

Dentistry as a Career Choice: Perception and Motivation of Dental Students Attending a Nigerian Tertiary University

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ABSTRACT

Background: Dentistry, though an essential component of healthcare, is often perceived as a secondary career option in Nigeria. Despite the increasing number of students enrolling in dental schools, perception and motivation about the profession remain varied and under-explored. This study aimed to assess the perception and motivation towards the choice of dentistry among dental student at the University of Port Harcourt.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional survey was conducted among 91 dental students using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: section A included questions on demographic information: age, gender, academic level and religion, section B included questions on motivation towards Dentistry, section C included questions on perception of Dentistry, while section D included questions on the impact of perception on academic performance. Data were analyzed with SPSS version 25.0 with significance set at $p < 0.05$.

Results: Sixty-six participants (72.5%) chose dentistry as first choice. Overall perception of the participants for dentistry was high. Key motivators for choosing dentistry included personal interest (23.1%), financial prospects (29.7%), and flexible working hours (30.8%). A significant relationship was found between positive perception and better academic performance ($p = 0.009$).

Conclusion: The study shows that 72.5% of participants chose dentistry as their first choice. 48.4% of the participants had high perception about dentistry. 49 (28.5%) participants indicated personal interest and passion as motivation for choosing dentistry. There was a significant negative relationship between students' perception scores of dentistry and academic performance ($\rho = -0.274$, $p = 0.009$).

Keywords: Dentistry. Career choice. Perception, Motivation

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INTRODUCTION

Dentistry is a crucial field of healthcare that focuses on oral health, including the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of oral diseases.¹ It covers a wide range of practices, from treating tooth decay and gingival disease to performing oral surgery and creating dental prosthetics.^{2, 3} Modern dentistry integrates medical science, technology, and engineering to provide preventive care, diagnostics, and treatment for oral diseases.^{2,4,5}

In Nigeria, the profession has grown significantly over the years, with several dental schools training professionals to meet the increasing oral health demands. Dental education in Nigeria is characterized by a structured curriculum, a growing number of dental schools, and a focus on both undergraduate and postgraduate training. However, dental students in Nigeria experience considerable stress, particularly during the pre-clinical and clinical phases of their education. This stress is exacerbated by the lack of adequate support systems and the scarcity of resources required for hands-on clinical practice.

Nevertheless, students' perceptions of Dentistry as a profession tend to improve as they progress through their training. However, many still express uncertainties about career prospects in Nigeria, with a significant number aspiring to practice abroad.^{6,7}

The perception and motivation of students pursuing dentistry vary widely. Studies have shown that a significant number of dental students in Nigeria choose dentistry not as their first career choice but as an alternative due to the competitive nature of other fields like medicine.^{6,8,9} In a similar study conducted in Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana, 50% of the sample population indicated that dentistry was not their first option because there was no government financial sponsorship for student opting for dentistry as compared to medicine.¹⁰

The motivations for studying dentistry among Nigerian dental students are diverse and multifaceted. A significant factor influencing students' choice is personal interest, which is often cited as a primary motivator.⁶ Other factors include a stable career with regular work hours,⁹ professional stability and economic benefits it offers, high earning potential and job security,^{11,12} family influence,⁹ the artistic nature of dentistry and the intellectual challenges.¹³

A number of studies^{14,15} on perception and motivation of dental students regarding dentistry as a career have been conducted in other regions of

Nigeria, however, there is paucity in the literature of such study among dental students in University of Port Harcourt, also the effect of perception of dentistry on the academic performance of the student was not assessed in these studies, which indicates a knowledge gap. Hence, this study aims to assess the perception and motivation among dental students on their career choice of dentistry. Also, to evaluate the effect of perception on academic performance of dental students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

This was a descriptive cross-sectional study, which assessed the perception and motivation of dental students regarding dentistry as a career choice.

