

# Peer Attachment and Well-Being of Residential Secondary Schools Students in Southwestern Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study aims to examine the relationship between peer attachment and subjective well-being of students and to assess the relationship between demographic variables (sex and school type) and subjective well-being of boarding secondary school students in Nigeria.

**Method:** Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The sample of 1512 boarding secondary school students in southwest Nigeria participated in the study. The questionnaire on Peer Attachment and Subjective Well-Being of Boarding School Students (QPASWBSS) was employed to elicit data for the study. The data were analyzed using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient and Chi-square Test.

**Results:** The results of the study showed that there was a significant relationship between peer attachment and students' subjective well-being ( $r = 0.101$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). There was also a significant relationship between demographic variables of sex ( $\chi^2$ , 1512 = 11.665,  $p < 0.05$ ) and school type ( $\chi^2 = 27.797$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and students' subjective well-being.

**Originality/Value** – This study is novel in terms of its population, isolating the boarding school environment, and uncovering how peer dynamics substitute for familial support to sustain subjective well-being.

**Keywords:** Peer attachment, Subjective well-being, Boarding students

## INTRODUCTION

Residential students are students who live in the school environment which is quite different from homes, away from their parents. While in school, students face physical, biological and psychological changes and challenges of adolescence coupled with other economic and environmental challenges of the nation. Boarding students in Nigeria seemingly faced myriad of challenges such as insufficient or undesired meals, unconducive hostel environment, peer or senior students' victimisation, unwanted schedules, homesickness, allergies and other challenges. These experiences tend to affect their moods, level of happiness and perception of life.

Cahyaningtyas and Muis's (2017) buttressed that boarding school students experience diverse issues which range from learning related, health issue, recreational preferences, and difficulties in building smooth rapport with teachers, house master's or mistresses and friends to difficulty in adjusting to the boarding school life, such as sharing bedrooms, bathrooms, and other hostel facilities. The residential nature of boarding schools, coupled with the less bonding time with parents and caregiver seem to affect the student's subjective wellbeing.

Subjective well-being (SWB) as conceptualized by Diener (1984) is an individual evaluation of quality of life, in relation to happiness and life satisfaction. (Azizan & Mahmud, 2018 ). SWB comprises two separate constructs: affect and life satisfaction. Affect can be described as a person's feelings. It is a measure of individual's emotional states, at a particular point in time. Such measures capture how people experience life rather than how they remember it (Helliwell & Wang, 2014). Affect is of two dimensions which are positive affect that captures positive feelings such as happiness, joy and gladness and negative affect which comprises negative experiences such as anxiety, rage, fear and general sadness. The life satisfaction component of

subjective well-being is defined as an individual's cognitive examination of overall quality of life or cognitive evaluation of specific domains of life such as school, work, family, environment, and so on (Haranin *et al*, 2007).

People with frequent positive affect and infrequent negative affect are said to possess high SWB, while individuals with low SWB are those who experience more negative emotion such as anger, anxiety and sadness. (Valente and Berry 2016 ). In recent years, studies on happiness, subjective well-being and life satisfaction have attracted more attention among researchers. To the extent that it has become one of the key metrics by which countries are compared (UNDP 2010). Studies have established the levels of students subjective wellbeing Okwaraji *et al*, (2016) and Oladipo *et al*, (2012) reported a low life satisfaction among adolescents, Okechukwu (2017) found a high level of happiness and life satisfaction among a sample of Nigerian adolescents. Ogungbaigbe & Omoteso (2023) also found a high level of subjective wellbeing among boarding secondary school students in southwestern Nigeria while Manzoor *et al*, (2014) a high level of subjective well-being among students in Pakistan.

SWB dimensions are indicators of adolescent mental health and school success (Abdel-khalek & Lester, 2017). Low subjective well-being is found to be associated with depression, anxiety, mental health disorder and suicide thoughts. In view of the disparities in the level of students subjective wellbeing coupled with unique stressors in residential environments such homesickness and separation anxiety, adjustment to school routines, social pressure and academic and co-curricular demands require further studies into factors that can enhance the wellbeing of boarding students.

The subjective well-being of residential secondary school students can be affected by some factors. In this study, peer attachment and demographic variables of sex and school type was investigated. Peer attachment refers to the creation of affectionate or close bond with individual external to family members which could be age mate, classmate, schoolmate or roommate (Rehman &Younus, 2016). During childhood, children bond with their parents especially mother, as they grow older and get to relate with people outside the family circuit, they begin to make close and intimate friends whom they view as confidants. Secondary school students especially those in boarding schools make close friends that are usually classmates, bunk or roommates.

