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Community Violence Exposure, Psychological Distress, and Differential Achievement Goal Orientations among In-School Adolescents in Ibadan, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined how psychological distress relates to achievement goal orientation among 298 in-school adolescents (150 male, 148 female; aged 10 to 21 years) in Ibadan metropolis, Nigeria, exposed to varying levels of community violence. Rather than treating achievement goal orientation as a single motivational construct, this study disaggregated it into its four constituent orientations, mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance, and tested psychological distress as a mediator of community violence exposure (CVE) separately for each. CVE significantly predicted psychological distress, B = .215, SE = .029, t = 7.53, p < .001. Distress, controlling for CVE, significantly and positively predicted mastery-approach goals (B = .084, p = .004), performance-approach goals (B = .077, p = .001), and performance-avoidance goals (B = .070, p = .012), but not mastery-avoidance goals (B = .021, p = .514). Bootstrapped indirect effects (5,000 resamples) of CVE on goal orientation through distress were significant for mastery-approach (*ab* = .018, 95% CI [.006, .032]), performance-approach (*ab* = .017, 95% CI [.007, .028]), and performance-avoidance (*ab* = .015, 95% CI [.004, .028]), but not mastery-avoidance (*ab* = .004, 95% CI [−.009, .019]). Rather than showing a uniform association with academic motivation, psychological distress was associated with greater endorsement of mastery-approach, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goals, suggesting a differentiated motivational profile rather than a generalized decline. Male adolescents reported significantly higher CVE than females (*d* = .60), with no gender differences in distress or goal orientation. These findings indicate that visible academic striving is not a reliable indicator that an adolescent has been unaffected by violence-related distress and highlight the need to examine the developmental resources that shape whether distress is expressed through adaptive or self-protective motivational strategies.

Keywords: Community violence exposure, Psychological distress, Achievement goal orientation, Motivational reorganization, Adolescent development, Mediation, Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

Achievement goal orientation, the motivational stance a student adopts toward learning, whether oriented toward mastering material for its own sake or toward avoiding failure and unfavorable comparison, is not a minor educational variable. It is a developmental achievement in its own right. Mastery-oriented motivation reflects a young person's capacity to regulate attention, tolerate setbacks, and sustain effort toward self-chosen standards; it is a proximal marker of the same self-regulatory competence that predicts long-term academic persistence, occupational attainment, and psychological adjustment well beyond the classroom (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Understanding what shapes this capacity in adolescence, therefore, is not simply a question about school performance. It is a question about a core developmental task.

This developmental task unfolds under particularly challenging conditions for many adolescents in African settings, where exposure to violence may occur across community, school, and family environments. Community violence exposure is a significant developmental risk for children and adolescents and has been consistently associated with adverse mental health and adjustment outcomes (Fowler et al., 2009). Evidence from Nigeria similarly indicates that violence exposure and polyvictimization are associated with elevated mental distress among young people (Atilola, 2012; Lee et al., 2022; Ughasoro et al., 2022). These findings make it important to examine not only whether violence exposure compromises psychological functioning, but also how its effects become expressed in adolescents' school-related motivational processes.

Why Motivation Changes During Adolescence

Adolescence is marked by a well-documented, near-universal decline in academic motivation, particularly in mastery-oriented engagement (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Stage-environment fit theory explains this decline as a mismatch between adolescents' emerging developmental needs (for autonomy, competence, and meaningful choice) and the increasingly regimented, evaluative, and comparison-heavy structure of secondary schooling (Eccles et al., 1993). Classroom goal structures that emphasize normative comparison over mastery further shape this trajectory, pulling students toward performance and avoidance orientations that are more reactive to stress (Ames, 1992). This normative backdrop matters for the present study: any additional influence of violence exposure on motivation is not occurring against a stable baseline but against a developmental period in which the full landscape of achievement goals, not just mastery motivation, is already actively being shaped by evaluative pressure.

The Developmental Importance of Goal Orientation

Goal orientation matters developmentally because it is one of the clearest behavioral expressions of how an adolescent is managing the broader developmental transitions of the period, including identity formation, increasing autonomy, and the consolidation of future goals (Nurmi, 1991). Adolescents who sustain mastery orientation under stress are, in effect, demonstrating a functioning self-regulatory system: the capacity to hold a future-oriented goal in mind and direct present effort toward it despite competing demands (Diamond, 2013). But achievement goal theory has long recognized that adolescents rarely hold a single, unitary orientation; approach and avoidance goals, and mastery and performance standards, can be pursued simultaneously and can be activated by different, sometimes co-occurring, psychological antecedents (Elliot & Church, 1997). African evidence also suggests that achievement orientations are contextually patterned rather than merely individual preferences.

