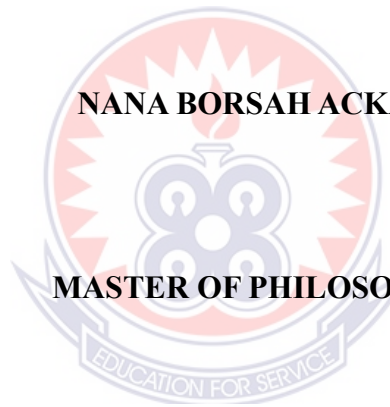


UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA

Exploring the socio-emotional and psychological experiences of first-time student mothers at the University of Education, Winneba

NANA BORSAH ACKAH

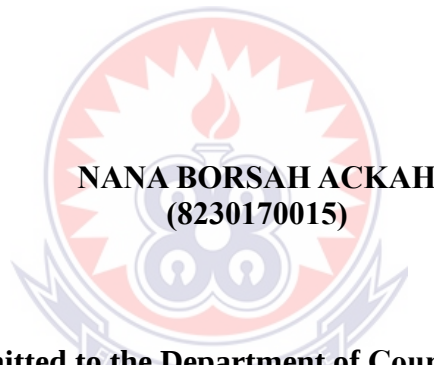
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY



2024

UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA

**EXPLORING THE SOCIO-EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL
EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-TIME STUDENT MOTHERS AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA**



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**A thesis submitted to the Department of Counselling Psychology,
Faculty of Applied Behavioral Sciences in Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the award of
Master of Philosophy Degree
(Counselling Psychology)
in the University of Education, Winneba**

SEPTEMBER 2024

DECLARATION

Student's Declaration

I, **Nana Borsah Ackah**, declare that this thesis report, except for quotations and references contained in published works for which have all been identified and duly acknowledged, is entirely my own original work, and it has not been submitted, either in part or whole, for another degree elsewhere.

Signature:

Date:



Supervisor's Declaration

I hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of this book was supervised in accordance with the guidelines for supervision of thesis work laid down by the University of Education, Winneba.

Supervisor's Name: Prof. Mrs. Patricia Mawusi Amos

Signature:

Date:

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my husband, Michael Afari Baidoo (PhD) for your immense support and love during this period. To my children Maame Aba, Fosuwaa and Papa Kwabedu I say thank you for cheering me on. Also, to my family, my mom Cecilia, my siblings Joshua, Daniel and my lovely and supportive sister Frimpongmaa, I say thank you.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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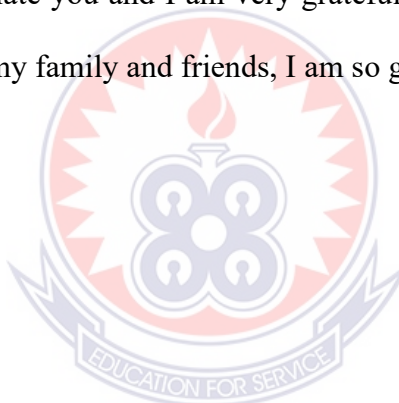


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Content	Pages
DECLARATION	iii
DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
LIST OF TABLES	
or! Bookmark not defined.	Err
GLOSSARY	vii
ABSTRACT	viii
 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	 1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Theoretical framework	1
1.3 Research Problem	7
1.4 Research Objectives	10
1.5 Research Questions	10
1.6 Significance of the study	10
1.7 Delimitation	11
1.8 Limitations	
or! Bookmark not defined.	Err
1.9 Definition of terms	11
1.10 Organization of the Study	12
 CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	 14
2.1 Introduction	14
2.2 Ideals of Motherhood	14
2.3 Motherhood and Education	19

2.4 Socio-Emotional Challenges of First-Time Student Mothers in an Academic Environment	21
2.5 Factors that affect the Psychological Wellbeing of First-time Student Mothers	23
2.6 Coping Mechanisms for First-Time Student Mothers	27
2.7 Support Systems for first-time student mothers	30
2.8 Conclusion	35
 CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	 36
3.1 Introduction	36
3.2 Research paradigm	36
3.3 Research Approach	37
3.4 Research Design	38
3.5 Population	38
3.6 Inclusion and Exclusion criteria	39
3.7 Study site	39
3.8 Sample and Sampling Procedure	40
3.9 Research Instrument	41
3.10 Data Collection Procedure	42
3.10.1 Interviews	43
3.10.2 Focus Group	43
3.11 Data Analysis Procedure	48
3.12 Permission	47
 CHAPTER FOUR : RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	 51
4.1 Introduction	51
4.2 Results	
or! Bookmark not defined.	Err
4.3 Discussion	62

