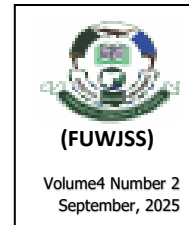


ORPHAN-HOOD AND IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN WUKARI LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, TARABA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The incidence of orphan-hood is increasing in Wukari Local Government Area and this is impacting the process of identity formation and self-concept development in affected children. The Symbolic Interactionist Theory forms the theoretical lens through which analyses in this paper occurred. The theory emphasized the interplay between individual characteristics, meanings derived, and other societal factors involved in shaping self-image. Data for the paper emerged from the sample size of 346 respondents who responded to a structured questionnaire. Results showed that orphaned children in Wukari exhibit lower self-esteem, feelings of social isolation, and less optimistic future aspirations compared to their non-orphaned counterparts. The paper concludes that cultural practices surrounding orphan-hood, such as: caregiver relationships and societal stigma do influence the self-perceptions and coping mechanisms of orphans in Wukari Local Government Area. The paper recommends that there is need for developing culturally informed programmes to address stigma associated with orphan-hood and implement mentorship initiatives connecting orphaned children with positive role models in Wukari Local Government Area.

Keywords: Children, identity formation, orphan-hood, self-concept

Introduction

Orphan-hood is ostensibly a global issue that affects millions of children. This means that orphan-hood seemingly cuts over national borders, cultural settings, and socioeconomic divides to present a global issue that is keenly felt all around the world. At its root, orphan-hood is the death of one or both parents, which places kids in a special position of vulnerability and fortitude. When statistics that illustrate the substantial influence it has on young lives are taken into account, the seriousness of this global problem becomes glaringly obvious. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2021), which is in charge of protecting children's rights, offers a thorough analysis of the scope of orphan-hood. The startling scale of this epidemic was illustrated by the forecast that 142 million children will be orphaned worldwide in 2020 alone. But the trajectory forecasted by UNICEF reveals

a gloomy truth: by 2030, this number is expected to rise to 153 million. Out of these, 63 million are orphaned due to the death of one or both parents. This prediction represents not just an increase in numbers but also the unfolding of millions of individual stories, each characterized by the absence of parental guidance and the difficulties it brings about.

The emotional well-being of orphaned children is a significant aspect of their lived experiences. Research has shown that orphaned children are at a higher risk of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) compared to their non-orphaned peers (UNICEF, 2015). The loss of parental care and support can lead to feelings of grief, loneliness, and abandonment. Additionally, factors such as the circumstances surrounding the loss of parents, exposure to violence or trauma, and disrupted attachment relationships can compound their emotional distress (Save the Children, 2018). The journey of orphaned children, though unique to each individual, is united by the thread of vulnerability that emerges from the loss of parental figures. As these children traverse the complex landscape of their lives, they often find themselves grappling with an array of challenges that cast a shadow on their growth and well-being. These challenges, emanating from their fragile position, span emotional, psychological, and socio-economic dimensions, painting a vivid picture of the hurdles they face. The absence of the nurturing presence that parents provide engenders a void that reverberates in their hearts. Smith et al. (2021) shed light on the emotional complexities inherent in this journey, underscoring the depth of emotional distress these children endure. The stark reality of navigating life without the guiding presence of parents cultivates a fertile ground for psychological turbulence. Identity crises, stemming from questions about belonging and one's place in the world, emerge as a significant challenge. The void left by parents magnifies the search for identity, pushing these children to seek a sense of self amidst a sea of uncertainty.

Across the African continent, the increasing number of orphaned children presents a pressing societal concern that demands attention and understanding. Recent statistics reveal a significant rise in the population of orphaned children, necessitating a comprehensive exploration of their lived experiences. According to UNICEF, the number of orphaned children in sub-Saharan Africa has surged, reaching a staggering 65 million in 2021 (UNICEF, 2021). This unprecedented increase is driven by factors such as conflict, HIV/AIDS, and other health-related crises. The rising numbers of orphaned children reflect a critical concern that requires deeper understanding to inform effective interventions. Asante et al. (2021) conducted a study in Ghana which revealed that the emotional toll of orphanhood is amplified with the growing numbers, as children face challenges in

adapting to new family dynamics and societal perceptions. The emotional impact is compounded by the absence of parental figures who provide comfort and guidance. The expanding population of orphaned children in Africa underscores socio-economic disparities that hinder their access to essential resources. Recent studies highlight the vulnerability of these children to poverty, limited access to education, and compromised healthcare (Mazurana et al., 2020).