Among learners in disadvantaged South African schools, performance-oriented goals were more strongly endorsed than mastery goals and were linked to the goal emphases communicated by teachers, schools, and parents (Ramnarain, 2013). Nigerian studies have similarly identified meaningful variations in mastery, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance orientations among secondary-school students (Musa et al., 2016; Usoroh et al., 2015). This evidence supports examining the goal dimensions separately within resource-constrained educational settings. This is the developmental logic that motivates treating achievement goal orientation not as one outcome variable, but as a multidimensional motivational profile, a profile that may itself be reorganized by environmental adversity rather than simply diminished by it.

How Chronic Stress May Reorganize Achievement Motivation

Chronic environmental stress, including exposure to community violence, is understood to affect motivation not necessarily by uniformly damaging academic interest, but by altering the psychological conditions under which achievement goals are adopted. Sustained physiological and psychological stress reallocates attentional and inhibitory control toward threat monitoring, a pattern documented across studies of poverty-related and community adversity (Blair & Raver, 2012; Evans & Kim, 2013), and it compromises emotion regulation capacity (Compas et al., 2017). Comparable patterns have been documented in African settings. Among young South African adolescents, exposure to multiple forms of violence was associated with both internalising and externalising symptoms (du Plessis et al., 2015), while Nigerian evidence has linked community violence and other forms of victimisation with psychological difficulties and mental distress (Lee et al., 2022; Ughasoro et al., 2022). Collectively, these studies support treating distress as a plausible proximal correlate of violence exposure within African adolescent populations.

Critically, however, Elliot and Church's (1997) hierarchical model of achievement motivation shows that anxiety-linked antecedents, such as fear of failure, do not simply suppress goal pursuit; they can simultaneously activate performance-avoidance goals, oriented around not appearing incompetent, and heightened approach-oriented striving, as students attempt to manage the threat to self-worth that failure represents (Covington, 1992). Anxiety can, under some conditions, be harnessed as a source of motivated effort rather than only a source of withdrawal, a pattern documented in research on defensive, anxiety-driven achievement striving (Norem & Cantor, 1986). This body of work suggests two competing possibilities for how community violence, operating through psychological distress, might relate to achievement goal orientation: a uniform decline consistent with simple resource depletion, or a differentiated reorganization in which some orientations intensify while others do not. The present study is designed to adjudicate between these possibilities empirically rather than assume either in advance.

This study also distinguished clearly between psychological distress and psychological well-being, two constructs that are conceptually and psychometrically distinct. The measure used here, the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), is a validated index of negative affective symptomatology, not of well-being. Accordingly, this study frames the relevant construct as psychological distress throughout, consistent with how the instrument is used in the wider empirical literature (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009).

Theoretical Framework

Rather than treating ecological and motivational theory as two separate lenses applied in sequence, this study integrates them into a single developmental account in which each theory explains a different link in the hypothesised developmental sequence. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory explains where the risk originates: community violence is a distal, chronic feature of the adolescent's mesosystem and exosystem, a characteristic of the neighborhood and social environment rather than of the individual. Achievement goal theory, and specifically Elliot and Church's (1997) hierarchical model, explains how that risk becomes visible academically: distress functions as a generalized antecedent, structurally analogous to fear of failure, that is associated with differential patterns of achievement goal orientation rather than acting on a single mastery-motivation pathway. Psychological distress is the proximal psychological correlate statistically linking community violence exposure with adolescents' differentiated achievement goal orientations. Framed this way, testing four parallel mediation pathways, one per achievement goal orientation, is an empirical examination of the integrated framework itself and a more precise one than testing a single composite pathway would be.

The Present Study

Although African studies have documented associations between violence exposure and psychological difficulties (Atilola, 2012; du Plessis et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2022; Ughasoro et al., 2022), and a smaller Nigerian and South African literature has examined achievement goal orientations among secondary-school learners (Musa et al., 2016; Ramnarain, 2013; Usoroh et al., 2015), these bodies of research have largely developed separately. To our knowledge, no Nigerian study has examined whether CVE is differentially associated with the four quadrants of the 2 × 2 achievement goal framework through psychological distress using bootstrapped indirect-effect estimation. This study addresses that gap.

