factors on mental well-being.

Conclusion

The socio-cultural causes of suicide among Nigerian youth are a significant concern that straddles the line between myth and reality. On one hand, traditional beliefs and cultural stigmas surrounding mental health issues often lead to underreporting and misinterpretation of suicide cases. Cultural norms that prioritize communal living and family reputation sometimes mask the underlying mental health struggles of individuals. In such settings, youth facing severe emotional distress feel pressured to conform to societal expectations, which exacerbate feelings of isolation and hopelessness. The myth aspect arises when these socio-cultural factors are either exaggerated or dismissed without recognizing their nuanced influence on the mental well-being of Nigerian youth.

On the other hand, the reality of socio-cultural influences cannot be ignored. The interplay of economic hardships, high unemployment rates, and societal pressures significantly impacts the mental health of young Nigerians. The lack of adequate mental health services and the prevailing stigma associated with seeking psychological help contribute to a growing crisis. Cultural factors, such as the emphasis on resilience and the taboo of discussing personal struggles, often deter youth from seeking necessary support. Therefore, addressing the socio-cultural causes of suicide among Nigerian youth requires a balanced understanding that acknowledges both the cultural myths and the harsh realities impacting their mental health. Comprehensive strategies that integrate cultural sensitivity with accessible mental health resources are essential for effectively mitigating this pressing issue.

Recommendations

From the foregoing discussion, the following recommendations were made;

  i.   Government should increase public awareness about the socio-cultural factors contributing to youth suicide to dispel myths and highlight the realities of the issue.
  ii.   Government should integrate mental health education into school curricula to help students recognize and address mental health issues early.
  iii. Establish support systems within communities, including counseling centers and helplines, to provide accessible mental health resources.
  iv.   Government should provide training for mental health professionals to understand and address cultural beliefs and norms impacting Nigerian youth.
  v.   Develop peer-led education programs that empower young people to support each other and reduce the stigma associated with seeking help.
  vi.   Government should also implement initiatives aimed at economic empowerment to alleviate financial stressors that contribute to mental health issues.

vii. Encourage active parental involvement in their children's lives to foster open communication and understanding within families.

viii. Support ongoing research to continuously monitor and understand the socio-cultural causes of suicide among Nigerian youth, ensuring interventions remain relevant and effective.

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