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### Effects of Psychological Strategies Intervention in Reducing Suicidal Thoughts Among Nigerian University Students with Sexual Harassment and Victimization Experience

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#### ABSTRACT

Sexual harassments and victimization of students in Nigerian higher institutions of learning have continue to receive widely research attention on the daily basis. On this note, the present study investigated on effects of Rational Emotional Behavioral Therapy (REBT) and Systematic Desensitization Therapy (SDT) in reducing suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience in Ebonyi State. The study used quasi-experimental design control-trial-pretest-posttest design. The population comprised all the 3,020 students with likely sexual harassment and victimization experience in Federal Universities in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The sample size of students identified with sexual harassment experience that met the inclusion criteria was 120. The instrument for data collection was subjected to contents and construct validity to be certain of accuracy and suitability in achieving the expected research outputs. Based on the data expected to generate through field trial, the instruments were modified accordingly. Suicidal thoughts Scale (STC) and Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation (Beck et al., 1991& Reynolds, 1988) were adapted for the study with each item required a response to a 5-point rating scale ranging from 0 ('Not at all') to 4 ('Daily or more'). Scores ranged from 0 to 24 with higher scores indicating greater suicidal ideation. The Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was the statistical tool used to determine the effect of Rational Emotional Behavioral Therapy (REBT) and Systematic Desensitization Therapy (SDT) in reducing suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience in Ebonyi State. More so, the effect size of REBT was gotten through Partial eta square and adjusted R<sup>2</sup> values. The result revealed that the post-treatment/interventions, using the intervention of rational emotional behavioural therapy (REBT) and Systematic Desensitization Therapy (SDT) were more effective in reducing suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience in experimental group than those in control group. Based on the finding of this study, the researchers recommended that the psychologists and other school counsellors should employ the services of

REBT and SDT and their principles in reducing suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience mostly in Ebonyi State. Curriculum designers can go a long way in embracing the principles of REBT and SDT towards re-structuring or innovate a transformative curriculum that reduces the menace of suicide crisis in Nigeria. In other words, understanding how to navigate suicidal thoughts deserves to be mainstreamed into the academic curriculum, particularly for reducing vulnerability among students and increasing access to restorative care for victims.

**Keywords:** REBT, SDT, Suicidal Thoughts, Sexual Harassment and Victimization.

## INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassments and victimization of students in Nigerian higher institutions of learning have continue to receive widely research attention. Further evidence-based study (Onasoga et al. 2019) established that the existence of sexual harassment and victimization in the university are mostly on the daily basis. The term sexual harassment encompasses a wide range of behavior, from inappropriate comments and gestures to coercive sexual demands and physical assault. A useful contribution on (Section 46 of the Violence against Persons Act, 2015) of Nigeria defines sexual harassment generally as “unwanted conduct of a sexual nature or other conduct based on sex or gender which is persistent or serious and demeans, humiliates or creates a hostile or intimidating environment and this may include physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct.” In addition, Onoyase (2019) states that “sexual harassment refers to sexual advances made by male academic and male non –academic staff to female students which could be verbal or non –verbal.” Another idea on sexual harassment “includes any inappropriate sexual overture, subtle and unsubtle persistent behaviour, assault and actual sexual abuse that may be expressed physically, verbally or non-verbally, usually from someone with a higher power or at a vantage position to less a privileged person (Taiwo, Omole & Omole ,2014).” The concepts of sexual harassment and victimization of students as described in this study is an indication that it is a phenomenon that permeates almost every facet of human society, including institutions of higher learning (Taiwo et al. 2014 & Long & Hubble, 2018). However, sexual harassment as it affects the well-being of students may likely happen in various forms.

The manifestation of sexual harassment and victimization of students in Nigeria could be seen as a serious issue that cannot be overlooked in this study. Alberta Human Rights Commission (2017) stated that inappropriate sexual behavior manifests in different forms and has been causing a lot of harms to human population. According to the Department of Industrial Relations (2018), sexual harassment has been identified with the following forms: Whistling or staring at a person, standing too close or blocking the way of a person, trailing or stalking someone, hugging and kissing someone, rape, sending an appealing text on email, text, and social media platforms, talking about sex, commenting on a person’s physical features or appearance, making sexual compliments, jokes, insinuations, insults, undignified comments, or slights, making enquiries about dating or sex, coercing someone to date or have sex, lying or spreading sexual rumors about someone, displaying or circulating sexual or insulting images on paper or electronically, making sexual gestures and exposing private body parts. Similarly, sexual harassment also takes several forms or manifestations which

include rape, sexually debasing gestures or comments, unwelcome text messages or emails, rating people based on physical features, telling sexual jokes, and sexually touching oneself in the sight of others (Rape Crises, 2021).

