



PERCEIVED IMPACT OF COUNSELLING ON RISK-TAKING BEHAVIOURS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MAKURDI LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigated the perceived impact of counselling on risk-taking behaviours among secondary school students in Makurdi Local Government Area, Benue State, Nigeria. Three research questions and three hypotheses guided this study. A descriptive survey research design was employed, with a population of 7,854 students across 22 Government Grant-Aided Secondary Schools in Makurdi Local Government Area. The sample size of 385 students was determined using the Glenn formula. The data were collected through a researchers-structured questionnaire titled 'Counselling and Risk-Taking Behaviour Questionnaire' (CRTBQ). Mean and standard deviation were utilized to answer the research questions. The findings showed that counselling has a perceived positive impact on students' involvement in cyberbullying, vandalism and cult activities. It was then recommended that counsellors use strategies through seminars, workshops and psycho-education to enlighten the students on the security issues involved in risk-taking behaviours and how to stop them.

Keywords: counselling, risk-taking behaviours, perceived impact, psycho-education

Introduction

Contemporary society is significantly troubled by the prevalence of risky behaviours, particularly among adolescents and young adults. According to Omale (2021), risk-taking behaviour refers to actions that involve danger or risk in an attempt to achieve a particular goal, while undermining overall security. This behaviour includes decisions that entail uncertainty and carry the potential for harm, insecurity, or negative outcomes. Individuals who engage in such behaviour are often willing to take risks despite the possible adverse consequences. Opeyemi, Unadike, and Oluwafiemi (2021) highlight that the rising incidence of risky behaviour among secondary school students is a major concern for the broader community, including government officials, counsellors, parents, teachers, and residents.

Oche (2019) notes that the intensity and motivation behind risk-taking can vary, influenced by factors such as personality traits, peer pressure, and life circumstances. It is crucial to recognize that many of these behaviours are driven by strong emotions, which can create a sense of insecurity within the community. Risk-taking behaviours can manifest in various aspects of life, including physical activities, social interactions, and financial decisions. Examples include unprotected sexual activities, sexting and other risky behaviours on social media, illegal substance use, vandalism, fighting, cult activities, and truancy. Adeleye (2018) contends that risk-taking encompasses a wide range of activities, such as substance abuse, hate crimes, gambling, self-harm, participating in dangerous social media challenges, experimenting with drugs, engaging in unsafe sexual practices, vandalism, cyberbullying, and involvement in cults.



Cyberbullying is the use of digital platforms, such as social media and messaging apps, to harass, intimidate, or harm individuals or groups (Internet Safety Technical Task Force, 2018). It involves the repeated and intentional use of technology to send hostile, offensive, or hurtful messages, images, or content. This form of harassment can lead to severe emotional and psychological consequences for the victim, resulting in feelings of fear, depression, and anxiety. In extreme cases, it may even lead to self-harm or suicidal thoughts (Lazarus & Folkman, 2014). It is particularly concerning that cyberbullying often occurs in online spaces where young people spend a significant amount of their time each day. Vandalism is the deliberate and malicious act of damaging or tampering with property without consent (Johnson, 2005). According to Abhishek and Philip (2016), it is viewed as an anti-social form of human aggression that may not always be criminal but results in property damage or loss. Vandalism includes actions such as graffiti, breaking windows, and spray-painting surfaces, ultimately leading to the degradation or destruction of property and instigating feelings of insecurity (Okoro, 2021). This behaviour is generally considered anti-social and is typically illegal, posing threats to individual, community, and national security. Vandalism can occur in various settings, from urban cities to rural areas, and motivations can range from protest and artistic expression to a simple desire to cause disruption and insecurity.

Cult activities are complex social phenomena characterized by tightly-knit groups centred around a charismatic and authoritarian leader. These groups often adopt beliefs, practices, and behaviours that significantly deviate from mainstream cultural or religious norms. According to Arijesuyo and Olusanya (2011), this deviation can include unorthodox spiritual or philosophical beliefs, as well as more extreme and unconventional practices. Mbah, Egwu, and Emesini (2018) emphasize that cultism involves ritual practices conducted by secretive groups, with membership formalities and operations kept confidential, affecting many individuals. Dauda (2021) noted that the activities of cult groups are often hidden, particularly when such activities may involve using individuals for sacrifices to appease their gods. Cult members frequently employ manipulative techniques to control the thoughts, emotions, and behaviours of their members. These tactics may include mind control and emotional manipulation, leading to feelings of insecurity. Awareness or suspicion of the existence of these cults can result in psychological distress among students, manifesting as anxiety, stress, psychological trauma, depression, and insecurity. This situation highlights the need for counselling services to support those impacted.

