EXPLORING THE INTERPLAY OF CHILDHOOD MALTREATMENT ON SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCES AND CHARACTER STRENGTHS AMONG IN-SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS IN IBADAN, OYO STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the correlation between childhood maltreatment and the development of social-emotional competence and character strengths among in-school adolescents in Ibadan. A descriptive survey design was employed, and a sample of 350 participants (163 male and 187 female, aged between 12 and 20) was randomly selected from five public secondary schools in Ibadan metropolis. Data were collected using the Social Emotional Competence Questionnaire (SECQ), Childhood Maltreatment Questionnaire (CMQ), and VIA Character Strengths (Youth Version). Descriptive statistics, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC), and Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) were utilized for data analysis. The findings revealed a significant direct causal effect of childhood maltreatment on social-emotional competence (SEC) and character strengths among in-school adolescents in Ibadan metropolis. The recommendations based on these results include promoting parental education to reduce childhood maltreatment and implementing character strengths building interventions in schools to enhance the development of social-emotional competence among adolescents.

Keywords: Childhood Maltreatment, Character Strengths, and Social Emotional Competence.

INTRODUCTION

Fostering social-emotional competence constitutes a significant and commendable objective in the development of children and adolescents, given its well-established correlation with positive outcomes in both the short and long term (Ee, Zhou, & Wong, 2014). Hence, social-emotional competencies (SEC) in adolescents has evolved into a complex undertaking, particularly for those who have been exposed to detrimental parenting styles or unhealthy parent-child relationships. Social emotional competence (SEC) and possession of appropriate positive character virtues plays vital roles in wholesome development of adolescents as it enables them to effectively navigate their social environment. However, experiencing any form of maltreatment either at home or school is likely to impede the development of character strengths and further hinders both the mechanism and manifestation of SEC. Consequently, adolescents may experience difficulties developing the skills required to regulate their emotions, understand others, and navigate social contexts, resulting in challenging peer/community interactions (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, and Gullotta, 2015; Bashir, 2013).

Although there has been long debate on the definition of social emotional competence, a common theme is that social emotional competence is an umbrella term that incorporates a variety of social or/and emotional abilities and/or behaviours. They are crucial skills that adolescents need to develop in order to be confident, empathetic, and effective communicators in personal, social, and ethical settings such as family, school, and community (Ee, Zhou, and Wong, 2014; Suratno, Komaria, Yushardi, Dafik, and Wicaksono, 2019). These competencies encompass the ability to establish positive relationships with others, express oneself clearly, understand and manage others' emotions and reactions, regulate one's own emotions and attitudes, communicate effectively with others, and be motivated to achieve specific goals and solve problems (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2008). SEC involves the development of key skills in various domains of human development, including emotional, cognitive, communication, and behavioural skills across different settings (Weissberg et al.,

2015). When adolescents possess sufficient level of competence in these areas, it fosters confidence, resilience, self-awareness and the understanding of own capabilities and weaknesses (Ee et.al, 2014).

Indeed, extant studies have highlighted the significant role of Social and Emotional Competencies (SEC) in fostering happiness, well-being, and a fulfilling life for adolescents (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger, 2011; Weare and Nind, 2011; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2015). SEC equip adolescents with the necessary skills to become competent and resilient individuals who are capable of navigating challenges and crises in both societal and learning environments (Ee, Zhou, & Wong, 2014; Suratno et al., 2019). Adolescents with high levels of SEC are better equipped to understand the impact of their social interactions on others and avoid negative consequences (Underwood, 2003). Furthermore, SEC serve as protective factors that enable adolescents to effectively cope with struggles they may encounter in life, while also developing self-awareness regarding their strengths, weaknesses, emotions, and other dispositions.

Social and emotional competence encompasses several key components. Self-awareness is the foundation, involving the capacity to identify and acknowledge one's own emotions and self-efficacy, or belief in one's own capabilities. Self-management builds upon this, entailing the skill to regulate and control one's emotions, handle stress, and seek assistance when necessary. Social awareness extends the scope to include empathy and respect for others, along with the ability to understand and perceive the emotions of those around us. Moving beyond individual awareness, relationship management encompasses effective communication, relationship-building skills, conflict resolution, and sound decision-making abilities. In essence, social and emotional competence is a holistic framework that encompasses self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and effective decision-making, all of which play a pivotal role in personal, social, and ethical responsibility.

