

Regional Differences in Fear of Missing Out and Stress Among Nigerian Students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and perceived stress have emerged as key indicators of student mental health in highly digitalised higher-education environments, yet little is known about how these constructs vary across regions and institutions within Nigeria. This study examined regional variations in FOMO and perceived stress among undergraduates drawn from public and private universities across the South-East, South-West and North-Central geopolitical zones. **Method:** A cross-sectional survey was administered to 4,930 undergraduates using structured questionnaires incorporating standard FOMO and perceived stress scales, alongside basic socio-demographic items. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations and one-way analysis of variance to compare FOMO across selected private universities. **Results:** FOMO was highly prevalent across all three zones: in each of the South-East and South-West, 89.3 % of students were classified as having FOMO, rising to 97.1 % in the North-Central zone. Perceived stress scores indicated a substantial stress burden across the sample, with most students reporting at least some level of stress. FOMO differed significantly across three private universities, with the South-East institution showing higher mean FOMO scores than the two South-West institutions. Both FOMO and perceived stress were widely distributed across socio-demographic subgroups, with concentrations among traditional-age undergraduates and a larger proportion of female respondents, but no strong demographic segmentation. **Novelty:** The findings indicate that FOMO and perceived stress are pervasive among Nigerian undergraduates and that regional and institutional contexts contribute to meaningful variation, particularly in FOMO. These results underscore the need for regionally sensitive and campus-specific interventions that address digital pressures and structural stressors simultaneously within Nigerian higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Fear of Missing Out, Perceived Stress and Regional Context

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has become a prominent construct in contemporary student mental health research, capturing a persistent sense that others are experiencing rewarding events from which one is absent and a consequent pressure to remain constantly connected to online social networks [1][2][3]. Empirical work with university students links higher FOMO to elevated distress, problematic social media engagement and disruptions to academic functioning [1][3]. Parallel research shows that perceived stress among undergraduates remains high globally, with substantial proportions of students reporting stress levels that interfere with concentration, sleep and academic performance [4][5][6].

Within African and Nigerian contexts, concerns about student stress are amplified by structural constraints such as large class sizes, infrastructural deficits, financial insecurity and uncertainties about graduate employment [7][8][9]. Recent evidence

indicates that perceived stress is widespread among undergraduates and often co-occurs with other indicators of psychological strain, including academic distress and impaired functioning [10][11]. Together, these developments suggest that FOMO and perceived stress are key psychological markers of how students navigate increasingly digitalised and competitive higher-education environments.

Nigeria provides an important setting in which to examine these dynamics. Its university system spans diverse geopolitical zones with marked differences in socio-economic development, security conditions and institutional resources. These macro-level contrasts shape campus life, patterns of digital access and the pressures students face in sustaining academic progress [12][10][13]. Understanding how FOMO and perceived stress vary across major Nigerian zones therefore has both theoretical and practical significance for student mental health.

International and Nigerian Studies on FOMO and Stress Among Undergraduates

Internationally, cross-sectional surveys consistently show that a large proportion of university students report at least moderate FOMO, with higher scores associated with more time spent on social media, greater emotional investment in online interactions and lower indicators of well-being [1][2]. Recent work also emphasises that FOMO is not merely a transient discomfort but part of broader digital-related vulnerability, often co-occurring with problematic smartphone or social media use and social comparison processes [3][14].

Systematic reviews and umbrella syntheses highlight that stress-related symptoms are highly prevalent in student populations, frequently exceeding 30–40 % for at least moderate stress [4][5][6]. These reviews also underline substantial heterogeneity across regions, suggesting that cultural, institutional and economic contexts shape both the magnitude and patterning of stress.

