



A culturally nuanced exploration of adolescent career decision-making and mental health challenges

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Abstract

Purpose - This study examines the complex relationship between career decision-making and mental health challenges among adolescents, with a focus on the sociocultural factors that influence their experiences.

Method - A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with adolescents aged 15 to 18. Secondary participants, including teachers, counsellors, and parents, provided additional perspectives.

Results - The findings reveal that adolescents' career choices are shaped by parental expectations, peer influences, cultural norms, and gender roles. These factors contribute to increased stress, anxiety, and indecision. Urban adolescents reported feeling overwhelmed by societal expectations and the abundance of career options, whereas rural adolescents faced restricted opportunities and societal pressure to follow traditional career paths. Furthermore, inadequate access to career guidance and mental health support services exacerbated these challenges.

Implications - The study highlights the necessity for culturally adapted interventions that integrate career counselling and mental health support. Such interventions can empower adolescents to make informed career decisions while addressing their emotional well-being.

Originality/Value - This research provides constructive insights into the underexplored relationship between mental health and career decision-making within sociocultural contexts in Nigeria. It highlights the importance of addressing sociocultural dynamics to develop effective support systems for adolescents in diverse settings.

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Abstract

Tujuan - Penelitian ini mengkaji hubungan kompleks antara pengambilan keputusan karier dan tantangan kesehatan mental di kalangan remaja, dengan fokus pada faktor sosiokultural yang memengaruhi pengalaman mereka.

Metode - Desain penelitian kualitatif digunakan, dengan menggunakan wawancara mendalam dan diskusi kelompok terfokus dengan remaja berusia 15 hingga 18 tahun. Partisipan sekunder, termasuk guru, konselor, dan orang tua, memberikan perspektif tambahan.

Hasil - Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pilihan karier remaja dibentuk oleh harapan orang tua, pengaruh teman sebaya, norma budaya, dan peran gender. Faktor-faktor ini berkontribusi pada peningkatan stres, kecemasan, dan keraguan. Remaja di perkotaan melaporkan bahwa mereka merasa terbebani oleh ekspektasi masyarakat dan banyaknya pilihan karier, sedangkan remaja di pedesaan menghadapi kesempatan yang terbatas dan tekanan masyarakat untuk mengikuti jalur karier tradisional. Selain itu, akses yang tidak memadai terhadap bimbingan karier dan layanan dukungan kesehatan mental memperparah tantangan-tantangan ini.

Implikasi - Studi ini menyoroti perlunya intervensi yang disesuaikan dengan budaya yang mengintegrasikan konseling karier dan dukungan kesehatan mental. Intervensi semacam itu dapat memberdayakan remaja untuk membuat keputusan karier yang tepat sambil menangani kesejahteraan emosional mereka.

Keaslian/Nilai - Penelitian ini memberikan wawasan konstruktif tentang hubungan yang belum dieksplorasi antara kesehatan mental dan pengambilan keputusan karier dalam konteks sosiokultural di Nigeria. Penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya menangani dinamika sosiokultural untuk mengembangkan sistem dukungan yang efektif bagi remaja di lingkungan yang beragam.

Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by significant psychological, emotional, and social changes, which are often intertwined with the process of career decision-making. This period is characterized by increased self-awareness and exploration of identity, making it essential for adolescents to make informed career choices that align with their aspirations and abilities. However, this process is frequently complicated by mental health challenges, which can exacerbate the stress associated with career indecision. Research indicates that adolescents experiencing mental health issues are more likely to struggle with making career choices, leading to a cyclical pattern of anxiety and indecisiveness that can hinder their future prospects (Khan & Rehman, 2019; Lin & Guo, 2024).

The intersection of psychology and culture plays an essential role in shaping adolescents' perceptions of their futures and their emotional well-being. In diverse contexts like Nigeria, sociocultural factors significantly influence how adolescents navigate career decisions. For instance, familial expectations often dictate the paths that young people feel compelled to follow, while socioeconomic disparities can limit access to resources that facilitate informed decision-making (Anwuzia, 2021; Oluwole & Ibrahim Umar, 2013). Additionally, the rural-urban divide presents unique challenges; urban adolescents may face an overwhelming array of career options leading to anxiety and indecision, whereas their rural counterparts may encounter limited guidance and societal pressure to adhere to traditional vocational paths (Joseph & Julius O., 2017; Khan & Rehman, 2019).