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	74
5.1 Introduction	74
5.2 Summary of Study	74
5.3 Conclusions	76
5.4 Recommendations	78
5.5 Future Directions	80
REFERENCES	83
APPENDICES	99
APPENDIX A: Interview Guide for Individual Interview	99
APPENDIX B: Interview Guide for Focus Group Discussion	101
APPENDIX C: Themes and Sub-themes	103
APPENDIX D: Permission Letter	103





GLOSSARY

ANC: Antenatal Clinic

HPERS: Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Sport

UEW: University of Education, Winneba

SCT: Social Cognitive Theory

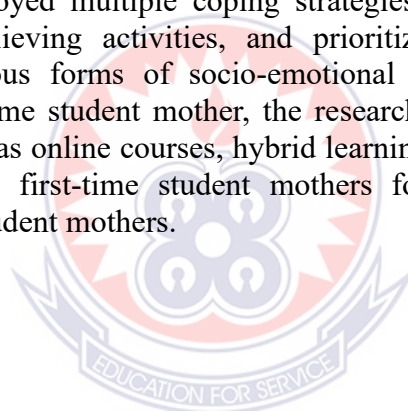
FSM: First Time Student Mother

FCP: Focus Group Participant



ABSTRACT

This study explored the socio-emotional and psychological experiences of first-time undergraduate student mothers at the University of Education, Winneba. For most women, having a child is a major life event that has both socio-emotional and psychological effects. These experiences can strongly affect the academic performance, health, safety and general well-being of the first-time student mother and the newborn child. Social Cognitive and Attachment theories served as the theoretical framework for the study. Based on phenomenological design that utilizes face-to-face interview and focus group discussion, the personal experiences of eighteen first-time undergraduate student mothers were captured. First-time student mothers were recruited from the antenatal unit at the University of Education, Winneba clinic and were selected using convenience and purposive sampling techniques. The sample included ten level 200 students and eight level 300 students. The findings of this study indicated that first-time undergraduate student mothers suffered from various socio-emotional and psychological challenges which resulted in increased stress and anxiety, social isolation, emotional strain, disruption of livelihood, financial hardship and sleep deprivation. Moreover, these first-time student mothers employed multiple coping strategies including time management, engaging in stress-relieving activities, and prioritizing self-care when possible. Considering the various forms of socio-emotional and psychological challenges suffered by the first-time student mother, the researcher recommended that flexible learning options, such as online courses, hybrid learning models, and evening classes, be made available to first-time student mothers for them to accommodate the scheduling needs of student mothers.



CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In the contemporary world where male student constitutes a greater percentage of student' population in universities globally, females are encouraged to enroll on tertiary education programmes to expand their knowledge and contribute to the welfare and development of their family, locality, country and world in general (Bush, Chamber & Walpole, 2023). According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), women who complete a 4-year degree program make around \$23,000 (GH¢253, 0000) more per year than women who do not pursue higher education. This implies that women who seek higher education programmes are probably able to make ends meet after successfully graduating. Additionally, as cited by Kensinger and Minnick (2017), Duquaine-Watson (2007) opined that female graduates are treated with the utmost respect by friends, coworkers, family members, and children.

However, a lot of women find academic work at the tertiary level very challenging. Some worry about unusual lecture schedules, the number of courses they have to register for and attend lectures on, staying awake all night to work assiduously to meet deadlines to submit assignments, and sitting for long hours to study to pass end-of-semester examinations (MacDonald & Malik, 2022). Similarly, the prevalent teaching strategies such as online classes, and face-to-face tutorials, especially at odd hours, act as a barrier as well. Furthermore, group projects and involvement in extracurricular activities including social meetings, religious activities and performances also cause a lot of stress to female students at the tertiary level. Other

female students who are hardworking are fixated on achieving good marks to enroll in graduate school or to land a decent job when they graduate (Dani & Singhai, 2022). These situations and many others make the university environment highly stressful for the female student.

