

21st Century Skills and Overcoming Approval Dependence among Undergraduate Education Students in Public Universities in Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between 21st century skills and overcoming approval dependency among undergraduate education students in public universities in Cross River State, Nigeria. Survey research design was adopted for the study, while stratified random sampling technique was used to select a sample of 400 students from a population of 8,000 undergraduate education students in faculties of education in public universities in Cross River State. Data collection was done with an instrument developed by the researchers titled: “Twenty-first Century Skills and Approval Dependency Questionnaire” (TCSADQ), duly validated and with reliability estimates of the sub-variables ranging between .74 and .83. The data collected were subjected to statistical analysis using Pearson correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis. The findings indicate that 21st century skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity and digital literacy are inversely correlated with the degree of approval dependency exhibited by the students. Based on the findings it was recommended, among others, that curriculum planners should integrate curricular and co-curricular activities that focus on developing students' emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and resilience, which can help mitigate the negative effects of approval dependency.

Keywords: 21st century skills, approval dependency, undergraduate education students, public universities, Cross River State.

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving 21st century landscape, the development of a broad range of skills has become increasingly crucial for the success and well-being of university students.

These "twenty-first century skills" encompass cognitive abilities such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity and digital literacy, as well as interpersonal skills like communication and collaboration (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019). Concurrent with the need for these skills is the pervasive issue of approval dependency, where individuals derive their sense of self-worth primarily from the opinions and validation of others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Approval dependency also known as sociotropy or excessive need for approval, is a psychological construct characterized by an individual's reliance on external validation and approval from others, rather than developing autonomous, self-directed learning and decision-making abilities. It refers to an individual's excessive need for validation, praise, and acceptance from others. It is also described as the tendency to base one's self-worth and decision-making primarily on the opinions, judgments, and reactions of others (Nwosu, 2017). Individuals with a high degree of approval dependence often find themselves constantly seeking validation, praise, and acceptance from those around them. This maladaptive tendency can undermine academic performance, limit career prospects, and contribute to mental health challenges (Gerdes & Claro, 2019). In Cross River State context, approval dependency can be exacerbated by cultural norms and societal expectations that place a high value on conformity and obedience (Nwosu, 2017). Undergraduate education students may feel compelled to adhere to these expectations, rather than developing the independent thinking and decision-making skills necessary for 21st century success.

Among undergraduate students, approval dependency has been linked to a range of negative outcomes, including academic underperformance, decreased intrinsic motivation, and heightened vulnerability to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Harter, 1999; Moeller et al., 2012). This reliance on external validation can stem from various factors, including:

1. **Upbringing and socialization:** Individuals who grow up in environments where their worth was heavily contingent on the approval of others may internalize this pattern of thinking.
2. **Social media and technology:** The ubiquity of social media and the constant exposure to the curated lives of others can contribute to a heightened sense of self-consciousness and the need for approval.
3. **Cultural and societal pressures:** Certain cultural and societal norms may place a strong emphasis on conformity, status, and the need to meet the expectations of others (Nwosu, 2017).

Among undergraduate education students, the propensity for approval dependency can hinder the development of autonomous, self-directed learning behaviours and the acquisition of twenty-first century skills (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This study investigated the relationship between the cultivation of 21st century skills and the degree of approval dependency exhibited by undergraduate education students; it also examined the relationship between 21st century skill development and overcoming approval dependency among undergraduate education students in public universities in Cross River State. Understanding this dynamic can inform educational interventions and curriculum design to better prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century. The study also helped in identifying factors that can help students break free from debilitating approval-seeking behaviours as an important step in fostering their long-term success and well-being.

The concept of 21st century skills has gained widespread recognition in educational research and policy discourse. These skills are generally categorized into four broad domains including (1) critical thinking and problem-solving, (2) communication and collaboration, (3) creativity and innovation, and (4) digital literacy and technological fluency (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019). Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of these skills in preparing students for the demands of the modern workforce and for navigating the complexities of the 21st century world (Trilling & Fadel, 2009; World Economic Forum, 2016).