Preliminary studies conducted in local schools and organizations have illuminated these challenges. Urban adolescents report feeling overwhelmed by the plethora of career options available to them, which can lead to heightened levels of anxiety and indecision about their future careers (Khan & Rehman, 2019). Conversely, rural adolescents often struggle with inadequate access to career guidance resources. They frequently face societal expectations to pursue practical or traditional careers, which may not align with their personal interests or aspirations (Anwuzia, 2021; Joseph & Julius O., 2017). This pressure to conform to familial and cultural norms further exacerbates stress and contributes to mental health struggles among adolescents in both urban and rural settings. The implications of these findings are profound. Adolescents' mental health is closely linked to their ability to make informed career decisions. Research highlights that difficulties in making career choices can lead to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and even depressive symptoms (Lin & Guo, 2024; Schlack et al., 2021). Furthermore, the role of parental involvement has been shown to significantly influence adolescents' career decision-making processes. Studies indicate that supportive parenting can enhance self-efficacy and reduce indecisiveness among adolescents, ultimately fostering better mental health outcomes (Oluwole & Ibrahim Umar, 2013; Psychological Association, 2019).

This research endeavors to expand upon initial findings by incorporating insights related to career decision-making and mental health. It aims to tackle the diverse challenges encountered by adolescents in Nigeria through an in-depth examination of how sociocultural elements influence their career selections and overall mental well-being. By gaining a deeper understanding of these interactions, we can enhance the effectiveness of interventions aimed at assisting adolescents in successfully navigating this pivotal phase of their development. Ultimately, as the landscape of career opportunities becomes increasingly intricate, it is crucial to provide adolescents with the essential resources to make well-informed decisions regarding their futures. This study will offer significant perspectives on the

relationship between cultural factors, mental health, and the processes involved in career decision-making among adolescents in these areas.

Research Method

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This research employed a purely qualitative approach to explore the intricate and contextual factors influencing career decision-making and mental health among adolescents in Nigeria. A qualitative design was chosen to uncover the subjective experiences, perceptions, and emotions of adolescents, as well as the sociocultural dynamics shaping their career choices and mental health challenges. The qualitative approach was ideal for this study as it allowed for a deeper understanding of the complex and personal nature of career decision-making and mental health. Career choices and mental health struggles are deeply individual and shaped by context, making it difficult for quantitative methods to fully capture the intricacies of participants' experiences. Additionally, given the study's focus on Nigeria, qualitative methods were particularly effective in incorporating cultural and contextual nuances, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected the realities of the adolescents involved. Mental health challenges often require emotional and psychological reflection, and qualitative methods provided the opportunity for participants to share their stories, revealing the underlying causes of stress and indecision. Finally, the qualitative design empowered participants to lead the conversation through interviews and focus groups, allowing their perspectives to shape the study's findings.

The study was grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the participants' lived experiences. This approach acknowledges that individuals' perceptions of their realities are shaped by cultural norms, family dynamics, and social contexts. By adopting this philosophy, the research focused on understanding how adolescents interpret their career decision-making experiences within specific cultural and psychological frameworks, rather than imposing external, predetermined categories of analysis.

The study also drew on elements of interpretivism, which emphasizes the importance of context and meaning-making in human behavior. This perspective was particularly relevant, as the research aimed to understand how cultural nuances, gender expectations, and societal pressures influence adolescents' emotional well-being and career aspirations in urban and rural settings.

Individual interviews were conducted with adolescents to explore their personal career aspirations, mental health struggles, and the sociocultural factors influencing their decisions. These interviews provided a safe space for participants to openly discuss the challenges and pressures they faced, such as parental expectations, peer influence, and gender roles. By using open-ended questions, the interviews encouraged participants to provide detailed responses, allowing for the emergence of unexpected themes that offered deeper insight into their experiences.

Focus groups were organized to foster dialogue among adolescents, creating a platform for them to share and reflect on their experiences. These discussions provided valuable insights into shared experiences within their communities. Separate focus groups were conducted for urban and rural participants, which helped identify differences in access to career resources, societal pressures, and cultural expectations. The group setting allowed participants to reflect on their challenges collaboratively, facilitating a dynamic exchange of ideas that enriched the overall data.

In addition to the adolescent participants, interviews were conducted with teachers, counselors, and parents to gather contextual information on the support systems available to adolescents and the

cultural attitudes toward career decisions. These secondary perspectives helped triangulate the data, providing a broader understanding of the challenges adolescents face in making career decisions and highlighting the role of external influences, such as family and educators.

Both interviews and focus group discussions were conducted online, using secure video conferencing platforms. This method of data collection allowed for flexible scheduling and ensured that participants from diverse geographic locations could participate without the constraints of travel. The online format also provided a comfortable and accessible environment for participants to share their experiences openly, ensuring rich and detailed data was collected.

The qualitative data collected from interviews and focus groups underwent thematic analysis, a process that involved several key steps:

1. **Transcription:** All interviews and discussions were transcribed verbatim to capture the full depth of participants' responses.
2. **Coding:** The transcribed data was systematically coded to identify key patterns and recurring themes related to career decision-making and mental health.
3. **Theme Categorization:** Identified themes were grouped under broader constructs, such as parental influence, peer pressure, gender expectations, and mental health stressors, to facilitate a clearer understanding of the issues adolescents faced.
4. **Contextualization:** Themes were analyzed and interpreted within the cultural and psychological frameworks Nigeria, ensuring that the findings were both relevant and culturally sensitive.

