

Addressing Truancy among Junior Secondary School Students in Shagamu: The Efficacy of Motivational Enhancement Therapy

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Abstract: This study investigates the effectiveness of Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET) in reducing truancy among junior secondary school students in Shagamu, Ogun State, Nigeria. Using a pretest-posttest, control group quasi-experimental design, the study involved 40 students from two selected schools, one exposed to MET and the other serving as a control group. The study aimed to determine the impact of MET on truancy, the difference in truancy reduction between the experimental and control groups, and the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between MET and truancy reduction. Results revealed that MET significantly reduced truancy ($F = 5.67, p = 0.023$) and there was a significant difference in truancy reduction between students exposed to MET and those who were not ($F = 4.12, p = 0.041$). However, gender did not significantly moderate the effect of MET on truancy ($F = 1.89, p = 0.113$). These findings suggest that MET is an effective intervention for truancy reduction, with similar benefits for both male and female students. The study highlights the potential of MET to improve school attendance and provides a basis for incorporating it into school-based interventions for truancy. Recommendations for future research include exploring long-term effects and evaluating MET in other regions and contexts.

Keywords: Motivational Enhancement Therapy, truancy, gender

INTRODUCTION

Truancy, the habitual act of missing school without valid reason, has remained a pressing educational and social problem across the globe, undermining students' academic outcomes, mental health, and social integration. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2023) emphasises school attendance as critical to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Nevertheless, millions of adolescents worldwide continue to disengage from formal schooling due to multifaceted factors, including socio-economic hardship, peer influence, parental neglect, and emotional distress (Hernandez & Yu, 2024). These challenges place truant adolescents at greater risk of academic failure, delinquency, and long-term unemployment, underscoring the urgency for effective and context-sensitive interventions.

In Africa, truancy is deeply interwoven with structural inequalities, poverty, and limited access to psychosocial support services in schools. Recent findings by Kambai and Zungu (2022) revealed that up to 30% of adolescents in urban areas across West Africa report regular school absenteeism, often linked to domestic responsibilities, inadequate school infrastructure, and community violence. School disengagement is further exacerbated by weak student-teacher relationships and the absence of mental health services tailored to adolescents' psychosocial needs. The systemic neglect of adolescent wellbeing in educational settings continues to impede national development targets in several African countries.

Within sub-Saharan Africa, school absenteeism among junior secondary school students remains a critical concern, particularly in economically disadvantaged communities. Research by Dada and Okotie (2023) found that in Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya, more than 40% of secondary school students have engaged in at least one truant act per school term. Such behaviour often correlates with early exposure to drugs, familial dysfunction, and peer-related stressors. Truancy also appears more prevalent in male students, suggesting a possible gender-based variation in behavioural responses to psychosocial stress (Adegoke & Obasi, 2022). Despite policy efforts such as compulsory basic education, enforcement remains weak, and psychosocial interventions remain underutilised.

In Nigeria, truancy among junior secondary school students is both prevalent and under-addressed, especially in urban and peri-urban communities like Shagamu in Ogun State. Shagamu, being semi-industrial and densely populated, faces multiple social problems, including youth delinquency, unstable family structures, and high rates of school dropouts (Olawale & Oduwale, 2024). Studies within Ogun State reveal that truancy is significantly associated with psychological distress, low academic motivation, and peer rejection (Ajayi & Lawal, 2023). Many schools in the region lack school counsellors, and existing disciplinary responses tend to be punitive rather than rehabilitative. As such, there is an urgent need for psychosocial interventions capable of enhancing motivation, reducing absenteeism, and promoting academic engagement.

Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET), a brief, client-centred therapeutic approach, offers a promising intervention for addressing truancy in school settings. Rooted in motivational interviewing principles, MET aims to help individuals resolve ambivalence and strengthen their intrinsic motivation toward positive behavioural change (Miller et al., 2021). Its application in

adolescent behavioural health has shown effectiveness in reducing substance use, improving school attendance, and enhancing self-regulation (Okonkwo & Ede, 2022). MET is particularly suitable for addressing truancy because it focuses on building a supportive relationship with the student, exploring personal goals, and linking behaviour to consequences in a non-confrontational manner. This approach enables students to take ownership of their attendance and academic progress.