Furthermore, the CASEL model, as proposed in 2008, views social emotional skills at two levels: intrapersonal and interpersonal. The intrapersonal level focuses on understanding and regulating one's own emotions, while the interpersonal level focuses on understanding and managing emotions in others, maintaining positive relationships, managing conflicts, and making responsible decisions (CASEL, 2008). These components collectively contribute to the development of comprehensive SEC in adolescents. However, studies have shown that deficiencies in social-emotional competencies can be linked to various challenges during adolescence, including adjustment problems, decreased academic achievement due to instability caused by conflict, and issues such as depression, anxiety, delinquency, and substance use. Given that deficiencies in socio-emotional competence (SEC) can subject adolescents to increased conflict with potential repercussions on their development (Durlak et al., 2011), it becomes crucial to emphasize the enhancement of this competence. This underscores one of the justifications for undertaking the current research.

In the same vein, character strengths, such as kindness, honesty, love of learning, optimism, and teamwork, are regarded as morally valued personality traits that are reflected in an individual's thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, akin to other personality traits (Park and Peterson, 2008; Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Gilham, et. al, 2011). These strengths are believed to foster effectiveness and efficiency in various settings such as home, family, school, and community. Accordingly, character strengths are strongly linked to essential aspects of human well-being and social functioning, and are considered foundational for lifelong development and success (Peterson, et.al. 2007; Hutcherson, Seppala, and Gross, 2008; Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, and Finkel, 2008; Proctor et al., 2011).

Furthermore, Peterson and Seligman (2004) assert that character strengths are the foundational building blocks of human well-being and are seen as catalysts for personal growth and the development of a healthy life. Peterson and Seligman identified 24-character strengths which are

organized into 6 virtues (Baumgardner and Crothere, 2015). These include qualities such as creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective, which fall under the virtues of wisdom and knowledge. Other virtues encompass bravery, persistence, honesty, and zest, falling under the virtue of courage. Additionally, character strengths such as kindness, love, and social intelligence are associated with humanity; teamwork, fairness, and leadership with justice; forgiveness, modesty or humility, prudence, and self-regulation with temperance; and appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality with transcendence (Park, 2004; Park and Peterson, 2009).These character strengths are expressed in various ways, including through emotions, thoughts, and behaviours throughout human lives (Carr, 2013; Richards and Huppert, 2011). However, childhood maltreatment, which includes child abuse and neglect, involve various forms of violence such as physical injury, abandonment, neglect, and malnourishment. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines child abuse or maltreatment as encompassing all forms of physical and/or emotional harm, sexual abuse, neglect, or negligent treatment, as well as commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development, or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power (WHO, 2011)and poses a significant challenge to the development of positive outcomes such as character strengths and social emotional competences in children and adolescent((Eigsti and Cicchetti, 2004; English et al., 2005; Norman et al., 2012).

Child maltreatment is a public health issue with severe consequences for both individual victims, regardless of any gender, (Gesinde, 2020; Asagba, Noibi and Ogueji, 2022) and society in general. The impact of childhood maltreatment can have lasting consequences on children as they grow, affecting their relationships with peers and their development. Children who have been exposed to traumatic experiences in their childhood are likely to face challenges in acquiring skills needed later in life. In other words, the effects of childhood maltreatment can persist into adolescence and adulthood, leading to emotional distress (Currie and Widom, 2010; Pepin and Banyard, 2006) and impacting socio-emotional adjustment, healthy development, and the ability to cope with adverse experiences and violence (Weissberg et.al, 2015; Bashir, 2013). Hence, this study investigated the connection of childhood maltreatment on social emotional competence and character strengths among in-school adolescents. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to investigate the impact of childhood maltreatment on the social-emotional competencies and character strengths of adolescents, and ascertain the degree to which such exposure influences these aspects.