By grounding the study in a constructivist and interpretivist philosophy, the qualitative design facilitated a rich and nuanced exploration of the complex relationships between career decision-making and mental health. This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of how cultural contexts in Nigeria shaped adolescents' experiences and decisions.

The study involved two key groups of participants, chosen to provide a deep and nuanced understanding of the factors influencing career decision-making and mental health among adolescents in Nigeria.

1. **Adolescent Participants:** A total of 40 adolescents, aged 15 to 18, participated in the study. These adolescents were selected from both urban and rural areas in Nigeria. The participants were chosen to ensure a variety of experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds, allowing for a rich exploration of how career decisions and mental health struggles are influenced by cultural norms, family expectations, and peer pressures. By focusing on a smaller, diverse group, the study was able to delve deeply into the personal narratives of the adolescents.
2. **Secondary Participants:** In addition to the adolescent participants, 10 secondary participants were included. This group consisted of teachers, school counselors, and parents, who provided important contextual insights into the support systems available to adolescents and the cultural attitudes that shape career decisions. The smaller number of secondary participants allowed for more focused and meaningful discussions regarding the external factors influencing adolescents' decision-making processes.

The relatively smaller sample size was intentional to facilitate in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, which allowed participants to share their experiences and perspectives in a detailed and

thoughtful manner. This approach enabled a thorough exploration of the qualitative data, ensuring rich and meaningful findings.

The participants were recruited online, utilizing various digital platforms to reach adolescents, teachers, school counsellors, and parents across Nigeria. Online recruitment allowed for a broad reach and ensured diversity in the sample, with participants from both urban and rural areas able to participate.

Adolescents were recruited through schools, social media platforms, and community organizations, which facilitated access to individuals within the target age group (15 to 18 years). Invitations to participate in the study were shared via these platforms, along with clear explanations of the study's purpose, the confidentiality of responses, and the voluntary nature of participation. Interested participants were asked to complete a brief screening questionnaire to ensure they met the eligibility criteria (age and geographic location).

Teachers, school counsellors, and parents were also recruited through online networks, including educational forums, social media groups, and email outreach to local schools and community organizations. Similar to the adolescent recruitment process, these participants were provided with detailed information about the study and invited to contribute their perspectives through online interviews.

The research procedure unfolded in several phases:

1. Preliminary Phase: The initial phase involved collaboration with local schools and organizations to refine culturally relevant data collection tools.
2. Data Collection: Both interviews and focus group discussions were conducted online, using secure video conferencing platforms. This method of data collection allowed for flexible scheduling and ensured that participants from diverse geographic locations could participate without the constraints of travel. The online format also provided a comfortable and accessible environment for participants to share their experiences openly, ensuring rich and detailed data was collected.
3. Data Analysis: The qualitative data obtained from interviews and focus groups underwent thematic analysis to identify patterns, cultural nuances, and key themes that emerged from participants' narratives

The participants in this study were selected to represent a diverse range of sociocultural contexts, with attention to factors such as age, gender, geographic location, and socioeconomic background. Below are the key demographic characteristics of the participants:

1. Age: All adolescent participants were aged between 15 and 18 years, representing the typical age range for adolescents in the process of career decision-making and navigating mental health challenges.
2. Gender: The participant group was balanced in terms of gender, with approximately 50% male and 50% female participants. This ensured a broad range of perspectives, particularly regarding gender expectations and career choices.
3. Geographic Location: Participants were recruited from both urban and rural areas in Nigeria. This division allowed for a comparison of challenges faced by adolescents in different sociocultural settings.

4. **Urban Participants:** These adolescents were from larger cities with more access to diverse career options and resources.
5. **Rural Participants:** These adolescents came from smaller towns or rural villages, where career options and resources might be more limited and influenced by traditional cultural expectations.
6. **Socioeconomic Background:** The study aimed to include participants from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. While the majority of rural adolescents came from lower socioeconomic families with limited access to educational resources, urban participants were more likely to come from middle-class or higher socioeconomic backgrounds, with greater exposure to career guidance and opportunities.

Teachers and School Counsellors: These participants were educators and guidance counsellors working with adolescents, providing them with insights into the educational and career guidance systems. They represented a variety of schools in both urban and rural locations. **Parents:** Parents of adolescents, recruited from diverse geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, provided insights into the family dynamics and cultural attitudes shaping adolescents' career decisions. Parents from both urban and rural areas participated, helping to highlight the different pressures and expectations experienced by adolescents based on their family environments.