Aim and Objectives

This study aimed to examine whether psychological distress statistically mediates, or is consistent with an indirect pathway in, the relationship between community violence exposure and achievement goal orientation among in-school adolescents in Ibadan metropolis, Nigeria, and whether this mediating role differs across the four achievement goal orientations. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Examine the direct relationship between community violence exposure and psychological distress.
2. Examine the relationship between psychological distress and each of the four achievement goal orientations (mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance), controlling for community violence exposure.
3. Test psychological distress as a statistical mediator of the relationship between community violence exposure and each of the four achievement goal orientations.
4. Examine gender differences in community violence exposure, psychological distress, and the four achievement goal orientations.

Hypotheses

H1: Community violence exposure will significantly positively predict psychological distress.

H2: Psychological distress will differentially predict the four achievement goal orientations, controlling for community violence exposure, rather than showing a uniform effect across all four.

H3: Psychological distress will mediate the relationship between community violence exposure and achievement goal orientation, with the presence and strength of mediation differing across the four orientations.

H4: Male and female adolescents will differ significantly in community violence exposure, psychological distress, and/or achievement goal orientation.

METHOD

Design and Participants

This study adopted a cross-sectional correlational design. A multi-stage sampling technique was used. Five of the eleven Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Ibadan were selected via simple random sampling. Two public secondary schools were then randomly selected from each LGA, and thirty respondents were randomly selected from each school, yielding sixty respondents per LGA. A total of 298 secondary-school students (150 males, 148 females) participated. Ages ranged from 10 to 21 years (M = 16.11, SD = 1.66). Although the study focused on adolescents, eight participants (2.7%) were aged 20–21 years. These participants remained enrolled in public secondary schools. Their inclusion is consistent with age-grade discrepancies associated with late school enrollment and delayed educational progression in Nigeria (Chima et al., 2026).

Instruments

Community Violence Exposure Scale: Community violence exposure was assessed using the 25-item Community Violence Exposure Scale developed by Schwartz and Proctor (2000). Participants reported how often they had experienced or witnessed different forms of community violence using four response options: Never, Once, A Few Times, and A Lot of Times. The instrument assesses both direct victimisation and witnessing of community violence. Responses were coded from 1 (Never) to 4 (A Lot of Times) and summed to obtain a total community violence exposure score, with higher scores indicating greater exposure to community violence. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency in the present study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$).

Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995): Psychological distress was assessed using the 21-item Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21). The instrument comprises three seven-item subscales assessing depression, anxiety, and stress. Participants indicated the extent to which each statement described their experiences using a four-point response scale ranging from Never to Almost Always. For the present study, responses were coded from 1 to 4 and summed across all 21 items to obtain a raw total psychological distress score ranging from 21 to 84. In line with the study objective, analyses were based on this total psychological distress score rather than the individual subscale scores, and scores were not multiplied by two. Higher scores indicated greater

psychological distress. The DASS-21 demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the present sample (Cronbach's α = .85).

Achievement Goal Questionnaire (AGQ; Elliot & McGregor, 2001): Achievement goal orientations were assessed using the original 20-item Achievement Goal Questionnaire developed by Elliot and McGregor (2001). Participants responded to each item using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The instrument comprises four five-item subscales measuring mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goal orientations. Responses were coded such that higher scores reflected stronger endorsement of the corresponding achievement goal orientation. Consistent with the theoretical framework of the study, each subscale was analyzed separately rather than combined into a composite score. Internal consistency was modest to acceptable across subscales: mastery-approach α = .61 (McDonald's ω = .61), mastery-avoidance α = .71 (ω = .71), performance-approach α = .60 (ω = .60), and performance-avoidance α = .54 (ω = .55). The Performance-Avoidance subscale showed comparatively low internal consistency (α = .54, ω = .55); findings involving this subscale should therefore be interpreted cautiously because measurement unreliability may attenuate observed associations.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. School principals granted institutional permission, and trained research assistants administered the questionnaires in classroom settings during school hours after explaining the study's purpose in age-appropriate language. For participants younger than 18 years, parental consent and adolescent assent were obtained. Participants aged 18 years or older provided informed consent independently. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