Nigeria is one of the countries most affected by orphan-hood. According to the National Population Commission of Nigeria, there are an estimated 10.5 million orphaned children in Nigeria. Of these, 6.5 million are orphaned due to the death of both parents, and 4 million are orphaned due to other factors poverty, depression, rejection etc. which forces parents to either give up their children for adoption or abandon their babies. The lived experiences of orphaned children in Nigeria are often characterized by poverty, neglect, and abuse. Many orphaned children are forced to work in order to support themselves and their siblings, and they often lack access to education and healthcare. As a result, they are more likely to experience poor health, malnutrition, and social exclusion.

The expected increase in the number of orphaned children according to UNICEF (2021) emphasizes how urgent it is to solve this problem on both a global and local scale. This phenomena, which transcends national boundaries, has effects on societies, communities, and legal systems. It is crucial to recognize the revolutionary force of these data as society prepares to enter a new decade. Behind every number is a child who deserves the chance to grow, to be loved, and to have access to the resources required for a respectable life. Orphaned children often face several challenges which may include social stigma and discrimination and this can impact their social integration and overall well-being. In many societies, orphan-hood is associated with negative stereotypes, leading to social exclusion and marginalization. These children may be subjected to prejudice, ridicule, and mistreatment due to their status as orphans. Furthermore, orphaned children are often at a higher risk of poverty and economic vulnerability due to the loss of parental financial support. The absence of adequate resources can limit their access to basic necessities such as food, shelter, and healthcare. Poverty exacerbates other challenges they face, including limited access to education and healthcare services.

The experiences of orphaned children in Wukari LGA are often characterized by poverty, neglect, and abuse. Many orphaned children are forced to work in order to support themselves and their siblings, and they often lack access to education and healthcare. As a result, they are more likely to experience poor health, malnutrition, and social exclusion. There are a number of factors that contribute to orphan-hood in Nigeria such as

HIV/AIDS, conflict, poverty etc. HIV/AIDS is a major cause of orphan-hood in Nigeria. According to the 2018 NDHS, an estimated 1.4 million children in Nigeria have lost at least one parent to HIV/AIDS. Conflict on the other hand is another major cause of orphan-hood in Nigeria. The Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast of the country, as well as ethno-religious crisis, Tiv/Jukun crisis, etc has displaced millions of people, many of whom have lost their parents. Poverty is a major risk factor for orphan-hood. Children from poor families are more likely to be orphaned due to factors such as illness, malnutrition, and accidents.

Orphans often face disruptions in their living arrangements, which can result in frequent relocations, changes in caregivers, or even displacement. This instability can affect their sense of security, stability, and belonging. The one of major challenges faced by orphaned children may include economic hardship as often times orphaned children are left without any financial support. The loss of parental financial support often plunges them into economic hardship, limiting their access to basic necessities such as food, healthcare, and clothing. Poverty exacerbates other challenges they face, including limited access to education and social services (Uzoka & Ogunro, 2019). In terms of education, orphaned children are more likely to drop out of school than their non-orphaned peers. This is due to a number of factors, including financial constraints, lack of parental support, and social stigma. The study is guided by the following objectives: identify the challenges and obstacles that orphaned children face in Wukari Local Government Area, Taraba State and explore the coping mechanisms that orphaned children use to deal with the challenges they face in Wukari Local Government Area, Taraba State.

Conceptualizing Orphanhood

Orphan is a term used to describe a child who has lost one or both parents. The term is often used interchangeably with abandoned or neglected children, but there are important distinctions between these terms. On a general note, orphaned children refer to those who have lost their parents through death. The phrase "orphaned children" is a complicated one. However, there are definitions offered by UNICEF, WHO, and the CDC. Orphaned children refer to minors who have lost one or both parents due to death, abandonment, or other circumstances. They are left without the care and support typically provided by parents, which can have significant implications for their well-being and development (UNICEF, 2015).

UNICEF (2021) defines an orphaned child as a person under the age of 18 who has lost one or both parents. This definition is aligned with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a crucial international human rights treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989. The

Convention recognizes the inherent vulnerability of orphaned children and emphasizes the need for special protection, care, and support to ensure their rights are upheld and safeguarded. The Convention on the Rights of the Child serves as a foundational framework for promoting the well-being of all children, including orphaned children. The Convention states that all children have the right to parental care, and that governments should take measures to ensure that children who have lost their parents have access to alternative care. It outlines a comprehensive set of rights, such as the right to education, healthcare, identity, and family reunification. UNICEF's definition of an orphaned child is rooted in this framework and seeks to protect and promote the rights and welfare of this vulnerable population.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2011), an orphaned child is a person under the age of 18 who has lost one or both parents to any cause, including death, abandonment, or separation. This definition is based on the WHO's 2011 report on orphan-hood, which sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the global orphan crisis and the diverse circumstances leading to parental loss. The WHO definition acknowledges the complexity of orphan-hood by covering all causes of parental loss. Children who are orphaned may suffer parental loss for a variety of reasons, including disease epidemics, military wars, natural disasters, or financial challenges. This inclusive definition emphasizes the need for interventions that can be inclusive and flexible in order to meet the unique problems that orphaned children confront in various environments. The report found that there were an estimated 140 million orphaned children worldwide in 2010, the majority of whom were living in sub-Saharan Africa. The report also found that orphaned children are more likely to be poor, to be out of school, and to experience violence and abuse.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2017) defines an orphaned child as a person under the age of 18 who has lost one or both parents to death. This definition is based on the CDC's 2017 report on orphan-hood in the United States, which aimed to gather essential data on orphaned and vulnerable children in the country. The CDC's definition specifically focuses on parental loss resulting from death, acknowledging that the loss of one or both parents can significantly impact a child's well-being and development. By narrowing the scope to parental death, this definition facilitates targeted research, policies, and programs to address the specific needs and support systems required for orphaned children in the United States. This CDC report found that there were an estimated 400,000 orphaned children in the United States in 2016. The report also found that orphaned children are more likely to be poor, to be in foster care, and to experience mental health problems.

