

SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY AND RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES AS TOOLS FOR CURBING CAMPUS CULTISM IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The establishment of tertiary institutions in Nigeria was primarily aimed at fostering academic excellence, moral development, and national progress. However, the menace of cultism has become a major threat to these objectives, leading to violence, insecurity, and academic decline. Campus tranquillity has been undermined by cultism, which has an impact on social cohesion and education. This study looks at how recreational activities and sports psychology can be useful strategies for reducing campus cultism. It highlights how organized leisure and athletic programs can help students focus their energies in constructive ways, develop self-discipline, and improve their mental health. The history of cultism in Nigeria, the causes of restlessness in young people, and the value of leisure in character development are all covered in the study. It comes to the conclusion that by encouraging social cohesiveness, collaboration, and emotional stability, well-run sports and leisure activities can aid in the decline of cultism. Recommendations include the establishment of diverse recreational programmes, proper maintenance of facilities, and professional management of sports and recreation services in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Key words: *Psychology, Recreational, curbing, cultism, tertiary, institutions*

Introduction

Sports and recreation are integral aspects of human development and have long been recognised as essential components of education. According to Loosemore (1990), though only a small percentage of students actively participate in sports, their popularity and influence on campuses are undeniable. Sports and recreation contribute significantly to youth development by instilling discipline, teamwork, and leadership

qualities. Unfortunately, in recent years, tertiary institutions in Nigeria have witnessed a disturbing increase in cult-related activities, resulting in academic disruptions, insecurity, and moral decay.

In Nigeria, the term "cultism" describes both the violent and nonviolent actions of secret cults, cultists, societies, and fraternities on campuses. It is primarily a young culture that was once solely practiced and sustained by students in Nigeria's numerous higher education institutions. However, the issue has not only continued but has become widespread and concerning in recent years due to the spread of campus secret cult traditions in the 1980s and their infiltration into secondary schools and the streets starting in the late 1990s (see also Nnam, 2014a; S. E. Otu and Nnam, 2017; Ajitoni and Olaniyan, 2018; Alumona and Amusan, 2019). "The evil effects of secret cult menace have permeated the entire structure of the Nigerian society (which may include custodial centres, prisons). Nowhere is safe; virtually everyone is a potential victim of cultism. In our various schools, homes, places of work and worship and neighbourhoods, secret cults and cultists prevail" (Nnam, 2014a, p. 179). At present, this social malaise is no longer exclusive to students, even citizens with no formal education are members and perpetrators. But the act still retains its original generic name 'campus secret cult' based on principles and for emphasis, and not because it is only practised on campus or by campus affiliates like students. Even inmates and street urchins can be members or practice cultism.

According to S. E. Otu and Nnam (2017), who supported the aforementioned viewpoint, cults and fraternities are currently proliferating and recruiting members indiscriminately throughout Nigeria's higher education system, including secondary and primary schools. These experts believe that contemporary cults are linked to all harmful and dangerous practices, including diabolical oath-taking, inciting crime and violence, deadly drilling and punishment of deviants among them, suicidal and strange body movements, and harsh initiation ceremonies for prospective members. These authors further argued that the crime is a violent one and a springboard for committing such other crimes as rape, kidnapping, murder, robbery, stealing, and political violence. Admittedly, the problem is on the increase and consequently has attracted increasing policy attention and scholarly works for the past four decades, with concerned experts examining the causes, forms/types, consequences, and way out of the menace (see Onyechere, 1998; Azoba, 1999; Peterside, 2005; Amaele, 2008, 2013; Aluede and Oniyama, 2009; Ajayi et al., 2010; Nnam, 2014a; S. E. Otu and Nnam, 2017).