Research Questions

1. Does exposure to childhood maltreatment, social emotional competence and character strength vary by gender among the adolescents?
2. Is there significant association among childhood maltreatment, social emotional competencies and character strengths?
3. To what extent would childhood maltreatment affect the development of social emotional competencies and character strengths among the adolescent?

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design of correlational type. A descriptive correlational study is a study in which the researcher is primarily interested in describing relationships among variables without seeking to establish a causal connection. The rationale for this research design is that, the study's variables will be described in relation to another. The independent variable in this study is childhood

maltreatment while the dependent variables are social emotional competence and character strengths.

Population and Participants

The study encompasses all students attending public secondary schools in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. Within Oyo State, there are 33 Local Government Areas (LGAs), with Ibadan itself containing 11 LGAs. Through the use of simple random sampling, four (4) LGAs in Ibadan were selected for inclusion in this research. This decision was made to facilitate a focused and manageable inquiry, ensuring in-depth and thorough data collection and analysis. Moreover, these selected LGAs embody diverse socio-economic, geographic, or demographic features within the context of Ibadan. The estimated number of schools and enrollees in the selected LGAs is 158 and 81,942, respectively. Employing a simple random sampling technique, five (5) schools were selected from these LGAs. In three (3) LGAs, mixed-sex schools were utilized, with 70 participants selected from each. To ensure gender balance and inclusivity, the fourth LGA involved two same-sex schools (1 boys-only and 1 girls-only school), with 70 participants selected from each institution. This configuration constituted the study's sample size of 350.

After securing approval from both the University of Ibadan Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee and the Ministry of Education, permission was sought from school principals to administer the questionnaire. The researchers provided a detailed explanation of the study's purpose to the participants, and the informed consent form was thoroughly discussed and subsequently distributed. Participation in the study was limited to students who returned a properly signed informed consent. Subsequently, participants were instructed to complete a set of questionnaires, with each session averaging 15 minutes. Following the questionnaire completion, the gathered data was transferred to a spreadsheet and subjected to a thorough double-check for accuracy.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1: Showing the Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	163	46.6%
	Female	187	53.4%
	Total	**350**	**100%**
Age	Below 15years	73	20.9%
	15-18years	239	68.3%
	19years and above	5	1.4%
	Missing values	33	9.4%
	Total	**350**	**100%**
Class	SS1	22	6.3%
	SS2	158	45.1%
	SS3	170	48.6%
	Total	**350**	**100%**

Family Type	Monogamous	217	62.0%
	Polygamous	76	21.7%
	Single parenthood	29	8.3%
	Others	4	1.1%
	Missing values	24	6.9%
	Total	**350**	**100%**
Living with	Both parents	262	74.9%
	Father only	12	3.4%
	Mother only	52	14.9%
	None	16	4.6%
	Missing value	8	2.3%
	Total	**350**	**100%**
Parental marital status	Married	282	80.6%
	Separated	19	5.4%
	Divorced	12	3.4%
	Widow	17	4.9%
	Single parent	7	2.0%
	Missing value	13	3.7%
	Total	**350**	**100%**
Father's Highest Education	No formal education	13	3.7%
	Primary school	29	8.3%
	SSCE	134	38.3%
	NCE/ND	29	8.3%
	HND/B.Sc.	52	14.9%
	Masters	37	10.9%
	Ph.D	23	6.6%
	Missing value	33	9.4%
	Total	**350**	**100%**
Mother's Highest Education	No formal education	13	3.7%
	Primary school	27	7.7%
	SSCE	139	39.7%
	NCE/ND	54	15.4%
	HND/B.Sc.	41	11.7%
	Masters	27	7.7%
	Ph.D	18	5.1%
	Missing values	31	8.9%
	Total	**350**	**100%**

Measures

The demographic information included age, gender, parent's highest education, and parent's marital status. The main parts of the questionnaires consist of measures about social emotional competence, childhood maltreatment and character strengths.

Social Emotional Competence Questionnaire, SECQ (Zhous and Ee, 2012), was used to assess social-emotional skills of the participants. This scale comprises five (5) subscales which are self-awareness, social-awareness, self-management, relationship management and responsible decision-making. Each subgroup has five items to make up the 25 items of the scale. The response format ranged from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). Example of items on the scale include: "I understand why I do what I do" and "I am tolerant of my friend's mistakes." The questionnaire had acceptable internal consistency and Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.70. The higher the score, the higher the social emotional skill of the participants; however, the lower the score the lower the social emotional skill of the participants.