The worst thing about the manifestation of these forms of sexual harassment is that they are mostly not to be reported especially among the students. Onasoga et al. (2019) observed that students are mostly aware of sexual harassment and victimization on them but seem to lack courage to report. In the study conducted by Srikanth (2018), over 80% of participants opined that the students with sexual harassment incidents at tertiary institutions are mostly identified with lack of courage, fear of disgrace, and social isolation experienced by the victim upon filing a complaint against the abuser. Again, the students have poor knowledge of appropriate places to report such experience of sexual harassment in the university. Cases may often go unreported or underreported because students fear victimization, punishment, or ridicule. Furthermore, students with sexual harassment experience may face the challenges of self-blame, minimization of experiences, and uncertainty about the seriousness of the offense (Potter et al., 2020).

The inability/challenges of the students to report cases of sexual harassment and victimization may have spiked the increase or prevalence of it in institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. Shred of evidence (Fred Yao Gbagbo, Gifty Nana Yaa Rockson, Frank Quansah & Edward Kwabena Ameyaw, 2023; Onoja, 2024 & Arowolo, 2021) have documented the widespread prevalence of sexual harassment in higher education institutions across the world, including Nigeria. According to a study by the Association of American Universities (2019), approximately 13% of undergraduate students reported experiencing nonconsensual sexual contact involving physical force or incapacitation. In Nigeria, the problem is similarly pervasive, with many students reporting experiences of sexual harassment from peers, faculty, and staff. A 2018 World Bank Group survey reported that 70% of female graduates from Nigerian tertiary institutions had experienced some form of sexual harassment during their academic pursuits. Mejuini and Obilade (2012) found that 23% of university students had experienced brutal sexual harassment and victimization. However, Iliyasu et al. (2011), found a much higher prevalence of 58.8 % cases related to sexual harassment of university students.

Sexual harassment of university students in most cases may be identified with some challenges of victimization. Victimization is a serious aggressive issue affecting many students in the university. In view of Brock and O'Malley (2016), victimization is the result of acts of intentional aggression by an individual or students operating from a position of strength and directed at a victim or students who are viewed as relatively weak. The essence of victimization is mostly to destroy status and/or social relationship of the students. To this end, Rana (2012) asserted that scholars in their effort to establish proof of victimization have identified two key components of peer victimization, which are repeated physical and verbal attacks against students who cannot properly defend themselves. On this note therefore, victimization is said to have occurred when students are harassed in a hurtful manner by stronger ones in whom the victimized students cannot defend against. Victimization is verbally based when students are orally attacked which can affect their emotional or psychological well-being. A growing number of victimizations exist of which between 10%

and 22.6% of learners are reported by (Brock & O'Malley, 2016; Aluede, 2004) to be affected in an unsafe learning environment.

Consequently, the above documented high prevalence of sexual harassment and victimization of students, mostly for the females could lead to so many impediments and psychological dysfunctions. It is also necessary to note that the impact of sexual harassment on university students is multifaceted, affecting their psychological, emotional, and academic well-being. Again, the students often experience anxiety, depression, and a diminished sense of self-worth, which can lead to withdrawal from academic and social activities (Owoaje, 2010 & Imonihke et al. 2011). Among others, students with sexual harassment could experience a serious psycho-socio problem in form of suicidal thoughts which is referred to as thinking about or planning on how to commit suicide. Evidence-based study (Mussarat et al., 2022) on effect of sexual harassment on suicidal ideation: moderating role of interpersonal support and resilience however revealed that sexual harassment predicted suicidal thoughts/ideation but failed to prove that both interpersonal support and resilience acted as moderators between sexual harassment and sexual ideation. Again, Emily, Christopher & Skye (2022) carried out a quantitative review to determine the degree to which suicidal thoughts and attempts are associated with sexual harassment which revealed that participants with sexual harassment experience reported a substantially higher prevalence of suicidal thoughts (27.25%) compared to those without sexual harassment (9.37%). However, students with sexual harassment experience and its psychological condition of having suicidal thoughts over a time and if not checked, could lead to full blown suicide.

