

## SOCIETAL STIGMATIZATION AND DISCRIMINATION AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DEPRESSION

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### Abstract

*This study investigated societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression. The study was carried out in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria. The study aimed to address three research questions and employed a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study consisted of 298 undergraduate students. To ensure representativeness, a sample size was selected using a random stratified sampling approach. Data collection was carried out through standardized test instrument developed by the researchers titled: Societal Stigmatization and Discrimination with Depression Questionnaire (SSDDQ). The questionnaire was face validated by three experts from the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using the Cronbach Alpha technique, which resulted in a high reliability coefficient value of 0.84. The collected data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The finding revealed the extent of stigma and discrimination, contextualizing the experiences. The finding also highlighted the consequences, including academic challenges and social isolation. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach involving educational institutions, policymakers, mental health professionals, and the wider community. By raising awareness, the research aims to promote a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students. Based on the finding, the study recommended that interventions and policies can be developed to reduce stigma and discrimination, fostering a healthier and more inclusive society for undergraduate students with depression.*

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**Keywords:** undergraduate students, depression, societal stigma, discrimination, mental health, stigmatization

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### Introduction

Depression is a prevalent mental health condition that affects individuals across various age groups and backgrounds, including undergraduate students. In understanding the impact of depression on individuals, it becomes essential to recognize its multifaceted nature encompassing emotional, cognitive, social, and physical aspects. This brief overview will explore the effects of depression on undergraduate students, including its impact on academic performance, personal relationships, and overall well-being. Hence, by comprehending the far-reaching consequences of depression, educational institutions can develop effective strategies to support and promote the mental health of undergraduate students. Depression, as defined by the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013), is a common mental health disorder characterized by persistent feelings of sadness, loss of interest or pleasure, and a

range of physical and cognitive symptoms. It affects individuals of all ages, genders, and backgrounds, including undergraduate students. Understanding depression and its impact is crucial in addressing the challenges faced by students in academic settings. Depression can significantly impact various aspects of an individual's life. Emotionally, it leads to feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, and low self-esteem (APA, 2013). Depressed individuals often experience difficulties in concentration, decision-making, and memory (APA, 2013). These emotional impairments can interfere with academic performance, leading to a decline in grades and overall educational outcomes. The academic achievements of undergraduate students can be compromised by the persistent feelings of sadness and the lack of motivation that depression brings (Brown & Harris, 2022).

Furthermore, depression has adverse effects on personal relationships and social functioning. Individuals with depression may withdraw from social activities, experience a lack of motivation to engage with others, and have difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships (APA, 2013). The impact of depression extends beyond the individual, affecting their family, friends, and the broader community. The social withdrawal and diminished interpersonal skills associated with depression can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness among undergraduate students (Brown & Harris, 2022). Moreover, depression poses a significant risk to an individual's physical health. It is often associated with sleep disturbances, changes in appetite, and a lack of energy (APA, 2013). These physical symptoms can further exacerbate the negative impact on daily functioning, overall quality of life, and even increase the risk of developing other health conditions. The physical health consequences of depression can be particularly challenging for undergraduate students who need energy and focus to meet the demands of their academic responsibilities (Jones & Watson, 2021). Perceptive the multifaceted impact of depression on individuals is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems for undergraduate students. By addressing depression comprehensively, educational institutions can foster an environment that promotes mental well-being and academic success. Recognizing the interconnectedness of emotional, cognitive, social, and physical aspects of depression is essential in developing strategies to support undergraduate students in managing their mental health and thriving in their academic pursuits.

Depression, also known as major depressive disorder, is a mental health condition characterized by persistent feelings of sadness, emptiness, or irritability, along with a range of physical and cognitive symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is a serious and common mental disorder that affects millions of people worldwide. According to American Psychiatric Association (2013), the symptoms of depression can vary in intensity and duration, but they generally include: depressed mood: feeling sad, empty, or experiencing a sense of hopelessness most of the day, nearly every day; loss of interest or pleasure: losing interest or enjoyment in activities that were once enjoyable, including hobbies, socializing-or work; significant weight loss or gain: experiencing a significant change in appetite or weight, leading to unintentional weight loss or weight gain; Sleep disturbances: having trouble sleeping, such as insomnia (difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep) or hypersomnia (excessive sleeping); Fatigue or loss of energy: feeling constantly tired, lacking energy or experiencing a general sense of lethargy; feelings of worthlessness or guilt: having a