Within Nigeria, multiple recent studies report high levels of psychological stress and related difficulties among undergraduates. During the COVID-19 period, large samples of Nigerian students reported considerable stress, with academic disruption, financial strain and uncertainty about future careers frequently cited as sources of strain [7]. Subsequent surveys conducted after the acute pandemic phase continue to document substantial perceived stress, with many students exhibiting moderate or high scores on standard stress scales [8][10]. Parallel research on financial stress, academic distress and psychosocial functioning in Nigerian tertiary institutions reinforces the view that stress is structurally embedded in the student experience [13][15][16].

Although FOMO has been discussed in relation to Nigerian young adults' social media use and mental health (Maduka, 2025), systematic empirical work on FOMO among Nigerian undergraduates remains limited. A closely related study has examined FOMO together with social support across geopolitical zones in Nigeria, highlighting high FOMO prevalence and suggesting regional variation in how FOMO co-occurs with perceived interpersonal resources [12]. However, less is known about how FOMO aligns

with perceived stress across different Nigerian zones and how these constructs vary across institutional settings within zones.

Conceptual Focus on Geopolitical Zones and Campus Environments

Nigeria's geopolitical-zonal structure offers a useful lens for investigating how macro-context shapes student experiences. The South-East, South-West and North-Central zones differ in terms of economic opportunities, infrastructural development, security conditions and patterns of private versus public higher-education provision. These structural differences feed into campus-level environments, affecting exposure to academic pressure, access to digital resources, and forms of social comparison and competition that may amplify FOMO and stress.

Recent African and global evidence indicates that student stress levels vary by region and institutional context, often aligning with broader socio-economic inequalities and sector-specific pressures [5][4][10]. Similarly, FOMO appears to be shaped by sociocultural norms around connectivity, peer comparison and achievement, which may differ across zones and between public and private institutions [1][3][14]. Against this background, a cross-zonal perspective allows a more granular understanding of how Nigerian undergraduates' FOMO and perceived stress are patterned across regions and campuses.

Aim and Objectives

The study aimed to examine regional variations in FOMO and perceived stress among Nigerian undergraduates in public and private universities across the South-East, South-West and North-Central geopolitical zones.

The specific objectives were to:

1. Compare the prevalence of FOMO and perceived stress across the three geopolitical zones.
2. Compare FOMO levels across selected private universities within these zones.
3. Examine how FOMO and perceived stress are distributed across key socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age group, level of study, marital status and religion).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Data Source

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design using structured questionnaires administered to undergraduate students. Data were obtained from 4,930 undergraduates enrolled in public and private universities in Nigeria. The survey captured scores on validated FOMO and perceived stress scales, alongside basic socio-demographic information and institutional identifiers.

Participants and Setting

Participants were drawn from universities located in three Nigerian geopolitical zones: South-East, South-West and North-Central. A stratified sampling strategy was used, with strata defined by geopolitical zone. Within each zone, universities were

treated as sampling units and selected using simple random sampling procedures. Students within the selected universities served as participants.

To maintain institutional anonymity, universities are referred to using neutral labels. Two private universities in the South-West and one private university in the South-East are labelled Private University SW-1, Private University SW-2 and Private University SE-1 respectively. Two large public universities, one in the South-East and one in the North-Central zone, are referred to as Public University SE-1 and Public University NC-1. Table 1 summarises the socio-demographic composition of the full sample.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the study sample (N = 4,930).

Variable	Category	N	%
Institution	Private University SW-1	1,221	24.8
	Private University SE-1	1,245	25.3
	Private University SW-2	511	10.4
	Public University SE-1	1,103	22.4
	Public University NC-1	850	17.2
Geopolitical zone	South-East	1,681	34.1
	South-West	2,093	42.5
	North-Central	1,156	23.4
Gender	Male	2,167	44.0
	Female	2,763	56.1
Level of study	100 level	1,748	35.5
	200 level	754	15.3
	300 level	883	17.9
	400 level	1,327	27.0
	500 level	218	4.4
Age group (years)	15-17	558	11.3
	18-24	3,704	75.1
	25-30	544	11.0
	31-40	117	2.4
	41 and above	7	0.1
Marital status	Single	4,795	97.3
	Married	116	2.4
	Separated	5	0.1
	Divorced	14	0.3
Religion	Christianity	4,755	96.4
	Islam	145	2.9
	Traditionalist	8	0.2
	Atheist	22	0.4

The sample was thus predominantly drawn from South-West and South-East universities, with a slightly smaller but substantial representation from the North-Central zone. Most respondents were female, in early adulthood, single and Christian, consistent with enrolment patterns in many Nigerian universities [10][12].