Academic stress on the female student could also be brought on by the need for perfection, parental or family pressure, commitments to groups, or a general desire to succeed in life. Most frequently, it leads to anxiety, panic attacks, burnout, and depression. The academic stress becomes even more severe when a female student without any prior motherhood experience, married or unmarried becomes a mother for the first time. They are confronted with combining the phases of pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, and family responsibilities with regular academic schedules (Al-Asfour, Tlaiss, Khan, & Rajasekar, 2017). As postulated by Harwood, MacLean and Durkin (2007), these experiences can strongly affect the academic performance, health, safety and general well-being of the first-time student mother and the newborn child.

For most women, having a child is a major life event that has both socio-emotional and psychological effects. Physically, childbearing is significant because it results in overt changes to a woman's appearance from the time of pregnancy to childbirth (Massey & Whitehead, 2022). Physical changes often experienced by first-time mothers during pregnancy include changes in appetite that might result in weight gain or loss, weakness throughout the body, swollen feet, appearance of stretch marks, loss of breast suppleness while breastfeeding. The effects of these physical changes on the woman can be unbearable, especially if she is a student (Zhang, 2021). Farias, Pinto, Teofilio, Vilela, Dos Santos Nardi and Kac (2013) reported that pregnant women's

physical healthcare has substantially improved in most developed nations, but there is still much work to be done in terms of psychological care. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), most pregnant women have little access to information and little access to socioemotional and psychological care related to pregnancy and birth preparation (Farias et al, 2013). This is particularly true for first-time mothers and couples who are dealing with certain problems at the beginning of pregnancy, which worsen as the pregnancy progresses to childbirth (Roos, Faure, Lochner, Stein, & Vythilingum, 2013).

The mental and emotional changes that occur during pregnancy and childbirth can have a significant impact on the relationship between first time student mother and colleagues, lecturers, family members and academic life on campus. Some first-time student mothers, when pregnant may experience mood swings from being excited to worried, or happy to sad and back and forth. Pregnancy hormones such as oestrogen and progesterone are responsible for this mix of emotional highs and lows, especially in the first three months of pregnancy (Erkkila, 2019). Similarly, most of the first-time student-mothers worry about the future, unborn baby, pregnancy problems, how they will cope with giving birth, the relationship with their partners and if they would be good mothers (Kisagan & Matiba, 2023).

To cope with academic and motherhood stress, some first-time student mothers go to the extent of hiring babysitters or bringing their relatives such as mothers or sisters to campus so that they can be freed from certain motherhood responsibilities and concentrate on their academic work. This, however, comes with a cost since in many instances the helper will have to be accommodated, fed and given monthly stipends (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). Meanwhile, pregnancy-related changes in a woman's

body, mind, and spirit can have a long-term effect on her health, happiness, and academic achievement (Ndorzi, Dusu & Kusi, 2022). To properly assist and care for these women and enable them to balance their academic obligations with the new roles as mothers, it is crucial to investigate the experiences of first-time student mothers before and after giving birth.

1.2 Theoretical framework

1.2.1 Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) as propounded by Albert Bandura highlights the importance of social influences on human behavior and development. Waddington (2023) opined that people develop their sense of self-efficacy or their belief in their ability to complete a task, through observational learning and direct experience. Bandura (1986) argued that people with high self-efficacy are more likely to set goals, persevere through difficult challenges and achieve success. In addition, Bandura (2011) suggests that a mother's emotional and psychological experiences is shaped by their personal factors (knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs), environmental factors (social support, cultural norms, and societal influences), and behaviour (skills and self-efficacy). Meanwhile, Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020) reported that people aspire for a sense of agency and the conviction that they have significant control over significant life events. This is a fundamental tenet of Bandura's theory. By establishing objectives and putting plans in place to reach them, they express this sense of agency by utilizing their cognitive and self-regulatory talents. They keep an eye on their progress toward their objectives and modify their plans of action as they see fit. People's sense of their own ability to learn and act at certain levels, or their self-efficacy, is central to this agentic perspective (Bandura, 1997).

Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020) asserted that self-efficacy, which results from self-reflection that is both evaluative and goal oriented, is a key internal motivational process in Social Cognitive Theory. Therefore, Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the importance of modelling and social support in promoting positive behavioral changes and can provide insight into developing effective interventions and programs to support first-time student mothers. Significantly, Shahry, Kalhori, Esfandiyari and Zamani-Alavijeh (2016) indicated that for some female students to accept and keep their pregnancy and carry it to full term, they might have built their self-efficacy, gained adequate knowledge of the condition, and developed positive attitudes towards the pregnancy. Furthermore, Rini, Schetter, Hobel, Glynn and Sandman (2006) reiterated that with the availability of the needed social support, the female student can go through the social stress of pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood and academic work with less difficulty.