Childhood Maltreatment Questionnaire, CMQ (Shirley and Rosen 2010): The scale was measured retrospectively the level of exposure to childhood maltreatment. The items were grouped into Abuse and Neglect. The original scale has 19 items on abuse scale while the neglect scale has 15 items. For the purpose of this study, 14 items from Abuse scale and 11 items from Neglect scale were adapted. The reported reliability of the modified scale is 0.84. Example of items on the scale include: "I was hit hard enough by a parent/guardian to leave marks on my skin" and "My physical care was neglected by a parent/guardian." The revalidated measure reported a Cronbach alpha of 0.78. Lower score illustrate low level of maltreatment at childhood; however, higher score depict high maltreatment at childhood.

VIA Character Strength (Youth) - Park & Peterson (2003): This scale comprises fifty-eight (58) items measuring the twenty-four (24) character strengths. The response format range from Very much like me (3) to Not much like me (1). Example of the items on the scale include: "You like to explore and discover new things'' and "You finish what you start." After pilot testing the measure reported a Cronbach alpha of 0.81. Higher score means high character strength while lower score means low character strength of the respondents.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected were coded using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. The independent t-test was conducted to determine the gender differences in childhood maltreatment, social emotional competence and character strengths, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to determine the association among childhood maltreatment, social emotional competence and character strengths. In addition, Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to determine the causal effect of childhood maltreatment, social emotional competence and character strengths among adolescents. A complete bootstrapping method was used with the aid of SmartPLS-4 for the analysis.

RESULTS

This section presents the result of the research on exploring the interplay of childhood maltreatment on social emotional competence and character strength among in school adolescents in Ibadan metropolis, Oyo State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: Does exposure to childhood maltreatment vary by gender among the adolescents?

Table 2:   **Summary of t-test on gender differences in childhood maltreatment, social emotional competence and character strengths among in-school adolescents**

Variable	Gender	N	$\bar{x}$	SD	Df	T	P value	Remark
Childhood maltreatment	Male	163	36.08	13.974	347	-0.884	0.377	*NS*
	Female	186	37.37	13.279				
Social emotional competence	Male	163	101.83	11.746	347	0.883	0.378	*NS*
	Female	186	100.60	13.912				
Character strengths	Male	162	149.04	21.529	347	-0.938	0.346	*NS*
	Female	184	151.11	19.387				

$p< 0.05$ level of significant; *NS* = Not Significant

Table 2 outlines the gender disparities in childhood maltreatment, social-emotional competence, and character strengths. The results indicate the absence of significant gender differences in childhood maltreatment ($\bar{x}$ Male = 36.08, $\bar{x}$ Female = 37.37, df = 347, t = -0.884, p-value = 0.377 > 0.05), social-emotional competence ($\bar{x}$ Male = 101.83, $\bar{x}$ Female = 100.60, df = 347, t = 0.883, p-value = 0.378 > 0.05), and character strengths ($\bar{x}$ Male = 149.04, $\bar{x}$ Female = 151.11, df = 347, t = -0.938, p-value = 0.346 > 0.05). This indicates that none of the study variables exhibits significant gender differences, implying their commonality across both genders.

Research Question 2: Is there significant association among childhood maltreatment, social emotional competence, and character strengths?

Table 3: Correlation matrix

	$\bar{x}$	SD	1	2	3
Childhood Maltreatment	36.78	13.587	-		
Social Emotional Competence	101.16	12.928	-.216[*]	-	
Character Strength	150.12	20.389	-.172[*]	.301[*]	-

$p< 0.05$ level of significant; N= 350

Table 3 shows the correlations among the variables. The findings indicate a noteworthy negative relationship between childhood maltreatment and social-emotional competence (r = -0.216, p < 0.05). Similarly, there is a significant negative correlation between childhood maltreatment and character strengths (r = -0.172, p < 0.05). In contrast, a significant positive correlation is observed between social-emotional competence and character strengths (r = 0.301, p < 0.05). This suggests that a reduction in exposure to childhood maltreatment is associated with an increase in both social-emotional competence and character strengths, and vice versa. Conversely, an increase in social-emotional competence corresponds to an increase in character strengths, and vice versa.