Measures (FOMO, Perceived Stress and Socio-Demographics)

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO): FOMO was assessed using a standardised FOMO scale widely applied in recent university-based research [1][2][3]. The scale consists of multiple items tapping preoccupation with missed experiences, anxiety about being excluded from social events and a strong urge to stay continuously connected. Items were rated on Likert-type response options, with higher total scores indicating greater FOMO. For descriptive purposes, students were categorised as “FOMO present” versus “FOMO absent” based on established scoring criteria used in similar student samples. Recent studies report good internal consistency for this scale among university students across diverse cultural settings [1][2][3].

Perceived Stress: Perceived stress was measured using a widely used perceived stress scale that captures the degree to which respondents appraise their lives as unpredictable, uncontrollable and overloaded. Items require respondents to rate the frequency of stress-related thoughts and feelings over a specified recent period. Higher scores reflect greater perceived stress. Contemporary studies in Africa and globally have used this scale extensively with university students and report satisfactory reliability and construct validity [7][8][5][10].

Socio-Demographic Variables: The questionnaire also collected information on gender, age group, level of study, marital status, religion, institution and geopolitical zone. These variables were used to characterise the sample and to examine how FOMO and perceived stress were distributed across key demographic categories in line with recent work on student mental health in Nigeria and other African settings [7][9][10][17].

Procedure and Ethics

Questionnaires were administered in participating universities during routine academic activities within an academic semester. An online survey link was shared via institutional and student communication platforms, including course groups and other university-approved channels. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Students were informed about the purpose of the study, the approximate time required to complete the questionnaire and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Informed consent was obtained electronically before respondents could access the main survey items. Ethical approval was granted by appropriate institutional review structures, and the study adhered to standard principles of confidentiality and data protection common to student mental health research [4][9].

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using standard statistical software. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to summarise socio-demographic characteristics and to estimate the prevalence of FOMO and perceived stress across

geopolitical zones. Cross-tabulations were used to assess how FOMO and perceived stress were distributed across socio-demographic categories. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare mean FOMO scores across the three participating private universities. Statistical significance was evaluated at the 0.05 level. The present article focuses on the components of the wider analysis relating specifically to FOMO, perceived stress, region and basic socio-demographics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Regional Distribution of FOMO and Perceived Stress

Across the full sample of 4,930 undergraduates, 4,492 students (91.2 %) met the criterion for FOMO, while 438 (8.8 %) did not. Table 2 presents the distribution of FOMO across the three geopolitical zones.

Table 2. FOMO by geopolitical zone (N = 4,930).

Zone	FOMO present n (%)	FOMO absent n (%)	Total n (%)
South-East	1,501 (89.3)	180 (10.7)	1,681 (100.0)
South-West	1,869 (89.3)	224 (10.7)	2,093 (100.0)
North-Central	1,122 (97.1)	34 (2.9)	1,156 (100.0)
Total	4,492 (91.2)	438 (8.8)	4,930 (100.0)

FOMO was highly prevalent in all three zones, with nearly nine in ten students in the South-East and South-West scoring in the FOMO-present category. The North-Central zone showed the highest FOMO prevalence, with 97.1 % of students classified as having FOMO and only 2.9 % falling into the non-FOMO category. These patterns suggest that while FOMO is widespread among Nigerian undergraduates generally, students in the North-Central zone were particularly likely to report elevated FOMO.