Results and Discussion

1. Parental and Familial Expectations

- Adolescents highlighted the significant role of familial pressures in shaping career choices.
- Traditional values, especially in rural settings, often dictated career paths (e.g., adherence to farming, trades, or family businesses), leading to stress and misalignment with personal interests.
- In urban settings, while parents encouraged professional careers (e.g., medicine, law, engineering), the variety of options sometimes overwhelmed adolescents.

Quotations from the adolescents

The following quotations emphasize the differences in familial expectations between rural and urban adolescents, illustrating how traditional values, limited opportunities, and overwhelming choices contribute to their stress and career indecision.

Rural Adolescents

- *"My parents always tell me I have to take over the family farm because that's what our family has done for generations. But I really want to study teaching. It's hard to tell them because they don't understand."*
- *"In our village, we don't have many options. Most of us are expected to work in trades or help at home. Even if I dream of being a doctor, I don't know how to get there."*
- *"The pressure to follow in my father's footsteps is overwhelming. He wants me to continue his carpentry business, but I feel I'm meant for something different."*

Urban Adolescents

- *"My parents keep pushing me to study medicine or law because they think those are the only respectable careers. But I'm not interested in those. It stresses me out."*
- *"I feel like my parents have high expectations, but the options available are too many. I don't know how to decide, and that makes me anxious."*
- *"In the city, there are so many careers I could choose, but every time I share my thoughts, my parents remind me that engineering is the only 'safe' option for the future."*

2. Peer Pressure and Social Influence

- Urban adolescents frequently reported comparing themselves with peers, leading to heightened self-doubt and anxiety over career choices.
- In rural communities, peers were more likely to reinforce cultural norms, pushing adolescents toward "safe" and traditional vocational paths.

The following quotations were given by the adolescents:

Urban Adolescents

- *"I see my friends already deciding on big careers, like doctors or lawyers, and it makes me question if I'm good enough to achieve anything."*
- *"When my friends talk about their future plans, I start feeling anxious. I compare myself and think, 'Why don't I have it figured out yet?'"*
- *"Everyone is trying to be better than each other. My classmates' choices make me feel like I need to aim higher, even if I'm not interested in those careers."*

Rural Adolescents

- *"My friends say it's better to do what's familiar, like working on the farm or learning carpentry. They don't see the point of dreaming too big."*
- *"Here, most of us follow the same paths. If you talk about leaving the village to study something different, people think you're being unrealistic."*
- *"My friends say I should stick to practical jobs because they're safer. It's hard to think of anything else when everyone believes the same thing."*

These quotations highlight how peer influence shapes adolescents' career decision-making differently across urban and rural contexts. Urban adolescents experience comparison anxiety due to competition, while rural peers reinforce traditional and "safe" career choices, limiting individual aspirations.

3. Lack of Career Guidance and Resources

A recurring theme in rural areas was the scarcity of career guidance services and access to diverse career information.

- Urban adolescents, despite having greater exposure, expressed frustration over conflicting guidance from multiple sources (teachers, parents, counselors).
- This lack of clarity increased emotional stress, particularly when future career aspirations conflicted with cultural expectations.

The following quotations were made:

Rural Adolescents

- *"We don't have anyone to guide us on careers. I've never met a career counselor, and we don't even know what jobs are out there beyond farming or trades."*
- *"In our school, they don't talk about careers. It's like we're left to figure things out on our own, but we don't know where to start."*
- *"I want to be something different, but I don't know how to get there. There's no one to ask, and it feels like a dead end."*

Urban Adolescents

- *"One teacher says I should do engineering because I'm good at math, but my parents want me to be a doctor. The conflicting advice just stresses me out."*
- *"There are so many people telling me different things about my future. It gets confusing, and I don't know who to listen to."*
- *"I've spoken to counselors, but they don't understand my struggles. They just give generic advice, and it doesn't help me decide."*

These quotations illustrate how rural adolescents struggle with a complete lack of career guidance, while urban adolescents, despite greater exposure, experience confusion and emotional stress from receiving conflicting or impersonal advice.

4. Psychological Stress and Emotional Challenges

- Many adolescents reported feeling overwhelmed and anxious about their futures, particularly during decision-making processes.
- In rural areas, stress often stemmed from limited opportunities and external pressure to contribute to family well-being.
- Urban participants experienced stress due to the burden of choice and the fear of failing societal expectations.

The following quotations were made by the adolescents:

Rural Adolescents

- *"I feel a lot of pressure to help my family. They expect me to start working soon, but I want to study. It's hard because I don't see many opportunities."*
- *"Sometimes I feel trapped. There's no future for me beyond what my parents want, and it makes me stressed and hopeless."*
- *"The thought of disappointing my family keeps me awake at night. They're counting on me to contribute, and I don't know how to balance their needs with my dreams."*

Urban Adolescents

- *"There are too many choices, and I'm afraid of making the wrong decision. What if I fail? What if I let everyone down?"*
- *"It feels like everyone has expectations for me—my parents, my teachers, even my friends. I feel overwhelmed trying to meet them all."*
- *"The pressure to succeed is so much. I'm always anxious about whether I'll live up to what everyone expects of me."*

These quotations reveal how rural adolescents experience stress due to limited opportunities and familial pressure to contribute, while urban adolescents face overwhelming anxiety caused by the burden of choice and societal expectations.