persistent sense of low self-worth, excessive guilt—or feelings of excessive responsibility; difficulty concentrating: experiencing difficulties with focus, attention, decision-making, and memory; psychomotor agitation or retardation: exhibiting restless behaviour or being noticeably slowed down in movements and speech; and recurrent thoughts of death or suicide: having frequent thoughts of death, dying, or suicidal ideation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Moreover, for a diagnosis of depression, these symptoms must be present for a minimum duration of two weeks and significantly impact daily functioning and overall well-being. It is also important to note that the severity and combination of symptoms can vary from person to person. Additionally, depression can co-occur with other mental health conditions—such as anxiety disorders or substance abuse, further complicating the diagnostic process and treatment.

Depression among undergraduate students is influenced by a multitude of factors, encompassing academic stress, social pressures, and challenges inherent to the university experience (Brown & Harris, 2022). Grasping the nuances of these contributors is pivotal for crafting effective strategies in prevention and intervention. These strategies encompass addressing the following aspects: Firstly, academic stress emerges from the weight of coursework, exams, and academic expectations, often leading to heightened anxiety and exacerbating depressive symptoms. Simultaneously, the intricate fabric of social pressures and transitions during the college phase can present challenges in forming new connections and finding one's place, thereby fostering feelings of loneliness and feeding into depressive tendencies. Furthermore, financial stress, stemming from concerns regarding tuition fees, living expenses, and student loans, can compound worries about meeting basic needs and affording education, thereby amplifying the grip of depressive symptoms. The influence of personal and family history also plays a pivotal role, as a background of mental health issues or a familial predisposition to depression can heighten the vulnerability of undergraduate students to developing depressive symptoms.

Moreover, a lack of social support, whether from peers or family members, serves to isolate individuals and intensify the impact of stressors, ultimately elevating the likelihood of experiencing depressive symptoms. This interplay of factors is further intertwined with substance use, which often coexists with depression in undergraduate students. Substance abuse, serving as both a coping mechanism and an instigator of depressive symptoms, adds another layer to the complexity. These contributors, operating in a dynamic relationship, manifest uniquely in each individual due to varying experiences and personal circumstances. To address these multifaceted challenges, educational institutions can play a pivotal role by identifying these factors and implementing proactive measures and customized support services. By fostering an environment that acknowledges and addresses these issues, universities can effectively diminish the risk of depression and bolster the overall mental well-being of their student populace.

Study conducted by Jones and Watson (2021) posited that depression is a significant mental health concern among undergraduate students, with a considerable impact on their overall well-being and academic performance. Understanding the prevalence of depression in this population is crucial for identifying the scope of the issue and implementing appropriate support systems. The authors further highlighted varying rates of depression among

undergraduate students and also a systematic review and meta-analysis study which the authors opined the prevalence of depression among undergraduate students ranged from 11% to 39%, with an overall pooled prevalence estimate of approximately 25%. This suggests that a substantial proportion of undergraduate students experience symptoms of depression during their college years. According to the authors, several factors contribute to the increased vulnerability of undergraduate students to depression which include academic pressures, new social environments, financial challenges, and increased independence. These factors, combined with the unique developmental challenges of emerging adulthood-can contribute to the onset of depressive symptoms among students (Brown & Harris, 2022).

Societal stigmatization refers to the negative beliefs, attitudes, and stereotypes held by society towards individuals with certain characteristics or conditions, including depression (Link and Phelan (2001). Undergraduate students with depression often face stigmatization, which can have detrimental effects on their well-being and ability to seek help. According to Link and Phelan (2001), societal stigma is a social process that labels and devalues individuals with depression, leading to discrimination and social exclusion. Stigmatizing beliefs and attitudes perpetuate the view that individuals with depression are weak, lazy, or incapable, rather than recognizing it as a legitimate medical condition. This can result in negative consequences for the self-esteem, self-worth, and overall mental health of undergraduate students. For instance, undergraduate students with depression may encounter various stigmatizing beliefs and attitudes. These can include the belief that depression is a personal failure; a sign of weakness, or those individuals should simply "snap out of it" or "pull them together." Such attitudes may be reinforced by societal expectations that students should be young, energetic, and carefree. Importantly, stigma towards undergraduate students with depression according to Green et al. (2019) creates significant barriers to seeking help and accessing appropriate support. Fear of being judged, labelled, or facing negative consequences may discourage students from reaching out for assistance. This delay in seeking help can prolong suffering, exacerbate symptoms, and hinder academic and personal development. Stigmatization also contributes to feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame, leading to increased social isolation and reduced quality of life. Hence, addressing societal stigmatization towards undergraduate students with depression is crucial for fostering a supportive and inclusive environment. By challenging stigmatizing beliefs and attitudes, educational institutions can promote empathy, understanding, and acceptance. This can be achieved through mental health awareness campaigns, educational initiatives, and fostering a culture of open dialogue, where students feel comfortable discussing their mental health concerns without fear of judgment.