1.2.2 Attachment Theory

Attachment theory in psychology originates with the seminal work of John Bowlby (1958). In the 1930s John Bowlby worked as a psychiatrist in a Child Guidance Clinic in London, where he treated many emotionally disturbed children. The theory suggests that processes of natural selection led to the evolution of an attachment behavioral system. According to Bowlby, the attachment system is a behavioral control mechanism that keeps track of a child's proximity to caregivers. This has been linked to protection from threats and a higher likelihood of survival and procreation in the ancestral environments of humans and many other mammals (Granqvist & Duschinsky, 2021). A child's attachment to the mother in terms of their social, emotional and cognitive development is very critical. Bowlby (1988) defined as a "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" and may be considered

interchangeable with concepts such as “affectional bond” and “emotional bond.” Notably, Bowlby conceived of four stages of attachment that begin during infancy; Pre-attachment, Attachment-in-the-making, Clear-cut attachment and Formation of reciprocal relationships.

The Attachment Theory emphasizes the importance of the presence of a mother in a child life, most especially from birth to the first five years of the child’s life (O’Shaughnessy, 2023). Muarifah, Mashar, Hashim, Rofiah, and Oktaviani (2022) reported that while insecure and anxious attachment had a negative impact on self-esteem, secure attachment had a positive effect. The authors revealed that mothers’ self-esteem may increase because of a more stable bond with their children. In contrast, O’Shaughnessy (2023) noted that mothers’ self-esteem may be lowered by worried or insecure attachment. Compared to adolescents with insecure attachment, individuals with secure attachment to their parents reported higher levels of self-esteem. Pare (2009) discovered that the condition of insecure attachment, which was brought on by insecure and restless early parenting, was negatively correlated with self-esteem. Bowlby described the consequences of a child’s early inadequate bonding process as unfortunate. According to Howe (2012), secure attachment is often what mothers wish; however, bad attachment outcomes such as ambivalent attachment, avoidance attachment, and disordered attachment is often what first-time student mothers are confronted with.

1.3 Research Problem

The journey from pregnancy to childbirth presents distinct challenges for many women, particularly those pursuing university education, as they navigate the physically and emotionally demanding aspects of pregnancy alongside the rigor of academic responsibilities (Ruth, Heather, & Paul, 2010; Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Research from Western contexts has consistently highlighted the unique struggles faced by pregnant students and student mothers, who often experience heightened stress levels that can adversely impact their academic performance and overall well-being (Camoirano, 2017; Lefkou & Hunt, 2018). Symptoms like nausea, fatigue, mood swings, and difficulties in concentration during pregnancy complicate their ability to meet academic expectations (Erkkila, 2019). Furthermore, the lack of support structures such as maternity leave, flexible schedules, and accessible childcare in academic institutions exacerbates these challenges, creating additional barriers for pregnant students and student mothers (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018).

In African contexts, studies on the experiences of pregnant and student mothers are gradually garnering attention. Emerging research examines the support mechanisms and coping strategies that student mothers employ to balance their dual roles of motherhood and academic responsibilities (Kubeka, 2016; Kisanga, & Matiba, 2023; Maluleke, Senekal Munnik, & Somhlaba, 2023; Mamabolo, Langa & Kiguwa, 2009; Zenebe & Haukanes, 2019). However, these studies often offer a broad perspective, seldomly addressing the unique socio-emotional and psychological needs of undergraduate first-time student mothers, who frequently feel unprepared for managing both motherhood and academia (Easterbrooks et al., 2011; Solivan et al., 2015; Vandsburger et al., 2008).

The research gap is even more pronounced in Ghana, where existing studies predominantly focus on coping strategies and perceived support without delving into preparedness and well-being among first-time mothers in university settings (Nordzi, Dusu, & Kusi, 2022; Anane, Adangabe, & Inkoom, 2021; Suglo & Siakwa, 2016; Wurapa, Abudey & Ayaga, 2016; Gyesaw & Ankomah, 2013; Manyeh, Amu, Williams & Gyapong, 2020). Ghanaian student mothers face unique socio-cultural expectations that impact their educational experiences, including traditional roles that may influence their sense of preparedness and adequacy in balancing motherhood and academics. Normally, female students are expected to focus on their studies whilst in school; therefore, no preparations are made in the universities for their roles as mothers.

