



# Peer Relations As Correlate Of Academic Engagement Among Undergraduate Students In Public Universities In Anambra State, Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

The study examined peer relations as correlate of academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria. Two research questions guided the study and two null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 levels of significance. The study adopted a correlational research design. The population of the study comprised 14,101 first year undergraduate students from two public universities in Anambra state. A sample of 705 respondents was selected using multi-stage sampling procedure. The instruments for data collection were two adapted questionnaires. They included: Peer Relations Scale (PRS) and Level of Students Engagement Scale (LSES). All were subjected to face and construct validation. Cronbach Alpha method was used to determine the reliability of the instruments. Reliability yielded co-efficient values of 0.87 for peer relations scale and 0.83 for academic engagement scale respectively. The data collected were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. The findings showed that a strong positive and significant relationship existed between peer relations and academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State. Furthermore, finding further revealed that that there exist a moderate positive relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among male and female undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra state. Based on the findings, it was recommended that administrators of Public Universities should implement peer mentoring programs that pairs students with peers who can provide guidance, support and motivation to enhance academic engagement. It was also recommended that students should join study groups or clubs to connect with peers who share similar interests and academic goals to stay motivated and engaged.

**Keywords:** Academic Engagement, Gender, Peer Relations, Undergraduates, Universities

## INTRODUCTION

Academic engagement encompasses students' psychological, emotional and behavioural commitment to learning and has been widely acknowledged as a determinant of academic success. Wang et al. (2022) describe it as the depth and intensity of students' motivation, focus and persistence in learning tasks. It includes three dimensions: cognitive engagement (self-regulation and goal setting), emotional engagement (sense of belonging and enthusiasm) and behavioural engagement (participation, attendance and task completion). Similarly, Hernández and García (2024) view it as students' active and constructive participation, stressing their autonomy and responsibility in the learning process. This multidimensional construct highlights that engagement goes beyond passive learning to involve genuine interest, effort and emotional investment in education.

High levels of academic engagement lead to better academic performance, greater satisfaction and improved well-being among students (Wang et al., 2022). However, disengagement remains a pressing issue, particularly among public university students in Anambra State, where low motivation and poor participation have been observed (Okeke, 2020). Disengaged students often avoid class discussions and assignments, showing little interest in academic activities (Wentzel, 2020; Hidi & Renninger, 2020). Such behaviours not only hinder learning outcomes but also contribute to dropout risks and behavioural problems (Popoola et al., 2021). Understanding the factors influencing engagement, including peer relationships, is therefore crucial for educators and policymakers seeking to enhance students' academic involvement and promote meaningful learning experiences.

Peer relations play a pivotal role in enhancing students' motivation to learn, contributing to their overall academic success. Peer relations, encompassing social interactions, friendship networks and peer influence, is a crucial element influencing academic engagement (Chen & Chang, 2022). Peer relations are the social ties and interactions between people who share the same age group and have an impact on adolescent academic success, emotional well-being and self-esteem. (Nguyen & Smith, 2023). Furthermore, peer relations is defined as the reciprocal and dynamic interactions among members of a social group that have an impact on outcomes in terms of mental health and the development of social skills and prosocial conduct (Roberts et al., 2022). According to Wang and Li (2021), "Peer relations include social interactions and relationships that people have with their peers, which shape identity formation, emotional control and psychosocial adjustment during emerging adulthood" (p.155). Also, Peer relations encompass the social networks and affiliations that individuals build with their peers, impacting emotional resilience, self-concept and academic motivation in early adolescence." (Garcia & Lopez, 2023).

Peer relations among students in a university setting have a substantial impact on how students perform academically. Peer relations are the social networks and connections that students make with their peers, including their interactions in and outside of the classroom, their participation in collaborative learning activities and their development of emotional support networks (Wentzel, 2016). In the researcher's conceptualization, peer relations are the complex web of contacts, connections and social interactions that people of similar age groups create and preserve and which influence their development as well as their academic engagement. Peer relations may also be affected by gender.

Gender plays a significant role in shaping the academic engagement of university undergraduate students. Research indicates that academic interests, which strongly influence engagement, often differ by gender—men tend to prefer Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, while women are more drawn to the humanities and social sciences (Lei et al., 2018). Since students are generally more engaged when studying subjects aligned with their interests, these gendered preferences can influence how actively they participate in learning. In the context of public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria, gender differences are therefore considered a crucial factor in understanding variations in students' engagement levels and learning experiences.