Societal stigmatization and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression are significant issues that have far-reaching consequences for individuals, academic institutions, and society as a whole (Smith, Hill and Amos, 2020). It is crucial to understand the relevance of this study in order to address the challenges faced by students with depression and promote a supportive and inclusive environment. Firstly, stigmatization surrounding mental health conditions such as depression, can create barriers to seeking help and accessing appropriate support (Jones & Watson, 2021). Undergraduate students may hesitate to disclose their depression due to fears of judgment, labelling, or negative

consequences. Stigmatization perpetuates the misconception that depression is a personal weakness or a character flaw, rather than recognizing it as a legitimate medical condition (Green et al., 2019). As a result, students may suffer in silence—which can worsen their symptoms, hinder their recovery, and impede their ability to fully engage in their academic pursuits. Secondly, discrimination against undergraduate students with depression can manifest in various forms—such as academic discrimination, social exclusion—and employment-related challenges (Brown & Harris, 2022). Academic discrimination may involve professors or administrators displaying biased attitudes, denying reasonable accommodations, or treating students with depression unfairly. Social exclusion can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation, affecting students' overall well-being and sense of belonging. Discrimination in employment settings can limit opportunities for internships, job placements or career advancement, contributing to long-term negative consequences for students' professional growth and prospects (Smith, Hill & Amos, 2020).

Furthermore, societal stigmatization and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression perpetuate the cycle of silence and invisibility surrounding mental health issues (Link & Phelan, 2001). When students feel judged or marginalized, they may be less likely to seek help, share their experiences—or participate in mental health advocacy. This hampers efforts to raise awareness, reduce stigma—and create a culture of support within educational institutions and society at large. However, addressing societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it promotes a culture of compassion, empathy—and understanding, which is essential for supporting the well-being of all individuals within the academic community (Green et al., 2019). Secondly, it enables students with depression to access the necessary resources and support to thrive academically and personally (Link & Phelan, 2001). Lastly, addressing stigma and discrimination contributes to the overall destigmatization of mental health conditions, fostering a more inclusive and supportive society (Jones & Watson, 2021).

Study conducted by Brown and Harris (2022) affirmed on several discriminations faced by undergraduate students with depression which can manifest in various forms and have significant negative impacts on their academic, social, and professional lives. However, understanding the discrimination faced by these students is crucial for addressing inequalities and promoting more inclusive and supportive environment, which include the followings:

- **Academic discrimination:** Undergraduate students with depression may experience discrimination within academic settings. This can include biased attitudes from professors or administrators, denial of reasonable accommodations, or unfair treatment. Discrimination in academia can hinder students' ability to fully participate in their educational pursuits, negatively impacting their academic performance and overall well-being.
- **Social exclusion and marginalization:** Discrimination against students with depression can lead to social exclusion and marginalization. Peers may exhibit negative attitudes or engage in stigmatizing behaviors, which can result in isolation, a lack of social support, and difficulty forming meaningful connections. Social exclusion further contributes to feelings of loneliness, depression, and a reduced sense of belonging within the student community.

- **Employment-related challenges:** Discrimination can also extend to employment settings for undergraduate students with depression. Students may face difficulties in securing internships, job placements, or career advancement opportunities due to discriminatory practices or biases. This discrimination can impede their professional growth, limit their options, and create long-term negative consequences for their career prospects.
- **Denial of opportunities and resources:** Discrimination may involve the denial of opportunities and resources available to undergraduate students with depression. This can include exclusion from extracurricular activities, research opportunities, scholarships, or leadership roles based on assumptions or biases related to their mental health condition. Such denial can hinder students' personal and academic development and perpetuate inequalities within the educational system.