Data Cleaning

Prior to analysis, all items were screened for out-of-range values. Four responses contained values outside the permissible scale ranges and were treated as missing. Given the extremely small proportion of affected responses (<0.02%), they were replaced using the corresponding item mean before scale-score computation. This affected fewer than 0.02% of all data points and did not materially change scale reliabilities or bivariate associations. Because eight participants (2.7%) were aged 20–21 years, a sensitivity analysis was conducted excluding these cases (N = 290). The pattern of results was unchanged: all regression coefficients differed by less than .006, and no substantive conclusions or statistical significance patterns changed. Consequently, the full sample was retained for analysis.

Data Analysis

Total scores for community violence exposure and psychological distress, together with separate scores for the four achievement goal orientation subscales, were computed by summing the relevant item responses. Reliability was assessed using both Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega (estimated from principal axis factor analyses of each subscale), as reporting both indices provides a more comprehensive evaluation of internal consistency. Item-total statistics were inspected for each subscale to identify any poorly functioning items. Simple indirect-effect models were estimated separately for each of the four achievement goal orientation subscales, following the regression structure of PROCESS Model 4 (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Path a (community violence exposure to psychological distress) and Path b

(psychological distress to each outcome, controlling for community violence exposure) were estimated using ordinary least squares regression, and each indirect effect (a × b) was tested using a nonparametric bootstrap with 5,000 resamples and 95% percentile confidence intervals. Heteroscedasticity-consistent (HC3) standard errors were used throughout. Independent-samples t-tests, using Welch's correction where variances were unequal, examined gender differences.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among the study variables. Community violence exposure was moderately and positively associated with psychological distress ($r = .394$, $p < .001$). Psychological distress was positively associated with mastery-approach ($r = .243$, $p < .001$), performance-approach ($r = .224$, $p < .001$), and performance-avoidance ($r = .159$, $p < .01$) goal orientations, but was unrelated to mastery-avoidance ($r = .004$, $p > .05$). Community violence exposure showed relatively weak direct associations with the achievement goal orientations, providing preliminary evidence that psychological distress may represent the more proximal correlate linking violence exposure to adolescents' motivational profiles. The four achievement goal orientations were moderately intercorrelated, supporting their conceptual relatedness while also indicating that they represent distinguishable motivational constructs.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations among Community Violence Exposure, Psychological Distress, and the Four Achievement Goal Orientations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Community Violence Exposure (CVE)	54.49	15.88	—					
Psychological Distress	35.42	8.67	.394***	—				
Mastery-Approach	8.80	3.37	.153**	.243***	—			
Mastery-Avoidance	10.54	4.25	−.080	.004	.283***	—		
Performance-Approach	8.64	3.16	.118*	.224***	.618***	.222***	—	
Performance-Avoidance	9.46	3.52	.034	.159**	.503***	.518***	.445***	—

Note. N = 298. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

As shown in Table 1, the four achievement goal orientations were significantly and positively intercorrelated (rs = .22–.62, all ps < .001), indicating that the orientations were related but not redundant. The strongest associations were observed between mastery-approach and

performance-approach (r = .62) and between mastery-avoidance and performance-avoidance (r = .52).

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for the four achievement goal orientation subscales. Internal consistency estimates ranged from .54 to .71, indicating acceptable reliability for mastery-avoidance and modest reliability for the remaining subscales. Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega estimates were nearly identical across the four subscales, while the single-factor analyses produced generally interpretable factor solutions.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Coefficients for the Four Achievement Goal Orientation Subscales

Subscale	Items	M	SD	A	Ω
Mastery-Approach	5	8.80	3.37	.61	.61
Mastery-Avoidance	5	10.54	4.25	.71	.71
Performance-Approach	5	8.64	3.16	.60	.60
Performance-Avoidance	5	9.46	3.52	.54	.55

Note. N = 298. ω = *McDonald's omega, estimated via single-factor principal axis factoring.*

Item-total statistics showed no items requiring removal, though item D1 ("my fear of performing poorly in this class is often what motivates me") within the performance-avoidance subscale showed a notably weak corrected item-total correlation (r = .14) and the lowest factor loading (λ = .19) of any item across all four subscales, likely reflecting its hybrid wording, which frames fear as a source of motivation rather than as a pure avoidance goal. This item was retained, as originally administered, but its presence is a plausible contributor to the comparatively low reliability of the performance-avoidance subscale and is addressed further in the limitations section.