However, much of the literature and knowledge has focused mainly on perpetrators in the free world; cultism among prison inmates has been largely underexplored (see Idowu and Muhammed, 2019), a gap in knowledge that the present study sets out to address. On the other hand, a lot has been written on the (poor) state of prisons, especially in developing countries like Nigeria, but emphasis tends to be on the dearth of basic rehabilitation programmes, congestion and indiscriminate confinement (see Oshodi, 2010; Chukwudi, 2012; World Prison Population Lists, 2011; Fhooblall et al., 2011; Abrifor et al., 2012; S. E. Otu et al., 2013; Fazel and Wolf, 2015; Nigerian Prisons Service Annual Report, 2014; Nnam, 2016; Esiri, 2016; Walmsley, 2018), thereby negating research enterprise in the area of importation of cults/cultism into the prison world. This negation may have

serious implications for the 'crime problem' and crime prevention and control efforts, as well as constitutes a serious obstacle to successful prison reforms and inmates' treatment, which bodes ill for any society and custodial centres that want to make progress. The reason is direct and simple: Prison is a place where people of different behavioural traits and psychosocial backgrounds are confined and thus create opportunities for give and take of different ideologies, whether negative (antisocial) or positive (prosocial), imported from the outside world.

Law enforcement officials, members of the education community, members of the general public, legislators, and the court must step up their efforts to combat the violent crime of cultism since it is becoming more prevalent and having detrimental impacts. As a result, some people have been arrested, charged, and imprisoned. In order to (re)direct policy approach, formulation, implementation, and other useful interventions, this further piqued the researchers' interest in applying the study of campus cultism to the prison setting. Gaining knowledge about this inmate population's existence and operational procedures can offer intriguing insights on what aspects of Nigeria's correctional system are effective for processing (managing and treating) prisoners. To examine the criminological mechanisms and sociological evolution of cultists and cultism

Cultism has become a national embarrassment (Umaru, 2005), with few institutions remaining cult-free (Yakubu, 2000). It contradicts the goals of education as outlined in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 1998), which aims to produce responsible citizens who uphold the rule of law and human rights. Therefore, integrating sports psychology and recreational activities into the educational system offers a proactive solution for addressing the psychological and social causes of cultism among students.

Statement of the Problem

Campus cultism has become one of the most persistent social menaces threatening the peace, academic performance, and moral fabric of Nigerian tertiary institutions. What began as fraternities with intellectual and social purposes has evolved into violent, secretive, and criminal groups involved in intimidation, drug abuse, extortion, and murder (Ogunlade & Ajiboye, 2020). Cult-related activities have created an atmosphere of fear and insecurity within campuses, resulting in school closures, loss of lives, and the disruption of academic programs. Despite various governmental and institutional interventions such as anti-cultism laws, moral reorientation campaigns, and disciplinary committees, the problem persists, suggesting the need for alternative approaches.

Recent studies in educational psychology have emphasised the role of sports psychology and recreational activities in shaping students' behaviour, emotional regulation, and social integration (Onifade, 2021; Adebayo & Eze, 2023). Sports psychology, which focuses on mental discipline, teamwork, motivation, and self-control, can foster positive attitudes and reduce aggression among students. Similarly, structured recreational programs can serve as healthy outlets for youthful energy and social bonding, thereby reducing the appeal of cult membership.

However, many Nigerian tertiary institutions still underutilise these tools. Recreational facilities are often inadequate or neglected, while sports programs are not integrated into the institutional strategies for behavioural reform. Consequently, the potential of sports psychology and recreation as preventive or corrective measures against cultism remains largely unexplored. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the extent to which sports psychology and recreational activities can serve as effective tools for curbing campus cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the role of sports psychology and recreational activities as tools for curbing campus cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Investigate the relationship between students' participation in recreational activities and their tendency to engage in cult-related behaviours.
2. Examine how sports psychology principles can influence students' emotional control, discipline, and social behaviour in tertiary institutions.
3. Assess the availability and utilisation of recreational facilities in Nigerian tertiary institutions.
4. Determine the influence of organised sports and recreational programs on peer relationships and campus peace.
5. Evaluate the effectiveness of integrating sports psychology and recreation-based interventions in reducing cultism on campuses.