Anecdotal evidence from the University of Education, Winneba (UEW), suggests that first-time student mothers encounter distinct challenges yet receive few research attentions on their experiences for these dual roles. Most existing studies focus broadly on student mothers' experiences or the support they receive without investigating the preparedness gap specific to first-time undergraduate student mothers. Notably, healthcare providers at UEW clinic report that a significant number of student mothers seeking medical assistance for physical symptoms often require socio-emotional or psychological support instead. The first-time undergraduate student mother also faces peculiar challenges from other female students in that, the extra time that a female student who is a mother can use to study and probable socialize, the first-time mother will be using that time in the care of her baby thereby making academic work tougher for her. This observation signals an unmet need for counseling and tailored support services on campus, underscoring the urgency of addressing this problem (UEW, 2023).

This study aims to fill these gaps by exploring the socio-emotional and psychological experiences of first-time undergraduate student mothers at UEW, assessing their preparedness and challenges, and identifying how the university can support them more effectively. This Ghana-specific focus is crucial for contributing to localized research and providing insight into institutional policies that could enhance the well-being and academic success of student mothers. By drawing on the Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes the role of social influences on behavior, this study departs from the commonly used feminist theoretical approaches. This framework will allow for an in-depth analysis of the social factors impacting first-time student mothers, some of whom express feelings of inadequacy or consider deferring their studies due to the demands of motherhood and academia.

This research seeks to provide actionable recommendations for creating a supportive academic environment, both at UEW and other similar institutions, to address the unique needs of student mothers and bridge the preparedness gap, thereby contributing to a more inclusive academic landscape (Safford & Mills, 2019; Zenebe & Haukanes, 2019).

Purpose of study

The study aims to explore the socio-emotional and psychological experiences of first-time undergraduate student mothers at the University of Education, Winneba.

1.4 Research Objectives

The following objectives were pursued:

1. To investigate how first-time undergraduate student mothers experience socio-emotional challenges as they balance the demands of motherhood and academics.
2. To explore how psychological factors contribute to the overall well-being and mental health of first-time student mothers.
3. To explore the coping mechanisms used by first-time mothers to overcome their challenges.
4. To identify the support systems available to assist first-time student mothers.

1.5 Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study

1. How do first-time undergraduate student mothers experience socio-emotional challenges as they balance the demands of motherhood and academics?
2. What psychological factors contribute to the overall well-being and mental health of first-time student mothers?
3. What coping mechanisms do these first-time mothers use to overcome their challenges?
4. What support systems are available to assist first-time student mothers in their socio-emotional, and psychological experiences for university life?

1.6 Significance of the study

This study would contribute to the understanding of the experiences and preparedness of first-time student mothers in their dual role. Similarly, the study would provide valuable insights for healthcare professionals, educators, and policymakers to develop

policies, programs, and interventions for the adequate support and care of first-time student mothers. Understanding the socio-emotional and psychological experiences of these students would help the management of UEW to put in place measures to reduce the negative impact of pregnancy and childbirth on health, well-being and academic performance. Furthermore, the study would offer the opportunity to lecturers, colleague students, family members and the entire university workforce the knowledge and skills to deal with socio-emotional and psychological issues of first-time student mothers.

1.7 Delimitation

The study focused on only first-time undergraduate mothers of the University of Education, Winneba, whose children are between six weeks to twenty-four months, to investigate how these first-time mothers experience socio-emotional challenges, to explore psychological factors and coping mechanism they use to overcome their challenges. This is because these group of people are assumed to know how academic life is before adding motherhood.

1.8 Operational definition of terms

- i. **Challenges:** Difficulties or obstacles that require effort to overcome or manage.
- ii. **Coping mechanism:** A psychological or behavioral strategy used by individuals to manage stress, emotions, or difficult situations.
- iii. **First time student mothers:** Female students who are now giving birth for the first time and are in school (typically college or university).
- iv. **Motherhood:** The state or experience of being a mother; the role, duties, and responsibilities associated with raising children.