Globally, suicide is the fifteenth leading cause of death, accounting for 1.4% of all deaths (WHO 2014). In total, more than 800,000 people die by suicide each year. The annual global age-standardized death rate for 2012 is estimated to be 11.4 per 100,000, and the World Health Organization (WHO) projects this rate to remain steady through 2030 (WHO,2014). The World Health Organization (2018), reports that Nigeria, including Ebonyi State has a suicide estimate of 17.3 per 100,000 which is higher than the global (10.3 per 100,000) and African (12.0 per 100,000) estimates.

Based on the observation on the reports of rising cases of suicide across the world, Nigeria, it has therefore, become necessary to employ strategic strategies on reducing suicide thoughts associated with sexual harassment affecting university students in Ebonyi State. On this note, the World Health Organization (2019) identified relevant steps in suicide prevention which include identifying the persons at risk and unprotected; to understand the circumstances that influence their self-destructive behavior and to effectively come out with strategic interventions.

In this study, many Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience tend to battle with suicidal thoughts which if not taken care of immediately may lead to suicide. In Ebonyi State, most university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience seem to find it difficult to report to the appropriate authority in the university or elsewhere and so, keep dying in silence. The students' inability to break the silence of what happened to them may over a time aggravate to suicidal thoughts, a worrisome situation affecting the well-being of humanity. In Ebonyi State, the researchers observed that most students with related cases of sexual harassment and

victimization are perceived to be afraid and sometime, share the ugly experience of sexual harassment and victimization to few of their friends with strong warning of keeping it as a secret to avoid being stigmatized in the learning environment or elsewhere. However, curbing this worrisome mental health condition identified as suicidal thoughts affecting most Nigerian university students become very necessary. Therefore, this study will adopt psychological interventions to see if they will help in reducing suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience. The psychological interventions adopted are rational-emotive behaviour therapy (REBT) and systemic desensitization therapy (SDT).

Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) is a therapeutic intervention approach which may be used to reduce severe mental related problems such as suicidal thoughts, among others. Theoretically, REBT stands that negative cognitive interpretations of an event/expresses tend to develop negative emotions and dispositions capable of impeding roles, and responsibilities of individuals (Ellis,1995). Adeoye (2019) stated that the main belief of REBT is that many individuals make irrational assumptions about themselves and the world that lead to their emotional and behavioral discomfort or upsetting. Its essence that rational thinking can lead to more effective living, but meaningful cognitive change is unlikely unless clients are prepared to replace irrational thinking and behave differently. This is why Albert Ellis feels that no one should be blamed for anything or behavior exhibited. Instead, individuals should take responsibility of either negative or positive behavior manifested as a result of circumstances in our environment.

Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy (REBT) uses the principle of Activating event, Beliefs, Consequences, Disputation and new Effect (ABCDE) model to redress dysfunctional perceptions and negative emotions, including physical reactions associated with individuals' experiences of events. According to Ellis (1973), principle A- stands for activation of activities, principal B- Belief represents the rational or irrational belief system of individuals, principle C- implies Consequence which is the consequence of irrational or rational belief. Irrational beliefs system develops unhealthy consequences while rational beliefs system paves way to healthy consequences, principle D- Disputation is a step employed to change irrational beliefs into a rational belief. The last, which is the principle of E stands for new Effect or effective world view. It is the result of the changed dysfunctional beliefs that manifest into rational dispositions /consequences. The manifestation of rational dispositions can help university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience to overcome suicidal thoughts and many other related emotional conditions. Using REBT as a psychological intervention to reduce suicidal thoughts of students with sexual harassment and victimization experience may be more effective if other therapy like systemic desensitization therapy (SDT) is engaged.