Perceived stress scores indicated that a large majority of students experienced at least moderate stress, consistent with recent Nigerian and African evidence on elevated stress among undergraduates [7][8][5][10]. In the available tabulations, perceived stress was analysed for 4,413 respondents, indicating minimal item-level missingness. Although detailed cross-zonal breakdowns for perceived stress were not available in the present outputs, the overall pattern was one of substantial stress burden across the combined sample, aligning with broader African meta-analytic estimates [5].

Institutional Comparisons Among Selected Universities

Institutional comparisons were conducted for the three participating private universities, anonymised here as Private University SW-1, Private University SW-2 and Private University SE-1. A one-way ANOVA examined whether mean FOMO scores differed across these institutions.

Table 3. One-way ANOVA for FOMO across private universities (N = 1,609).

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	50.890	2	25.445	44.314	.000
Within groups	922.153	1,606	0.574		
Total	973.043	1,608			

The analysis indicated a statistically significant difference in mean FOMO scores across the three private universities, $F(2, 1,606) = 44.31$, $p < 0.001$. Descriptive statistics for the institutions are shown in Table 4.

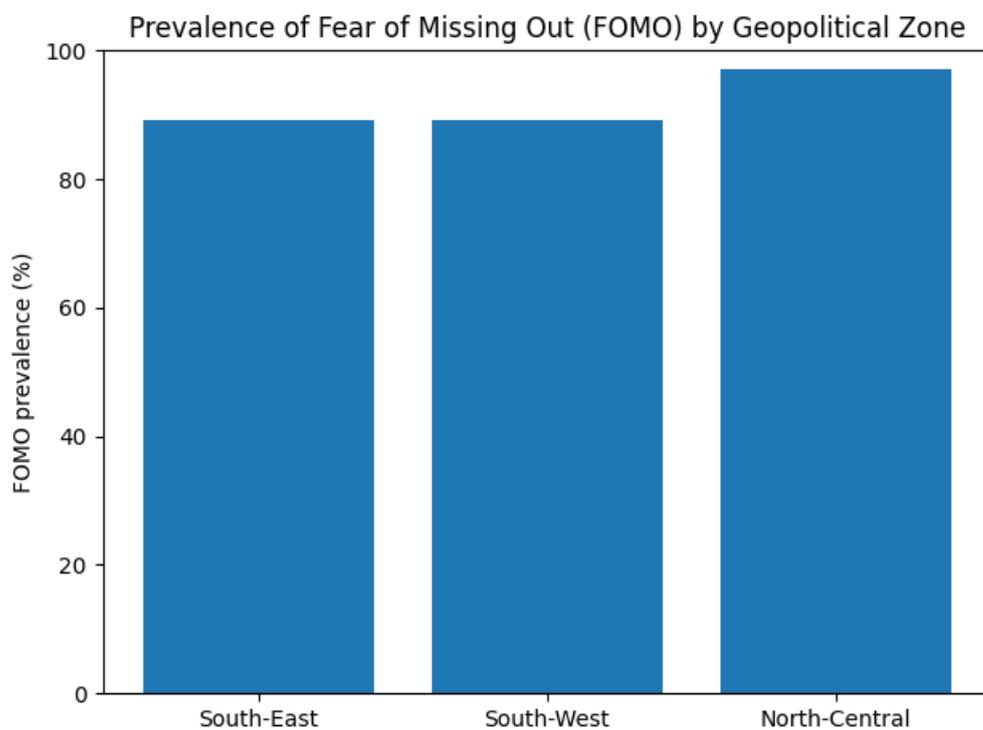


Figure 1. Prevalence of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) among undergraduates across the South-East, South-West and North-Central geopolitical zones.

Table 4. Mean FOMO scores across private universities.

