



## Virtual Peer Counseling and Emotional Well-Being among Distance Learning Students Higher Education

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### Abstract

*This study examines the influence of virtual peer counseling on the emotional well-being of distance learning students in Nigerian higher education institutions. The increasing expansion of digital learning environments has intensified concerns regarding emotional isolation, psychological stress, and reduced social connectedness among online learners. Using a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 287 students enrolled in distance learning programs across selected Nigerian universities. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis. The findings reveal that virtual peer counseling significantly and positively influences students' emotional well-being. Peer-based digital interaction was found to strengthen emotional stability, academic motivation, psychological comfort, and social connectedness among students participating in online learning systems. Empathy and emotional communication emerged as the most influential dimensions of peer-support interaction. The study also demonstrates that virtual peer counseling explains a substantial proportion of variance in students' emotional well-being within distance education contexts. The findings provide important implications for universities and policymakers in developing emotionally supportive and sustainable digital learning environments through structured peer-support initiatives.*

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid integration of digital technology into higher education has transformed learning systems, academic communication, and student support mechanisms worldwide. Universities increasingly utilize online learning platforms to expand educational accessibility, improve learning flexibility, and accommodate diverse student populations. In Nigeria, distance learning has become an important strategy for addressing educational inequality and increasing participation in higher education among students facing geographical, economic, and social barriers (Ayodele, 2023; Eli-Chukwu et al., 2023). Institutions such as the National Open University of Nigeria and several federal universities continue to expand virtual learning infrastructures to support flexible educational delivery (Ofulue, 2025; Yusuf & Ibrahim, 2024; Adedoyin et al., 2024; Eli-Chukwu et al., 2023).

Despite these advantages, the growth of distance learning environments has also generated significant psychosocial challenges for students. Unlike traditional face-to-face classrooms, online learning environments often reduce direct interpersonal interaction between students, instructors, and academic communities (Sjölle et al., 2022; Yin & Shi, 2022; Eklund & Isotalus, 2024). This condition increases the likelihood of emotional isolation, academic stress, and psychological disengagement among students participating in virtual education systems. Existing studies indicate that the absence of meaningful social interaction in digital learning environments negatively affects students' motivation, academic satisfaction, and emotional stability. Consequently, emotional well-being has become an increasingly important issue in contemporary higher education research.

The Nigerian higher education context presents additional complexities. Many distance learning students experience unstable internet connectivity, limited access to technological resources, financial pressure, and inadequate institutional counseling support (Glazkova et al., 2025; Naidoo & Cartwright, 2022; Akmad, 2024). Furthermore, students frequently combine academic responsibilities with employment obligations and family commitments, intensifying emotional burdens associated with online learning participation. These conditions demonstrate that distance learning challenges extend beyond technological adaptation and involve broader emotional and psychosocial dimensions requiring institutional attention.

Emotional well-being refers to individuals' capacity to maintain positive emotional functioning, manage stress effectively, and develop healthy interpersonal relationships within social and educational environments (Van Pham, 2024; Shengyao et al., 2024). In higher education, emotional well-being significantly influences academic engagement, learning persistence, self-confidence, and cognitive performance. Students with stronger emotional well-being tend to demonstrate higher resilience, better stress management, and more positive learning experiences compared with students experiencing emotional distress (Nāstasā et al., 2022; Stein et al., 2024; Versel et al., 2023; Mohamed et al., 2025; Shengyao et al., 2024).

In distance learning environments, emotional well-being becomes increasingly vulnerable because students often navigate academic activities in relatively isolated conditions (Marler et al., 2024; Juntunen et al., 2022; Dost, 2025). Previous research demonstrates that online learning students frequently experience loneliness, anxiety, emotional fatigue, and decreased motivation due to limited face-to-face communication and weak social connectedness. According to studies published by UNESCO, emotionally supportive learning environments are essential for sustaining student participation and reducing psychological pressure in digitally mediated education systems. Similarly, research conducted by American Psychological Association emphasizes that students in online educational environments face higher risks of emotional exhaustion and stress when institutional social support mechanisms remain limited (Yang et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2025).

Several empirical studies further support this argument. Wang et al. (2024) found that social interaction and collaborative engagement significantly improved students' emotional experiences in online learning settings. Likewise, Guo et al. (2025) argued that emotional connectedness plays a central role in sustaining student engagement and academic persistence. More recent studies by Huang & Zhang (2022) revealed that emotional well-being among online learners is strongly influenced by peer interaction, communication quality, and perceived social support within digital learning communities. These findings indicate that emotional well-being should be considered a fundamental component of successful distance education systems rather than merely a supplementary psychological concern.