Counselling is a process in which individuals or groups meet with a trained professional to discuss the challenges they are facing. It is described as the application of principles from mental health, psychology, or human development, utilizing cognitive, affective, behavioural, or systemic interventions. These strategies aim to promote wellness, personal growth, and career development, and address psychological issues (Adriana, 2017). However, the availability and accessibility of counselling services have become significant challenges. Many students engaged in risky behaviours grapple with underlying emotional, psychological, or social issues. Unfortunately, due to factors such as limited resources, stigma, and insufficient awareness, not all students can access the counselling services necessary to address these issues. As these risky behaviours persist, the safety and harmony of the entire community are at risk.

According to Smith (2013), students who receive counselling show a significantly lower likelihood of engaging in cyberbullying compared to those who do not. Brown (2019) asserts that counselling helps students develop a strong sense of self-worth and belonging. When students possess a positive self-image and feel connected to their school community, they are less likely to engage in harmful behaviours such



as cyberbullying. Okoye (2020) suggests that counselling aids students in developing empathy for others. By understanding different perspectives, students are less inclined to partake in actions that may harm their peers, including cyberbullying.

Adeoye, Afolabi, and Adeyemi (2021) found that students who received counselling exhibited a lower tendency to vandalize school property or the belongings of others compared to those who did not receive counselling. Olatunji (2018) argued that counselling provides students with insights into the underlying causes of their vandalistic behaviour. By understanding why they engage in vandalism, students can begin to develop strategies to address the root issues. Olatunde and Alabi (2020) indicated that group counselling is effective in reducing students' involvement in vandalism, suggesting that those who participated in group counselling showed a decreased likelihood of vandalizing school property or others' possessions.

Adeleke (2016) emphasized that counselling can foster a sense of community and belonging among students. When students feel connected to others, they tend to place more value on their school and community, reducing the likelihood of engaging in vandalism and security threats. Olatunbosun (2020) affirmed that counselling enables students to understand and manage their emotions, thus alleviating symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns. Additionally, Adegbola (2015) stated that students learn to establish and maintain healthy boundaries in relationships, which reduces instances of exploitation, manipulation, and security threats. It is against this background, that this study aims to determine the perceived impact of risk-taking behaviour among secondary school students in the Makurdi Local Government Area.

Statement of the Problem

Incidences of risk-taking behaviours among youths and adolescents around the globe, particularly in Nigeria, Benue State, and specifically within Makurdi Local Government Area, have become increasingly common. In many schools in Benue State, especially in Makurdi, researchers have observed students engaging in various disruptive activities, including vandalism, cultism, drug and substance abuse, cyberbullying, and armed robbery. Ajibade, Ogunfowokan, and Umar (2019) noted that a significant challenge in addressing these issues is the limited availability of qualified counsellors in secondary schools. This shortage hampers the timely and specialized counselling support necessary for students struggling with such risk-taking behaviours. Additionally, there is a pervasive stigma surrounding the act of seeking counselling, which deters students from obtaining the help they need. Fear of judgment, concerns about breaches of confidentiality, and potential social consequences contribute to a reluctance to engage with counselling services. Researchers have also observed that diverse cultural beliefs and practices affect the willingness of students and families to participate in counselling. Moreover, economic constraints further limit access to private counselling services. Some existing programs do not adequately address the specific risk factors and challenges faced by secondary school students in Makurdi Local Government, highlighting the need for a more contextually sensitive approach to counselling. Hence, the study aimed to determine the perceived impact of counselling on the risk-taking behaviours of secondary school students in Makurdi Local Government Area of Benue State.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised and answered in the study:

1. What is the perceived impact of counselling on students' involvement in cyberbullying in Makurdi Local Government of Benue State?
2. What is the perceived impact of counselling on students' involvement in vandalism?
3. What is the perceived impact of counselling on students' involvement in cult activities?

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised 7,854 students from 22 Government Grant-Aided Secondary Schools in the Makurdi Local Government Area of Benue State (Benue State Teaching Service Board, 2020). A sample size of 385 students was determined using Glenn's (2012) formula for calculating sample sizes from a population. The study employed a multi-stage sampling technique, including stratified, proportional, and simple random sampling methods. The researchers developed an instrument titled the 'Counselling and Risk-Taking Behaviour Questionnaire' (CRTBQ). This instrument consisted of three clusters: Cluster A (items 1-5) assessed the impact of counselling on students' involvement in vandalism, Cluster B (items 6-10) explored the effect of counselling on students' participation in cyberbullying, and Cluster C (items 11-15) examined the influence of counselling on students' engagement in cult activities. The questionnaire utilized a 4-point rating scale: Strongly Agree (SA) = 4, Agree (A) = 3, Disagree (D) = 2, and Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1. The questionnaire was reviewed by two experts in Guidance and Counselling and one expert in Test and Measurement from the Faculty of Education at Benue State University, Makurdi. A total of 385 questionnaires were administered to respondents in person, and the completed forms were collected immediately. The data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the perceived impact of counselling on students' involvement in cyberbullying?