Institution	n	Mean FOMO score
Private University SW-1	703	2.23
Private University SW-2	291	2.26
Private University SE-1	615	2.60

Post-hoc comparisons (originally conducted using standard pairwise procedures) showed that students at Private University SE-1 had significantly higher mean FOMO scores than those at both Private University SW-1 and Private University SW-2, whereas the two South-West private universities did not differ significantly from each other in

FOMO ($p > 0.05$). Taken together with the zonal findings, these results suggest that institutional context within zones contributes to variation in FOMO, with the private university located in the South-East showing particularly elevated FOMO levels.

Socio-Demographic Correlates of FOMO and Perceived Stress

Socio-demographic distributions were examined separately for FOMO and perceived stress. Among the 4,492 students classified as having FOMO, 1,821 (40.5 %) were male and 2,671 (59.5 %) were female. FOMO was therefore common among both genders but more frequent in the larger female subgroup. Age distributions within the FOMO-present group are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Age distribution among students with FOMO (n = 4,492).

Age group (years)	Male n (%)	Female n (%)
15–17	245 (13.5)	244 (9.1)
18–24	1,319 (72.3)	2,088 (78.2)
25–30	199 (10.9)	226 (8.5)
31–40	56 (3.1)	47 (1.8)
41 and above	2 (0.1)	66 (2.5)
Total	1,821 (100.0)	2,671 (100.0)

Across both genders, roughly three-quarters of students with FOMO fell within the 18–24 age band, indicating that FOMO was concentrated among traditional-age undergraduates but also present among older students. The level-of-study distribution within the FOMO-positive group (not shown in full) indicated that FOMO was represented at all levels, with slightly higher frequencies at 100 and 400 levels, echoing observations that academic transitions and final-year pressures can amplify digital comparison and anxiety in Nigerian universities (Ofili et al., 2025; Mba et al., 2025).

For perceived stress, 4,413 students contributed data. Of these, 1,569 (35.6 %) were male and 2,844 (64.4 %) female. Age distributions are displayed in Table 6.

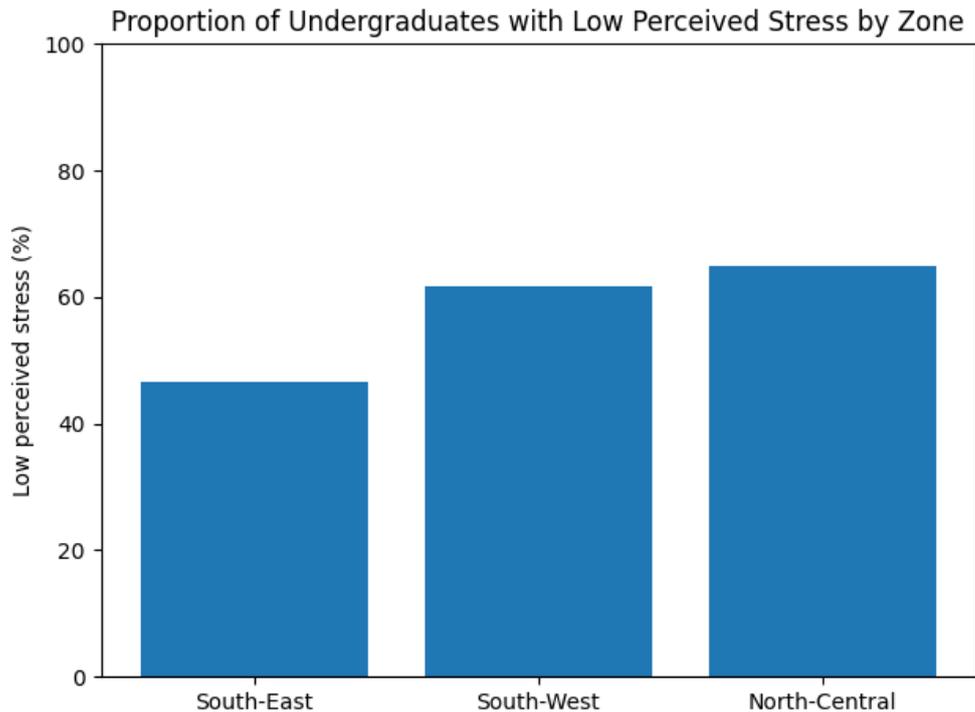


Figure 2. Distribution of perceived stress categories among undergraduates by geopolitical zone (South-East, South-West and North-Central).