- v. **Experience:** An event or occurrence which leaves an impression on someone.
- vi. **Psychological factors:** Refers to the internal and subjective experiences that occur within an individual's minds, which include thoughts, beliefs, moods and expectations.
- vii. **Socio-emotional:** Refers to the interactions and relationships we have with others, and the emotions that arise from these interactions, these include empathy, cooperation and support.
- viii. **Support systems:** Networks of individuals, resources, and organizations that provide assistance, encouragement, or help during times of need or challenge.
- ix. **Undergraduate student:** A student enrolled in a bachelor's degree program at a college or university, typically pursuing their first degree after high school.

1.10 Organization of the Study

The thesis was organized into five chapters. Chapter one contained the background to the study, theoretical framework, statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, delimitation, limitations and definition of terms. Chapter two dealt with the review of literature related to the research topic. It focused on ideals of motherhood, motherhood and education, socio-emotional challenges of first-time student mothers in academic environment, as well as the factors that affect psychological wellbeing of first-time student mothers. Additionally, literature was reviewed on coping mechanisms and support systems for first-time student mothers. Chapter three involved the methods which comprise the research paradigm, the research design, population, sample and sampling procedures, data collection procedure, processing and analysis. Chapter four presented results and

discussion, whilst chapter five comprised a summary of findings, conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the socio-emotional and psychological experiences of first-time undergraduate student mothers at the University of Education Winneba. This chapter reviews literature related to the research topic. It focused on ideals of motherhood, motherhood and education which elaborates on the social and cultural context of motherhood, traditional role of women and the positive and negative effect of bonding between mothers and children with respect to their pursuit in education. The socio-emotional challenges of first-time student mothers in the academic environment are also discussed, looking at areas such as stress and anxiety that these first-time student mothers experience in order to balance their dual role, as well as the factors that affect psychological wellbeing of first-time student mothers. The psychological factors discussed in this literature include attitude towards childbirth and motherhood, satisfaction of childcare and performance in academic life. Additionally, literature was reviewed on coping mechanisms where these mothers must implore means like counselling to help deal with their experiences. Support systems for first-time student mothers are discussed under subthemes, financial, friends, family, spousal and institutional support to help these first-time student mothers balance their dual role.

2.2 Ideals of Motherhood

Every society has an established idea of what and how motherhood ought to be. Motherhood may be viewed in certain social and cultural situations as a practice

focused on the home, where the child receives all the attention and care needed (Akomaning & Osafo, 2021). Meanwhile, Barnes (2013) and Torres et al. (2020) reported that motherhood is socially entwined with notions of femininity and enforces women's gender identity. Several studies have reported that gender norms influence ideals of motherhood. Many women strive to meet the socially valued ideal of motherhood, while they fulfil other social roles. Ananne et al. (2021) and Taukeni (2014) explain the ideals of motherhood, as considering the needs of the child and the family before the needs of the mother.

Women are expected to stay at home and care for the children, while men secure employment and provide the material needs of the family. Barnes (2013) explains the notions of gender identity in detail, commenting that female have no space in intellectual spaces, especially in institutions heavily influenced by Western masculine ideals. Also, Barnes (2013) believes Western masculine ideals favour male bodies based on the idea that a scholar is solitary, dispassionate and disconnected from the needs of his body. Therefore, because female bodies are responsible for reproduction, it is considered less vital for women to participate in academic spaces, since their role as mothers 'tampers' with their intellectual functioning. Additionally, Monk (2013) as cited by Kubeka (2019) has accused medical and psychological studies of framing mothers and their children as mutually exclusive, as if the child's needs are not met without the mother's full presence. According to Brown and Amankwaa (2007) as cited by Kubeka (2019) mothers go through a process of creating their own identities while at the same time trying to live up to the expectations of the dominant ideals, thus leaving them conflicted.

The social and cultural contexts in which mothers raise their children tend to guide their parenting styles and the ways in which they relate to their children (Mayer, 2009). According to Mayer (2009), some mothers have asserted that they value being able to contribute economically to their households while at the same time being a mother to their children. The way in which mothers balance these roles reflects the kinds of experiences they go through to maintain a good relationship with their family and their academic careers. According to early theories by Ainsworth (1969) and Bowlby (1988), having children is appropriate and good for women's status in society, and motherhood is natural and desired for women (Mamabolo et al., 2009). According to Mamabolo et al. (2009), motherhood is both an ideological practice and a role that aids in a person's spiritual and personal development.