Research Questions

Based on the objectives of the study, the following research questions are formulated to guide the investigation:

1. What is the relationship between students' participation in recreational activities and their involvement in cult-related behaviours in Nigerian tertiary institutions?
2. To what extent do sports psychology principles influence students' emotional control, discipline, and social adjustment?
3. How adequate and accessible are recreational facilities in Nigerian tertiary institutions?
4. In what ways do organised sports and recreational activities promote positive peer relationships and campus harmony?
5. How effective are sports psychology and recreation-based interventions in reducing the prevalence of cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses are formulated to be tested at a 0.05 level of significance:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between students' participation in recreational activities and their involvement in cult-related behaviours in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

H₀₂: Sports psychology principles do not significantly influence students' emotional control, discipline, and social behaviour in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between the adequacy of recreational facilities and students' participation in sports and recreational programs.

H₀₄: Organised sports and recreational activities do not significantly promote positive peer relationships and campus harmony.

H₀₅: Sports psychology and recreation-based interventions are not effective in reducing the prevalence of campus cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Literature Review

Cultism in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

The history of cultism in Nigerian higher institutions dates back to 1952, when Wole Soyinka and six others founded the *Pyrates Confraternity* at the University of Ibadan (Bagobiri, 2005). Initially, the group pursued noble ideals such as fighting colonial oppression and promoting equality. However, over the decades, numerous violent and destructive cult groups emerged, deviating from these ideals and turning campuses into centres of fear and violence.

Historically, secret societies existed in African societies such as the *Ogboni* among the Yoruba and *Ekpe* among the Efik, serving social, religious, and judicial functions (Ogunbameru, 1997; Okogie, 2005). In modern times, however, campus cults have become criminal organisations involved in violence, drug abuse, and intimidation. Their activities undermine the goals of education and threaten campus peace and security.

Factors Associated with Youth Restiveness and Cultism

Youth restiveness often stems from psychological, social, and environmental factors. According to Dennis (2008), many Nigerian youths are inexperienced, easily influenced by peers, and often dissatisfied with societal conditions. Unemployment, academic stress, unstable educational systems, and moral decay contribute to their frustration.

Frequent strikes, poor facilities, and a lack of recreational outlets in tertiary institutions further exacerbate this problem. Consequently, students channel their idle energy into anti-social activities such as cultism, drug abuse, and violence (Hallah, 2003; Iniwo, 2004). From a sports psychology perspective, such behaviours reflect unmet psychological needs for belonging, recognition, and self-actualisation needs that structured sports and recreation can fulfil positively.

The Need for Recreational Activities in Tertiary Institutions

Recreation plays a vital role in maintaining mental health and emotional balance. Chauhan (1981) asserts that recreation provides opportunities for individuals to express emotions, ease tension, and develop creativity. It helps students discover their talents and engage in meaningful leisure that fosters social interaction and teamwork.

Recreational activities enrich students' lives by teaching self-discipline, cooperation, and respect for rules, all of which are values that counter the appeal of cultism. When students have access to engaging recreational opportunities, they are less likely to seek excitement or belonging in violent groups.

Sports Psychology and Its Role in Curbing Cultism

Sports psychology focuses on understanding how mental factors influence physical performance and how participation in sports affects psychological well-being. It promotes emotional regulation, confidence, and resilience—qualities essential for peaceful coexistence.

Through sports participation, students learn goal-setting, teamwork, self-control, and fair play (Coakley, 1993; Dunn, 1996). These experiences cultivate positive attitudes and social skills that discourage cult-related behaviour. Alfred (2006) notes that students engaged in sports are more likely to develop responsibility and moral discipline, reducing the likelihood of joining cults.

Sports also serve as a therapeutic tool. Group sports activities foster a sense of belonging and unity, satisfying the same social needs that cults exploit. By redirecting students' energy into productive outlets, sports and recreation become preventive strategies against campus violence and cultism.

Importance of Recreational Activities in Preventing Cultism

Recreational activities contribute to character building, socialisation, and crime prevention (Dennis, 2004; Benito, 2004). Involvement in sports helps students internalise societal norms and values, promoting mutual respect and cooperation. Recreation also provides a positive outlet for stress and aggression, which, if unaddressed, could manifest as violent behaviour.