Table 6. Age distribution among students reporting perceived stress (n = 4,413).

Age group (years)	Male n (%)	Female n (%)
15–17	193 (12.3)	206 (7.2)
18–24	1,133 (72.2)	2,227 (78.3)
25–30	191 (12.2)	273 (9.6)
31–40	50 (3.1)	71 (2.5)
41 and above	2 (0.1)	67 (2.4)
Total	1,569 (100.0)	2,844 (100.0)

The perceived stress profile closely mirrored that for FOMO: stress was most common among 18–24-year-olds but remained evident among older age groups. In line with Nigerian and African work, these distributions highlight that stress is not confined to early undergraduate years but persists across the university trajectory [7][8][5].

Marital status and religion were overwhelmingly skewed towards single and Christian categories for both FOMO and perceived stress, reflecting the demographic composition of the wider student population rather than specific risk patterns. Overall, the demographic analyses indicate that FOMO and perceived stress are broadly distributed across genders, age groups and levels of study, with modest variations rather than sharp demographic segmentation.

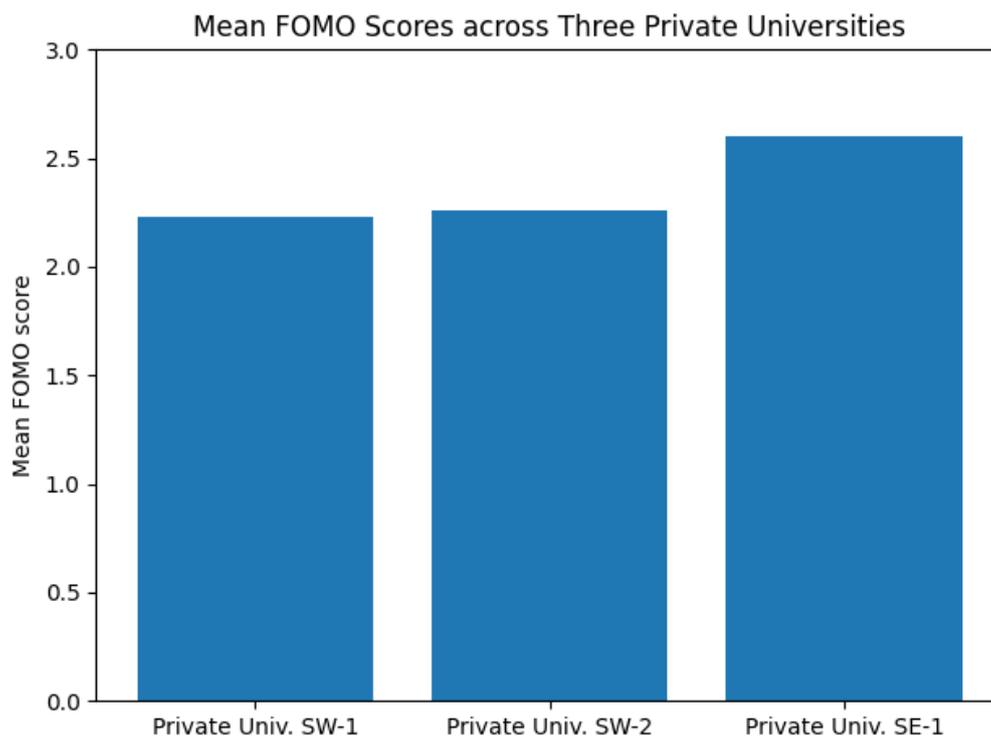


Figure 3. Mean FOMO scores among undergraduates in three private universities (Private University SW-1, Private University SW-2 and Private University SE-1).