Study Population

The study population comprised dental students in the University of Port-Harcourt. This included students at various levels of study, from preclinical (100–300 level) to clinical years (400–600 level). Inclusion criteria include enrolled dental students at University of Port Harcourt, dental students who provide informed consent to participate. Exclusion criteria include dental students who are unwilling to participate, interns and graduates of dental schools.

Instrument for data collection

A self-administered, structured questionnaire was used for data collection. After a face-validity of the questionnaires by the authors, the questionnaires were pre-tested among medical students to ensure simplicity and ease of understanding by the respondents. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: section A included questions on demographic information: age, gender, academic level and religion, section B included questions on motivation for choosing dentistry, section C included questions on perception of dentistry, while section D included questions on the impact of perception on academic performance.

The participants' perception of dentistry was assessed by asking the question: *"How would you rate the prestige of dentistry as a career?"* the responses included A. Very low prestige B. Low prestige C. Moderate prestige D. High prestige and E. Very high prestige.

The participants' motivation towards dentistry was assessed by asking the question: *"What was your primary reason for choosing dentistry?"* the responses included A. Personal interest B. Inability to get

admission into other department C. Parent/family influence D. Job security E. Financial motivation F. flexible working hours F. Availability of admission slot.

The impact of perception on academic performance was assessed by asking: "*Has the choice of dentistry affected your academic performance negatively?*" the responses included A. No, my academic performance has not been affected negatively B. Yes, my academic performance has been slightly affected C. Yes, my academic performance has been moderately affected D. Yes, my academic performance has been severely affected.

Data analysis

Statistical analysis was done using the Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) version 25.0 (IBM SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois). Continuous variables were expressed as means and standard deviations, while categorical variables were expressed as frequencies with accompanying percentages. Differences between groups were compared using the Chi-square tests for categorical variables. P value <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 shows that there were 91 respondents with age range of 17- 29 years, with mean age of 23.07 years (SD = 0.84). There were 41 males and 50 females with M: F of 1:1.22. Academic representation

was highest among 600-level students 28 (28.6%) and lowest among 200-level students 10 (11%). Majority of the population were Christians 89 (97.8%), while only nominal representation from Muslims 1 (1.1%) and non-religious individuals 1 (1.1%).

Dentistry as first choice of study among participants

Figure 1 shows that 66 (72.5%) of participants chose dentistry as first choice, 13 (14.3%) chose dentistry as second choice, while 12 (13.2%) didn't apply for dentistry.

Respondents' perceptions of dentistry

Figure 2 shows that 44 (48.4%) of the participants rated dentistry of very high prestige, 34 (37.4%) rated dentistry of high prestige, while 1 participant (1.1%) each rated dentistry of low prestige and very low prestige.

Respondents' perceived prestige of dentistry

Table 2 shows that the relatively high mean (4.31) indicates that, on average, respondents view dentistry as a highly prestigious career. The standard deviation (0.812) suggests that while most students rated it highly, there was some variability in responses — though not substantial enough to suggest major disagreement. Overall, the results imply that dentistry is perceived positively among students, reinforcing its status as a respected and valued profession.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents (n = 91)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	41	44.0
	Female	50	56.0
Age Range	Less than 18	3	6.6
	18–20	21	18.7
	21–25	43	31.9
	Above 25	24	42.9
Level of Study	100 Level	13	14.3
	200 Level	10	11.0
	300 Level	12	13.4
	400 Level	14	15.4
	500 Level	14	15.4
	600 Level	28	28.6
Religion	Christianity	89	97.8
	Islam	1	1.1
	Non-religious	1	1.1

Motivation for choosing dentistry among participants

Table 3 shows that 49 (28.3%) responses indicated for personal interest and passion, 12 (6.9%) indicated for inability to gain admission elsewhere, 20 (11.6%) for parental/family influences, while 10 (5.8%) indicated for availability of admission slot.