According to the authors, addressing discrimination against undergraduate students with depression requires a comprehensive approach that includes policy changes, awareness campaigns, and the creation of inclusive environments. Educational institutions should enforce anti-discrimination policies, promote diversity and inclusivity, and provide training to faculty, staff, and students to foster an understanding of mental health challenges and reduce discriminatory behaviours. Additionally, offering support services, such as counselling, accessibility accommodations, and mental health resources, can help mitigate the negative effects of discrimination and create an inclusive environment that supports the well-being and success of all undergraduate students, regardless of their mental health condition (Brown & Harris, 2022).

There are several discriminatory practices targeting undergraduate students with depression that can manifest in various ways and have significant consequences on their academic, social, and employment experiences. According to Green et al (2019), understanding these examples helps shed light on the challenges faced by students and the need to address discriminatory practices, some of which include: Academic discriminatory practices Some students with depression may experience such as: Denial of reasonable accommodations such as extended deadlines, flexible attendance policies, or modifications in coursework requirements. This can hinder their ability to fully participate in their academic pursuits, negatively impacting their academic performance and overall educational experience. Another one is differential treatment and biased grading practices towards students with depression which may be held to different standards, face bias in evaluation, or receive lower grades compared to their peers. These practices can perpetuate inequities and limit students' opportunities for academic success. On the other hand, the academic effects of discrimination on students include the followings:

- **Impaired academic performance:** Discrimination can hinder students' academic performance. The psychological distress and reduced self-efficacy resulting from discrimination can impede concentration, focus, and information processing, leading to difficulties in learning and achieving academic success.

- **Disengagement and decreased motivation:** Discrimination can lead to disengagement from academic pursuits and a decreased motivation to excel. Students may feel disillusioned or discouraged, lacking the drive to actively participate in their educational experiences.
- **Educational aspirations and career choices:** Discrimination can influence students' educational aspirations and career choices. Students may revise their goals, limit their ambitions, or feel deterred from pursuing certain fields or professions due to the perceived barriers and biases associated with discrimination.
- **Reduced sense of belonging:** Discrimination creates a diminished sense of belonging within the academic community. Students may feel disconnected, isolated, or excluded, which can impact their engagement in learning, participation in classroom discussions, and overall integration into the educational environment. Consequently, addressing and combating discrimination is vital for minimizing its psychological and academic effects on students. Implementing anti-discrimination policies, fostering diversity and inclusion, and promoting awareness and education can help mitigate the negative effects of discrimination on students' psychological and academic experiences.

Undergraduate students with depression face significant impacts on their mental health and overall well-being. Understanding these effects according to Jones and Smith (2022) is crucial for addressing the unique challenges faced by students with depression and as well providing appropriate support and resources. These include the followings: Worsening of depressive symptoms: Stigma and discrimination can contribute to the worsening of depressive symptoms among students with depression. The negative attitudes, social exclusion, and judgment they experience can intensify feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and despair, leading to a decline in their mental health; Increased risk of comorbid mental health conditions: Students with depression may be at an increased risk of developing comorbid mental health conditions due to the impacts of stigma and discrimination. The stress and strain resulting from these experiences can contribute to the development or exacerbation of anxiety disorders, substance abuse issues, and other mental health challenges and Reduced self-esteem and self-worth: Stigma and discrimination can significantly impact students' self-esteem and self-worth. The negative beliefs and attitudes they encounter can lead to internalized stigma, resulting in feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame. This can further erode their sense of self-worth and contribute to a negative self-perception.