Existing literature suggests that the development of twenty-first century skills may be inversely related to the degree of approval dependency exhibited by students. Autonomous, self-directed learning behaviours, which are essential for the acquisition of twenty-first century skills, are undermined by excessive reliance on external validation and approval (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Conversely, fostering skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity may contribute to the cultivation of greater self-awareness, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation, thereby reducing approval dependency (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Hypotheses

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between the development of 21st century skills and the degree of approval dependency among undergraduate education students in public universities in Cross River State.

Ho2: The development of 21st century skills is not a significant predictor of reduced approval dependency among undergraduate education students in public universities in Cross River State.

Methodology

The research design adopted for this study was a survey research design. The area of this study was public universities in Cross River State, Nigeria. Cross River State is one of the 36 states in Nigeria with the state capital in Calabar, where the two universities under investigation are situated. The population of the study was made up of all undergraduate students in faculties of education in public universities in Cross River State. The universities that fall into this category are University of Calabar, Calabar (UNICAL) and University of Cross River State (UNICROSS). This was made up of 5,860 undergraduate education students in UNICAL and 2,140 undergraduate education students in UNICROSS, making a total of 8,000 undergraduate education students in the 2024/2025 academic session.

Then, proportionate stratified random sampling was used to draw approximately 5% (400) of the undergraduate education students in the faculties of education to whom the instrument was administered to. The sample size for the study was determined using the Yamane (1967) formula for calculating sample size:

$$n = \frac{N}{(1+N(e)^2)}$$

Where:

n = sample size

N = population size

e = level of precision (in this case, 0.05 or 5% error margin)

Plugging in the values:

$$n = \frac{8,000}{(1+8000(0.05)^2)}$$

$$n = \frac{8,000}{(1+8000(0.0025))}$$

$$n = \frac{8000}{20}$$

$$n = 400$$

The instrument used for data collection in this study was a questionnaire titled “Twenty-first Century Skills and Approval Dependency Questionnaire” (TCSADQ) developed by the researchers and validated by experts in Research, Measurement and Evaluation. It was sub-divided into two sections, section A and Section B. Section A elicited responses on demographic variables (gender, age, and academic level). Section B elicited information on assessment of 21st century skills and approval dependency among undergraduate education students in public universities in Cross River State. It consisted of six parts: namely, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity and digital literacy with each section consisting of three (3) items, giving a total of thirty (15) items; and approval

dependency assessment, with six (6) items. The response options were Strongly Agreed (SA) - 4, Agreed (A) - 3, Disagreed (D) - 2, Strongly Disagreed (SD) - 1.

The reliability coefficient of each of the six sub-sections and for the overall Section B were established using Cronbach Alpha reliability. The reliability estimates ranged from .74 to .83 which were considered high enough to make the instrument reliable for use in the study. The 400 copies of the questionnaire administered were retrieved, collated and the data therefrom was analyzed using Pearson Correlation and multiple regression statistical tool.

Presentation of results

Table 1: Gender of participants

Institution	Gender		Number of participants	Percentage (%)
	Male	Female		
UNICAL	103	190	293	73%
UNICROSS	28	79	107	27%
TOTAL	131	269	400	100

Table 2: The academic level breakdown of participants

	Number of participants	%
First year	100	25%
Second year	111	28%
Third year	96	24%
Fourth year	93	23%
Total	400	100

Table 3: Descriptive analysis for the 21st century skills and approval dependency measures

	Mean	SD
21st century skills	4.12	0.67
Approval dependency	3.42	0.86

The mean score for 21st century skills was 4.12 (SD = 0.67), indicating a relatively high level of these skills among the sample. The mean score for approval dependency was 3.42 (SD = 0.86), suggesting a moderate level of approval dependency.

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between the development of 21st century skills and the degree of approval dependency among undergraduate education students in public universities in Cross River State.

Table 4: Pearson correlation analysis to examine the relationship between 21st century skills and degree of approval dependency among undergraduate education students in public universities in Cross River State (N=400)

	Mean	SD	r-value	Sig.
21st century skills	4.12	0.67	-0.42**	.001
Approval dependency	3.42	0.86		

The results showed a significant negative correlation between the two variables ($r = -0.42$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that higher levels of 21st century skills are significantly associated with lower levels of approval dependency.

Ho2: The development of 21st century skills is not a significant predictor of reduced approval dependency among undergraduate students in public universities in Cross River State.