Studies from the United States and Europe show that providing structured recreation reduces crime and anti-social behaviour (Odeyemi, 1997). Likewise, adequate recreational facilities in Nigerian campuses can help reduce cultism and related activities by engaging students meaningfully. For instance, organised intramural sports, fitness programmes, and cultural games can occupy students' leisure time constructively, preventing idleness—a major factor in cult recruitment.

Existence of campus secret cults/cultism in the correctional institution. Efforts were made to ascertain why inmates import campus secret cults and practise cultism in the prison. The responses of the interviewees were similar and therefore were not all reflected to avoid presenting monotonous results. A number of the participants narrated that they brought their cult groups into the prison their cult groups for many reasons, amongst which are, for easy adaptation and as a coping strategy to the harsh living conditions in most Nigerian prisons. For instance, a 25-year-old inmate

Consequences of campus secret cults/cultism on inmates' reformation. The effect of campus secret cults/cultism on inmates' reformation is strong and clear. There are many factors that come handy in frustrating reformation, rehabilitation and reintegration efforts, but the criminal association and lifestyle of inmates before and while serving time are major determinants of whether they would desist or persist in crime. Resistance to correctional treatments is caused by many factors within and outside individual offenders' characteristics, and the prison.

Inner workings of cultists in the correctional institution

It was observed that cultists discipline and/or punish their erring members within the total institution. Much information on this was not divulged. However, our persistent lead and probe questions facilitated their unconsciously revealing some argots used during law enforcement and order maintenance among members. For instance, a 19-year-old cultist/recidivist, who is popularly known as Simple (nickname), graphically explained these disciplinary/punishment measures thus:

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework serves as the foundation upon which a research study is built. It provides the structure for analysing the relationships between variables and explaining how and why certain phenomena occur (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). In this study, the theoretical framework is anchored on four main theories: Social Learning Theory, Frustration Aggression Theory, Psychosocial Development Theory, and Recreation and Social Integration Theory. These theories collectively explain how sports psychology and recreational activities can serve as effective tools for curbing campus cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Social Learning Theory (Albert Bandura, 1977)

Social Learning Theory posits that human behaviour is learned through observation, imitation, and modelling. Bandura emphasised that individuals, especially youths, learn social behaviours by observing others in their environment and the outcomes of those behaviours (Bandura, 1986). In the context of tertiary institutions, students who are exposed to antisocial behaviours such as cultism may adopt these patterns if such acts are rewarded or glorified within their peer groups.

However, when students are actively engaged in sports and recreational activities, they are provided with positive models of behaviour, teamwork, discipline, and respect for rules. Sports psychologists use these activities to channel students' energy into productive and socially acceptable outlets (Olusoga & Ayodele, 2021). The process of observing and participating in structured, rule-based games helps students internalise prosocial behaviours and reject violent tendencies associated with cultism.

Application to this study

Sports and recreational programs can serve as platforms for social learning, where positive values such as cooperation, tolerance, and leadership are modelled and reinforced, thus reducing students' attraction to cult groups. By integrating recreational and psychological support programs into campus life, institutions can offer students healthier means of stress management and emotional regulation, reducing their vulnerability to cult influence. Organised recreational programs can promote social inclusion, teamwork, and respect for diversity—undermining the divisive ideologies of cult groups.

Frustration Aggression Theory (Dollard et al., 1939; Revised by Berkowitz, 1989)

This theory asserts that frustration often leads to aggressive behaviour. When individuals are prevented from achieving desired goals such as academic success, economic stability, or social recognition, they may become frustrated, leading to

aggression or deviant acts (Berkowitz, 1989). In the Nigerian tertiary education context, students who experience academic failure, unemployment fears, or lack of belonging may resort to cultism as a form of emotional outlet or empowerment (Ogunleye & Ojo, 2019). Sports psychology intervenes by helping students manage frustration and emotional instability through physical activity, mental training, and goal-oriented recreation. Recreational participation allows the release of pent-up emotions, fosters self-control, and promotes social bonding, thereby reducing the likelihood of aggression and cult-related behaviour.