However, addressing the impacts on mental health and well-being of students with depression requires a comprehensive approach. Educational institutions should prioritize mental health support services, foster a culture of acceptance and understanding, and implement strategies to reduce stigma and discrimination. Providing accessible and timely mental health resources, promoting awareness and education, and creating supportive environments can help mitigate the negative impacts and promote the well-being of students with depression. On the other hand to overcome the societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression requires interventions policies to address situation. In order to address societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression, it is crucial to implement a comprehensive set of intervention

policies. First and foremost, increasing awareness and understanding about depression and mental health is essential (Jones et al., 2021). This can be achieved through educational campaigns that challenge stereotypes and misconceptions, as suggested by Brown and Smith (2022). These anti-stigma campaigns aim to dispel myths surrounding depression and promote empathy and support. Furthermore, providing mental health training for faculty, staff, and students is vital (Johnson & Davis, 2023). By equipping the campus community with the knowledge and skills to identify and support individuals with depression, the overall stigma can be reduced. To ensure the availability of accessible counselling and support services, it is necessary to establish and maintain well-resourced mental health centres on campus (Thompson, Jones, Holman and Silver, 2020). These centres should offer confidential counselling services, crisis intervention, and psychiatric consultations. In addition, implementing policies that offer accommodations for students with mental health conditions is crucial (Williams & Miller, 2021). This may include flexible academic deadlines, modified attendance policies, or the provision of emotional support animals, as recommended (Lee, Mogle, Jackson & Buxton, 2019).

Supporting staff in effectively assisting students with depression is another important aspect (Garcia & Johnson, 2022). This can be achieved through professional development opportunities, training programs, and regular communication channels to enhance their knowledge of depression and the best practices for support. Collaborating with mental health professionals both on and off campus is essential for resources and referrals (Smith & Thompson, 2023). This collaboration can ensure a holistic approach to student well-being, including access to specialized care when needed. Empowering students to take an active role in mental health advocacy is also beneficial (Davis et al., 2022). Encouraging student-led initiatives that promote mental health awareness and support can create a positive and inclusive campus culture. These initiatives may include peer support groups, awareness campaigns, or mental health resource fairs. Regularly reviewing and improving policies and interventions based on feedback from students, faculty, and staff is necessary for ongoing progress (Brown, Cohen, Costello, Brazhnik and Galis, 2023). This feedback can inform policy updates, resource allocation, and the implementation of evidence-based practices. Consequently, by implementing these intervention policies, campuses can work towards reducing societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression. Creating a supportive and inclusive environment that prioritizes mental health not only benefits individuals with depression but also promotes the overall well-being and success of the entire campus community.

Addressing stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression according to Smith and Thompson (2023) requires a multi-faceted move toward that involves raising awareness, promoting understanding, and fostering a supportive and inclusive environment. Here are some strategies that can be implemented to address stigma and discrimination: Mental health education: Implement comprehensive mental health education programs that provide accurate information about depression, its causes, symptoms, and available treatments. Educate students, faculty, and staff about the realities of living with depression, promoting empathy and dispelling myths and misconceptions; Anti-stigma campaigns: Launch anti-stigma campaigns on campus to challenge stereotypes, reduce



stigma, and promote a culture of acceptance. These campaigns can include posters, workshops, panel discussions, and guest speakers sharing personal experiences to humanize the issue and foster understanding; Anti-discrimination policies: Develop and enforce clear anti-discrimination policies that explicitly prohibit discrimination based on mental health conditions, including depression. Ensure that these policies are widely communicated and that there are mechanisms in place for reporting and addressing incidents of discrimination; and Accommodation and support services: Enhance accessibility and support services for students with depression. This includes providing reasonable accommodations, such as flexibility with deadlines and attendance policies, and offering mental health resources, counselling services, and peer support groups on campus.

Others strategies that can be implemented to address stigma and discrimination among students with depression according to Brown and Harris (2023) include staff training: Conduct training programs for faculty and staff members to increase their understanding of mental health issues, including depression, and equip them with the knowledge and skills to support students effectively. This training should include strategies for creating inclusive classrooms, recognizing signs of distress, and providing appropriate referrals; Offer sensitivity training to foster empathy, reduce bias, and promote respectful interactions among students. This training can focus on challenging stereotypes, improving communication, and creating a more supportive and inclusive campus climate; Establish peer support programs that connect students with depression to peers who have had similar experiences. These programs can provide a safe and understanding space for sharing challenges, seeking advice, and fostering social connections; Develop mentorship initiatives that pair students with depression with mentors who can offer guidance, support, and encouragement throughout their academic journey. Mentors can serve as role models and provide insights on navigating the challenges of college life with depression; Well-being initiatives: Promote overall well-being on campus through initiatives that emphasize self-care, stress management, and healthy coping strategies. Offer workshops, resources, and activities focused on mindfulness, relaxation techniques, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance; and Launch campaigns that encourage open conversations about mental health, self-care, and seeking help. Normalize help-seeking behaviours and highlight the importance of early intervention and access to appropriate support services.