Impact of perception on students' academic performance

Table 4 shows that 72 (79.1%) of the participants' academic performance were not negatively affected by their perception of dentistry, 10 (11.0%) participants' academic performance were slightly

affected by their perception, while only 1 (1.1%) participant's academic performance was severely affected by the perception of dentistry.

Correlation between perception scores and Academic performance

Table 5 shows that Spearman's rho correlation analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between students' perception scores and the belief that the choice of dentistry had negatively affected their academic performance ($\rho = -0.274$, $p = 0.009$). This suggests that students with a more positive perception of dentistry were less likely to report negative impacts on their academic performance.

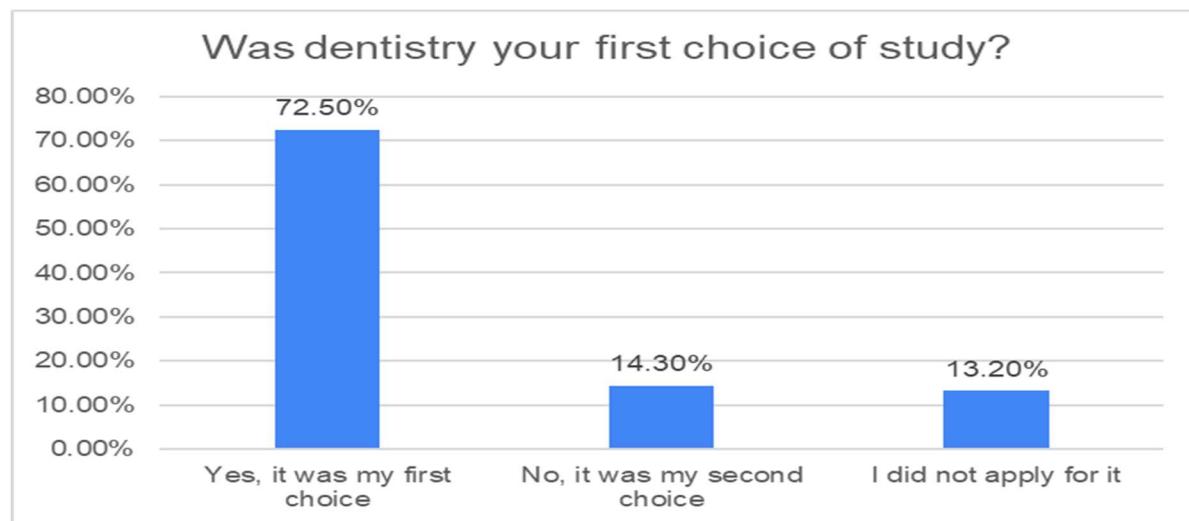


Figure 1: Dentistry as first choice of study among participants

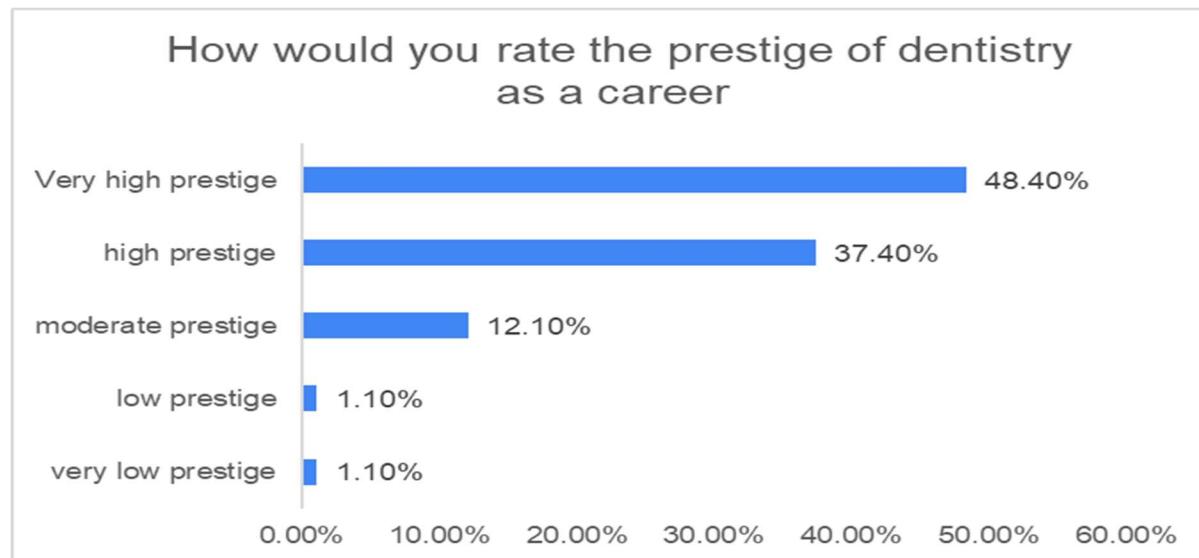


Figure 2: Respondents' perceptions of dentistry

Table 2: Respondents' perceived prestige of dentistry

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Prestige rating of dentistry (1-5 scale)	91	1	5	4.31	0.81

5-point Likert scale (1 = Very low prestige, 5 = Very high prestige), Higher scores indicate greater perceived prestige

"Mean = 4.31, SD = 0.81 on 1-5 scale"

Table 3: Motivation for choosing dentistry among participants

Reason	Responses (N)	Percentage (%)
Personal interest and passion	49	28.3
Inability to gain admission elsewhere	12	6.9
Parental/family influence	20	11.6
Job security	21	12.1
Financial motivations	31	17.9
Flexible working hours	30	17.3
Availability of admission slots	10	5.8
Total	173	100.0

Multiple response analysis (dichotomy group tabulated at value 1) *

Table 4: Impact of perception on students' academic performance

Response Category	Frequency	Percent
Yes, severely affected	1	1.1
Yes, moderately affected	8	8.8
Yes, slightly affected	10	11.0
No, not affected negatively	72	79.1
Total	91	100.0

Table 5: Correlation between perception scores and Academic performance

	Perception Score	Academic Performance Impact
Perception Score		
Spearman's ρ	1.000	-0.274**
Sig. (2-tailed)	—	0.009
N	91	90
Academic Performance Impact		
Spearman's ρ	-0.274**	1.000
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.009	—
N	90	90

DISCUSSION

This study explored the perception and motivation of participants at the University of Port Harcourt. the majority of University of Port Harcourt dental students selected dentistry as a first-choice career path (72%), this finding is in contrast to a previous study conducted by Ameh et al. in 2022, at the University of Lagos, where 20.9% of students were motivated to study dentistry due to failure to gain admission into other programs, while only 27.0%