The growing concern regarding students' emotional well-being has encouraged higher education institutions to explore alternative counseling approaches capable of strengthening emotional support within online learning environments (Wang, 2024; Brandao De Souza & Jacomuzzi, 2025; Eloff et al., 2023). One emerging approach is virtual peer counseling, which refers to emotional and academic support provided by trained peers through digital communication platforms such as social media groups, messaging applications, discussion forums, and video conferencing systems. Virtual peer counseling emphasizes empathy, mutual understanding, shared experiences, and collaborative coping strategies among students encountering similar academic and emotional challenges (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2026; Shonfeld et al., 2025; Prakosa et al., 2024).

Compared with formal institutional counseling services, peer-based counseling approaches are often considered more accessible and socially relatable for students. Many students feel more comfortable discussing emotional concerns with peers who share similar experiences and academic pressures. Virtual peer counseling also offers greater flexibility because support interactions can occur continuously through digital communication technologies without requiring physical meetings (Mirbahaeddin & Chreim, 2024; Lukka et al., 2023).

Previous international studies demonstrate the effectiveness of peer-support mechanisms in improving students' emotional adaptation and psychological resilience. Grégoire et al. (2024) reported that peer counseling programs significantly reduced emotional isolation and improved students' academic confidence in online universities. Similarly, Smith et al. (2022) found that virtual peer interaction positively influenced students' sense of belonging and emotional stability within remote learning environments. Another study by Hyseni Duraku et al. (2026) showed that digital peer-support communities contributed to stress reduction and emotional resilience among undergraduate students participating in online education systems.

From a theoretical perspective, virtual peer counseling can be understood through social support theory, which emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships in helping individuals manage emotional pressure and psychological stress. Emotional support, informational assistance, and social connectedness are considered critical factors influencing individuals' well-being and adaptive capacity. In addition, student engagement theory suggests that meaningful peer interaction strengthens students' academic participation, learning motivation, and emotional attachment to educational communities. These theoretical perspectives provide an important foundation for understanding how peer-centered virtual interaction contributes to emotional well-being in distance learning environments.

### **Literature Gap and Research Novelty**

Although studies on online learning and student mental health continue to grow, several important limitations remain within the existing literature. First, most previous studies examining virtual peer counseling were conducted in technologically advanced countries where digital infrastructure and institutional mental health systems are relatively well developed. Consequently, limited empirical evidence explains how virtual peer counseling operates within developing-country contexts characterized by technological inequality and limited counseling resources.

Second, existing Nigerian studies on educational counseling predominantly focus on academic achievement, examination anxiety, career guidance, or institutional counseling effectiveness rather than peer-based digital emotional support systems. Third, many previous studies discuss mental health broadly without specifically positioning emotional well-being as a central analytical variable within distance learning contexts. As a result, there remains insufficient understanding regarding

how virtual peer counseling influences emotional well-being among Nigerian distance learning students.

This study addresses these gaps by specifically examining the relationship between virtual peer counseling and emotional well-being among distance learning students in Nigerian higher education institutions. The novelty of this research lies in its integration of educational counseling, emotional well-being, and digitally mediated peer-support mechanisms within the context of Nigerian higher education. Unlike previous studies emphasizing institutional counseling structures or technological adoption, this study focuses on peer-driven virtual interaction as an alternative emotional support mechanism in online learning environments.

### **Research Objective**

This study aims to analyze the influence of virtual peer counseling on the emotional well-being of distance learning students in Nigerian higher education institutions. The study contributes theoretically by extending social support theory and student engagement theory into digitally mediated counseling environments within African higher education contexts. Practically, the findings are expected to provide evidence-based recommendations for universities, counselors, and policymakers in developing more inclusive and emotionally supportive distance learning systems capable of improving students' psychological well-being and academic sustainability.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a quantitative research approach using a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between virtual peer counseling and emotional well-being among distance learning students in Nigerian higher education institutions. A quantitative design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to measure the influence of virtual peer counseling practices on students' emotional well-being through statistical analysis. According to John W. Creswell, quantitative survey methods are effective for investigating relationships among variables and generating empirical generalizations within social science research. The cross-sectional approach enabled the researcher to collect data from respondents at a single point in time while capturing students' current experiences with online peer-support systems and emotional conditions in digital learning environments.