Hence, by implementing these strategies, educational institutions can foster a supportive and inclusive environment that promotes understanding, reduces stigma, and addresses discrimination. Through education, policy changes, training, peer support, and promoting well-being, we can create a campus culture that values and supports the mental health and well-being of all students. Other strategies according to Green et al (2022) include the followings: Incorporate mental health education into curricula: Integrate mental health topics into educational curricula to increase students' understanding of mental health, including depression, its signs, and available resources; Organize guest speaker events and workshops that focus on mental health awareness and education. Invite mental health professionals, advocates, or individuals with lived experiences of depression to share their insights, promote understanding, and facilitate open discussions; Encourage student-led initiatives, such as mental health clubs or organizations, to create safe spaces for open

discussions about depression and mental health. These platforms can provide opportunities for sharing personal experiences, providing peer support, and organizing awareness events; Develop guidelines for respectful and inclusive language when discussing mental health. Promote language that avoids stigmatizing or derogatory terms and encourages understanding and empathy. Train students, faculty, and staff on using appropriate language when talking about depression and mental health (Smith & Thompson, 2023); Collaborate with local mental health service providers to offer on-campus workshops, counselling services, or support groups. This partnership can ensure students have access to comprehensive mental health care and support; Encourage collaboration between different departments within educational institutions, such as psychology, counselling, and education, to develop comprehensive approaches to address stigma and discrimination. This collaboration can lead to innovative programs, research, and interventions (Brown & Harris, 2023). However, by promoting mental health awareness and education, encouraging open dialogue, implementing supportive policies and resources, and fostering collaboration, educational institutions can create an environment that supports students with depression, reduces stigma, and provides the necessary tools and support for their academic and personal success.

While existing research has shed light on societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression limited research has explored the intersectionality of stigma and discrimination, considering factors such as Lack of awareness and understanding about depression and mental health in society; prevalent stereotypes and misconceptions about mental illness; fear or discomfort in discussing mental health openly which may influence the nature and impact of stigma. Additionally, there is a need for further investigation into the effectiveness of interventions and support systems in addressing stigma and discrimination, as well as the long-term outcomes for students with depression. Addressing these gaps will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue and inform the development of targeted interventions and policies that can effectively reduce stigma and discrimination, promote inclusivity, and support the well-being and success of undergraduate students with depression.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Depression among undergraduate students is a pressing concern, as it is associated with significant negative consequences for their mental health, overall well-being, and academic performance. A critical aspect of this issue lies in the societal stigmatization and discrimination that these students often encounter. Despite various efforts aimed at increasing awareness and fostering inclusivity, the persistence of stigma and discrimination remains a substantial impediment, leading to reluctance in seeking help, fostering emotions of shame and isolation, and ultimately hindering academic achievement and educational progress. This research centres on the experiences of undergraduate students grappling with depression and the detrimental effects of societal stigmatization and discrimination they face. The study seeks to gain a comprehensive understanding of the scope and manifestations of this stigma and discrimination, the underlying factors driving these negative attitudes and behaviours, and effective strategies for addressing and mitigating these challenges. By tackling this issue, educational institutions can work toward creating more supportive and inclusive

environments, thereby enhancing the well-being, academic success, and holistic development of undergraduate students dealing with depression

### **Purpose of the Study**

The main objective of the study was to investigate the societal stigmatization and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression in Nigerian University. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Examine factors that contribute to societal stigmatization and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression.
2. ascertain the interventions policies to address societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression.
3. determine the strategies to reduce stigmatization and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression?

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study

1. What factors contribute to societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression?
2. What are the interventions policies to address societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression?
3. What are the strategies to reduce stigmatization and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression?

### **Methodology**

The study aimed to address three research questions and employed a descriptive survey research design. The study was carried out in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria. The population of the study consisted of 298 undergraduate students. To ensure representativeness, a sample size was selected using a random stratified sampling approach. Data collection was carried out through standardized test instrument developed by the researchers titled: SOCIETAL Stigmatization and Discrimination with Depression Questionnaire (SSDDQ). The questionnaire was face validated by three experts from the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using the Cronbach Alpha technique, which resulted in a high reliability coefficient value of 0.84. The collected data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The collected data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The scales used for the questionnaire were Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree with the values of 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively. These responses were based on positively worded items. The average score from coded data ( $4+3+2+1=10/4$ ) was 2.50.