Tarekegn and Mitiku (2022) established that the experiences encompass the totality of an individual's subjective reality, which is shaped by their perceptions, emotions, and actions in the context of their daily lives. It acknowledges that each person's experience is unique and influenced by various factors such as culture, environment, and personal history. In the specific context of orphaned children, lived experiences pertain to the personal journeys they undergo following the loss of their parents. It encompasses the challenges they face, the emotions they experience, and the actions they take to navigate their circumstances. These experiences are deeply influenced by the absence of parental guidance and support, which can have significant psychological, social, and practical implications for the children.

The experiences of orphaned children in Wukari involve a range of emotions, including grief, sadness, confusion, and resilience. They may struggle to make sense of their loss and grapple with feelings of abandonment or loneliness. At the same time, they may display remarkable strength and resilience as they adapt to new family arrangements, communities, or support systems. Moreover, the lived experiences of orphaned children are not limited to their emotional realm but also encompass practical challenges and opportunities. They may encounter difficulties in accessing education, healthcare, and basic necessities due to the loss of parental resources and support. Conversely, they may find support systems, whether through extended family, community organizations, or government initiatives, that provide them with opportunities for growth, education, and a sense of belonging.

Challenges and Obstacles of Orphaned Children in Nigeria

Numerous challenges and barriers that orphaned children must overcome have a negative effect on their development and well-being. These difficulties, which have emotional, social, educational, and economic elements, result from the lack of parental supervision. In order to enhance the lives of orphaned children, it is essential to comprehend these difficulties and build tailored treatments and support networks.

1. **Emotional Challenges:** As orphaned children deal with the deep effects of parental mortality, the loss of parents can cause them great emotional suffering. The absence of their primary caregivers may cause these kids to feel a wide range of complicated emotions, including grief, anxiety, and a profound sense of abandonment, according to Skinner et al. (2019). Their mental health and general well-being may suffer if they have trouble coping with these feelings. Grief is a primary emotional response to parental loss. Their mental wellbeing may be impacted by the overpowering sense of loss and despair, making it difficult for them

to engage in regular daily activities or develop healthy relationships. Orphaned children may experience a protracted grieving process as they come to terms with the loss of their parents (Masten et al., 2020). Grief can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including sadness, anger, guilt, and loneliness. Children who are grieving may also have difficulty sleeping, eating, and concentrating.

Anxiety is yet another common emotional difficulty orphaned children have. Their anxiety levels may be made worse by the uncertainties in their future, such as possible changes to their living situation or a prospective breakup with their remaining family members (Shumba et al., 2022). Anxiety can be triggered by the fear of abandonment, the uncertainty of the future, or the memories of the parent's death. Children who are anxious may be restless, irritable, or have difficulty sleeping. They may also have trouble concentrating and may be afraid to go to school or be around other children. Their mental health may be affected by this increased anxiety and fear, which can upset their emotional balance.

Sense of abandonment: This feeling can be caused by the actual loss of the parent, or it can be a result of the child's perception that they have been abandoned. Children who feel abandoned may feel like they are not loved or cared for, and they may have difficulty trusting others. Orphaned children frequently feel abandoned (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2021) as a common emotional experience. They could still feel their parents' absence even if they are taken care of by guardians or extended family. Insecurity in one's emotions and difficulty making new bonds might result from feeling abandoned and uncared for.

2. **Social Stigma:** Orphaned children often encounter social stigma and discrimination as a consequence of their vulnerable status. The loss of parents can lead to negative perceptions and attitudes from peers and members of the community, resulting in feelings of being different, marginalized, and excluded (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2017). Stereotypes, prejudices, and cultural assumptions about orphan-hood contribute to social stigma. Orphaned children could unjustly be connected to unfavorable preconceptions, such as being less lucky, weak, or even carriers of bad luck. They may be subjected to discrimination and social exclusion as a result of these stigmatizing ideas, which may harm their relationships with others and self-esteem. Immediately upon the death of a parent, particularly during times of grieving or at funeral services, the stigmatization process can start. Because of the stigma around discussing parental loss, orphaned children may receive different treatment or be ignored. Feelings of guilt, embarrassment, or the burden of others can result from such therapy.