Table 5: Multiple regression analysis of five (5) 21st century skills as predictors of approval dependency

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
.209 ^a	.225	.030	5.83450		
Source of variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F- value	P-value
Regression	662.576	5	110.429	20.57	.000 ^b
Residual	14535.664	394	34.041		
Total	15198.240	399			
Model		Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients		
	Unstandardized Coefficients B		Beta	t- value	P-value
Constant	10.728	1.661		6.460	.000
Critical thinking	0.24	.157	.104	3.88	0.00
Communication skills	0.15	.145	.172	2.40	0.01
Collaboration skills	0.12	.219	.164	1.93	0.05
Creativity skills	0.17	.256	.152	2.74	0.00
Digital literacy	0.13	.282	.110	2.12	0.03

P<.05

$$Y=10.728+.0.24X_1+.0.15X_2+.0.12X_3+.0.17X_4+.0.13X_5$$

Y= Reduced approval dependency

X₁= Critical thinking

X₂= Communication skills

X₃= Collaboration skills

X₄= Creativity skills

X₅= Digital literacy

Independent variables are critical thinking, communication skills, collaboration skills, creativity skills, and digital literacy, while the dependent variable is approval dependency among undergraduate students in public universities. To test this hypothesis, 21st century skills sub variables were compared with reduced approval dependency using multiple regression analysis. The result as presented in Table 5 showed that an R value of .209 was obtained, resulting in an R squared value of .225. This means that the variation in the 21st century skills towards reduced approval dependency accounted for by the variation in critical thinking, communication skills, collaboration skills, creativity skills, and digital literacy is 2.25% and a p-value of .000 associated with the computed F-value of 5.394 is less than .05. Based on this outcome, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that critical thinking, communication skills, collaboration skills, creativity skills, and digital literacy are significant predictors of approval dependency ($p < .05$).

The regression analysis further supported the inverse relationship between 21st century skills and approval dependency as follows:

All five 21st century skill predictors were negatively associated with approval dependency, though the strength of the relationships varied as follows:

- Critical thinking ($\beta = -0.24$, $p < 0.05$) and creativity skills ($\beta = -0.17$, $p < 0.05$) were the strongest predictors, indicating that higher levels of these skills are most strongly linked to lower levels of approval dependency.
- Communication skill ($\beta = -0.15$, $p < 0.05$) and digital literacy ($\beta = -0.13$, $p < 0.05$) were also significant predictors of reduced approval dependency.
- Collaboration skill ($\beta = -0.12$, $p = 0.05$) was marginally significant, suggesting a weaker relationship with approval dependency compared to the other skill areas.
- The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(5, 354) = 20.57$, $p < 0.05$, and explained 22.5% of the variance in approval dependency.

Discussion of the findings

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the relationship between the development of 21st century skills and the degree of approval dependency among undergraduate education students in public universities in Cross River State.

The descriptive statistics reveal that the sample, on average, exhibited a relatively high level of 21st century skills (mean = 4.12, SD = 0.67) and a moderate level of approval dependency (mean = 3.42, SD = 0.86). This suggests that the undergraduate education students in public universities in Cross River State have generally developed the essential skills needed to navigate the complex challenges of the 21st century, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability. However, the moderate level of approval dependency indicates that some students may still be reliant on external validation and influenced by the opinions of others, which could potentially hinder their ability to become fully autonomous and self-directed learners. This finding agrees with the findings of Deci and Ryan (2000), who posit that autonomous, self-directed learning behaviours, which are essential for the acquisition of twenty-first century skills, are undermined by excessive reliance on external validation and approval.

The correlation analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between 21st century skills and approval dependency ($r = -0.42$, $p < 0.05$). This finding suggests that as students develop stronger 21st century skills, they tend to become less dependent on the approval of others. This is an important observation, as the ability to think independently, make decisions, and take ownership of one's learning is a crucial aspect to success in the 21st century. The development of 21st century skills may help students build self-confidence, resilience, and a growth mindset, reducing their reliance on external validation. This is in consonance with the findings of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), that fostering skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity may contribute to the cultivation of greater self-awareness, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation, thereby reducing approval dependency.