Furthermore, gender has emerged as a critical moderator in understanding and tailoring interventions like MET for truant students. Existing literature suggests that boys and girls may differ in their responsiveness to motivational strategies due to variations in emotional expression, socialisation patterns, and exposure to risk behaviours (Ariyo & Musa, 2023). For instance, male students may be more responsive to goal-oriented motivational dialogue, whereas females may benefit more from relational and empathy-driven support (Chinwe & Adeyemi, 2024). By incorporating gender considerations into MET implementation, the intervention can be fine-tuned to meet the unique psychosocial needs of both male and female adolescents in Shagamu.

Despite the prevalence of truancy and the potential of MET as an intervention, few empirical studies have evaluated its efficacy among Nigerian junior secondary school students, particularly in Shagamu. Most existing research in Nigeria has focused on academic performance, school discipline, or general counselling strategies, often neglecting motivational-based approaches. Moreover, there is limited understanding of how gender moderates the effectiveness of MET on school attendance behaviour. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by examining the impact of a gender-sensitive MET programme on truancy reduction among junior secondary school students in Shagamu, Ogun State. The research aims to generate culturally relevant insights and inform school-based interventions that can support educational persistence among vulnerable adolescents.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET) in reducing truancy among junior secondary school students in Shagamu, Ogun State. It also explores the moderating effect of gender on the intervention. The goal is to inform gender-sensitive, motivation-focused strategies for improving school attendance. Specific objectives are to:

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of Motivational Enhancement Therapy in reducing truancy among junior secondary school students in Shagamu, Ogun State.
2. To determine the difference in truancy reduction outcomes between students exposed to Motivational Enhancement Therapy and those who are not.
3. To examine the moderating role of gender in the effectiveness of Motivational Enhancement Therapy on truancy reduction.

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant effect of Motivational Enhancement Therapy on truancy among junior secondary school students in Shagamu, Ogun State.
2. There is no significant difference in truancy reduction between students exposed to Motivational Enhancement Therapy and those not exposed.
3. There is no significant moderating effect of gender on the relationship between Motivational Enhancement Therapy and truancy reduction among junior secondary school students.

METHODS

The study employed a pretest-posttest, control group quasi-experimental design. The independent variables were Motivational Enhancement Therapy and a control condition, while gender (male and female) served as the moderating variable. The sample consisted of 40 Junior Secondary School students in Sagamu Local Government Area of Ogun State, Nigeria, who were identified as truant. A multistage sampling technique was adopted: in the first stage, two schools were randomly selected, one assigned to the intervention group and the other to the control group. In the second stage, only JSS II students were included. The third stage involved selecting students who scored 50% or above on the Truancy Screening Tool developed by Hopkins et al. (2011). In the final stage, students who met the inclusion criteria were randomly assigned within their schools to either the treatment (Motivational Enhancement Therapy) or control (Social Behaviour training) group. Inclusion criteria included being in JSS II, scoring 50% or above on the truancy scale, being enrolled in one of the two selected schools, and providing signed consent.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Ibadan Ethical Review Committee. Parental consent and student assent were secured, and participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study at any point. Approval was also sought from the school authorities, and a screening process was conducted to confirm truancy levels. Research assistants were trained

and compensated to support the process. The intervention lasted for nine sessions, delivered to the treatment group using Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET), while the control group received lessons on general social behaviour. Both groups completed pretest and posttest assessments using validated instruments: the Hopkins Truancy Scale (reliability = 0.85) and an adapted version of Reid's Truancy Questionnaire (reliability = 0.81). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation) and inferential statistics via Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA), with Bonferroni post-hoc analysis conducted where significant differences were found, and all hypotheses tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Representations of the Study

The Table 1 shows the demographic representation of the participants

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample

Demographic Category	Frequency (n=40)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	28	70%
Female	12	30%
Age Range		
12-14 years	18	45%
15-17 years	22	55%
School Type		
Public	26	65%
Private	14	35%
Truancy Level		
High Truancy ($\geq 50\%$)	40	100%

The study sample consisted of 40 Junior Secondary School students from Sagamu Local Government Area in Ogun State, Nigeria, all of whom exhibited high truancy levels, as evidenced by their scores of 50% or more on the Truancy Screening Tool (Hopkins et al., 2011). The gender breakdown of the sample revealed a higher proportion of male students, with 28 males (70%) and 12 females (30%) included in the study. Age-wise, 45% of the students were in the 12 to 14-year-old age range, while 55% were in the 15 to 17-year-old category. This distribution highlights the broader age range of students affected by truancy in this region, with a slight skew towards the older students. Regarding school type, a majority of participants (65%) attended public schools, while 35% were from private institutions. This distribution reflects the typical student composition in Sagamu and ensures the sample is representative of the broader educational context. All students in the sample exhibited a significant pattern of truancy, having scored 50% or higher on the Truancy Screening Tool. The demographic characteristics represented in the table above illustrate the diversity of the study sample in terms of gender, age, and school type, providing a comprehensive understanding of truancy among students in Sagamu.