Stigmatization can also occur in educational settings, impacting the educational experiences of orphaned children. Peers may shun them, which can cause social isolation and make it difficult to build lasting relationships. In addition to making orphaned children feel more vulnerable and powerless, discrimination fears may deter them from asking for assistance or support. Stigma at the level of the community may also have an impact on the overall social support offered to orphaned children. It may discourage prospective guardians or carers from stepping forward to help or take on the duty of looking after them. Therefore, it may be difficult for orphaned children to find secure and supportive situations where they can develop and flourish.

3. **Educational Barriers:** Orphaned children confront enormous barriers to receiving a high-quality education, which impedes their academic progress and reduces their chances for personal development and growth. These impediments, as underlined by Olapeju et al. (2020), cover a range of issues, such as financial limitations, a lack of educational resources, and restricted access to schools. Due to their precarious situation, orphaned children may occasionally face stigma or discrimination at school (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2021). There may be prejudice or marginalization caused by teachers' or peers' assumptions about being an orphan. Their academic achievement may be hampered by such discrimination, which can foster a hostile learning environment. For orphaned children, a major educational hurdle is a lack of financial resources. Parents' financial support for school costs, uniforms, books, and other educational demands is sometimes lost when parents pass away. The continuity of their education may be jeopardized if orphaned children are compelled to leave school or attend class infrequently due to a lack of financial support. According to UNICEF (2018), orphaned children may struggle to access basic educational resources such learning materials, textbooks, and technology. Their capacity to participate in the learning process successfully and their academic success may be hindered by a lack of these resources. According to Skinner et al. (2019), many orphaned children reside in impoverished or isolated places where access to schools is scarce. They could have to travel a great distance, which is risky and disheartening, because there may not be any close schools. Their inability to easily reach schools may cause attendance issues and prevent them from taking part in class. Orphaned children may also experience psychosocial difficulties that compromise their academic performance. The emotional pain and grief brought on by parental death might make it difficult to focus, learn, and participate in class (Skinner et al., 2019). Lack of therapy and emotional support may make these problems worse and have an adverse effect on

their academic achievement. For orphaned children from minority linguistic or racial groups, language challenges may be an additional hurdle to their education. Their ability to grasp and communicate effectively may suffer if the language of instruction is different from their home tongue, which could have an impact on their overall academic achievement.

4. **Health and Nutrition:** Because they no longer have their parents' support, orphaned children are more likely to experience health problems and nutritional deficiencies. They also have less access to quality nutrition and healthcare. In the absence of parents, children may have lessened awareness of health-related issues and restricted access to healthcare facilities, which could result in unresolved health issues (United Nations, 2018). Children who have lost their parents may find it difficult to maintain healthy lives and may not have access to important preventative healthcare measures. Infections, malnutrition, and other health issues may therefore be more likely to affect them. Parents' lack of emotional support can have an effect on their children's mental health, including stress-related disorders and emotional problems. In orphaned children's households, access to nourishing food may also be hampered, particularly if they are experiencing financial difficulties (Nkwake et al., 2019). Their growth and development depend on proper nutrition, and inadequate nutrient intake can impede their physical and cognitive progress, which can impair their capacity to function well in school and participate in daily activities.
5. **Economic Difficulties:** For children who are orphans, financial difficulties may be brought on by the loss of parents. They may become financially vulnerable and impoverished if their parents' financial security and protection are lost. According to Nkwake et al. (2019), children may struggle to meet basic requirements including food, shelter, and education if their parents' income disappears overnight. Especially in households with minimal financial resources, orphaned children may experience difficulties accessing opportunities and financial resources. It may be difficult for them to invest in education and skill development or plan for the future if they don't receive financial advice from their parents. Their vulnerability may be further heightened by poverty and restricted access to resources, which may further limit their options in life. Economic pressures may put them at risk for exploitation, underage labor, and early marriage.
6. **Family Instability:** After losing their parents, orphaned children frequently endure interruptions in their family relationships. They might be placed in institutional care, with caretakers, or with extended relatives, which might not necessarily provide a secure and supportive

environment (Save the Children, 2021). For orphaned children, the lack of parental figures may translate into a dearth of appropriate mentors and role models. This may make it difficult for them to develop personally and may make learning valuable morals and values more difficult.