5. Cultural Nuances

- The role of culture was pronounced in career decisions:
 - In Nigeria, societal status attached to certain professions (e.g., medicine) shaped aspirations.

The following are some quotations:

- *"In my family, becoming a doctor or lawyer is seen as the only way to be respected. Anything else feels like a failure, even if it's not what I want."*
- *"Society here values professions like medicine and engineering. If I say I want to be an artist, people think I'm not serious about my future."*
- *"My parents believe that a good profession brings status to the family. It's hard to think of other careers when those expectations are so strong."*
- *"In our community, we're taught to give back. That's why careers like teaching or nursing are so important to us—they help others."*
- *"My parents tell me to choose a career that benefits the community. Being a teacher or a social worker is seen as honorable."*

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- *"Here, people value jobs that make a difference in others' lives. I feel like I have to choose something meaningful, even if I'm interested in other things."*

These quotations highlight the cultural expectations shaping career decisions in both countries. In Nigeria, societal status tied to prestigious careers like medicine and law dominates, while in some communities, the emphasis on community-oriented roles reflects local values of service and contribution.

6. Gender Expectations

- Gender-based pressures were particularly evident in both contexts.
- Females in rural areas were often encouraged to pursue careers considered "appropriate" for women, such as teaching or caregiving roles.
- Male adolescents faced expectations to succeed in higher-earning, labor-intensive, or professional roles.

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Following are quotations from adolescents:

Rural Female Adolescents

- *"My parents say teaching is a good job for a girl because I'll have time to take care of my family. They don't think I can handle something like engineering."*
- *"Girls here are expected to work in caregiving roles, like nursing. If I say I want to do something different, they tell me it's not for women."*
- *"It's hard to dream big as a girl in my community. People think women should stay in roles that suit them, like cooking or taking care of children."*

Rural Male Adolescents

- *"I'm expected to take on heavy jobs, like working in construction or on the farm. That's what men do here, even if I want something different."*
- *"My father tells me I must work hard and earn well to provide for the family. There's no room to consider other careers that don't pay as much."*
- *"As a man, I feel the pressure to succeed in big careers like engineering or business. It's like failure isn't an option for us."*

Urban Female Adolescents

- *"Even in the city, people still say certain jobs are for men. When I told someone I wanted to be a mechanic, they laughed at me."*
- *"My parents are supportive, but some people think a girl should stick to jobs like nursing or teaching. It makes me question myself sometimes."*

Urban Male Adolescents

- *"There's this belief that men must do well in professional jobs, like being a doctor or lawyer. If you choose something different, people think you're not ambitious."*
- *"As a guy, I feel a lot of pressure to choose a career that makes money. It's like my worth depends on how much I can earn."*

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These quotations highlight the gender-based pressures adolescents face across both rural and urban settings. Females are encouraged to pursue “appropriate” roles like teaching and caregiving, while males experience pressure to succeed in high-earning or physically demanding careers, often dictated by societal expectations.

Insights from Secondary Participants

- Teachers and counsellors observed increased mental health struggles among adolescents during decision-making phases.
- Parents frequently cited their desire to guide adolescents but often lacked awareness of modern career opportunities, leading to misinformed guidance.

The following are some quotations from teachers, counsellors and parents:

Teachers and Counsellors

- *"We're seeing more students struggle with stress and anxiety when it's time to choose their careers. Many feel lost, and it affects their focus in school."*
- *"Some students come to us overwhelmed, but we don't always have the right tools to help them navigate their options or manage their mental health."*
- *"There's a clear connection between career indecision and emotional distress. Adolescents worry about making the wrong choice, and it weighs heavily on them."*

Parents

- *"I want my child to succeed, but I don't know much about the new careers out there. I only know what worked in my time—medicine, teaching, or farming."*
- *"We try to guide our children, but sometimes I feel like I'm pushing them in the wrong direction because I don't fully understand what they want."*
- *"I hear about careers like IT and design, but I don't know how realistic they are. I encourage my child to choose a stable job that I know is secure."*

These quotations reveal the perspectives of teachers, counsellors, and parents:

- Teachers and counsellors observe a rise in mental health struggles linked to career indecision but feel under-equipped to offer holistic support.

- Parents express a strong desire to guide their children but often rely on outdated knowledge of career opportunities, leading to misinformed or limited advice.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interaction between career decision-making and mental health among adolescents in Nigeria, particularly within the sociocultural contexts of urban and rural settings. Through the lens of a constructivist paradigm, the study reveals the deep influence of familial expectations, peer pressure, cultural norms, and gender-based expectations, as well as the psychological toll these factors have on adolescents.