Hypothesis Testing

Regression assumptions were adequately met prior to hypothesis testing: variance inflation factors showed no multicollinearity concern (VIF = 1.18 for CVE and distress across all outcome models), and heteroscedasticity-consistent (HC3) standard errors were used throughout to account for mild non-normality and heteroscedasticity detected in residual diagnostics, given the sample size (N = 298).

H1 (Path a). CVE significantly predicted psychological distress, B = .215, SE = .029, t = 7.53, p < .001, 95% CI [.159, .271], supporting H1. This path is identical across all four subscale models, as the outcome variable, not the predictor, changes across models.

H2 and H3 (differential paths b and indirect effects). As shown in Table 3, distress significantly and positively predicted mastery-approach, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goals, controlling for CVE, but did not significantly predict mastery-avoidance goals. The pattern that psychological distress demonstrated differential associations across the four achievement goal orientations supports H2: distress does not relate uniformly to achievement goal orientation. Bootstrapped indirect effects mirrored this pattern exactly: CVE's effect on goal orientation through distress was significant for mastery-approach, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance, but not for mastery-avoidance, supporting H3. In every case, the direct effect of CVE on goal orientation (c′), controlling for distress, was

non-significant, indicating that wherever an effect of CVE on goal orientation exists, it was represented by a significant indirect association through distress rather than through any direct pathway. The non-significant direct effects, alongside significant indirect effects for three orientations, were consistent with indirect-only statistical mediation (Zhao et al., 2010); however, the cross-sectional design does not establish temporal or causal transmission.

Table 3: Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects of Community Violence Exposure on Achievement Goal Orientations through Psychological Distress

Outcome	b: B (SE)	p	c′: B (SE)	P	c: B (SE)	p	Indirect (ab)	Boot 95% CI
Mastery-Approach	.084 (.030)	.004	.014 (.012)	.229	.033 (.012)	.007	.018	[.006, .032]
Mastery-Avoidance	.021 (.032)	.514	−.026 (.016)	.100	−.022 (.016)	.170	.004	[−.009, .019]
Performance-Approach	.077 (.024)	.001	.007 (.012)	.539	.024 (.012)	.044	.017	[.007, .028]
Performance-Avoidance	.070 (.028)	.012	−.008 (.013)	.569	.007 (.013)	.565	.015	[.004, .028]

Note. Unstandardized B coefficients (SE in parentheses), HC3-robust standard errors. p values reported exactly, except p < .001. Indirect effects (ab) tested via a 5,000-resample nonparametric bootstrap with 95% percentile confidence intervals; an interval that excludes zero indicates a statistically significant indirect effect.