For orphaned children, dealing with these intense feelings can be very difficult. They might not be emotionally mature enough to comprehend and deal with their sadness, and they might not have the necessary support to handle their worry and sense of abandonment. Without the proper support networks, such children can find it difficult to successfully express their feelings, which could result in psychological and behavioral problems, as established by Skinner et al. (2019). Numerous adverse effects, such as mental health issues, subpar academic performance, and social isolation, may result from this.

Coping Mechanisms of Orphaned Children employ to deal with Challenges of Life

Orphaned children face a multitude of challenges and emotional distress following the loss of their parents. In response to these difficulties, they employ various coping mechanisms to navigate their circumstances and maintain a sense of emotional well-being. These coping strategies can vary based on individual personality traits, cultural influences, and available support systems. Understanding the coping mechanisms that orphaned children employ is crucial for designing effective interventions and providing appropriate support to promote their resilience and overall well-being.

Seeking Social Support: One common coping mechanism adopted by orphaned children is seeking social support from peers, extended family members, or caregivers (Skinner et al., 2019). Connecting with others who have experienced similar losses can provide a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation. Supportive relationships can offer comfort and understanding, helping orphaned children process their emotions and experiences.

Engaging in Expressive Activities: Creative outlets, such as art, music, or writing, serve as powerful coping mechanisms for orphaned children (Masten et al., 2020). Engaging in expressive activities allows them to express and release their emotions in a non-verbal manner. These activities can provide a sense of catharsis and contribute to emotional healing.

Developing Resilience: Orphaned children may develop resilience as a coping mechanism to adapt to challenging circumstances (Makame et al., 2020). Resilience involves the ability to bounce back from adversity and maintain a positive outlook despite hardships. Developing resilience enables

them to build a sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to face life's challenges.

Fostering Religious or Spiritual Beliefs: For some orphaned children, religious or spiritual beliefs serve as a coping mechanism to find solace and meaning in the face of parental loss (Shumba et al., 2022). Engaging in religious practices or rituals can provide a sense of comfort and guidance during times of emotional distress.

Seeking Professional Counseling: Some orphaned children may benefit from professional counseling to cope with their emotional challenges (Skinner et al., 2019). Counseling sessions provide a safe space for them to discuss their feelings, fears, and anxieties with a trained therapist. These sessions can equip them with coping strategies and emotional regulation skills.

Maintaining Daily Routines: Maintaining daily routines and engaging in regular activities can provide a sense of stability and predictability for orphaned children (Shumba et al., 2022). Routines offer a sense of structure during times of upheaval and can help reduce feelings of chaos and uncertainty.

Engaging in Physical Activities: Physical activities, such as sports or exercise, can be a constructive way for orphaned children to cope with stress and emotional challenges (Masten et al., 2020). Physical activity releases endorphins, which can improve mood and provide a positive outlet for their emotions.

Cognitive Coping Strategies: Orphaned children may employ cognitive coping strategies, such as reframing negative thoughts or practicing positive self-talk, to manage stress and challenges (Shumba et al., 2022). These strategies can help them develop a more optimistic outlook and enhance their ability to cope with difficult situations.

Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionist Theory

Symbolic interactionism is a micro-sociological theory that emerged in the early 20th century. It was developed by George Herbert Mead, Charles Horton Cooley, and Herbert Blumer. Mead argued that humans are fundamentally social creatures who learn to interact with others through a process of symbolic communication. He believed that the self is not a fixed entity, but is constantly being created and recreated through our interactions with others. Cooley proposed the concept of the looking-glass self, which is the idea that we develop our self-concept based on how we think others see us. He argued that our self-image is shaped by the reflected appraisals of others. Blumer further developed symbolic interactionism by focusing on the importance of symbols in human interaction. He argued that symbols are the building blocks of social reality and that they play a central role in the

way we make sense of the world. Assumptions of symbolic interactionism is based on the following:

People as Active Agents: Symbolic interactionism posits that individuals are not passive recipients of social reality but are active agents who actively participate in creating and shaping the world around them. This means that they are not simply victims of their circumstances, but they have the power to interpret and respond to their circumstances in a way that shapes their own reality. In the context of orphaned children, this means that they are not simply helpless victims of their loss. They are able to make sense of their loss and develop new identities through their interactions with others. They can also take steps to improve their situation, such as seeking out support from caregivers, family members, or friends.

Meaning are created through interaction: Symbolic interactionism also posits that meaning is not inherent in objects or events, but it is created and negotiated through social interaction. This means that the meaning of the death of a parent for an orphaned child is not something that is fixed or predetermined. It is something that is constantly being created and negotiated through their interactions with others. For example, the orphaned child may come to understand the death of their parent as a tragedy, a blessing, or something else entirely, depending on their interactions with their caregivers, peers, and the broader society. The emotional impact and implications of the loss will also be shaped by these interactions.