Gender has been defined as the socially constructed roles, behaviours and expectations associated with being male or female (Okeke in Nnamani & Oyibe, 2016). These social meanings influence how individuals perceive their roles and responsibilities in academic settings. For instance, male students may exhibit competitive or hierarchical group dynamics, while females often prioritise cooperation and support (Wentzel, 2017). Such gendered interactions shape socialisation patterns and the kind of academic support students receive. Understanding the interaction between gender and peer relations is critical to improving students' engagement and success in public universities in Anambra State. Although previous studies have explored how social and academic factors influence engagement, few have specifically examined the combined effects of gendered peer relationships. By investigating these dynamics, the present study addressed a crucial gap in literature and offered insights that can guide educators and policymakers in fostering gender-responsive learning environments. Such efforts can enhance academic engagement, promote equity and improve the overall performance and well-being of undergraduate students in Nigerian universities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Academic engagement is widely acknowledged as a key determinant of students' learning outcomes, success and overall development in higher education. In the context of public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria, the issue of poor academic engagement among undergraduate students has become increasingly evident and concerning. Many students demonstrate low commitment to their studies, as reflected in irregular class attendance, lateness to lectures, minimal participation in academic discussions, poor task completion and declining enthusiasm for learning. This lack of engagement has contributed to unsatisfactory academic performance, weak intellectual development and in some cases, withdrawal from school, thereby undermining the objectives of tertiary education in the state.

The low level of academic engagement among students may be attributed to several factors, including social, psychological and environmental influences. Among these, peer relations stand out as a crucial determinant of students' involvement in academic activities. The quality of interactions, friendships and social networks formed within the university setting can either promote or inhibit engagement. Positive peer relations often encourage collaborative learning, motivation and emotional support, which enhance students' focus and persistence in academic work. Conversely, negative peer influence, social isolation and unsupportive peer environments can discourage learning and foster disengagement. Although existing research has examined several factors influencing student engagement, there remains limited empirical evidence on the combined influence of peer relations on the academic engagement of undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State. This gap in literature has left many questions unanswered regarding how students' social interactions and academic motivations jointly affect their engagement and success. It is against this backdrop that the present study investigated peer relations as correlate of academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among university undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State. Specifically, the study sought to examine;

1. The relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State.
2. The relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among male and female undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra state.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State?
2. What is the relationship between peer relations and academic engagement of male and female undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra state?

### **Hypotheses**

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

- 1: There is no significant relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State.
- 2: There is no significant relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among male and female undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State.

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

The study adopted a correlational research design. The design was considered appropriate because it allowed the researcher to examine existing relationships among the variables without manipulation. The study was conducted in Anambra State, located in the southeast region of Nigeria, known for its rich cultural heritage and high literacy rate. The state hosts several higher institutions, including Nnamdi

Azikiwe University, Awka and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Uli and Igbariam Campus.

The population of the study comprised 14,101 first-year undergraduate students (6,854 males and 7,247 females) in public universities in Anambra State during the 2023/2024 academic session. A sample of 705 students (343 males and 362 females) was drawn through a multi-stage sampling procedure involving proportionate stratified and simple random sampling techniques. Data were collected using two standardized and adapted instruments: the Peer Relations Questionnaire Scale (Hudson, 1982) and the Level of Students' Engagement Scale (Delfino, 2019). The instruments were validated by experts in educational foundations and construct validity was established through Principal Component Analysis (KMO = 0.835, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity,  $\chi^2(94) = 195.599$ ,  $p < .000$ ). Reliability was determined using Cronbach Alpha, yielding coefficients of 0.87 and 0.83 for the respective instruments, indicating very high internal consistency.

Data collection was conducted by the researcher with assistance from four trained research assistants. Questionnaires were distributed and retrieved from respondents in their lecture halls, with a 97.7% return rate. Data were analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Pearson correlation was used to answer research questions and test hypotheses on the relationships among variables at a 0.05 level of significance. Decisions on hypotheses were based on p-values, with significance established when  $p \leq 0.05$ .

## RESULTS

**Research Question 1:** *What is the relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State?*

**Table 1:** Summary of Pearson correlation analysis on the relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State.

Correlations		Peer relations	academic engagement	Remark
Peer relations	Pearson Correlation	1	0.71**	Strong positive Relationship
	N	684	684	
Academic engagement	Pearson Correlation	0.71**	1	

\*\* . Correlation is significant at 0.05level(2-tailed).

Table 1 presented an analysis showing that there exists a strong positive relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra state. This deduction comes as a result of the 'r' having a strong positive value,  $r = 0.71^{**}$  and  $n = 684$ . Hence, the study concluded that there exist a strong positive correlation (relationship) between peer relations and academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra state.

**Research Question 2:** *What is the relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among male and female undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra state?*

**Table 2:** Summary of Pearson correlation analysis on the relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among male and female undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra state.