### **Research Context and Population**

The study was conducted in selected higher education institutions offering distance learning programs in Nigeria. These institutions included public universities and open learning centers that actively implement virtual learning systems through digital educational platforms. The Nigerian higher education context was selected because of the increasing expansion of online learning programs alongside growing concerns regarding students' emotional well-being and limited institutional counseling support.

The target population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in distance learning programs during the 2025 academic year. Students participating in fully online or blended learning systems were considered suitable respondents because they regularly interacted with digital communication technologies and virtual peer networks. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents who had prior experience participating in online peer-support interactions or virtual counseling activities. This sampling strategy ensured that respondents possessed relevant experiences associated with the study variables.

A total of 320 questionnaires were distributed electronically through institutional communication channels, online student communities, and virtual academic forums. After the data screening process, 287 valid responses were included in the final analysis. This sample size was considered adequate for multivariate statistical analysis and aligned with methodological recommendations for social science survey research.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire designed based on previous studies related to virtual counseling, peer support, and emotional well-being. The questionnaire consisted of three main sections: demographic information, virtual peer counseling practices, and emotional well-being indicators. The virtual peer counseling variable was measured using indicators such as accessibility of peer support, emotional communication, empathy, collaborative interaction, and frequency of online peer engagement. Meanwhile, emotional well-being was measured through indicators including emotional stability, stress management, social connectedness, psychological comfort, and academic motivation.

All measurement items utilized a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). The use of Likert-scale instruments is widely recommended in educational and psychological research because it enables systematic measurement of attitudes and perceptions. Prior to large-scale distribution, the questionnaire underwent a pilot test involving 30 distance learning students to ensure clarity, consistency, and comprehensibility of the instrument items.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques with the assistance of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software application. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics and general response patterns related to virtual peer counseling and emotional well-being variables. Inferential analysis was conducted using Pearson correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis to examine the relationship and predictive influence between the independent and dependent variables. The analytical procedures followed the statistical recommendations proposed by Joseph F. Hair Jr. regarding multivariate analysis in social science research. Regression analysis was selected because it allowed the study to identify the extent to which virtual peer counseling contributes to variations in students' emotional well-being. The level of statistical significance was established at 0.05.

### **Validity and Reliability**

To ensure instrument validity, the questionnaire items were developed based on established theoretical frameworks and empirical findings from previous international studies concerning peer counseling and student emotional well-being. Content validity was evaluated through expert review involving two educational counseling scholars and one higher education researcher specializing in digital learning environments. Their feedback was used to refine item clarity and conceptual relevance. Construct validity was assessed using factor analysis to confirm the suitability of measurement indicators within each variable dimension. Reliability testing was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. According to methodological standards proposed by Lee J. Cronbach, a Cronbach's Alpha value above 0.70 indicates acceptable internal consistency reliability. The results showed that all variable constructs exceeded the recommended threshold, confirming that the research instrument possessed satisfactory reliability for data collection and statistical analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings regarding the influence of virtual peer counseling on emotional well-being among distance learning students in Nigerian higher education institutions. The findings are presented systematically to provide a comprehensive understanding of the statistical relationships between the study variables. The section begins with respondent demographic characteristics, followed by validity and reliability testing of the research instruments. Subsequently, descriptive statistics, assumption testing, correlation analysis, and regression analysis are presented to explain the influence of virtual peer counseling on students' emotional well-being. All tables are interpreted analytically to ensure consistency between statistical findings and research objectives.

### Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

The study involved 287 valid respondents selected from several Nigerian higher education institutions implementing distance learning systems. The demographic analysis aimed to identify the background characteristics of respondents participating in the study.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

| Variable                      | Category          | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Gender                        | Male              | 154       | 53.7           |
|                               | Female            | 133       | 46.3           |
| Age                           | 18–22 Years       | 96        | 33.4           |
|                               | 23–27 Years       | 127       | 44.3           |
|                               | Above 27 Years    | 64        | 22.3           |
| Academic Level                | Undergraduate     | 213       | 74.2           |
|                               | Postgraduate      | 74        | 25.8           |
| Duration in Distance Learning | Less than 1 Year  | 58        | 20.2           |
|                               | 1–3 Years         | 149       | 51.9           |
|                               | More than 3 Years | 80        | 27.9           |

Source: Research Data Processed, 2026

Table 1 shows that male respondents slightly dominated the sample population, accounting for 53.7% of participants. Most respondents were between 23 and 27 years old, indicating that the study primarily involved students within active higher education age groups familiar with digital learning technologies. Undergraduate students represented the majority of respondents, while more than half of the participants had engaged in distance learning for one to three years. These findings indicate that respondents possessed sufficient experience interacting within online educational environments and virtual peer-support systems.