Role of Symbols: Symbols are used to create and communicate meaning: Symbols are pivotal in human interaction. They can be words, gestures, objects, or any element that carries shared meanings within a particular cultural context. For orphaned children, the concept of "parent" itself is a symbolic construct that encompasses emotional attachment, guidance, and care. The absence of a parent shifts the symbolism associated with this role, influencing their perceptions and interactions. For example, an orphaned child may come to see their caregiver as a "mother" or "father" figure, even if they are not biologically related. This is because the symbols associated with these roles are still present in their interactions with their caregiver.

Fluidity of the Self as the self is created social interaction: The self, rather than being a fixed entity, is continuously shaped and reshaped through interactions with others. This means that the orphaned child's self-concept evolves as they interact with caregivers, family members, and peers. Their sense of identity adapts to new roles and relationships emerging from the loss, such as their interaction with caregivers taking on parental roles. For example, an orphaned child may initially see themselves as a victim of their circumstances. However, as they interact with others and begin to take on new roles, their self-concept may shift to one of resilience or strength.

Notable strengths of the theory has aided its longevity; Symbolic interactionism is a micro sociological theory, which means that it focuses on the individual level of analysis, how individuals interact with each other and how they create meaning in their lives. Symbolic interactionism is a dynamic theory, which means that it can be used to understand how people create and change their own meanings. This is because the theory recognizes that people are constantly interacting with each other and with their environment, and that these interactions can change the way they see the world. Symbolic interactionism is focuses on human agency which emphasizes the active role individuals play in constructing their reality and identity, acknowledging that orphaned children have the capacity to shape their own experiences. Critics have argued against symbolic interactionism because it primarily focuses on the micro-level interactions between individuals and the meanings they attach to symbols. This narrow focus can limit its ability to explain or predict large-scale social phenomena that involve complex interplays of structural factors, institutions, and collective behaviors.

In relation to the effects of orphan-hood on identity formation and Self-concept in Wukari, symbolic interactionism explains that Orphans experience a profound loss of significant symbols like parents, family, and kinship networks. These symbols usually anchor and shape an individual's sense of belonging, cultural heritage, and personal history. Their absence can create a void in the symbolic landscape, leading to identity confusion and feelings of alienation. Orphans in some communities, face stigmatization and negative labeling. Terms like "motherless" or "fatherless" carry harmful connotations, leading to social exclusion and discrimination. Interaction with negative symbols further damage the orphan's self-esteem and hinder their ability to form positive social identities. In the absence of parents, orphans often have to take on new roles and responsibilities within their families or communities. These new roles come with their own set of symbols and meanings that can shape their self-perceptions. For example, an orphan caring for younger siblings might develop a sense of responsibility and maturity, while another facing economic hardship might internalize negative beliefs about their capabilities. Symbolic interactionism recognizes that individuals are not passive recipients of meaning but active agents who interpret symbols and negotiate their identities. Orphans in Wukari can employ various strategies to resist negative labels and forge their own identities. They can seek positive role models, form supportive relationships, and engage in activities that affirm their strengths and sense of belonging. The theory explains how these children make sense of their loss and how they develop new identities such as by taking on new roles in their families or by joining new social groups.

Research Methodology

The study adopted the survey design where research questionnaire were designed to source for the socio data of respondents and also to address all the objectives of the study, therefore all data collected were presented and analyzed in that manner. The target population for the study are individuals between 15-40 years. 400 sample size was determined by Taro Yamane formula and 346 questionnaires were duly retrieved. The multistage sampling was employed for the study. The percentages are calculated as follows: $(\text{Frequency} \div \text{Total}) \times 100$ and generated by SPSS version 25.0.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents According to Sex

Sex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	135	39.0%
Female	211	61.0%
Total	346	100%
Age		
15-24 years	51	14.7%
25-34 years	119	34.4%
35-44 years	110	31.8%
45 and above	66	19.1%
Total	346	100%
Occupation		
Civil Servant	30	8.7%
Farming	65	18.8%
Student	141	40.7%
Business	110	31.8%
Total	346	100%
Marital Status		
Single	139	40.2%
Married	110	31.8%
Divorce/separated	80	23.1%
Widow	17	4.9%
Total	346	100%
Qualification		
Primary school	89	25.7%
Secondary school	118	34.1%
HND/University Degree	91	26.3%
Postgraduate	48	13.9%
Total	346	100%
Qualification		
Primary school	89	25.7%
Secondary school	118	34.1%
HND/University Degree	91	26.3%
Postgraduate	48	13.9%
Total	346	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

The figures on Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of males and females in a sample of 346 people. There are 135 males, which makes 39.0% of the sample. There are 211 females, which is 61.0% of the sample. The percentage of males is lower than the percentage of females. This suggests that there are more females in the sample than males.