**Correlations**

Gender			peer relations	academic engagement	Remark
Male	Peer relations	Pearson Correlation	1	0.69**	
		N	319	319	Moderate positive relationship
Female	academic engagement	Pearson Correlation	0.69**	1	
	Peer relations	Pearson Correlation	1	0.61**	Moderate positive relationship
		N	265	265	
	academic engagement	Pearson Correlation	0.61**	1	

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 presented an analysis showing that there exists a moderate positive relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among male and female undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra state. This deduction comes as a result of the ‘r’ having a positive value,  $r = 0.69^{**}$ ,  $n = 319$  and  $r = 0.61^{**}$ ,  $n = 265$  for males and females respectively. Hence, the study concluded that there exist a moderate positive relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among male and female undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra state.

**Hypothesis 1:** There was no significant relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State.

**Table 3:** Test of Significance of Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient on relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State.

**Correlations**

		Peer relations	Academic engagement	Decision
peer relations	Pearson Correlation	1	0.71**	
	Sig.(2-tailed)		0.00	Significant
	N	684	684	
Academic engagement	Pearson Correlation	0.71**	1	
	Sig.(2-tailed)	0.00		
	N	684	684	

\*\*Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The result of the test of significance of Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient from Table 6 above showed a significant relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State with  $r = 0.71^{**}$   $n = 684$  and  $p\text{-value} = 0.00$ . Since  $p\text{-value} (0.00)$  is less than 0.05, the study rejects the null hypothesis and do not reject the

alternative hypothesis that there is a significant relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra state.

**Hypothesis 2:** There was no significant relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among male and female undergraduate students in public universities.

**Table 4:** Test of Significance of Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient on relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among male and female undergraduate students in public universities.

**Correlations**

Gender			peer relations	academic engagement	Decision
Male	Peer relations	Pearson Correlation	1	0.69**	Significant
		Sig.(2-tailed)		0.00	
		N	319	319	
	academic engagement	Pearson Correlation	0.69**	1	
		Sig.(2-tailed)	0.00		
		N	319	319	
Female	Peer relations	Pearson Correlation	1	0.61**	Significant
		Sig.(2-tailed)		0.00	
		N	265	265	
	academic engagement	Pearson Correlation	0.61**	1	
		Sig.(2-tailed)	0.00		
		N	265	265	

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The result of the test of significance of Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient from Table 4 above showed a significant relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among male and female undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra state with  $r = 0.69^{**}$   $n = 319$ ,  $p$ -value = 0.00 and  $r = 0.61^{**}$   $n = 265$ ,  $p$ -value = 0.00 for males and females respectively. Since the  $p$ -value (0.00) was less than 0.05, the study rejects the null hypothesis and do not reject the alternative hypothesis that there was a significant relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among male and female undergraduate students in public universities.

**DISCUSSION**

Findings of the study on the relationship between peer relations and academic engagement of undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State showed a strong positive and significant relationship between peer relations and academic engagement of students. This finding was in consonance with that of Yang and Xiang, (2024) who found a strong positive and significant relationship between peer support and academic engagement in their study involving 4,581 Chinese college students ( $r = .755$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The findings of this study also agree with that of Adeyemi et al. (2019) documented that peer group had significant influence on academic performance of undergraduate students. These findings were as a result of the responses of students to a peer relations questionnaire, indicating that students who reported positive relationships with their peers also tended to exhibit higher levels of academic engagement. This consistency across different settings reinforces the idea that positive peer relationships play a crucial role in supporting students' academic engagement. These findings underscores the need for schools at all levels to create a positive social climate where students are safe and establish cordial interpersonal relationships.

Findings of the study on the relationship between peer relations and academic engagement between male and female undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State showed a moderate positive and significant relationship between peer relations and academic engagement of male and female students. The findings of this study align with Robert et al.'s (2020) research. Robert et al.'s study specifically explored the effects of male peers on female students' educational outcomes in STEM fields

and found no negative academic impact. Similarly, this study's results suggest that positive peer relations, regardless of gender, contribute to increased academic engagement. However, it is worth noting that Robert et al.'s study focused on a specific context (female students in STEM courses) and examined the impact of male peers, whereas this study took a more general approach, exploring the relationship between peer relations and academic engagement across genders. These findings were as a result of the responses of students to a peer relations questionnaire, indicating that students who reported positive relationships with their peers also tended to exhibit higher levels of academic engagement, with similar patterns observed among both male and female students.

## CONCLUSION

Peer relations play a crucial role in enhancing students' academic engagement. A supportive and collaborative peer environment encourages active participation, motivation and commitment to learning activities. The findings of this study, which examined the relationship between peer relations and academic engagement among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State, revealed a significant positive correlation between the two variables. Consequently, the study concludes that peer relations are a significant and positive correlate of academic engagement and should be given priority in educational strategies and interventions aimed at improving students' learning outcomes.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made from the findings of this study

1. Administrators of Public Universities should implement peer mentoring programs that pairs students with peers who can provide guidance, support and motivation to enhance academic engagement.
2. Students should join study groups or clubs to connect with peers who share similar interests and academic goals to stay motivated and engaged.

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