Research Question 3: To what extent would childhood maltreatment affect the development of social emotional competence and character strengths among adolescents?
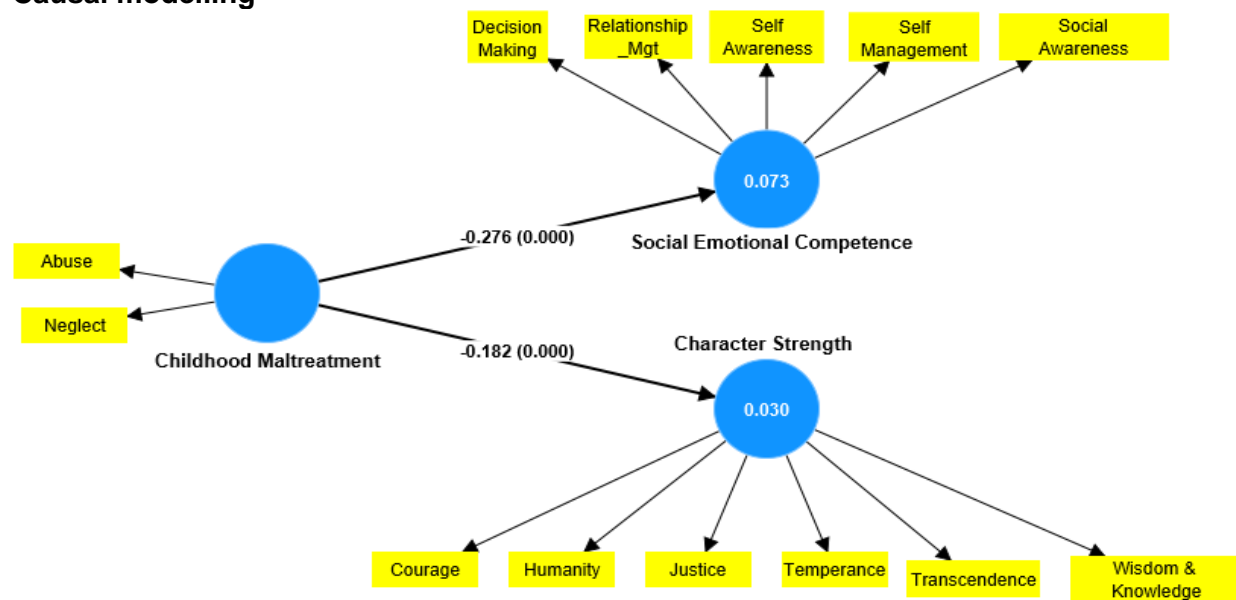
Causal modelling

Figure 1: Causal model of childhood maltreatment, social emotional competence and character strength

Table 4: **Estimated direct effects of childhood maltreatment on social emotional competence and character strengths among in-school adolescents**

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Childhood Maltreatment -> Character Strength	-0.182	-0.195	0.048	3.774	0.000
Childhood Maltreatment -> Social Emotional Competence	-0.276	-0.293	0.058	4.757	0.000

Table 4 presents the calculated direct causal effects of childhood maltreatment on the social-emotional competence and character strengths of adolescents. The findings indicate a significant direct causal effect of childhood maltreatment on adolescents' character strengths (β= -0.182, p<0.05). The coefficient of -0.182 suggests that a decrease in childhood maltreatment corresponds to an increase in adolescents' character strengths. This implies that higher character strengths are associated with lower exposure to childhood maltreatment. Consequently,

adolescents not exposed to childhood maltreatment exhibit elevated positive character strengths, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Additionally, as shown in Table 4, childhood maltreatment has a significant direct causal effect on adolescents' social-emotional competence (β= -0.276, p<0.05). The coefficient of -0.276 indicates that an increase in childhood maltreatment is linked to a decrease in   adolescents' social-emotional competence, as depicted in Figure 1. This suggests that a higher incidence of childhood maltreatment is associated with lower levels of social-emotional competence in adolescents.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The result revealed that there was no significant gender differences in childhood maltreatment, social emotional competence, and character strength of adolescents. This corroborates the findings of Gesinde (2020) who reported that there was no significant gender difference in paternal psychological abuse and psychopathology symptoms among children and adolescents. Also, Asagba et al (2021) found that there was no statistically significant gender difference in children's exposure to domestic violence. However, this finding was inconsistent with a previous study (Yue, et.al, 2023) which reported gender differences in the relationship between childhood maltreatment and non-suicidal self- injury among adolescents indicating that females are more sensitive to emotional abuse than their male counterparts.