The analysis of the Table shows the age distribution of respondents within the following categories "15-24 years," "25-34 years," "35-44 years," and "45 and above." The highest number of respondents that participated in this study falls in the "25-34 years" age category which is 119 (34.4%), followed by the "35-44 years" category 110 (31.8%), and the "45 and above" category 66 (19.1%). The least was the "15-24 years" category, 51 (14.7%). With the highest percentage of people in the 25-34 age categories suggests that it is a relatively young population that were readily available for the study.

On the Table, the frequency and percentage of people in different occupations in a sample of 346 people. The occupations are civil servant, farming, student, and business. The largest category consists of students 141 (40.7%), followed by respondents engaged in business activities 110 (31.8%), farming 65 (18.8%), and The smallest occupation is civil servants which is 30 (8.7%). This suggests that the population of respondents with a relatively high representation were the students.

The Table displays the marital status distribution among the respondents. The largest group is comprised of single respondents with a figure of 139 (40.2%), followed by married respondents 110 (31.8%), those who are divorced or separated were 80 (23.1%), and the least were the widows with a figure of 17 (4.9%). This implies that the study captured the experiences across various life stages and circumstances.

The Table further displays the figures of respondents within each qualification category. There were 89 respondents with a primary school qualification which is about 25.7%, the majority of 118 respondents with a secondary school qualification, constituting approximately 34.1%, 91 respondents with HND/University Degree, accounting for around 26.3% of the total sample, and 48 respondents with a postgraduate qualification, making up about 13.9% of the total sample. This implies the highest percentage of respondents are with secondary school qualification suggests that the respondents are relatively educated.

Challenges and Obstacles that Orphaned Children Face in Wukari

This section examines different challenges that orphaned children confront on their journey as the first objectives of this research study. The study seek to shed insight on the distinctive challenges that define the children's lives after parental death by carefully evaluating their experiences.

Table 2: Experience the Loss of Your Parent

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than a year ago	95	27.5%
1-2 years ago	113	32.7%
3-5 years ago	91	26.3%
More than 5 years ago	47	13.6%
Total	346	100%

Source: Field Survey 2023

Table 2 provides distribution of respondents' experienced parental loss. For the 'less than a year ago' categories, 95 respondents represents 27.5% of the total respondents. For the '1-2 years ago' category, 113 respondents, constituting 32.7%, the majority of the sample. For the '3-5 years ago' category, 91 respondents, accounts for 26.3% of the total of the sample. For the 'More than 5 years ago' category 47 respondents, making 13.6% of the total. This implies that majority of respondents only became orphans recently 1-2 years ago.

Table 3: Responses on where Respondents were raised

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Grandparents	108	31.2%
Extended family members	134	38.7%
Foster family	16	4.6%
Orphanage/home	33	9.5%
Others (Please specify)	55	15.9%
Total	346	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Table 3. displayed figure reveals that 108 respondents were cared for by grandparents, makes 31.2% of the total sample, 134 respondents were raised by extended family members, constituting 38.7% of the total sample, 16 respondents raised in foster families, accounting 4.6% of the total sample, 33 respondents in orphanage homes which makes 9.5% of the total sample and 55 respondents specified "Others" which makes 15.9% of the total sample. This indicates that those who ticked 'others' were raised alone by themselves or assisted by strangers or got entangled in a relationship to survive.

Table 4: Social Stigma or Discrimination faced due to Parental Loss

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	299	86.4%
No	47	13.6%
Total	346	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Table 4 provides insights into the availability of support systems for orphaned children and suggests implications for their overall well-being as it demonstrates that 299 respondents, which represents the majority 86.4% of the total sample, admits that they have experienced social stigma and discrimination. While 47 respondents, constituting only 13.6% of the total sample indicated that they have never experienced social stigma and discrimination probably because they became orphans as adults or as indicated they had access to support systems that did not place them in a position to face social stigma and discrimination. This highlights the importance of addressing gaps in support and building stronger networks for these vulnerable children.

Table 5: Effect of Loss of Your Parent(s) on Their Emotional Well-Being

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sadness	75	21.7%
Anger	66	19.1%
Confusion	136	39.3%
Other (Please specify)	69	19.9%
Total	346	100%

Source1: Field Survey, 2023

Table 5 provides a glimpse into the emotional coping mechanisms adopted by orphaned children, reflecting their emotional responses to the challenges they face. The presence of "Anger" as 66 respondents indicated represents the least (19.1%) of the total sample which suggests that some orphaned children channel their emotions into anger as a way to cope. This could be a natural response to the injustice or sense of loss they feel. The higher frequencies is "Confusion" with a figure of 136 represents (39.3%) and "Sadness" displays the second highest represents (21.7%), suggest that these emotions are more commonly experienced by orphaned children. This might reflect the complex emotional landscape they navigate due to their circumstances. The "Other" category as highlighted by 69 represents (19.9%) of the total sample and this suggests that orphaned children employ a range of additional coping mechanisms not specified in the given options. These could include strategies like seeking support,

Table 6: Effect of loss of your Parent(s) on Academic Performance

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Improved Performance	32	9.2%
No change	63	18.2%
Declined Performance	251	72.5%
Total	346	100%

Source: Field Survey 2023.