Systematic desensitization therapy (SDT) as a therapy developed by Wolpe in 1918 is a form of classical conditioning in which anxiety evoking stimuli are paired with inhibitory response through imagination in desensitization. The therapy teaches relaxation skills to lessen anxiety reactions in a safe setting while exposing clients to anxiety-provoking circumstances gradually. Reducing anxiety symptoms and assisting the individual in creating coping skills are the two main objectives of systematic desensitization (Clark & Wells, 2019). Creating a hierarchy of dread and avoidance is often the initial stage in the

exposure process (Hofmann & Otto, 2020). Rebuilding the list of terrifying possibilities with the help of a therapist, the client assigns ratings to each scenario according to how much fear it evokes. Furthermore, specific assessments of avoidance and terror are typically collected. The finished hierarchy serves as a guide for practicing exposure. Clients were told to stay in dreaded circumstances during exposure in the hopes that a long enough exposure would result in new habits and learnings and lessen anxiety in the setting. Exposure starts with low-ranked scenarios (e.g., mildly anxiety-inducing situations) and gradually rises to more anxiety-inducing situations to maintain manageable situations (Hofmann & Otto 2020). Some studies (Obi et al., 2019; Nwobodo et al., 2022 & Ogugua, 2016) supported that exposure treatment frequently exposes individuals to feared or anxiety-inducing stimuli in a controlled and gradual manner.

Several evidence-based studies have reported effectiveness of REBT-based interventions in reducing behavioural induced problems facing many individuals and Systematic desensitization therapy (SDT) respectively. For the REBT, a quasi-experimental study on efficacy of rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) on depression among adolescents has been proven as an effective psychological tool in the management of depression (Saleh et al., 2022). The review of literature identifies related research and application of REBT as educational intervention of children and adolescents with emotional related conditions, however, established that effective implementation of REBT has the capacity to reduce emotional disorders (Banks & Zions, 2009). Another related study using rational emotive behavior therapy reported significant reduction in managing stress and irrational beliefs among special education teachers in Nigerian elementary schools (Onuigbo et al., 2018). Further studies (Bistamin, et al., 2015 & Adomeh, 2006) revealed that structured group counseling using REBT principles were found to be effective in the treatment of individuals with psychological problems such as anxiety and suicidal crisis. Another recent related study on the management of PTSD among teachers in security challenged areas found that REBT significantly minimized emotional related problems of teachers than those in the control group (Diara et al., 2023). Again, a study on effect of counselling strategies on prevention of suicidal thoughts among internally displaced persons, however, revealed that REBT was effective in preventing suicidal thoughts among internally displaced persons (Mukhtar & Buhari, 2020; Abashi & Onyinwui, 2023).

On the studies related to Systematic desensitization therapy (SDT), Agus, Raras and Josetta (2020) conducted a study on effect of Systematic Desensitization for Decreasing of Anxiety in Individual with Specific Phobia and the results showed a decrease in anxiety scores in individuals with specific phobias after being given systematic desensitization therapy. This means that SDT is effective in reducing mental related problems including anxiety crisis affecting individuals. Similarly, Kolodi, Ejiro, Ebebuwa-Okoh & Ugoji (2024) investigated the effect of adopting systematic desensitization therapy on the social anxiety of senior secondary school adolescents. The result of the study indicated that there was a significant difference between the pretest and post-test social anxiety meant scores of students treated with systematic desensitization therapy and those in the control group. Furthermore, Caparons, Sosa and Avero (2008) conducted a study applying Systematic Desensitization in the treatment of fear of flying. The result portrayed significant effects in both the interview and self-re-enforced valuables. The researchers concluded that the

treatment was effective in reducing fear of flying. A related study on effect of counselling strategies on prevention of suicidal thoughts among internally displaced persons revealed that a therapy known as systematic desensitization was effective in preventing suicidal thoughts among internally displaced persons (Abashi & Onyinwi, 2023).

Despite the different studies supporting the effectiveness of REBT and SDT in reducing behavioural and cognitive induced problems affecting various persons across the world, this study aimed at investigating on if psychological strategies intervention can help in reducing suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience. Meanwhile, to the best knowledge of the researchers, REBT and SDT have not been vividly used in reducing suicidal thoughts among students with sexual harassment and victimization experience in Federal Universities in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. With this in mind, this study is still not sure. Hence, the need for this presents research. The researchers therefore hypothesized that there will be a significant result of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) and Systematic Desensitization Therapy (SDT) in reducing students with sexual harassment and victimization experience compared to the control group.