### Instrument Validity and Reliability Testing

Before conducting the main statistical analysis, validity and reliability tests were performed to evaluate the consistency and appropriateness of the research instruments. Construct validity was assessed using factor loading values, while reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficients.

Table 2. Validity and Reliability Test Results

| Variable                | Number of Items | Factor Loading Range | Cronbach's Alpha |
|-------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|------------------|
| Virtual Peer Counseling | 10              | 0.712–0.861          | 0.903            |
| Emotional Well-Being    | 10              | 0.701–0.847          | 0.889            |

Source: Research Data Processed, 2026.

As shown in Table 2, all measurement items exceeded the minimum factor loading threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory construct validity. Similarly, the Cronbach's Alpha values for both variables were above 0.80, demonstrating strong internal consistency reliability. According to Lee J. Cronbach, reliability coefficients above 0.70 indicate acceptable reliability in social science research. Therefore, the instruments used in this study were considered valid and reliable for further statistical analysis.

### Normality and Multicollinearity Testing

Assumption testing was conducted to ensure that the regression model met statistical requirements. The normality test examined whether the data distribution followed normal statistical patterns, while multicollinearity testing evaluated the relationship between independent variables.

Table 3. Normality and Multicollinearity Test Results

| Test Indicator          | Value | Threshold | Interpretation       |
|-------------------------|-------|-----------|----------------------|
| Kolmogorov–Smirnov Sig. | 0.087 | > 0.05    | Normal Distribution  |
| Tolerance               | 0.768 | > 0.10    | No Multicollinearity |
| VIF                     | 1.302 | < 10.00   | No Multicollinearity |

Source: Research Data Processed, 2026

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that the Kolmogorov–Smirnov significance value exceeded 0.05, confirming that the data were normally distributed. In addition, the tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values satisfied recommended statistical thresholds, indicating the absence of multicollinearity problems within the regression model. Consequently, the data fulfilled the assumptions required for regression analysis.

### Descriptive Analysis of Virtual Peer Counseling

The descriptive analysis of virtual peer counseling examined students' perceptions regarding peer interaction, emotional communication, empathy, accessibility of support, and collaborative engagement within digital learning environments.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Virtual Peer Counseling

| Indicator                        | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|----------------------------------|------|--------------------|
| Accessibility of Peer Support    | 4.08 | 0.71               |
| Emotional Communication          | 4.14 | 0.68               |
| Empathy Among Peers              | 4.19 | 0.73               |
| Frequency of Virtual Interaction | 3.97 | 0.76               |
| Collaborative Problem Solving    | 4.11 | 0.70               |
| Overall Mean                     | 4.10 | 0.72               |

Source: Research Data Processed, 2026

Table 4 demonstrates that respondents generally perceived virtual peer counseling positively. Empathy among peers recorded the highest mean score (Mean = 4.19), indicating that students considered peer-support interactions emotionally supportive and psychologically understanding. Emotional communication and collaborative problem-solving also showed relatively high values, suggesting that students actively utilized digital communication platforms to discuss academic and emotional challenges.

The frequency of virtual interaction obtained the lowest mean score among the indicators, although it remained within the high category. This finding suggests that

while peer interaction existed consistently, some students still encountered limitations in maintaining regular communication due to technological barriers, academic workload, or personal constraints.

### Descriptive Analysis of Emotional Well-Being

The second major variable analyzed in this study was emotional well-being, which included emotional stability, stress management, psychological comfort, social connectedness, and academic motivation.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Emotional Well-Being

| Indicator             | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|-----------------------|------|--------------------|
| Emotional Stability   | 3.95 | 0.75               |
| Stress Management     | 3.88 | 0.79               |
| Psychological Comfort | 4.02 | 0.72               |
| Social Connectedness  | 3.91 | 0.77               |
| Academic Motivation   | 4.06 | 0.70               |
| Overall Mean          | 3.96 | 0.75               |

Source: Research Data Processed, 2026

As presented in Table 5, respondents demonstrated moderate to high levels of emotional well-being. Academic motivation obtained the highest mean value, indicating that students remained academically committed despite participating in online learning environments. Psychological comfort also showed a relatively high score, suggesting that many students adapted positively to virtual educational systems.