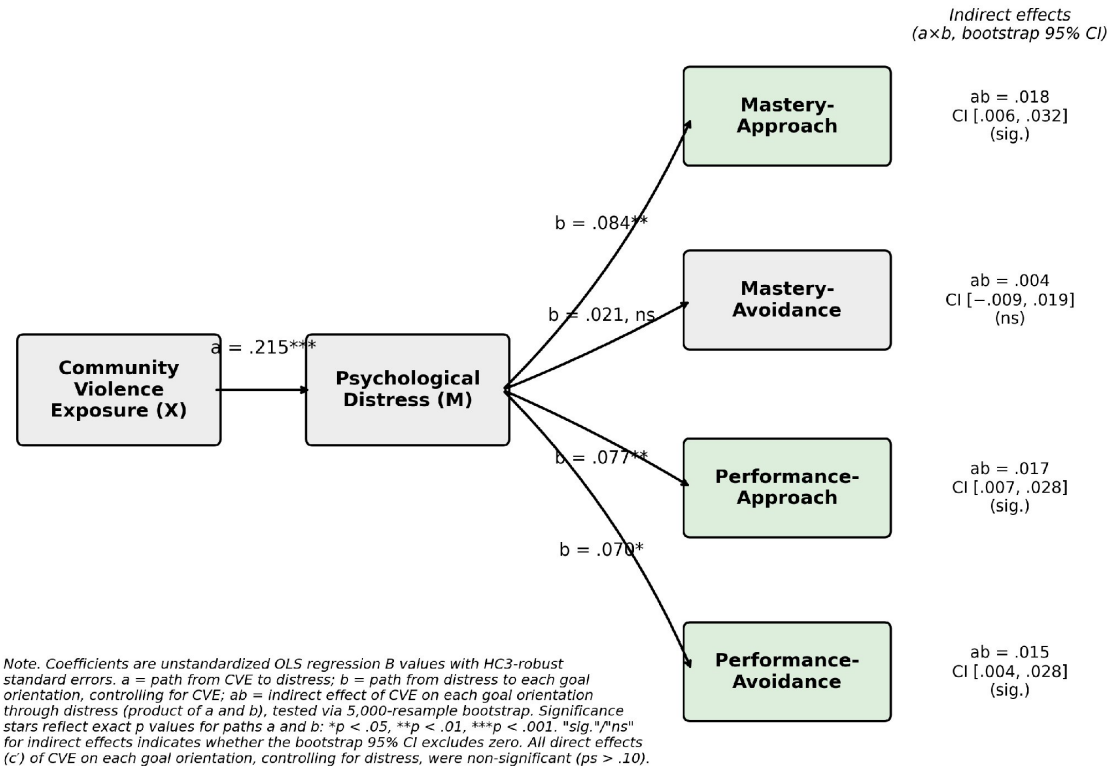

Figure 1: Differential mediation of community violence exposure on the four achievement goal orientations through psychological distress.

Table 4: Gender Differences in Community Violence Exposure, Psychological Distress, and Achievement Goal Orientation Subscales

Variable	Male M (SD)	Female M (SD)	t	df	p	*d*
CVE	59.05 (16.62)	49.86 (13.65)	5.22	288.9	< .001	.60
Distress	36.25 (8.00)	34.57 (9.25)	1.68	288.5	.094	.20
Mastery-Approach	8.96 (3.41)	8.64 (3.35)	.81	296.0	.418	.09
Mastery-Avoidance	10.13 (4.04)	10.96 (4.43)	−1.68	292.7	.094	−.20
Performance-Approach	8.69 (3.18)	8.60 (3.17)	.23	296.0	.817	.03
Performance-Avoidance	9.49 (3.74)	9.43 (3.31)	.15	292.6	.882	.02

Note. Welch-corrected t-tests reported given unequal variances. Gender comparisons were conducted separately for each achievement goal orientation because the four orientations were analyzed as theoretically distinct motivational constructs throughout the study; therefore, no composite goal orientation score is reported.

H4 was partially supported. Male adolescents reported significantly greater community violence exposure than females, with a medium effect size. However, no significant gender differences emerged in psychological distress or in mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, or performance-avoidance goal orientations. Thus, despite greater exposure to community violence among males, psychological distress and achievement goal orientations were comparable across gender. These findings suggest that the differentiated achievement goal profile associated with psychological distress was similar for male and female adolescents, despite males reporting higher levels of community violence exposure.

DISCUSSION

This study tested whether psychological distress relates uniformly or differentially to Nigerian adolescents' achievement goal orientation, disaggregating a single composite outcome into its four constituent achievement goals. The central finding is that distress does not act on academic motivation as a single, unitary system. Rather than reducing academic motivation uniformly, psychological distress appears to be associated with differential patterns of achievement goal orientation: it is associated with greater endorsement of both approach-oriented goals (mastery-approach, performance-approach) and an avoidance-oriented goal (performance-avoidance), while leaving one orientation, mastery-avoidance, unaffected. This is a more complex pattern of motivational activation than either a simple decline or a simple increase, and it would have been entirely invisible in a composite analysis, where positive and offsetting-in-direction subscale effects (though, notably, here all significant effects ran in the same positive direction) would have simply been averaged into a single, smaller, and less interpretable number.

Why Adolescence is a Developmentally Sensitive Window for This Pathway

The distress-linked reorganization documented here is not developmentally generic; it is especially consequential during adolescence for reasons that extend beyond the statistical model. Adolescence is a period of compounding educational transitions, from junior to senior secondary school, each requiring renewed adjustment to new academic demands, evaluative structures, and social hierarchies (Eccles et al., 1993). It is simultaneously the period in which

identity formation is a central developmental task: adolescents are actively constructing a sense of who they are and what they are capable of, and academic self-concept is one of the primary materials from which that identity is built (Erikson, 1968). It is also the period during which executive functions, including working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility, are still maturing rather than fully formed, making self-regulatory capacity more vulnerable to disruption by chronic stress than it would be in a fully matured adult system (Diamond, 2013; Steinberg, 2005). Future orientation, the capacity to hold long-term goals in mind and organize present behavior around them, is itself a developmental achievement that consolidates gradually across adolescence (Nurmi, 1991), which means that violence-related distress striking during this consolidation period may shape which motivational strategies become habitual, rather than simply disrupting an already-fixed system.