cited personal interest as their main motivation.⁸ This highlights a significant institutional or contextual difference. It further underscores the need for dental schools and policymakers to invest in early career guidance and public awareness about dentistry to attract genuinely interested students, which may ultimately impact retention and professional commitment.

A significant number of students in this study, 44 (48.4%) rated dentistry as career with very high

prestige, with a high mean prestige score of 4.31 out of 5. This indicates a generally positive perception of the profession among students. Similar pattern was observed in Jordan, where prestige and the desire to help others were dominant motivators.¹⁶ However, in India, a significant number of students reported choosing dentistry as a fallback to medicine, reflecting perceptions of lower societal status for dentistry.¹⁷ These variations emphasize that while many students develop pride in the profession, initial perception and motivations are often influenced by how the profession is viewed in different regions. There is a general lack of awareness and knowledge about the dental profession among medical professionals and the public.¹⁸ A study revealed that while a majority of medical doctors, students, and nurses were aware of the dental profession, there was a low level of knowledge and attitude towards dentistry, with many not seeing the need for routine dental visits.¹⁸ This lack of awareness contributes to the perception of dentistry as a less important field. Additionally, societal views often regard dentistry as less prestigious and financially rewarding compared to medicine, which is seen as a more lucrative and respected profession.⁹ In contrast, perceptions of dentistry in the United States are generally more positive, well-regarded, with a strong emphasis on dental aesthetics and preventive care.¹⁹ A study have shown that perceptions of dental aesthetics in Nigeria are similar to those in the United States, indicating a potential for the acceptance of dental standards and practices.¹⁹ However, the societal status and popularity of dentistry as a career in the U.S. are higher, with dentistry being seen as a prestigious and financially rewarding profession. Addressing these issues is essential to ensure that dental students are not only well-prepared but also motivated and committed to contributing positively to the healthcare system in Nigeria.