Table 3 affirmed that there was a significant positive correlation between social emotional competence and character strengths in adolescents. This result is in line with previous study by Gilham et.al, (2011), which reported that kindness, teamwork, forgiveness, and other social character strengths could facilitate and increases bonding with others and enhances social connectivity. It is also consistent with the findings of Hatchimonji, et al, (2022) who found that a constellation of five character virtues (diligence, gratitude, forgiveness, future-mindedness, and generosity) was associated with purpose and social-emotional learning, thereby providing empirical support for the framework for social-emotional and character development interventions in schools. This suggests that character strengths enhance social connection, fosters positive emotions toward others, instills a sense of purpose, and promotes a heightened state of awareness overall (Hutcherson, et al, 2008; Fredrickson, et al, 2008). Moreover, this holds   significance for the cultivation of social-emotional competences, mental well-being, life satisfaction, and self-perception in later adulthood.

The results presented in Fig. 1 showed that as childhood maltreatment decreases, character strengths and social emotional competences increases. This aligns with Ngai's (2015) findings, indicating a significant association between adolescents' character strengths and parental care and control. Consequently, the character strengths and social-emotional skills of adolescents are shaped by the quality of parental care and control, underscoring the impact of a child's relationship with their parents or caregivers on character development (Ngai, 2015). This suggests that positive or adverse childhood   experiences exert a profound influence on an individual's future development. Children nurtured in an environment characterized by love, warmth, and safety are more likely to lead happy and fulfilling lives in their later years.

Furthermore, Bocknek, Brophy-Herb, and Banerjee's study (2009) highlights those variations in childhood exposure result in individual differences in self-regulation. To sum up, the level and quality of parent-child interaction, coupled with parental warmth and supportiveness, significantly contribute to social-emotional development. These factors influence what such children can achieve and how they navigate emotional challenges within their social groups (Bocknek et al., 2009).

In summary, while this study found no notable gender differences in the interaction between childhood maltreatment, social-emotional competencies, and character strengths among adolescents, it revealed a detrimental causal impact of childhood maltreatment on the

development of social-emotional competencies and character strengths. Additionally, there is a considerable likelihood that interventions based on enhancing character strengths could potentially mitigate the adverse effects of childhood maltreatment on adolescents, thereby contributing to the improvement of their social-emotional competencies.

This study recommends that parents and caregivers should refrain from engaging in abusive parenting practices, as they have been identified as detrimental to the nurturing of children's social and emotional competencies and character strengths. Furthermore, it is essential to conduct ongoing public awareness programs emphasizing the importance of developing social-emotional competencies and character strengths, along with highlighting factors that can hinder their growth. These awareness initiatives should be regularly organized across various media platforms, including social media. Additionally, counselling psychologists are encouraged to incorporate more interventions focused on character strengths and the development of social-emotional skills, particularly within group activities for adolescents and in day-to-day interactions.

Limitation of the Study
Certain limitations of the study must be addressed. Firstly, the present study had a survey scope, and the subjects were not randomized between the groups. Thus, the results were not controlled for other inter-group variables. Further research is necessary, preferably using longitudinal and experimental designs allowing for group comparisons. Secondly, an only self-report method was used to measure all variables. As the survey was conducted among in-school adolescents within the peri-urban areas, the tendency toward social desirability might have biased participants' answers. To gain some more reliable knowledge about the relations between the studied constructs, it may be necessary to repeat the questionnaire survey in private schools and the urban areas. Finally, the study results are limited to Oyo State, Nigeria only. It would be interesting to investigate more diverse environments

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