This interpretation is consistent with research from stressed African educational environments showing that adolescent school engagement is shaped by combinations of personal, caregiver, teacher, and school resources rather than by individual motivation alone (Theron et al., 2022). It is also consistent with South African evidence that exposure to violence across home, school, and community settings is associated with educational delay, although supportive parenting may mitigate this risk (Herrero Romero et al., 2018). This reframes the present findings from a community violence study with an academic outcome into a developmental science account of how ecological adversity becomes biographically consequential during a specific, identifiable window in which several motivational systems are simultaneously under construction.

Distress was positively associated with mastery-approach, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goals, but not mastery-avoidance goals. Rather than functioning as a simple suppressor of academic motivation, these findings suggest that psychological distress may operate as a form of *motivational amplification*, simultaneously strengthening endorsement of both approach-oriented and avoidance-oriented achievement goals. Importantly, this interpretation should be viewed as a theoretically informed explanation of the observed pattern rather than a directly measured motivational process.

Developmentally, this pattern is consistent with Elliot and Church's (1997) hierarchical model, in which anxiety-linked antecedents can simultaneously activate approach-oriented striving and avoidance-oriented self-protection, rather than uniformly suppressing goal pursuit; it is also consistent with self-worth theory's account of effortful, anxious achievement striving aimed at protecting a threatened sense of competence (Covington, 1992) and with evidence that anxiety can be harnessed as motivating fuel rather than only as a source of withdrawal (Norem & Cantor, 1986). Compared with a straightforward resource-depletion account, in which chronic stress should suppress effortful goal pursuit across the board, the present pattern, three orientations elevated, one unaffected, is not well explained by depletion alone. It is important to be precise about what this study can and cannot establish: fear of failure, self-worth threat, and defensive anxiety were not directly measured here, so these accounts are offered as plausible, theoretically grounded interpretations of a distinctive empirical pattern, not as confirmed mechanisms. Practically, this pattern indicates that a distressed adolescent may present as more academically driven, not less, which has direct implications for how schools identify students affected by community violence.

The absence of a distress-mastery-avoidance relationship deserves particular attention because this subscale showed the highest reliability of the four ($\alpha = .71$), indicating that the null finding is unlikely to be attributable to measurement error. Indeed, mastery-avoidance was the best-

measured of the four goal orientations and still showed no association with psychological distress. One possible interpretation is that mastery-avoidance reflects concern about failing to meet an internal standard of complete understanding, whereas mastery-approach reflects active movement toward learning and competence. Psychological distress may be more likely to intensify active striving, whether oriented toward mastery or performance, than apprehension about incomplete mastery. Distress arising from a socially threatening environment such as community violence may also be more readily channelled into socially referenced achievement strategies than into a purely internally referenced standard. These interpretations remain tentative and should be evaluated in future research using direct measures of fear of failure, perceived competence, self-worth contingency, and related motivational processes.

The correct interpretation of the DASS-21 as a measure of psychological distress, rather than psychological well-being, is central to understanding these findings. A positive association between community violence exposure and DASS-21 scores indicates greater psychological distress rather than improved psychological functioning. Accordingly, the observed motivational pattern should not be interpreted as evidence of adaptive adjustment to community violence. Elevated achievement striving in the context of psychological distress is not synonymous with healthy adaptation; although these adolescents may appear more motivated in some academic domains, they nevertheless experience higher levels of psychological distress.

The absence of a significant gender difference in distress or goal orientation, despite males reporting substantially higher violence exposure, is noteworthy. It may indicate that girls experience comparable psychological consequences from lower absolute levels of exposure, consistent with evidence of differential emotional reactivity to adversity by gender (Schwab-Stone et al., 1995), or that shared structural stressors within Ibadan's high-risk communities compress gender disparities in psychological outcomes (Matud et al., 2019). Practically, school mental health programming should not be limited to adolescents with the most visible violence exposure.