### **Research Questions**

Two research questions guided the study:

- 1 What is the effect of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) on reduction of suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience in experimental group and those in control group?
- 2 What is the effect of Systematic desensitization therapy (SDT) on reduction of suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience in experimental group and those in control group?

### **Hypotheses:**

Two null hypotheses which were tested at 0.05 levels of significance guided the study:

H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant difference in the pre-test and post-test scores on reduction of suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience who are exposed to experimental group (REBT) and those in control group.

H<sub>02</sub>: There is no significant difference in the pre-test and post-test scores on reduction of suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience who are exposed to experimental group (SDT) and those in control group.

### **Method**

This study used quasi- experimental design to investigate on reducing suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Specific design for this study was pre-test- post-test non-equivalent control group design with the experimental group adopting REBT and SDT interventions and the control group using conventional strategy.

The design is represented thus:

Groups	Pre-test	Treatment	Post-test
Experimental group	O <sub>1</sub>	X <sub>1</sub>	O <sub>2</sub>
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Control group	O <sub>1</sub>	---	O <sub>2</sub>

The symbols are explained thus:

O<sub>1</sub> = Pre-test administered to experimental and control groups respectively.

X<sub>1</sub> = Treatment given to experimental group by using digital-based synthetic phonics instruction.

O<sub>2</sub> = Post-test administered to the experimental and control groups.

-- = Conventional method was used for the control group.

The justification of this design is acceptable because there was no randomization of the subjects.

The area of the study was in Federal Universities in Ebonyi State of Nigeria. The choice of the area of study was based on reported cases of sexual harassment and victimization in most of the higher institutions in Nigeria. The population comprised all the students with likely sexual harassment and victimization experience in Federal Universities in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

The students with sexual harassment and victimization experience were identified using adapted sexual harassment and victimization scale based on the inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were in line with the adapted Instrument to Identify students with sexual harassment experience (Gilliatt Hanois Falbo Neto et al, 2022). For the students who indicated no sexual harassment experience were excluded in the sample. The sample size of students identified with sexual harassment experience was 120.

The sample size of identified students with sexual harassment and victimization experience was based on inclusion criteria to set the stage for who can participate in the study (Hornberger & Rangu, 2020). For the inclusion criteria, every participant must be at Nigerian university level, the consent of students must be acknowledged before the intervention, the students must be available for the intervention without interference. The students must have been sexually harassed and victimized mostly with in the university environment. However, those without this inclusion criteria mentioned above were excluded from participating in the study.

The instrument Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation for the study was subjected to contents and construct validity to be certain of accuracy and suitability in achieving the expected research outputs. Based on the data expected to generate through field trial, the instrument was modified accordingly. Suicidal thoughts Scale (STC) and Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation (Beck et al., 1991& Reynolds, 1988) were integrated and adapted for the study with each item required a response to a 5-point rating scale ranging from 0 ('Not at all') to 4 ('Daily or more'). Scores ranged from 0 to 24 with higher scores indicating greater suicidal ideation. Accordingly, students are instructed to tick the scale ranging from 0-4 so as to ascertain their categories of suicidal thoughts including low, moderate and severe. In

this study, students with high symptom severity in the BSI is suffering from suicidal thoughts. The researchers complied with the ethical standard specifications of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2016) and the World Medical Association (2014). This implies that the study adhered to ethical principles, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. Data collected was analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer research questions while analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 probability level.

## RESULTS

**Table 1: mean and standard deviation effect of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) on reduction of suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience in experimental group and those in control group**

Groups	N	Pretest		Posttest		Mean $\bar{x}$ loss	Mean $\bar{x}$ loss difference
		$\bar{x}$	Std	$\bar{x}$	Std		
Experiment (REBT) Group	66	59.81	4.28	11.15	3.54	-38.66	-23.41
Control Group	54	58.44	4.36	43.19	3.75	-15.25	

Data in table 1 shows the pre-test mean and standard deviation scores ( $\bar{x}$  =59.81; SD=4.28) of the experiment group and post-test mean and standard deviation scores ( $\bar{x}$  = 11.15; SD= 3.54) of the same group with mean loss of -38.66. Also, the pre-test mean and standard deviation scores ( $\bar{x}$  =58.44; SD=4.36) of the control group and post-test mean and standard deviation scores ( $\bar{x}$  =43.19; SD=3.75) of the same group with mean loss of -15.25. The standard deviation scores which ranged from 3.54 to 4.36 for the experimental and 3.75 to 4.36 for the control groups show that their responses did not vary widely. Also, the mean  $\bar{x}$  loss difference of the two groups of -23.41 shows that Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) was effective in the reduction of suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience.