### **Results**

**Research Question One:** What factors contribute to societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression?

**Table 1: Mean Rating and Standard Deviation of Responses on factors that contribute to societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression**

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
1.	Lack of awareness and understanding about depression and mental health in society	2.67	0.10	A
2.	Prevalent stereotypes and misconceptions about mental illness	2.78	0.09	A
3.	Discomfort in discussing mental health openly	2.89	0.07	A
4.	Perceived weakness associated with mental health issues	2.66	0.10	A
5.	Cultural beliefs discouraging help-seeking for mental health problems	2.51	0.11	A
6.	Social exclusion from peers	2.54	0.11	A
7.	Inadequate support systems within educational institutions	2.50	0.11	A
8.	Limited access to mental health resources	2.59	0.11	A
9.	Stigma perpetuated by media portrayals of mental health	2.61	0.10	A
10.	Fear of negative academic consequences when disclosing mental health issues	2.72	0.09	A
11.	Limited knowledge among staff in supporting students with mental health challenges	2.60	0.10	A
12.	Ineffective policies for students with depression	2.56	0.11	A
<b>Overall Mean Score</b>		<b>2.64</b>	<b>0.10</b>	<b>A</b>

Table 1 above show the mean ratings and standard deviation of responses on factors that contribute to societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression. Above statements met the standard mean score of 2.50 and above which was in agreement with the respondent decision based on the overall mean score of 2.64 and standard deviation of 0.10 correspondingly.

**Research Question Two:** What are the interventions policies to address societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression?

**Table 2: Mean Rating and Standard Deviation of Responses on the interventions policies to address societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression**

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
13.	Increase awareness and understanding about depression and mental health.	2.88	0.08	A
14.	Conduct anti-stigma campaigns challenging stereotypes and misconceptions.	2.69	0.10	A
15.	Provide mental health training for staff and students.	2.61	0.10	A
16.	Ensure the availability of accessible counselling and support services.	2.71	0.09	A

17. Implement policies offering accommodations for students with mental health conditions.	2.81	0.08	A
18. Support staff in effectively assisting students with depression.	2.92	0.07	A
19. Collaborate with mental health professionals for resources and referrals.	2.80	0.09	A
20. Foster student-led initiatives promoting mental health awareness and support.	2.77	0.09	A
21. Regularly review and improve policies and interventions based on feedback.	2.94	0.07	A
<b>Overall Mean Score</b>	<b>2.79</b>	<b>0.09</b>	<b>A</b>

Result in Table 2 revealed the mean ratings and standard deviation of responses on the interventions policies to address societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression. According to decision rule Item 11 – 21 met the standard mean rating of 2.50 and above which indicate acceptance by respondent. Based on the overall mean score of 2.79 and standard deviation of 0.09 the above statements accepted by respondents as the interventions policies to address societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression.

**Research Question Three:** What are the strategies to reduce stigmatization and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression?

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
22.	Advocate for education as a means to diminish stigma	3.11	0.03	A
23.	Share the stories and personal experiences of individuals who have battled depression.	3.12	0.03	A
24.	Create safe and supportive environments for open discussions.	3.10	0.04	A
25.	Establish peer support networks for students with depression.	3.01	0.06	A
26.	Provide training to staff on mental health issues and support strategies.	3.04	0.05	A
27.	Develop inclusive policies and ensure their implementation.	2.79	0.09	A
28.	Enhance availability of on-campus counselling and mental health services.	2.80	0.09	A
29.	Collaborate with mental health professionals and organizations for support services	2.81	0.08	A
30.	Conduct campaigns to challenge stereotypes and promote understanding.	2.67	0.10	A
31.	Ensure privacy for students seeking help.	3.11	0.03	A
	<b>Overall Mean Score</b>	<b>2.96</b>	<b>0.06</b>	<b>A</b>

Results in Table 3 shows the analysis carried out by researcher to decide on the strategies to address–stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression. Items above met the standard mean ratings of 2.50 and above which indicate accepted by respondents. Based on the responses by respondents, the overall mean score of 2.96 and standard deviation of 0.06 was used to analyze the research contents of the above table.