Table 6 demonstrates the emotional distress resulting from parental loss might contribute to the challenges faced by orphaned children in their academic journey. The high percentage (72.5%) of respondents picked the "Declined Performance" category suggests that the loss of parent(s) significantly impacts the academic achievements of orphaned children. This emphasizes the need for targeted interventions to address the academic challenges they face. 63 respondents that picked "No change" category, constitute 18.2% of the total sample. The presence of respondents that ticked "Improved Performance" category represents (9.2%) of the sample could indicate instances where orphaned children draw motivation from their circumstances to excel academically.

The Coping Mechanisms Orphaned Children Use to Deal with the Challenges

This section addresses the second objective of the study and it presents the coping mechanisms that orphaned children utilize to address the adversities they encounter. The journey of orphaned children is marked by a series of unique challenges arising from their vulnerable circumstances.

Table 7: How Respondents Cope with your Emotions Related to the Loss of a Parent

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Talking to friends/family	103	29.8%
Engaging in hobbies/activities	152	43.9%
Keeping emotions to myself	37	10.7%
Other (Please specify)	54	15.6%
Total	346	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Table 7 shows the results of a survey on how respondents cope with stress of loss of ones parents. The most common way to cope with stress is by talking to friends/family 103 (29.8%). This is followed by engaging in hobbies/activities category which represents 152 (43.9%) of the total sample. Then 54 respondents who picked "others" category represents 16.6% of the total sample "Keeping emotions to myself" category is the least common way to cope with such stress as 37 respondents indicated which makes (10.7%) of the sample. This implies that those orphans who picked "Talking to friends/family" rely on their social connections for support. This emphasizes the importance of a strong support network in helping them cope. For the option "Engaging in hobbies/activities" suggests that orphaned children might find solace and distraction in their interests, which can contribute to their overall well-being. The choice of "Keeping emotions to myself" highlights the possibility that some orphaned children might internalize their feelings. This could indicate a need for safe spaces and

opportunities for emotional expression. The "Other (Specify)" option allows respondents to share coping mechanisms not listed in the given options, which provides insight into the uniqueness of each respondent's coping strategies.

Table 8: Presence of a Support System to Rely on during Tough Times

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	74	21.4%
No	272	78.6%
Total	346	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Table 8 shows the figures of a survey on whether respondents have presence of a support system to rely on during tough times. 74 respondents which constitute the least (21.4%) of the sample responded yes, while 272 respondents which represents the majority (78.6%) of the sample responded no. This implies that the highest percentage of respondents responded "No" indicates that a significant portion of orphaned children in the study do not have access to counseling services. The "Yes" responses indicate that some orphaned children do have access to counseling, which emphasizes the importance of such services in addressing the emotional and psychological needs of these children.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Orphan-hood in Wukari disrupts crucial social roles and identities, leaving individuals navigating a complex landscape of loss, stigma, and altered expectations. The symbolic meanings attached to family, home, and belonging are profoundly reshaped for orphans, potentially leading to feelings of isolation and a fragmented self-concept. Orphans actively negotiate new interactions and social networks, seeking alternative sources of support and mentorship to construct new identities and bolster their self-esteem. The cultural specificities of Wukari, including traditional beliefs and practices, significantly influence the experiences and coping mechanisms of orphaned individuals. The following recommendations emerge as crucial strategies to address the challenges of orphans and enhance their overall well-being.

Given the emotional distress and psychological turbulence faced by orphaned children, it is essential to establish comprehensive mental health support systems. Schools, community centers, and healthcare facilities should provide counseling services to help orphaned children navigate their grief, anxiety, and sense of abandonment effectively.

Educational barriers are a significant challenge for orphaned children. To address this, tailored educational programs should be developed,

including scholarship opportunities, mentorship programs, and academic resources that cater to their specific needs.

Efforts to combat social stigma and marginalization should be prioritized. Community awareness campaigns and programs within schools can promote understanding and empathy, ensuring that orphaned children are treated with dignity and respect. To address economic hardships, skill-building and vocational training programs should be established to equip orphaned children with marketable skills that empower them to secure livelihoods and break the cycle of poverty. Extended families and communities play a vital role in the lives of orphaned children. Strengthening these networks can provide a stable and nurturing environment, offering emotional and material support.

Governments should enact and enforce policies that specifically address the needs of orphaned children. This could include subsidized education, healthcare, and financial assistance to help them thrive in challenging circumstances. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based initiatives should collaborate to provide holistic support to orphaned children. This can include after-school programs, mentorship, and access to recreational activities that foster a sense of belonging.

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