Nevertheless, stress management recorded the lowest average score among the indicators. This finding implies that distance learning students continued to experience emotional pressure associated with academic responsibilities, technological limitations, and reduced physical interaction. Social connectedness also remained relatively moderate, reflecting that some students still experienced emotional isolation within digital learning environments.

### Correlation Analysis Between Variables

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between virtual peer counseling and emotional well-being.

Table 6. Correlation Analysis Results

| Variables               | Virtual Peer Counseling | Emotional Well-Being |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Virtual Peer Counseling | 1.000                   | 0.684**              |
| Emotional Well-Being    | 0.684**                 | 1.000                |

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: Research Data Processed, 2026

The findings reveal a strong positive correlation between virtual peer counseling and emotional well-being ( $r = 0.684$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This result indicates that students who actively participated in peer-support interactions tended to exhibit stronger emotional well-being compared with students experiencing weaker peer interaction. The correlation result demonstrates that peer-centered digital communication contributed significantly to emotional stability, social connectedness, and psychological comfort among students. These findings support the assumption that

peer-based interaction functions as an important emotional support mechanism within online learning systems.

## Hypothesis Testing

Based on the research framework, the study proposed the following hypothesis:

H1: Virtual peer counseling positively influences emotional well-being among distance learning students in Nigerian higher education institutions.

To test this hypothesis, regression analysis was conducted.

Table 7. Regression Analysis Results

| Variables               | Beta  | t-value | Sig.  |
|-------------------------|-------|---------|-------|
| Virtual Peer Counseling | 0.641 | 12.487  | 0.000 |

Table 8. Model Summary

| Indicator         | Value   |
|-------------------|---------|
| R                 | 0.684   |
| R Square          | 0.468   |
| Adjusted R Square | 0.462   |
| F-value           | 155.927 |
| Significance      | 0.000   |

Source: Research Data Processed, 2026

The regression results indicate that virtual peer counseling significantly influenced emotional well-being among distance learning students ( $\beta = 0.641$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, H1 was accepted. The positive beta coefficient demonstrates that improvements in virtual peer counseling practices corresponded with increases in students' emotional well-being.

The R Square value of 0.468 indicates that virtual peer counseling explained approximately 46.8% of the variance in emotional well-being. This finding suggests that peer-support interaction represented a substantial factor affecting students' psychological conditions within online educational environments. Meanwhile, the remaining variance may be influenced by additional factors not examined in this study, such as family support, financial conditions, institutional policies, and individual coping strategies. The relatively high F-value confirms that the regression model was statistically significant and appropriate for explaining the relationship between the variables. Overall, the findings reinforce the importance of virtual peer-support systems in promoting emotional resilience and psychological adaptation among distance learning students.

## Virtual Peer Counseling and Emotional Well-Being in Distance Learning Contexts

The findings of this study demonstrate that virtual peer counseling significantly contributes to the emotional well-being of distance learning students in Nigeria higher education institutions. The positive relationship identified between virtual peer counseling and emotional well-being indicates that peer-centered digital interaction functions as an important psychosocial support mechanism within online learning environments. Students who actively participated in virtual peer-support activities reported stronger emotional stability, higher academic motivation, improved psychological comfort, and greater social connectedness. These findings reinforce the argument that emotional support systems are essential components of sustainable distance education frameworks.

The results are consistent with previous international studies emphasizing the importance of peer interaction in promoting students' psychological adaptation

within digital learning environments. Drysdale et al. (2022) argued that peer-support systems reduce emotional isolation and strengthen students' academic confidence in online universities. Similarly, Yi et al. (2024) found that virtual peer engagement positively influences students' sense of belonging and emotional resilience. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that virtual peer counseling also plays a substantial role within developing-country higher education systems characterized by technological limitations and uneven institutional counseling support. This contribution is important because most previous studies were conducted in technologically advanced educational contexts with stronger digital infrastructures.