### **Discussion of findings**

The finding of the study revealed factors that contribute to societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression which include: Lack of awareness and understanding about depression and mental health in society; prevalent stereotypes and misconceptions about mental illness; fear or discomfort in discussing mental health openly; inadequate support systems within educational institutions; stigma perpetuated by media portrayals of mental health; fear of negative academic or professional consequences when disclosing mental health issues; and lack of effective policies or accommodations for students with depression. The findings of the study are in consonance with the findings of Brown and Harris (2022) who posited that depression among undergraduate students is influenced by a variety of factors, including academic stress, social pressures, financial stress, personal and family history, lack of social support, substance use and other challenges associated with the university experience. According to the authors, by identifying these contributing factors, educational institutions can implement preventive measures and provide appropriate support services to address the unique challenges faced by undergraduate students. Further, creating a supportive and nurturing environment that addresses these factors can help reduce the risk of depression and promote the mental well-being of students (Brown & Harris, 2022).

The finding of the study revealed the interventions policies to address societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression which include: increase awareness and understanding about depression and mental health; conduct anti-stigma campaigns challenging stereotypes and misconceptions; collaborate with mental health professionals for resources and referrals; foster student-led initiatives promoting mental health awareness and support; and regularly review and improve policies and interventions based on feedback. The findings of the study are in consonance with the findings Jones et al (2021) who posited that in order to address societal stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression, it is crucial to implement a comprehensive set of intervention policies. First and foremost, increasing awareness and understanding about depression and mental health is essential. This can be achieved through educational campaigns that challenge stereotypes and misconceptions, as suggested by Brown and Smith (2022). These anti-stigma campaigns aim to dispel myths surrounding depression and promote empathy and support.

The finding of the study revealed the strategies to reduce the stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression which include: promote education and awareness to reduce stigma; share stories and experiences of individuals with depression; collaborate with mental health professionals and organizations for support; conduct campaigns to challenge stereotypes and promote understanding; and ensure

confidentiality and privacy for students seeking help. The study findings align with previous research conducted by Smith and Thompson (2023), highlighting the need for a comprehensive approach to address stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression. This approach should involve various strategies, such as raising awareness, promoting understanding, and cultivating a supportive and inclusive environment. These findings are also consistent with the research conducted by Green et al. (2022), which emphasizes that implementing these strategies can enable educational institutions to create a campus culture that values and supports the mental health and well-being of all students. These strategies encompass measures like integrating mental health topics into educational curricula to enhance students' comprehension of mental health, including depression, its symptoms, and available resources. Additionally, organizing guest speaker events and workshops dedicated to mental health awareness and education is crucial in fostering a supportive and inclusive environment (Green et al., 2022)

### **Conclusion**

Addressing the societal stigma and discrimination faced by undergraduate students with depression is crucial for promoting their mental health, well-being, and academic success. This review highlights the need to prioritize mental health awareness, encourage open dialogue, implement supportive policies and resources, and foster collaboration among educational institutions, mental health services, and student organizations. Despite efforts to raise awareness, stigma and discrimination persist, creating barriers to seeking help and negatively impacting students' academic performance and well-being. It is crucial to address the underlying factors contributing to stigma and discrimination and understand the diverse experiences of students with depression. Hence, by amplifying the voices of students with depression, educational institutions can develop tailored interventions and policies that meet their specific needs. Moreover, prioritizing mental health awareness, challenging stigma, and providing accessible support services can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for students with depression. Importantly, collaboration among students, faculty, staff, mental health professionals, and policymakers is essential in eliminating stigma and discrimination towards undergraduate students with depression. Let work together to create a society that values and supports the mental health of all students, fostering an environment of acceptance and equal opportunities for their academic and personal growth.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. Nigerian Universities should enhance mental health education and awareness in the society at large.
2. Nigerian Universities should implement clear anti-discrimination policies to address mental health conditions.
3. Accessible mental health support services, including counselling and helplines, should be provided.
4. Peer support programmes and mentorship initiatives should be established in Nigerian universities

5. University communities and administrators should be involved in developing strategies to address stigma and discrimination.

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