Table 1: *Perceived Impact of Counselling on Students' Involvement in Cyberbullying*

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std	Decision
I have stopped sending hurtful messages to someone online	109	108	70	87	2.64	1.14	Accepted
I have stopped posting embarrassing photos of someone online	94	127	52	101	2.57	1.14	Accepted
I have stopped spreading rumours about someone online	104	115	66	89	2.63	1.13	Accepted
I have stopped sending hate speeches online	102	94	35	84	2.23	1.18	Accepted
I have stopped using emotional manipulation online	210	62	23	79	3.08	1.22	Accepted
Weighted Average					2.63		Accepted

Table 1 shows a reduction in cyberbullying behaviours, including sending hurtful messages, posting embarrassing photos, spreading rumours, sending hate speech, and using emotional manipulation online.

The mean scores across items reflect that respondents generally agree they have discontinued these negative online behaviours, with all items meeting the “accepted” threshold. The item measuring cessation of hurtful messaging yielded a mean score of 2.64, indicating that most respondents have refrained from sending hurtful messages. Likewise, the mean score for stopping the posting of embarrassing photos (2.57) and the cessation of spreading rumours (2.63) similarly reflect a general agreement among respondents that they have reduced these actions. Notably, respondents showed a slightly lower mean score of 2.23 on reducing hate speech, suggesting that this behaviour may present additional challenges for some individuals to eliminate, with greater variability in responses reflecting mixed levels of adherence to change. However, the cessation of emotional manipulation showed the highest mean score (3.08), indicating that many respondents have strongly agreed to discontinue this behaviour, although a standard deviation of 1.22 highlights some variability, suggesting that while a majority have refrained, a segment may continue to struggle with fully eliminating it. The weighted average mean score of 2.63 indicates a general trend of positive change, with respondents acknowledging efforts to reduce harmful online behaviours. This implies that counselling has a positive perceived impact on students’ involvement in cyberbullying in Makurdi, Benue State.

Research Question 2: What is the perceived impact of counselling on students’ involvement in vandalism?

Table 2: *Perceived Impact of Counselling on Students’ Involvement in Vandalism*

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std	Decision
I have stopped drawing on the walls	177	100	19	78	3.01	1.17	Accepted
I have stopped destroying the windows	154	91	44	85	2.84	1.19	Accepted
I have stopped destroying electrical switches.	132	118	34	90	2.78	1.17	Accepted
I have stopped banging on the doors.	137	93	61	83	2.76	1.17	Accepted
I have stopped destroying desks and lockers by climbing on them	123	112	44	95	2.70	1.18	Accepted
Weighted Average					2.82		Accepted

Table 2 presents findings on students’ involvement with vandalism, such as drawing on walls, damaging windows, destroying electrical switches, banging on doors, and damaging desks and lockers by climbing on them. The results show that, overall, respondents indicate a positive shift away from these behaviours, as all items yield mean scores above the midpoint of 2.5, with a weighted average mean of 2.82. This score, coupled with the "Accepted" decision status for each item, suggests that most respondents have made efforts to cease these actions. The highest mean score (3.01) is observed in the item on ceasing to draw on walls, suggesting a stronger consensus among respondents that they have successfully stopped this behaviour. This could indicate that drawing on walls is more easily controlled or perceived as less acceptable behaviour. A slightly lower but still high level of agreement is observed in responses to the item on avoiding window destruction, with a mean score of 2.84, suggesting that most respondents have

refrained from this action as well. Items relating to the cessation of damaging electrical switches (2.78), banging on doors (2.76), and climbing on desks or lockers (2.70) all fall within similar ranges, indicating moderate agreement that respondents have stopped these behaviours. The standard deviations across items, ranging from 1.17 to 1.19, suggest moderate variability in responses, meaning that while many individuals have discontinued these actions, some may still engage in them occasionally or have more difficulty ceasing them completely. This implies that counselling has a positive perceived impact on students' involvement in vandalism in Makurdi, Benue State.

Research Question Three: What is the perceived impact of counselling on students' involvement in cult activities?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Perceived Impact of Counselling on Students' Involvement in Cult Activities

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std	Decision
I have stopped giving my cult groups any money	180	98	19	77	3.02	1.17	Accepted
I have stopped asking questions about cult activities.	102	118	50	104	2.58	1.17	Accepted
I have stopped recruiting new members for the group	140	86	48	100	2.71	1.23	Accepted
I have stopped spending time with the group.	117	99	60	98	2.63	1.18	Accepted
I have changed my appearance and behaviour from the group.	150	77	58	89	2.77	1.21	Accepted
Weighted Average					2.75		Accepted