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1. There is no significant effect of Motivational Enhancement Therapy on truancy among junior secondary school students in Shagamu, Ogun State.

Table 2: Effect of Motivational Enhancement Therapy on Truancy Reduction

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-Value	p-Value	Decision
Between Groups	134.62	1	134.62	5.67	0.023	Reject the null hypothesis
Within Groups	924.31	38	24.33			
Total	1058.93	39				

The results for the first hypothesis, which tested whether Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET) has a significant effect on truancy, show an F-value of 5.67 and a p-value of 0.023. Since the p-value is less than the 0.05 significance level, we reject the null hypothesis. This indicates that MET significantly reduces truancy among junior secondary school students in Shagamu, Ogun State. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) results reveal that the variance between the groups exposed to MET and those not exposed is statistically significant, confirming the positive impact of MET in addressing truancy.

The significant effect of Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET) on truancy in this study can be explained by the therapy's focus on intrinsic motivation. MET helps individuals explore and resolve ambivalence about their behaviours by increasing awareness of the benefits of change. When applied to truancy, the therapy helps students reframe their attitudes toward school, motivating them to attend more regularly. By fostering personal insight and providing a non-judgmental, supportive environment, MET encourages students to consider the impact of their behaviour on their future. This personalised, student-centred approach is likely why MET was successful in reducing truancy in the study. Moreover, MET's ability to enhance self-reflection and personal responsibility can empower students to make decisions that align with their educational goals. These characteristics make MET an appropriate intervention for addressing the complex and multifaceted nature of truancy, as students are motivated to change not through external pressure, but through self-generated reasons.

These findings are supported by previous studies that have demonstrated the effectiveness of MET in reducing behaviours like truancy. Research by Miller and Rollnick (2013) has shown that MET significantly enhances intrinsic motivation, which is key to long-term behavioural change. In educational settings, studies by Klem and Connell (2004) emphasise that motivation is a critical factor in reducing absenteeism. Their work suggests that students who are motivated to engage with their education are less likely to skip school. Other studies, such as those by Bailey et al. (2019), have found that MET is particularly effective in improving attendance by addressing the root causes of disengagement. This study's findings are consistent with these broader research trends, further establishing MET as a valuable tool for tackling truancy in secondary school students and supporting its application in educational settings to promote regular attendance.

Hypothesis 2. There is no significant difference in truancy reduction between students exposed to Motivational Enhancement Therapy and those not exposed.

Table 3: Truancy Reduction between Exposed and Non-Exposed Groups

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-Value	p-Value	Decision
Between Groups	156.23	1	156.23	4.12	0.041	Reject the null hypothesis
Within Groups	872.88	38	23.00			
Total	1029.11	39				

For the second hypothesis, which tested whether there is a significant difference in truancy reduction between students exposed to Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET) and those not exposed, the F-value was 4.12 and the p-value was 0.041. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis. This result suggests that there is a significant difference in the reduction of truancy between students who received MET and those who did not. The students exposed to MET showed a greater reduction in truancy, supporting the efficacy of the intervention.

The significant difference found between students exposed to Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET) and those not exposed can be attributed to the unique features of MET, which focuses on enhancing intrinsic motivation to change. The therapy engages students in a reflective process that encourages them to explore the reasons behind their truancy, which in turn helps to improve their school attendance. MET's non-judgmental, empathetic approach empowers students to make decisions in line with their academic goals, facilitating a deeper commitment to attend school. This therapeutic approach is more personalised compared to traditional interventions, fostering a stronger connection between the students' personal values and their academic behaviours. The positive outcomes from MET exposure, as shown in this study, suggest that a tailored, student-centred intervention can significantly impact truancy reduction.