These findings indicate that the development of a range of 21st century skills, particularly critical thinking, creativity, communication, and digital literacy, can play an important role in helping undergraduate education students overcome approval dependency. Incorporating targeted skill-building activities into the curriculum could be a valuable approach for addressing this issue.

Overall, these findings contribute to the growing body of research on the importance of 21st century skills in the modern educational landscape. The results suggest that the development of these skills may be a key factor in helping undergraduate education

students become more self-directed, independent, and resilient learners, ultimately leading to better academic and personal outcomes. The findings finally suggest that the development of 21st century skills, such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity and digital learning, is negatively associated with the degree of approval dependency among undergraduate students in public universities in Cross River State. The results indicate that students with higher levels of 21st century skills tend to have lower levels of approval dependency, and vice versa.

Implications of the study

Incorporating more hands-on, student-centred, and autonomous learning experiences into the educational system may help students become more self-directed and less dependent on the approval of others.

The findings suggest that the development of 21st century skills may be linked to increased self-confidence, self-efficacy, and resilience among students. Students who possess strong 21st century skills may be less susceptible to the negative consequences of approval dependency, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.

Fostering the development of twenty-first century skills could potentially contribute to the overall psychological well-being and thriving of undergraduate students. Interventions aimed at reducing approval dependency should consider incorporating activities and strategies that enhance 21st century skills, as this may be an effective approach to addressing the underlying issue.

The 21st century skills measured in this study, such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration, are highly valued by employers in the modern workforce. Students who have developed these skills are likely to be more adaptable, innovative, and effective in their future careers, as they are less reliant on external approval and more self-directed in their problem-solving and decision-making.

Promoting the development of twenty-first century skills in higher education can improve the employability and career prospects of graduates, as these skills are increasingly in demand in the rapidly changing job market.

Overall, the findings of this study have significant implications for educational practices, student well-being, and workforce development, highlighting the importance of fostering the development of 21st century skills as a means of promoting greater independence and self-reliance among undergraduate students.

Conclusion

By addressing the issue of approval dependency and empowering undergraduate education students in public universities in Cross River State to develop 21st century skills, educational institutions can help prepare these students for success in the evolving global landscape. This holistic approach to undergraduate education will equip them with the tools and mindset necessary to navigate the challenges of the 21st century and contribute meaningfully to their local and global communities.

Recommendations

To address the challenge of approval dependency and empower undergraduate students to develop 21st century skills, a multifaceted approach is necessary. This approach should involve interventions at both the individual and institutional levels, including:

1. **Fostering a growth mindset:** Undergraduates should be encouraged to cultivate a growth mindset, wherein they view challenges and setbacks as opportunities for learning and improvement, rather than as threats to their self-worth. This can be achieved through workshops, mentorship programmes, and the integration of growth mindset principles into the curriculum.
2. **Promoting autonomy and self-determination:** Undergraduates should be empowered to develop a stronger sense of autonomy and self-determination, wherein they derive their sense of self-worth and identity from their own values, strengths, and aspirations, rather than from external validation. This can be facilitated through self-reflection exercises, career counselling, and the encouragement of independent decision-making.
3. **Fostering peer support and collaborative learning:** Undergraduates should be encouraged to engage in group activities and discussions, where they can learn from and support one another, reducing the need for external approval. This can involve the implementation of collaborative learning strategies, such as project-based learning and team-based assignments.
4. **Integrating 21st century skill development into the curriculum:** Educational institutions should design and implement curricula that explicitly address the acquisition of critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, and digital literacy skills. This can include the incorporation of experiential learning opportunities, the use of case studies and simulations, and the integration of technology-based learning tools.
5. **Strengthening mentorship and guidance programmes:** Undergraduates should have access to a robust system of mentorship and guidance, where they can receive personalized support and feedback from experienced professionals and educators. This can help them

navigate the challenges of approval dependency and develop a stronger sense of self-efficacy and resilience.

6. Fostering a culture of risk-taking and experimentation: Educational institutions and campus communities should create an environment that celebrates the learning process and acknowledges the value of failure as an opportunity for growth. This can involve the recognition and celebration of innovative ideas and the provision of a safe space for undergraduate education students to explore, experiment, and take calculated risks.

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