Table 3 provides insight into students' disengagement from cult-related activities, including stopping giving cult groups money, no longer inquiring about cult activities, stopping recruitment, reducing time spent with the group, and changing appearance and behaviour associated with cult groups. Responses show an "Accepted" decision status, reflecting a general trend towards disengagement. The item with the highest mean score (3.02) indicates that most respondents have stopped giving money to cult groups, suggesting a strong commitment to reducing financial ties. This could be an indicator of a broader commitment to distancing themselves from the group, as financial contributions often represent an active form of participation. Respondents also reported ceasing recruitment of new members with a mean score of 2.71, which highlights another important shift away from group involvement. Stopping recruitment efforts may signify a critical turning point, as recruiting often reinforces group loyalty and spreads influence. Furthermore, changes in appearance and behaviour associated with the cult group (mean score of 2.77) reveal a more personal level of disengagement. Modifying appearance and distancing from group identity suggest that respondents are taking steps to reshape their identities outside of the group. On the items of avoiding questions about cult activities (mean of 2.58) and reducing time spent with the group (mean of 2.63), respondents show positive progress, albeit with slightly lower mean scores than other items. This difference might indicate that while respondents are stepping away, they may still experience curiosity or social pull from the group, which can complicate full disengagement. The standard deviations



across items, ranging from 1.17 to 1.23, show moderate variability, suggesting that while many respondents have moved away from these behaviours, some may still have occasional challenges in completely detaching. This implies that counselling has a positive perceived impact on students' involvement in cult activities in Makurdi, Benue State.

Discussion of Findings

Research question one revealed that counselling has a significant positive perceived impact on students' involvement in cyberbullying. This implies that counselling helps students stop sending hurtful messages online, stop posting embarrassing photos of someone online, and helps students stop spreading rumours about someone online. This finding is in line with the work of Brown (2019), who found that counselling facilitates the development of a strong sense of self-worth and belonging among students. When students have a positive self-image and feel a sense of belonging in their school community, they are less inclined to partake in detrimental activities like cyberbullying. This finding also agrees with the work of Okoye, (2020) who postulated that counselling helps students develop empathy for others. When students can see things from other people's perspectives, they are less likely to engage in behaviours that would harm others, including cyberbullying.

Research question two revealed that counselling has a significant perceived impact on students' involvement in vandalism. This implies that counselling helps students stop drawing on the walls, stop destroying the windows, and prevent damaging electrical switches in schools. This finding is in line with the work of Adeoye, Afolabi, and Adeyemi (2021), who found that students who underwent counselling exhibited a reduced tendency to engage in acts of vandalism towards school property or the belongings of others, in contrast to those who did not receive counselling. This finding is also in agreement with the work of Olatunde and Alabi (2020) who found that employing group counselling proved effective in diminishing students' involvement in vandalism. This implies that students who took part in group counselling exhibited a reduced inclination to vandalize school property or the possessions of others.

Research question three revealed that counselling has a significant perceived positive impact on students' involvement in cult activities. This implies that counselling helps students stop giving cult groups money, stop asking questions about cult activities, and stop recruiting new members for the group. This finding is in line with the works of Adegbola (2015) who asserted that students learn to establish and uphold healthy boundaries in relationships, consequently reducing instances of exploitation, manipulation and security threats. This finding is in agreement with the work of Adeoye (2017), who asserted that counselling enhances self-esteem and self-value, empowering students to confront challenges and pursue their aspirations with confidence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings from the study reveal a positive impact of counselling on risk-taking behaviour from reducing cyberbullying behaviours to disengaging from vandalism and cult-related activities among secondary school students in Makurdi Local Government area of Benue State. Respondents generally report taking steps to stop harmful online behaviours, cease destructive acts within physical environments, and distance themselves from cult involvement. The mean scores for each behaviour consistently fall above the midpoint, reflecting an overall commitment to positive change. However, the moderate variability in standard deviations suggests that while a majority have adopted these changes, a subset of respondents may still face challenges in fully adhering to these improvements.



The results emphasize the importance of counselling interventions and continued support to sustain these positive behavioural changes. Programs focused on digital citizenship, behaviour management, and rehabilitation could provide additional assistance, helping individuals maintain these improvements and foster a safer, healthier environment both online and offline. Continuous collaborative efforts of school counsellors and educational psychologists should focus on reducing incidences of students' involvement in cyberbullying, vandalism and cult activities would yield positive results.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. School counsellors and educational psychologists should invest in anti-bullying and cyberbullying prevention programs that are accessible to all students. These can be done through internet safety workshops and advocacies to teach students about online privacy, safe social media practices, and how to recognize and avoid online threats.
2. Counsellors and educational psychologists should adopt Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) techniques that will help students identify and change negative thought patterns and behaviours associated with risk-taking like acts of vandalism.
3. Counsellors should collaborate with stakeholders in education, for example, teachers, parents, and local authorities to address students' involvement in cult activities. Collaboration can lead to a more holistic approach to tackling these issues.

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