They may develop feelings and belief that their friends will be there when needed. They share their worries and fears with peer as the adage says "problem shared is half solved". Students feel more relaxed and happier around their peers since they usually share similar challenges and issues. This is usually contrary to the parents' view; most parents discourage peer relationship with the fear that peer attachment can influence their children negatively. Though it might be true that bad peers can influence already vulnerable adolescents, worsening their psychological distress and increase unhealthy behaviour such as lesbianism, substance use, alcohol, violence, theft, rape and so on, yet, peer attachment could have positive effect on the students' subjective well-being. This controversy is worth investigating since peer attachment is inevitable among students especially among students in boarding school that have their peer as the only available companion (Adegboyegba, *et al*, 2019).

In the literature, peer support, peer relationships and peer attachment have been linked with various variables that lead to well-being and happiness. Artigues-Barberà *et al* (2025) reported that secure peer attachment is consistently linked to higher life satisfaction and lower level of depression. When adolescents feel a sense of belonging and trust with peers, they report higher self-esteem and more positive body image. Raboteg-Šarić, *et al* (2008) studied a representative sample of 2823 Croatian high school students and found friends support to influence their overall life satisfaction.

Peer attachment is believed to have a great impact on adolescents' social and emotional development and have potentials to upturn youth's overall life adjustment Gorrese & Ruggieri (2012). According to Katyal (2015) attachment matters a lot to children, peer attachment promotes social and emotional competencies among peers, aid self-esteems and influence well-being. In spite of these advantages of peer attachment, Young people can also engage in unacceptable behaviours such as bullying, verbal abuse, physical intimidation , social loafing and so on with their peers. This probably made (Berndt, 2004) to underscore the assessment of the quality of peer relationships and the kinds of engagement for adolescent well-being.

Attachment in its various forms have been found to have a cushion effect on psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Vrangalova, 2015 & Lucktong, *et al*, 2018). Parental and peer attachment is positively related to life satisfaction which means that higher levels of experienced attachment towards both parents and peers bring about higher levels of experienced life satisfaction. Although some studies found that there was an association between global life satisfaction and peer attachment, the finding from another study identified the kind of attachment and found that romantically involved attachment to peer could not significantly predict life satisfaction (Guarnieri *et al*, 2014). A study also found attachment toward peers to enable students to manage their emotional regulation better and improve adolescents' well-being (Rasyid, 2012 & Balluerka *et al.*, 2016). Despite all the evidence, the research that examines the role of peer attachment on subjective well-being in boarding school students still appears very limited.

Also, there could be differences in the subjective well-being of male and female students. Well-being of male and female is often given different attention by significant others according to cultural practices (Clark, Amar-Singh & Hashim 2014). Due to this, the perception of life, negative and positive affects of male and female may not be the same. In Southwestern Nigeria, female child is given special attention though there are exceptions to this assumption but, most parents seem overprotective of their female children especially the adolescent, they try to meet their demands by all means with the notion that if their needs are not met they could resolve to prostitution in order to meet their needs. Teachers in schools also seem to pay special attention to female students, they tend to react more promptly to issues that involve female than male students usually with the claim that females are at the receiving end of any negative situations. These situations coupled with the differences in gender role could result in differences in subjective well-being of male and female students.

Studies have it that girls have more attachment to peers than boys do (Ma & Huebner, 2008; Nickerson & Nagle, 2005; Raja, *et al*, 1992). Some researchers also state that attachment to parents more than to peers better explains subjective well-being and adjustment (Ma & Huebner, 2008; Wilkinson & Walford, 2001). Therefore, it is essential to investigate the relationship between peer attachment and subjective well-being of boarding student who inevitably live away from their parents. The objectives of the study are:

- (a) To Examine the Relationship Between Peer Attachment and Subjective Well-Being of the Students; And
- (b) Assess The Relationship Between Demographic Variables (Sex and School Type) And Subjective Well-Being of the Students.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The study adopted the descriptive survey research design. The study population was all boarding school students in Southwestern Nigeria. The sample for the study comprised 1512 boarding school students which were selected using the multistage sampling procedure. At first stage, three states (Osun, Ondo and Lagos state) were selected from the six states in Southwestern Nigeria, using simple random sampling technique. The states were grouped based on homogeneity and one state was randomly selected from each group, two federal government colleges were also selected from each of the state using stratified random sampling technique with school type (single sex/mixed sex school to accommodate selection of both sexes) as stratum, making a total of six federal unity schools. For the second stage, one private boarding school was purposively selected from each selected states based on at least 10 years of consistent operation of boarding system, making a total of three private boarding schools. At the third stage, Senior Secondary School one and two (SS 1&2) students were selected purposively from each school because students in these classes are in their mid-adolescence and are matured enough to report their feelings making a total of 18 classes. Finally, 84 secondary school students were selected from each class using systematic sampling technique. These students were proportionately selected from Science, Commercial and Art classes based on the total number of students in each class.

An instrument titled "Questionnaire on Peer Attachment and Subjective Well-being of Boarding School Students (QPASWBSS) was used to collect data for the study. The instrument was a combination of two adapted standardised psychological scales packaged together as one. Section A of the questionnaire elicited responses on the demographic variables of the respondents such as name of school, class, and sex. Section B was titled

Subjective Well-Being Scale (SWBS) which was used to elicit information on the students' subjective well-being, it measured the students' positive/negative affects and life satisfaction. Section C, comprised Peer Attachment Scale (PAS) which measures the students relationship with their friends. The scales were revalidated and yielded internal consistency reliabilities of 0.64 and 0.93 respectively.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Peer attachment and subjective well-being

Hypothesis one, which states that there is no significant relationship between peer attachment and the students' subjective well-being was formulated to achieve objective one. In order to test this hypothesis, responses of students to 12 items on Peer Attachment Scale (PAS) were scored accordingly. Due to the negative nature of items 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11 they were reversed in scored before responses were cumulated for further analysis. Total scores on peer attachment were cross tabulated with total of subjective well-being. The relationship between the two variables was determined by using Pearson product moment correlation inferential statistics. The results of the cross tabulation are presented in Table 1

| Table 1 Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient of Peer Attachment and Subjective Well-Being                                                     |                                   |            |           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------|-----------|
|                                                                                                                                                         |                                   | TOTE       | TOTB      |
| TOTE                                                                                                                                                    | Pearson Correlation               | 1          | 0.101**   |
|                                                                                                                                                         | Sig. (2-tailed)                   |            | 0.000     |
|                                                                                                                                                         | Sum of Squares and Cross-products | 100658.872 | 5128.010  |
|                                                                                                                                                         | Covariance                        | 66.617     | 3.394     |
|                                                                                                                                                         | N                                 | 1512       | 1512      |
| TOTB                                                                                                                                                    | Pearson Correlation               | 0.101**    | 1         |
|                                                                                                                                                         | Sig. (2-tailed)                   | 0.000      |           |
|                                                                                                                                                         | Sum of Squares and Cross-products | 5128.010   | 25765.994 |
|                                                                                                                                                         | Covariance                        | 3.394      | 17.052    |
|                                                                                                                                                         | N                                 | 1512       | 1512      |
| **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)sample<br>** Note: TOTE = Total of peer attachment<br>TOTB = Total of subjective well-Being. |                                   |            |           |

Table 1 shows the relationship between peer attachment and subjective well-being of secondary school students in boarding schools in Southwestern Nigeria. It can be observed that the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient indicated a significant relationship between the perceived teachers' support and subjective well-being,  $r = 0.101$ ;  $p < 0.05$ . Therefore, null hypothesis was rejected and the alternate accepted. That is there is a significant relationship between peer attachment and subjective well-being.

From the result, one can suggest that the more a student maintain healthy relationship with other student which could be classmates, roommates or bunkmates as the case may be, the more they maintain high positive affect, less negative affect and high life satisfaction. To this effect, it could be said that The finding of this study agreed with the study carried out by Katyal, (2015) which also found a significant relationship between peer attachment and life satisfaction and contradicted the study of Guarnieri, *et al* (2015) which found that peer attachment was not connected to life satisfaction. The differences in findings on the relationship between peer attachment and subjective well-being could be attributed to differences in population of study as this study investigated boarding secondary school students, while the other study was conducted among undergraduate students.