Considering the motivation for choosing dentistry, only 12 (6.9%) of respondents in this study cited "admission issues" as a strong primary motivation on their decision to study dentistry, indicating that most respondents chose the profession proactively rather than as an alternative to medicine or other programs. Flexible working hours had the greatest influence (30.8%) on their decision to study dentistry, closely followed by financial motivation (29.7%). This finding aligns with previous international studies,^{20,21} a multinational study involving students from 13 countries, including Australia, India, and the United States, found that lifestyle benefits, the desire to

help others, and an interest in healthcare were consistent motivators for choosing dentistry as a career.²⁰ In Saudi Arabia, the most influential factors included the profession's prestige and the opportunity to improve patients' appearance.²¹ Meanwhile, a survey in Qatar showed that family influence and the hands-on nature of the profession played major roles in students' decisions.²² These similarities and differences highlight how motivations are shaped both by universal values and by local cultural and educational influences. Regarding how students' perceptions of dentistry as a profession might influence their academic performance. The results from a Spearman's rho correlation analysis showed a statistically significant negative correlation between students' perception scores and their belief that studying dentistry negatively affected their academic performance ($p = -0.274$, $p = 0.009$). This finding indicates that students with more positive perceptions of dentistry were less likely to report that the course had a negative impact on their academic performance. This suggests that perception plays a protective role in students' academic engagement. Those who viewed dentistry as prestigious and fulfilling demonstrated greater academic stability. This aligns with previous studies which found that positive perception of the educational environment and career satisfaction are strong predictors of academic success.^{23,24} Cho et al.²³ in 2023 found that Korean dental students who were satisfied with their field of study and also had a positive perception of their learning environment were more likely to be academically prepared and committed to their career paths. Similarly, Sharma et al.²⁴ in 2022 demonstrated that positive perceptions of the learning environment among Indian dental students were significantly correlated with higher academic achievement. These studies reinforced the link between perception, motivation, and academic performance, and underline the importance of maintaining favorable perceptions throughout dental training.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that 72.5% of participants chose dentistry as first choice. 48.4% of the participants had high perception about dentistry. 49 (28.5%) participants indicated personal interest and passion as motivation for choosing dentistry. There was a significant negative relationship between students' perception scores of dentistry and their academic performance ($p = -0.274$, $p = 0.009$)

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study was limited to dental students at the University of Port Harcourt, as such, the findings may not be generalizable to all dental schools in Nigeria. The use of self-administered questionnaires may also have introduced response bias, as participants might have provided socially desirable answers. In addition, the study focused primarily on students' self-reported perception and motivation without a longitudinal follow-up to observe changes over time. Future research involving multiple institutions and longitudinal tracking would provide a more comprehensive understanding of professional identity development among dental students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To sustain these positive academic outcomes, it is recommended that dental schools promote early clinical exposure and mentorship programs, maintain a supportive and engaging educational environment, recognize and address student concerns about curriculum or workload. By investing in the educational experience and reinforcing the value of dentistry, institutions can enhance both student well-being and academic success, ultimately contributing to the development of a committed and competent dental workforce. Efforts should be made at institutional and policy levels to support students' career development and promote dentistry as a vital and fulfilling profession in Nigeria.

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