One of the significant findings of this study concerns the high level of empathy reported within virtual peer counseling interactions. Respondents perceived empathy among peers as the strongest component of peer-support engagement. This finding suggests that students value emotionally understanding relationships when navigating the pressures associated with online learning environments. Consistent with social support theory, emotional assistance and interpersonal connectedness function as protective factors helping individuals manage stress and maintain psychological stability. Previous research by Younas et al. (2025) similarly emphasized that emotionally supportive communication strengthens resilience among students participating in virtual learning systems. However, this study provides additional contextual evidence showing that empathy-driven peer interaction becomes particularly important in Nigerian higher education settings where access to formal counseling services remains relatively limited.

The study also found that stress management represented the weakest dimension of emotional well-being among respondents. Although students generally demonstrated positive emotional adaptation, many continued to experience emotional pressure associated with academic workload, unstable internet connectivity, financial difficulties, and limited face-to-face interaction. This finding aligns with studies conducted by Maloney et al. (2023), which emphasized that online learners frequently encounter emotional fatigue due to reduced social engagement and increased independent learning responsibilities. Nevertheless, the current findings indicate that virtual peer counseling partially mitigates these pressures by providing emotional reassurance and collaborative coping opportunities among students.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the development of educational counseling literature by extending social support theory and student engagement theory into digitally mediated African higher education environments. Existing studies often conceptualize emotional well-being primarily through institutional support structures or psychological intervention frameworks. In contrast, this research demonstrates that peer-driven virtual interaction constitutes an effective informal support mechanism capable of strengthening emotional resilience in online learning contexts. The findings therefore expand theoretical understanding regarding the role of interpersonal digital communication in supporting students' psychological adaptation within distance education systems.

The results have implications for the field of higher education, counselors, and policymakers. It is important for Universities to acknowledge the link between emotional well-being and students' academic persistence and learning sustainability. Therefore, it is recommended that structured distance learning peer-support programs be included in student counseling services by the institution that has implemented a distance learning system. Emotional support networks among students can be strengthened through peer mentoring communities, online, moderated discussion groups, and peer-counselor trainings. Furthermore, universities need to enhance their digital accessibility and psychological support systems to minimize emotional isolation among online learners.

The novelty of this study is the consideration of virtual peer counseling as a digitally mediated emotional support mechanism in Nigerian distance learning environment which is poorly studied in the current educational counseling research. This research does not focus on technological adoption or formal institutional counseling systems, as many studies have done; instead, it stresses the importance of emotional interaction between students and peers as a means of supporting students' well-being. The view here speaks to ongoing conversations around digital mental health care and emotionally supported online education systems in developing countries.

The results of this study have their limitations. One limitation of the study was the cross-sectional design, which does not allow for assessing the students' emotional well-being over time. Second, the study focused mainly on selected HEIs in Nigeria, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other HEIs or educational contexts. Thirdly, the study was based on self-reported responses to questionnaire items, which can be subject to subjectivity on the part of the respondents, based on their perceptions and emotional state. Longitudinal studies should be used in the future to investigate the impact of virtual peer counseling on students' emotional well-being at various phases of students' academic journeys. The study of multiple countries and/or educational systems would also offer a wider perspective of how peer-support mechanisms work in different cultural and technological settings. Further, future studies can include qualitative methods to fully illuminate students' lived experiences, emotions, and interaction in virtual peer counseling contexts.

## CONCLUSION

This study showed that virtual peer counseling has contributed to emotional wellbeing of students in the distance learning programme of higher education institutions in Nigeria. The results show that the use of peer digital interaction can improve the emotional stability, psychological comfort, social connection and academic motivation of students in the online learning environment. The results indicated that empathy and emotional communication were the most positive factors of virtual peer counseling, while stress management was the most difficult part of students' emotional health when engaging in virtual peer counseling. The findings of this study support the hypothesis that emotionally supportive peer interaction can be an important psychosocial mechanism to buffer students from emotional isolation and enhance their resilience in distance education systems.

Theoretically, the study extends social support theory and student engagement in the context of digitally mediated counseling inside the higher education context in Africa. The results have implications for the practical application of the study in the sense that they emphasize the significance of implementing structured programs of peer support into institutional student support services for enhancing emotional sustainability in an online learning environment. Nevertheless, the study has several limitations: cross-sectional design, limited institutional coverage, and self-reported data. Long-term emotional adaptation and the effectiveness of virtual peer counselling in different learning environments should be explored by studies using a longitudinal and comparative method that also includes wider educational contexts. Furthermore, qualitative research can give a more in-depth understanding of students' feelings and interactions in digital counseling groups.

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