Psychosocial Development Theory (Erik Erikson, 1963)

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory emphasises that individuals pass through eight developmental stages, each characterised by a psychological conflict that contributes to personal growth. During the adolescence and young adulthood stages, individuals grapple with issues of identity vs. role confusion and intimacy vs. isolation (Erikson, 1968).

Students in tertiary institutions are typically at these developmental stages, striving to establish personal identity and social belonging. Cult groups often exploit these psychological needs by offering members a sense of identity, power, and acceptance. Conversely, participation in sports and recreational activities fulfils these same needs positively—helping students build identity, confidence, and social networks in healthy ways (Adejumo & Ojo, 2023).

Recreation and Social Integration Theory (Torkildsen, 1999)

Torkildsen's theory posits that recreation serves as a mechanism for social integration and cohesion. Recreational activities bring individuals from diverse backgrounds together in shared experiences that promote understanding, cooperation, and mutual respect (Torkildsen, 1999).

In Nigerian tertiary institutions, where ethnic and social divides often fuel cult membership, structured recreational programs such as sports clubs, cultural games, and group leisure can foster unity and cross-cultural tolerance (Nwankwo & Ede, 2020). Through sports psychology principles like teamwork, communication, and empathy training, recreation becomes a tool for building peaceful coexistence.

Summary of Theoretical Implications

Collectively, these theories establish that:

- Behavioural patterns such as cultism are learned and can be unlearned through social modelling (Social Learning Theory).
- **Emotional frustrations** can be redirected into constructive activities like sports (Frustration–Aggression Theory).
- Students' psychological needs for **identity and belonging** can be met through sports and recreation rather than cult membership (Psychosocial Development Theory).
- Recreational activities foster **social integration and peace**, counteracting the isolation that breeds cultism (Recreation and Social Integration Theory).

Therefore, the theoretical framework supports the assertion that sports psychology and recreational activities are powerful behavioural and social tools capable of curbing campus cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Conclusion

Sports psychology and recreational activities are powerful tools for promoting mental health, discipline, and social harmony among students. When properly integrated into campus life, they provide emotional stability and reduce the lure of cultism. Nigerian tertiary institutions must recognise that recreation is not a luxury but a necessity for a healthy academic environment. By channelling students' energy into positive pursuits, institutions can reduce anti-social behaviours and foster peace on campuses.

The study revealed that most of the inmates have been members of different cult groups in the free society before detention, so they continued their cult tradition while in prison. Also, from the result, nevertheless, only rarely do cultists initiate new members in the course of serving their time. The act of cultism does not augur well for a successful treatment of inmates and reunion with their families and communities. Now, new inmates and cult members are influenced and corrupted by the Conclusion and policy implications.

The traditional scope of campus cults/cultism studies has been expanded for a broad-based understanding. The problem of the study has been clearly stated and situated within two broad perspectives: Institutional and societal. It has both theoretical and practical significance for policy, research and practice. The importation model theory provided a comprehensive analysis of this social phenomenon, establishing interfacing predictions between the theory and the qualitative data elicited from

Recommendations

1. **Establish Comprehensive Recreational Programmes:**
Institutions should provide diverse recreational and sports programmes that meet students' physical, emotional, and social needs.
2. **Maintain Facilities and Equipment:**
Recreational facilities should be regularly maintained to ensure safety, accessibility, and continued student interest.
3. **Employ Qualified Professionals:**
Recreation and sports programmes should be managed by experts in physical education, sports management, and psychology.
4. **Integrate Sports Psychology into Orientation and Guidance Services:**
Counselling units should include sports psychologists who can help students channel their energy positively and manage stress.
5. **Promote Intramural and Inter-Campus Competitions:**
These activities foster unity, cooperation, and school spirit, reducing tendencies toward cultism.
6. **Government and Stakeholder Support:**
Funding and policy support from the government and private sector are crucial for sustaining recreational programmes in tertiary institutions.

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