**Ho<sub>1</sub>:** There is no significant difference in the pre-test and post-test scores on reduction of suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience who are exposed to experimental group (REBT) and those in control group.

**Table 2: ANCOVA of the effect of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) on reduction of suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience in experimental group (REBT) and those in control group**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	21834.801 <sup>a</sup>	2	10917.400	1007.821	.000	.949
Intercept	2383.398	1	2383.398	220.019	.000	.669
Pretestinterest	280.231	1	280.231	25.869	.000	.192
Groups	21712.066	1	21712.066	2004.313	.000	.948
Error	1180.762	117	10.833			
Total	420357.000	120				
Corrected Total	23015.562	119				

a. R Squared = .949 (Adjusted R Squared = .948)

**0.2 (small effect), 0.5 (moderate effect) and 0.8 (large effect) (Cohen 1998)**

Data in table 2 shows  $F(2, 117) = 2004.313, p=0.00 < 0.05$  level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference in the pre-test and post-test scores of Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience who are exposed to Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) and those not exposed is significant. Therefore, there is a significant difference in the pre-test and post-test scores of Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience who are exposed to Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) and those not exposed.

**Table 3: mean and standard deviation of the effect of Systematic desensitization therapy (SDT) on reduction of suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience in experimental group and those in control group**

Groups	N	Pretest		Posttest		Mean $\bar{x}$ loss	Mean $\bar{x}$ loss difference
		$\bar{x}$	Std	$\bar{x}$	Std		
Experiment (STD) Group	66	47.21	5.20	10.10	3.50	-37.11	-31.80
Control Group	54	48.10	7.11	42.79	3.05	-5.31	

Data in table 3 shows the pre-test mean and standard deviation scores ( $\bar{x} = 47.21; SD=5.20$ ) of the experiment group and post-test mean and standard deviation scores ( $\bar{x} = 10.10; SD=3.50$ ) of the same group with mean loss of -37.11. Also, the pre-test mean and standard deviation scores ( $\bar{x} = 48.10; SD=7.11$ ) of the control group and post-test mean and standard deviation scores ( $\bar{x} = 42.79; SD=3.05$ ) of the same group with mean loss of -5.31. The standard deviation scores which ranged from 5.20 to 3.50 for the experimental and 7.11 to 3.05 for the control groups show that their responses did not vary widely. Also, the mean  $\bar{x}$  loss difference of the two groups of -31.80 shows that Systematic desensitization therapy (SDT) was effective in the reduction of suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience.

**Table 4: ANCOVA of the effect of Systematic desensitization therapy (SDT) on reduction of suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience who are exposed to experimental group (SDT) and those in control group**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	4548.907 <sup>a</sup>	2	2274.454	853.792	.000	.940
Intercept	1509.783	1	1509.783	566.748	.000	.839
Pretest	.003	1	.003	.001	.975	.000
Groups	3022.717	1	3022.717	1134.678	.000	.912
Error	290.370	117	2.664			
Total	28127.000	120				
Corrected Total	4839.277	119				

a. R Squared = .940 (Adjusted R Squared = .939)

**0.2 (small effect), 0.5 (moderate effect) and 0.8 (large effect) (Cohen 1998)**

Data in table 2 shows  $F(2, 117) = 1134.678, p=0.00 < 0.05$  level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference in the pre-test and post-test scores of Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience who are exposed to Systematic desensitization therapy (SDT) and those not exposed is significant. Therefore, there is a significant difference in the pre-test and post-test scores of Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience who are exposed to Systematic desensitization therapy (SDT) and those not exposed.

## DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the study revealed that the rational emotional behavioural therapy (REBT) was effective psychological therapy which significantly reduced suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience. In other words, REBT was more effective than the conventional approach in addressing suicidal thoughts of students. The significant result of this study has proven that the REBT as an effective intervention for reducing mental related challenges including suicidal thoughts affecting the well-being of students in Nigeria Universities especially those of them in Ebonyi State with sexual harassment and victimization experience has all it takes to dispute irrational thoughts affecting individuals. The point is that using REBT as an effective psychological intervention in reducing suicidal thoughts of students is very commendable in that emotional issues such as feeling hopelessness, thinking about or planning on how to commit suicide mostly in the school related environment were disputed therefore, making them free to live a healthier lifestyle. This positive impact of REBT in reducing suicidal thoughts of students with sexual harassment and victimization experience is in line with the

previous related evidence-based studies which revealed that REBT has been a useful intervention tool for reducing/treating psychological related problems such as stress and irrational beliefs among special education teachers in Nigerian elementary schools (Onuigbo et al., 2018). It is also necessary to acknowledge that there have been a number of previous studies that have demonstrated the effectiveness of structured group counseling using REBT in treatment of individuals with psychological problems such as anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation which is in tandem with the current study (Bistamin, et al., 2015; Adomeh, 2006; Banks & Zionts, 2009; Mukhtar&Buhari, 2020; Saleh et al., 2022 & Abashi & Onyinvwi, 2023). This present study further agrees with another related study on the management of PTSD among teachers in security challenged areas which found that REBT significantly minimized emotional related problems including PTSD of teachers than those in the control group (Diara et al., 2023).

On the other hand, findings show that systematic desensitization therapy (SDT) was more effective in reducing suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience. This was possible because systematic desensitization is based on learning and behavioral change principles. Through repeated exposures and relaxation techniques, students with suicidal thoughts learn to identify anxiety-provoking events with relaxation rather than terror, leading to a positive shift in behavior and emotional reaction. This therapy coincides with recent studies, such as those of Obi et al. (2019), Nwobodo et al. (2022), and Ogugua (2016) which revealed that exposure treatment frequently exposes individuals to feared or anxiety-inducing stimuli in a controlled and gradual manner. Over time, individuals undergoing systematic desensitization learn to properly handle social anxiety, resulting in decreased conditioned fear responses and greater confidence which is necessary in overcoming suicidal thoughts. However, the findings of this study is line with Kolodi, Ejiro, Ebebuwa-Okoh & Ugoji (2024) who investigated on the effect of adopting systematic desensitization therapy on the social anxiety of senior secondary school adolescents. The result of the study indicated that there was a significant difference between the pretest and post-test social anxiety mean scores of students treated with systematic desensitization therapy and those in the control group. Again, Caparons, Sosa and Avero (2008) conducted a study applying Systematic Desensitization in the treatment of fear of flying. The result portrayed significant effects in both the interview and self-re-enforced valuables. The researchers concluded that the treatment was effective in reducing fear of flying. Agreeing with this study, a related study on effect of counselling strategies on prevention of suicidal thoughts among internally displaced persons however revealed that a therapy known as systematic desensitization was effective in preventing suicidal thoughts among internally displaced persons (Abashi & Onyinvwi, 2023).

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers concluded that after the post-treatment/interventions, using the intervention of rational emotional behavioural therapy (REBT) and Systematic Desensitization Therapy (SDT) were more effective in reducing suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience. In other words, the strengths of REBT and SDT in reducing suicidal

thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience were significantly effective.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Given that REBT and SDT in reducing suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience were significantly effective, the researchers recommended that psychologists and other school counsellors should employ the services of REBT and SDT and their principles in reducing suicidal thoughts among Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience mostly in Ebonyi State. However, suicidal thoughts of Nigerian university students with sexual harassment and victimization experience need to be assisted to seek for intervention through the principles of REBT and SDT since they have been empirically proven to be significant in reducing mental related issues affecting human beings. Curriculum designers can go a long way in embracing the principles of REBT and SDT towards re-structuring or innovate a transformative curriculum that reduces the menace of suicide crisis in Nigeria. In other words, understanding how to navigate suicidal thoughts deserves to be mainstreamed into the academic curriculum, particularly for reducing vulnerability among students and increasing access to restorative care of victims.

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