### Demographic variables (sex and school type) and subjective well-being

To achieve objective two, another hypothesis was formulated which states that there is no significant relationship between demographic variables (sex and school type) and the subjective well-being of the students. In order to

test this hypothesis, students' sex and school type were cross tabulated with subjective well-being. In addition, the Chi-Square value was obtained to determine the significance or otherwise of the relationship. The results are presented in Table 2

**Table 2 Chi-Square Test of Relationship between demographic variables and Subjective Well-Being of the students**

| Sex         | Subjective Well-Being |            | Total        | $\chi^2$ | Df | p     |
|-------------|-----------------------|------------|--------------|----------|----|-------|
|             | High                  | Low        |              |          |    |       |
| Male        | 394(26.1%)            | 130(8.6%)  | 524(34.7%)   | 11.665   | 1  | 0.001 |
| Female      | 815(53.9%)            | 172(11.4%) | 988(65.3%)   |          |    |       |
| Total       | 1209(80.0%)           | 302(20.0%) | 1512(100.0%) |          |    |       |
| School Type | Subjective Well-Being |            | Total        | 55.497   | 1  | 0.001 |
|             | High                  | Low        |              |          |    |       |
| Public      | 747(49.4%)            | 255(16.9%) | 1003(66.3%)  |          |    |       |
| Private     | 462(30.6%)            | 47(3.1%)   | 509(33.7%)   |          |    |       |
| Total       | 1209(80.0%)           | 302(20.0%) | 1512(100.0%) |          |    |       |

Table 2 shows the relationship between demographic variables of sex and school type and subjective well-being. It can be observed that a Chi-square test result indicated that there exists a significant relationship between sex and subjective well-being,  $\chi^2_{1512} = 11.665$ ;  $p < 0.05$  as well as between school type and subjective well-being of the students,  $\chi^2_{1512} = 55.497$ ;  $p < 0.05$ . Therefore, null hypothesis was rejected and the alternate accepted. That is there is a significant relationship between demographic variables of sex and school type and subjective well-being.

This result further showed that female had more positive emotions, less negative emotion and high life satisfaction. This means that girls in boarding secondary school reported high subjective well-being than boys. This could be as a result of differences in gender role, differences in physical and physiological changes and challenges of adolescence coupled with differences in attention received from parents and teachers buttressing the point raised by Clark, *et al*, (2014) that well-being of male and female is often given different attention by significant others according to cultural practices. In this part of the country, that is predominantly Yoruba's, the culture appears to prioritise the well-being of a female child as they are often viewed as weaker vessel though advocacy on gender equality among elite and educated is fast bridging the gap. This finding was supportive of Al-Attiyah and Nasser (2013) suggestion that boys might be less satisfied with school than girls because boys develop more deleterious relationships with classmates and need to express and exert their independence. However, it disagreed with the finding of (OECD, 2017) which reported that boys had higher life satisfaction than girls. The variance in findings could be due to differences in cultural practices of the various population of study

Moreover, this result also showed that there was a significant relationship between subjective well-being and school type. It showed that public school students had higher subjective well-being compared to private school students. This revelation was quite surprising as one would think that private school students should be happier and more satisfied with their life. Since students in private boarding schools are wealthier and have the luxury of basic amenities at their disposal. They also seem to enjoy special attention from teachers and other caregivers. The plausible reasons for this could be that boarding students in private school do not derive happiness and satisfaction from the observable factors. The finding of this study agreed with the study carried out by Badri *et al*, (2018), which also found that subjective well-being was connected with school type.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results, peer attachment among boarding students affects their subjective well-being while girls reported high subjective well-being than boys and public school students had higher subjective well-being compared to private boarding school students. Thus, it can be concluded that peer attachment is an essential factor in enhancing boarding secondary school subjective well-being. These results contribute to the existing literature in the fields of positive psychology and Guidance and counselling, particularly regarding the role of peer attachment in enhancing the subjective wellbeing of boarding secondary school students. In terms of practical implications, stakeholders in education should be more concerned about the boarding student's welfare particularly the welfare of boys that reported more negative affect and low life satisfaction. Both public and private boarding school students' needs should be catered for including their gender based needs in order to increase their subjective well-being. Therefore, School counsellors, teachers and house masters should create cooperative learning environments within the school, classrooms and hostel by physically arranging student desks into learning groups or by creating student "teams" to foster positive peer attachment and improve subjective well-being. Importantly, teachers should carefully monitor groups to ensure that positive student-student interactions are occurring in order to enhance subjective well-being of the students. Modeling supportive interactions should also be an important component of classroom teaching. Warm, positive supportive behaviours can also be modeled by the teachers to encourage peer attachment and increase subjective well-being.

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