Discussion

Interpreting Cross-Zonal Patterns in FOMO and Perceived Stress

The findings demonstrate that FOMO is highly prevalent among Nigerian undergraduates in all three zones studied, with particularly pronounced levels in the North-Central zone, where 97.1 % of students were classified as having FOMO. FOMO prevalence in the South-East and South-West was also high at 89.3 %. These values align with international reports of substantial FOMO in student populations and indicate that Nigerian undergraduates are similarly immersed in digital comparison and connectivity pressures [1][2][3].

The especially high FOMO prevalence in the North-Central zone may reflect a combination of contextual factors. Institutions in this zone often operate under conditions of infrastructural uncertainty, intermittent disruptions and heightened concerns about security and future prospects. Such conditions may amplify students' reliance on online networks for information, social comparison and perceived opportunities, thereby intensifying FOMO. Existing evidence suggests that regional disparities in economic development, connectivity and campus resources contribute to variations in student stress and digital engagement patterns across Africa [5][4][10], and the present results are consistent with this broader picture.

Perceived stress was also widespread, corroborating Nigerian studies that document substantial stress related to academic workload, financial constraints and post-graduation uncertainty [7][8][9][10]. Although detailed cross-zonal breakdowns of

perceived stress were not available in the current outputs, the overall pattern reinforces the view that Nigerian undergraduates face sustained stress exposures. Together with the FOMO results, this suggests that many students navigate university life at the intersection of persistent stress and intense digital comparison, a combination that has been linked elsewhere to compromised well-being and academic disruption [6][4].

Institutional Context and Campus Environments

The institutional analysis revealed significant differences in mean FOMO scores across the three private universities. Students at Private University SE-1 reported significantly higher FOMO than their counterparts at the two South-West private universities, which did not differ from each other. This pattern suggests that beyond regional context, campus-specific environments shape FOMO. Possible mechanisms include differences in institutional culture, social media norms, peer competition, campus size, and academic expectations.

Qualitative and quantitative work from Nigerian and other African universities indicates that campus climate, including perceived competitiveness, social status hierarchies and digital norms, can heighten students' sense of being left out or left behind [12][15][14]. In more selective or symbolically prestigious institutions, students may feel under constant pressure to track opportunities, achievements and social events, thereby amplifying FOMO. While the present study did not assess these mechanisms directly, the observed institutional differences in FOMO are consistent with this interpretation.

Implications for Student Mental Health and Academic Functioning

High levels of FOMO and perceived stress have important implications for student mental health and academic engagement. International and African evidence links persistent stress to increased risk of psychological symptoms, sleep difficulties, reduced academic performance and dropout [5][4][10]. FOMO has been associated with problematic social media use, emotional dysregulation and academic distraction [1][2][3].

In the Nigerian context, where universities already contend with resource constraints and large enrolments, the combination of widespread FOMO and stress may exacerbate vulnerabilities. Students who perceive that they are constantly missing out on opportunities or social experiences may over-invest in online monitoring at the expense of focused study, while ongoing stress may erode concentration and motivation. Evidence from Nigeria and other countries shows that stress is associated with poorer academic outcomes and broader mental health difficulties among undergraduates [7][8][10][17].

Policy and Practice Implications for Universities and Policymakers

The cross-zonal and institutional patterns observed here underscore the need for regionally sensitive and campus-specific strategies. For zones and institutions with particularly high FOMO, interventions could focus on digital literacy and healthy social media use, helping students critically evaluate online content, manage comparison processes and set boundaries around connectivity. Such measures are consistent with

broader recommendations on mitigating digital-related distress in university populations [1][3][14].

At the same time, stress-reduction initiatives should address structural demands rather than only individual coping. Evidence from Nigerian universities suggests that perceived stress can be reduced through targeted improvements in academic advising, timetable organisation, assessment scheduling and access to counselling, alongside programmes that promote adaptive coping and social support [7][8][10][11]. Policymakers and institutional leaders in higher education could use zonal data to allocate resources and design mental health services tailored to local pressures, particularly in zones where FOMO and stress appear especially high.