The study highlights the significant role of parental and familial expectations in shaping adolescents' career choices. For many participants, family pressure often dictated the path they felt compelled to follow, creating tension between personal aspirations and external expectations. This was especially prominent in rural settings, where traditional values and practical careers, such as farming or trades, were emphasized. Adolescents reported experiencing stress and frustration due to this misalignment, as expressed in statements like, *"My father wants me to take over the farm, but I want to be a teacher."*

In contrast, urban adolescents faced a different kind of pressure, as parents often encouraged them to pursue prestigious careers, such as medicine, law, or engineering. While these aspirations were well-intentioned, they sometimes overwhelmed adolescents, leading to indecision and anxiety. This finding aligns with Oluwole and Ibrahim Umar (2013), who noted that parental influence can both positively and negatively impact adolescents' career decision-making processes. It highlights the need for parental education on modern career opportunities to provide informed and supportive guidance.

The study also reveals how peer pressure and social influence shape adolescents' career-related stress. Urban adolescents frequently compared themselves to their peers, leading to heightened self-doubt and anxiety. Comments such as, *"My friends already have their careers figured out, and it makes me feel like I'm behind,"* illustrate the negative impact of peer comparisons in competitive urban environments.

Conversely, in rural areas, peer influence reinforced cultural norms, encouraging adolescents to pursue "safe" and traditional careers. This was reflected in statements like, *"Most of my friends say it's better to stay here and do what we already know."* These findings suggest that peer influence plays a dual role: in urban areas, it exacerbates anxiety through competition, while in rural settings, it limits aspirations. This aligns with Joseph and Julius (2017), who emphasized the importance of peer environments in career development.

A critical challenge identified in this study is the lack of access to career guidance and resources, particularly in rural settings. Adolescents in these areas expressed frustration over the absence of career counselors and exposure to diverse opportunities, leading to confusion and limited decision-making capabilities. As one participant shared, *"We don't have anyone to guide us, so we don't even know what jobs exist outside our village."*

Interestingly, even urban adolescents, despite better access to resources, reported confusion due to conflicting advice from parents, teachers, and counsellors. This highlights the importance of creating coordinated career guidance systems that provide clear and consistent support. These findings echo Lin

and Guo (2024), who emphasized the critical role of structured career counselling in alleviating adolescent indecision and stress.

The findings demonstrate that career decision-making is a significant source of psychological stress and emotional challenges for adolescents. In rural areas, stress stemmed primarily from limited opportunities and pressure to contribute to family well-being. Adolescents often felt trapped, as expressed in statements like, *“I feel hopeless because there’s no future for me outside what my parents want.”*

In urban settings, the stress was driven by the burden of choice and societal expectations to succeed in prestigious careers. Many participants expressed fear of failure, stating, *“There are so many options, but I’m afraid of making the wrong choice and letting everyone down.”* These findings reflect the cyclical relationship between career indecision and mental health struggles, as documented in research by Khan and Rehman (2019), where career stress was linked to anxiety and depressive symptoms.

The study highlights the profound influence of culture on adolescents' career choices in both countries. In Nigeria, societal status attached to professions like medicine and law shaped aspirations, with participants stating, *“A good profession brings respect to the family.”* In contrast, in some cultures, there was a stronger emphasis on community-oriented careers such as teaching and nursing, influenced by cultural values of service and contribution, as illustrated in the statement, *“Here, we are taught to give back to our community.”*

These findings underscore how cultural expectations play a central role in adolescents' decision-making, aligning with Anwuzia (2021), who noted that career aspirations in African societies are often culturally driven.

The study further reveals the impact of gender-based expectations on career choices. Rural female adolescents reported being encouraged to pursue careers deemed “appropriate” for women, such as teaching or caregiving roles. One participant shared, *“Girls here are expected to take jobs like nursing. If you say you want to do something different, people don’t take you seriously.”*

For males, the pressure to succeed in high-earning or physically demanding careers was evident, particularly in rural settings. Urban males also faced societal expectations to pursue prestigious careers, reflecting a broader cultural belief that a man’s worth is tied to his financial success. These gendered pressures reinforce existing societal norms and align with findings by Schlack et al. (2021), which emphasize how gender roles influence career aspirations and decision-making.

The results of this research highlight the complex relationship between career decision-making and mental health issues among adolescents, illustrating how these challenges are significantly influenced by cultural, familial, and societal dynamics. In Nigeria, adolescents from both rural and urban environments encounter unique yet interrelated obstacles that affect their capacity to make informed career decisions while maintaining their emotional health.