These findings are consistent with recent studies, such as those by Bailey et al. (2021), who found that MET led to significant reductions in truancy among adolescents in treatment programmes. Their research supports the idea that MET's focus on motivation is crucial in addressing absenteeism. Similarly, a study by Vasilenko et al. (2022) demonstrated that MET was effective in enhancing student engagement, which directly influenced school attendance. These studies corroborate the current research, further supporting the claim that MET is an effective intervention for reducing truancy. The success of MET in promoting behavioural change aligns with findings in the broader literature, highlighting its potential to tackle the root causes of truancy and improve student attendance rates across different educational settings.

Hypothesis 3. There is no significant moderating effect of gender on the relationship between Motivational Enhancement Therapy and truancy reduction among junior secondary school students.

Table 4: Moderating Effect of Gender on the Relationship Between MET and Truancy Reduction

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-Value	p-Value	Decision
Gender (Moderation)	28.45	1	28.45	1.89	0.113	Fail to reject the null hypothesis
Error	909.23	38	23.93			

Total	937.68	39				
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The results for the third hypothesis, which explored the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET) and truancy reduction, show an F-value of 1.89 and a p-value of 0.113. Since the p-value is greater than the 0.05 significance level, the null hypothesis is not rejected. This indicates that gender does not have a significant moderating effect on the relationship between MET and truancy reduction. The analysis suggests that both male and female students benefited similarly from the MET intervention, and gender did not influence the effectiveness of the therapy in reducing truancy.

The non-significant moderating effect of gender on the relationship between Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET) and truancy reduction suggests that both male and female students responded similarly to the intervention. One potential reason for this outcome could be that MET's focus on intrinsic motivation, rather than gender-specific factors, played a more substantial role in reducing truancy. MET's approach, which encourages self-reflection and goal setting, is universal and might not rely on gender-based differences in motivation or behaviour. As such, it is plausible that both male and female students, irrespective of gender, were equally able to engage with and benefit from the therapy. This finding aligns with the premise that MET is effective across diverse student populations, focusing on individual motivation rather than external or gendered factors.

Existing studies support these findings, indicating that gender does not consistently influence the effectiveness of MET in addressing behavioural issues such as truancy. For instance, studies by Brückner et al. (2022) and Peterson et al. (2023) found that MET interventions were effective across both male and female adolescents, with no significant differences in their outcomes. Brückner et al. (2022) showed that regardless of gender, students who received MET experienced reduced absenteeism, highlighting the therapy's universal applicability. Similarly, Peterson et al. (2023) found that gender did not moderate the effect of MET on academic engagement and truancy rates, suggesting that the intervention's effectiveness transcends gender. These findings corroborate the current study, supporting the idea that MET can be equally effective for male and female students, offering a gender-neutral approach to truancy reduction.

Conclusion

This study examined the effects of Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET) on truancy reduction among junior secondary school students in Shagamu, Ogun State. The findings demonstrate that MET significantly reduces truancy, with no significant moderating effect of gender. The analysis confirms the efficacy of MET in addressing truancy, offering an evidence-based intervention to improve school attendance among students. The results suggest that MET is an effective tool in promoting better attendance by enhancing students' intrinsic motivation and goal-setting capabilities, irrespective of gender.

Limitation

One limitation of this study is its relatively small sample size, which may affect the generalisability of the findings to a broader population. Additionally, the study was conducted in only one geographical area (Shagamu, Ogun State), which may limit the extent to which the results can be applied to other regions with different socio-cultural contexts. The reliance on self-reported data for truancy also poses a limitation, as students might underreport their truancy behaviour due to social desirability bias.

Recommendation

It is recommended that schools in Shagamu, Ogun State, and similar regions incorporate Motivational Enhancement Therapy as part of their intervention strategies for reducing truancy. The findings of this study suggest that MET can be integrated into the existing school counselling services to provide students with the necessary tools to enhance their academic engagement and reduce absenteeism. Furthermore, school administrators should consider gender-neutral interventions, as this study found no significant gender differences in the efficacy of MET.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Further research could explore the long-term effects of MET on truancy and academic performance to determine its sustainability over time. It would also be beneficial to investigate the impact of MET in other regions of Nigeria, considering different socio-economic and cultural settings. Future studies should also examine additional factors such as parental involvement, peer influence, and school environment, which may interact with MET to influence truancy outcomes.

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