The importance of these cross-zonal patterns in FOMO and perceived stress becomes clearer when viewed alongside findings from a companion analysis that modelled suicidal ideation in the same multi-zonal sample of 4,930 undergraduates. In that study, FOMO, perceived stress, quality of life and social support jointly explained a modest but meaningful proportion of variance in suicidal ideation, with perceived stress and social support operating statistically as protective factors, while poorer quality of life and higher FOMO were associated with greater suicidal thoughts [12]. Situating the current regional FOMO–stress profiles against this broader evidence suggests that zones and institutions with particularly elevated FOMO, or with stress profiles that may cease to be protective under more severe conditions, should be prioritised for early-identification and prevention strategies targeting suicide risk among Nigerian undergraduates.

The regional variations in FoMO and perceived stress observed in this study also align with evidence that these constructs are implicated in suicidal ideation among Nigerian undergraduates. In a related predictive model, fear of missing out, perceived stress, quality of life and perceived social support jointly accounted for significant variance in suicidal ideation, with higher FoMO associated with greater risk, whereas higher perceived stress and stronger social support emerged as protective factors [12]. Taken together, this suggests that zones or institutions with clusters of students reporting very high FoMO and lower stress may be exposed to a more adverse risk profile, reinforcing the need to interpret cross-zonal patterns in FoMO and stress in relation to suicide-prevention priorities on campus.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

A major strength of this study is the large, multi-institutional sample spanning three key Nigerian geopolitical zones and both public and private universities. The use of standardised FOMO and perceived stress instruments enhances comparability with international research and aligns with recent African work on student mental health [7][8][5][10]. The analysis also benefits from explicit attention to both regional and institutional levels, highlighting that FOMO and stress are shaped by macro- and micro-contextual factors.

However, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference regarding the relationships between regional context, institutional environment, FOMO and stress. The reliance on structured questionnaires means that all variables were assessed at a single time-point, and temporal dynamics cannot be evaluated. In addition, detailed zonal breakdowns for perceived stress were not available in the present outputs, limiting the extent to which stress could be compared across zones. Finally, while the sample is large, it is confined to universities in three zones and cannot be assumed to represent all Nigerian undergraduates.

Recommendations for Research, Policy and Campus Interventions

Future research should extend the regional coverage to other Nigerian zones and explore longitudinal designs to track how FOMO and perceived stress evolve over the course of students' programmes and in response to broader socio-political changes. Multi-method approaches incorporating qualitative data could illuminate the specific campus cultures, digital practices and coping strategies that underlie zonal and institutional differences in FOMO and stress [5][16][12].

For policy and practice, universities could integrate routine screening for stress and digitally related difficulties into student support systems, with particular attention to institutions and zones where FOMO and stress are highest. Interventions might combine psychoeducation on healthy digital engagement with structural reforms designed to reduce academic overload and enhance students' sense of control and support [8][10][11]. Collaboration between university counselling units, academic departments and student associations will be important in tailoring these efforts to local needs.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : This study shows that FOMO and perceived stress are highly prevalent among Nigerian undergraduates, with FOMO particularly elevated in the North-Central zone and at one private university in the South-East. Socio-demographic analyses indicate that both constructs are widely distributed across gender and age groups, with concentrations among traditional-age undergraduates but meaningful representation among older students. **Implication:** These patterns suggest that regional context and campus environments shape Nigerian undergraduates' FOMO and stress profiles in ways that have implications for mental health and academic functioning. **Limitation:** Socio-demographic analyses indicate that both constructs are widely distributed across gender and age groups, with concentrations among traditional-age undergraduates but meaningful representation among older students. **Future Research:** Addressing these issues will require integrated, context-sensitive strategies that combine digital well-being initiatives with broader efforts to reduce structural sources of stress within Nigerian higher education.

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