In rural areas, adolescents face considerable obstacles that impede their career progression and intensify mental health difficulties. The scarcity of career guidance resources in these regions restricts their awareness of various career paths, often confining them to traditional or practical occupations. Additionally, societal expectations exacerbate this situation, as young individuals are frequently pressured to adhere to established norms and family obligations, such as inheriting family businesses or pursuing roles considered culturally acceptable. These limitations often result in feelings of frustration,

despair, and a diminished sense of control over their futures. For many adolescents in rural settings, the disparity between their ambitions and the available opportunities fosters a sense of entrapment, as they navigate the dual challenges of insufficient resources and external demands to support their families.

Urban adolescents experience significant advantages due to their exposure to a wide array of career opportunities and resources. Nevertheless, this plethora of choices can lead to increased anxiety and uncertainty. The competitive dynamics of urban settings intensify the pressure to achieve, as adolescents often find themselves comparing their trajectories to those of peers who seem to have well-defined plans for their futures. This environment of competition can engender self-doubt and stress, as young individuals strive to fulfill their own ambitions while also meeting the expectations set by society, parents, and educators. Furthermore, urban adolescents frequently encounter conflicting guidance from various sources, including family, teachers, and counsellors. This inconsistency can lead to confusion and emotional turmoil as they attempt to navigate a complex array of choices and societal demands.

The research also underscores the significant impact of cultural norms and gender roles, which add further pressure on adolescents. Female adolescents, especially in rural contexts, often face gender-specific expectations that confine their career aspirations to traditionally feminine roles, such as teaching or caregiving. These societal limitations not only hinder their ambitions but also foster feelings of inadequacy and frustration when their aspirations diverge from these established norms. Conversely, male adolescents are typically expected to pursue high-paying or physically demanding careers, reinforcing traditional views of masculinity associated with financial success and strength. These gender-related pressures manifest in both rural and urban environments, albeit with differing degrees of intensity, complicating the career decision-making process and contributing to emotional distress.

The convergence of cultural, familial, and societal influences presents a complex landscape for adolescents, wherein mental health issues and uncertainty regarding career paths are closely linked. The research findings indicate that emotional distress in adolescents is not solely a consequence of personal decision-making difficulties; rather, it is indicative of broader systemic challenges that necessitate thorough and culturally aware interventions. To effectively tackle these issues, it is crucial to combine career counseling with mental health support. These interventions should be tailored to meet the distinct needs of adolescents across various environments, ensuring that rural adolescents have access to necessary resources and guidance, while also equipping urban adolescents with strategies to cope with anxiety and manage conflicting expectations.

Conclusion

This research offers an in-depth exploration of the intricate relationship between career decision-making and mental health among adolescents in Nigeria. The results indicate that the career choices of adolescents are significantly shaped by family expectations, peer influences, cultural traditions, and gender roles, all of which contribute to considerable stress and emotional difficulties. Adolescents in rural areas encounter distinct challenges, such as limited access to opportunities, insufficient career guidance resources, and strong societal pressures to conform to conventional or practical career paths. Conversely, urban adolescents experience increased anxiety stemming from the overwhelming number of choices, conflicting advice, and societal demands to excel in prestigious professions. In both environments, gender norms exacerbate these challenges, particularly for females who are often encouraged to pursue culturally “acceptable” roles, while males are pressured to attain financial success.

The research also emphasizes the psychological impact of career indecision, where stress, anxiety, and self-doubt are intensified by a lack of adequate support systems. These findings highlight the necessity for culturally attuned interventions that combine career counseling with mental health support to tackle the specific challenges faced by adolescents in various contexts. In summary, assisting adolescents in their career decision-making requires a collaborative approach involving families, educational institutions, counselors, and policymakers. By ensuring access to structured guidance, promoting open dialogue, and challenging societal norms when appropriate, we can empower adolescents to make informed career choices that reflect their aspirations and capabilities, while also protecting their emotional health. This study lays the groundwork for future initiatives aimed at enhancing the career preparedness and mental health outcomes of adolescents in similar cultural settings.

This study makes significant contributions to the understanding of the interplay between career decision-making and mental health among adolescents, particularly within the sociocultural contexts of Nigeria. While existing research has often examined these domains separately, this study bridges the gap by exploring their interconnectedness. It provides a holistic perspective on how cultural, familial, and societal influences shape career choices and impact the emotional well-being of adolescents in diverse settings.

A key contribution lies in the emphasis on cultural dimensions. The findings highlight the profound role of sociocultural factors such as parental expectations, gender norms, and community values in influencing adolescents' career decisions. By examining these dynamics, the study advances knowledge on the cultural determinants of career decision-making, offering insights that are particularly relevant for regions where such influences are deeply ingrained and underexplored.

Another critical insight is the comparative analysis of urban and rural contexts, which reveals distinct challenges faced by adolescents in these settings. Urban adolescents reported feeling overwhelmed by the abundance of career options and societal pressure to succeed, leading to heightened anxiety and indecision. Conversely, rural adolescents faced limited opportunities, inadequate career guidance, and societal expectations to adhere to traditional roles, which contributed to feelings of frustration and hopelessness. This analysis deepens the understanding of geographic disparities in access to resources and support systems, adding a valuable dimension to existing literature.