These findings also identify an important direction for future research. If psychological distress differentially reorganizes adolescents' achievement motivation rather than uniformly suppressing it, the next question is what determines whether distress is channelled into predominantly adaptive motivational strategies, such as mastery-approach striving, or more self-protective strategies, such as performance-avoidance. Positive youth development assets, including supportive relationships, competence, confidence, and connectedness, may represent important protective resources that shape this motivational profile. Examining these assets may help explain why adolescents exposed to comparable levels of adversity follow different motivational pathways. The absence of gender differences across all four achievement goal orientations further supports the decision to analyze the subscales separately, demonstrating that the null finding was consistent across each motivational dimension rather than arising from aggregation into a composite score.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify these findings. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference regarding the direction of the CVE, psychological distress, and achievement goal orientation pathways; longitudinal or experimental designs are needed to establish temporal precedence. Second, all measures were self-reported, introducing potential shared-method variance that may have inflated the observed associations. Third, the modest reliability of several achievement goal subscales may have reduced measurement precision and attenuated

the observed associations. Findings involving the performance-avoidance subscale, which showed the lowest internal consistency, should therefore be interpreted cautiously. Fourth, the specific psychological processes proposed to explain the differentiated pattern, including fear of failure, self-worth protection, and defensive anxiety, were not directly measured and should be regarded as plausible theoretical interpretations requiring direct empirical examination rather than as confirmed mechanisms. Fifth, the sample was drawn exclusively from public secondary schools in one metropolitan area, limiting the generalisability of the findings to private-school and rural adolescent populations.

Implications

This study extends ecological systems theory by identifying psychological distress as a plausible proximal psychological correlate linking a distal, mesosystem-level stressor (community violence exposure) with adolescents' achievement goal orientations. It also extends achievement goal theory by showing that, in a naturalistic high-adversity sample, psychological distress was differentially associated with the four quadrants of the 2 × 2 achievement goal framework, consistent with Elliot and Church's (1997) hierarchical model. Future ecological research on adolescent motivation would benefit from conceptualizing achievement goal orientation as a multidimensional motivational profile rather than treating it as a unidimensional outcome by default.

Because visible academic striving can co-occur with, rather than rule out, elevated psychological distress, schools in high-exposure communities should not treat high effort or strong goal orientation as evidence that a student is coping well. Teachers should be trained to recognize that hardworking, achievement-focused presentation is not a reliable signal of psychological well-being in this population, and academic support structures should incorporate routine, non-stigmatizing psychological check-ins regardless of a student's visible motivation level. This multisystemic approach is especially relevant in resource-constrained African schools, where sustained engagement under adversity has been associated with the combined availability of caregiver warmth, competent teachers, and supportive school resources rather than with learner characteristics alone (Theron et al., 2022). Interventions should therefore combine student-level psychological support with family engagement, teacher capacity-building, and improved school support structures.

School counsellors are positioned to intervene at precisely the point in this pathway where intervention is most tractable: psychological distress. Because elevated performance-avoidance goals specifically reflect self-worth protection under threat (Covington, 1992), counselling approaches that directly address fear of failure and self-worth contingency, rather than approaches focused solely on study skills or general encouragement, are indicated for adolescents in high-violence-exposure communities.

Violence-prevention policy focused solely on reducing exposure, without a parallel investment in school-based mental health infrastructure, addresses only the distal end of this pathway. Because distress-linked motivational reorganization can produce adolescents who appear more driven rather than less, policies and screening tools that rely on declining grades or visible disengagement to identify violence-affected students risk systematically overlooking a substantial share of the affected population.

CONCLUSION

Community violence exposure was indirectly associated with a differentiated pattern of achievement goal orientations among Nigerian adolescents through psychological distress. Significant indirect associations emerged for mastery-approach, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goals, but not for mastery-avoidance, indicating that violence-related distress was not associated with a uniform reduction in academic motivation. Instead, distress may coincide with a form of motivational amplification in which approach-oriented striving and self-protective avoidance are simultaneously elevated. This interpretation remains tentative because the cross-sectional design cannot establish temporal ordering and the proposed motivational mechanisms were not directly measured. Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate that visible academic striving does not necessarily indicate psychological adjustment. Schools should therefore attend to adolescents' emotional functioning even when they remain highly achievement-oriented, particularly in communities characterised by persistent violence exposure.

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