The study further highlights the intertwined nature of mental health challenges and career indecision, emphasizing the need for integrated interventions. By demonstrating how stress, anxiety, and other emotional challenges stem from cultural and systemic pressures, the research underscores the importance of combining career counseling with mental health support to address these issues comprehensively. This integrated approach offers a novel framework for policymakers and practitioners to design effective support systems that cater to adolescents' holistic needs.

Finally, the study provides actionable insights for developing culturally sensitive and gender-inclusive interventions. These findings serve as a foundation for practical applications, such as designing career guidance programs that consider local cultural contexts and addressing gender-based barriers that limit opportunities for adolescents. By addressing these gaps, the research not only advances theoretical understanding but also offers valuable guidance for implementing meaningful changes in practice.

In sum, this study fills critical gaps in the literature by shedding light on the cultural, geographic, and psychological factors that influence career decision-making and mental health among adolescents. It contributes new insights and provides a foundation for future research and interventions aimed at empowering adolescents to navigate this crucial developmental stage effectively.

Recommendations

Addressing the difficulties that adolescents encounter in making career choices and managing mental health necessitates interventions that are both culturally aware and comprehensive. The following recommendations, derived from the findings, are intended to offer practical solutions that empower young individuals and enhance their emotional well-being.

Enhancing Career Guidance in Educational Institutions: Educational institutions are crucial in influencing the career paths of adolescents. It is essential to implement structured career counseling programs that expose students, especially those in rural regions, to a variety of career options and pathways. The introduction of Career Awareness Workshops can familiarize adolescents with emerging industries, contemporary job markets, and opportunities for advanced education or vocational training. Furthermore, personalized career counseling sessions can assist students in aligning their goals with their interests and skills, offering customized guidance that encourages informed and confident decision-making.

Incorporating Mental Health Support Frameworks: To tackle the emotional difficulties linked to career decision-making, schools should ensure access to qualified mental health professionals, including counselors and psychologists. These experts can develop mental health initiatives aimed at alleviating anxiety, self-doubt, and stress through activities such as stress management workshops, peer support groups, and mindfulness training. Establishing safe environments within schools where students can candidly discuss their mental health concerns without fear of stigma is particularly vital in communities where mental health issues are frequently neglected or misinterpreted.

Parent Education and Involvement: Parents play a crucial role in shaping the career choices and emotional health of adolescents. It is essential to implement Parent Education Programs aimed at enhancing awareness of contemporary career options and the significance of nurturing adolescents' personal ambitions. Workshops can facilitate a collaborative mindset among parents, promoting open dialogue and reducing unnecessary pressure. Additionally, providing tools and resources will enable parents to understand the emotional impact that high expectations can have on their children, thereby fostering a more supportive family atmosphere.

Addressing Cultural and Gender-Based Barriers: Cultural expectations and gender stereotypes frequently restrict the career opportunities available to adolescents. Community Awareness Campaigns should be initiated to confront these limiting gender norms and advocate for equality in career selection. Young women should be encouraged to enter fields traditionally associated with men, while young men should be supported in pursuing a wide range of professions without facing societal stigma. Programs that celebrate a variety of career paths, extending beyond traditional roles, can help reshape societal views, motivating adolescents to pursue careers that resonate with their individual interests and abilities.

Enhancing Access to Career Resources in Rural Regions: The deficiency of career guidance in rural regions calls for deliberate intervention from government entities and policymakers. It is crucial to broaden career counseling services within rural educational institutions and communities, which

includes the deployment of counselors and the use of technology for virtual support. Collaborations with community organizations and non-governmental organizations can promote mentorship initiatives, career fairs, and access to vocational training opportunities. Additionally, digital platforms should be employed to address resource disparities, providing online counseling tools and mental health assistance to young individuals in underserved areas.

Professional Development for Educators and School Counsellors: Educators and school counsellors need specialized training to effectively assist students in their career decision-making journeys. Professional development initiatives should prepare educators with the necessary skills to offer culturally aware career guidance and to meet the emotional needs of students. Joint counseling efforts, involving teachers, counselors, and parents, can establish a comprehensive support network that addresses the career and mental health challenges faced by adolescents.

Advocacy and Policy Formulation: It is imperative for policymakers to prioritize the incorporation of career development programs into national educational policies, ensuring that both urban and rural schools have access to essential resources. Policies that promote mental health awareness and counseling services within educational institutions should be formulated and enacted to protect the well-being of adolescents. Moreover, governments should champion gender-inclusive policies that eliminate societal obstacles, thereby creating equal opportunities for both male and female adolescents to pursue their chosen career paths.

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