The fact that society has normalized motherhood as emotionally fulfilling suggests that it is viewed as beneficial and fulfilling for women. Different conventional and societal expectations of motherhood are cherished and handed down through the generations in every society. Women are often portrayed as one that nurtures and enables children to grow up healthy and strong. This notion is largely attributed to the many theories about mothering and the upbringing of healthy children because of good attachment and good enough mothering (Bowlby, 1988). Although such theories and ideals exist, the intensity of the experience of motherhood still brings many challenges such as physical, emotional and psychological. Coo et al, (2023) assert that mothers often carry the 'burdens' of motherhood in fear of being seen by society as 'bad mothers. Mothers face immense pressure and criticism from the idea of the perfect mother, partly because these expectations are difficult to meet. Many women who care for their children while still actively participating in their careers and

academic pursuits find themselves under stress due to widely held beliefs about what constitutes the perfect mom (Serrano et al.,2022).

Prominent British psychologists (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1988; St. Clair, 1996; Winnicott, 1971) are the epitomes of mothering research. Their beliefs have paved the way for the conceptualization of women's roles in both preventing and developing psychopathology. For their children to form safe attachment patterns, mothers have a crucial role to perform (Bowlby, 1978; St. Clair, 1996). According to Winnicott (1971), a mother-child relationship must be "good enough" to guarantee a child's psychological well-being from infancy through adulthood. The notion of a good and a bad mother has been widely researched following the theories of Winnicott (1971) and many others on the relationship between an infant and his or her mother. St. Clair (1996) argues that Winnicott's (1971) theory on good enough mothering and transitional objects were shaped by the way society conceptualised motherhood in 19th-century Britain (St. Clair, 1996). This theory argues that the relationship between the infant and his or her mother is one of the essential relationships that humans form (Bowlby, 1988; St. Clair, 1996).

This means that the foundations of good child development are reliant on the mother's relationship with the child. The mother must provide enough care and love for the child to feel secure, which Winnicott (1971) calls a holding environment. The mother's style of holding the child, including breastfeeding and other necessary caring techniques, determines the child's conception of relationships later in life (Winnicott,1971). Winnicott (1971) further suggested that if a child does not receive adequate care and a holding environment from his or her parent, he or she could develop anti-social tendencies. This child is characterised by a sense of integrity and

inferiority, and this may result in oppositional behaviour (Winnicott, 1971). Winnicott's (1971) theory places great emphasis on the role of women in shaping human development and assumes that a women's role is central to the home environment. Winnicott's (1971) theory is similar to other theories of childhood development such as object relations and attachment theory. It also suggests that mothers need to be good enough to provide a secure and nurturing relationship for their children. This seems to support the notion of the stay-at-home mother who is always available to meet the child's needs (Mamabolo et al, 2009). All of these theories assume that women are biologically predisposed to provide nurturing and care for their children. However, this notion ignores women's socio-economic status, health, and marital status, as well as the support structures that are needed for one to take care of a child (Kubeka, 2016). While there is evidence about the impact of good mothering on a child's well-being, it is also evident that societies have their own perceptions about what constitutes good mothering (Mamabolo et al, 2009; Taukeni, 2014).

There are also internalised notions about what a good mother should be able to do for her children. This focus draws on the medical and psychological theories that a mother should be able to achieve these goals (Mayer, 2009). In taking this focus, they problematise mothers who perform dual roles because of the intimacy that is emphasised between the mother and her child (Springer et al., 2009). Other aspects of these mothering difficulties are evident for those women who have other roles to perform, and some have to try to balance their roles in order to adequately cater for each of those roles. Women who perform roles such as taking care of the house, the children and work outside the home face many difficulties with meeting all the demands of mothering, such as 'bonding' and being ever present (Estes, 2011;

Mamabolo et al, 2016; Story, 1999). Therefore, the notion of balance of different roles deserves exploration and mothers' experiences need to be heard in order to deconstruct the dominant notions of motherhood. Being stressed and anxious is one of the main problems that mothers who are also students encounter (Edwards, Hirsch & Flynn, 2018)

2.3 Motherhood and Education

The societal idealization of motherhood can conceal the difficulties of being a mother and a student at the same time, such as the emotional and physical toll it takes, the lack of resources and social support that mothers face (Glenn, 1994). Feminist scholars have contended that societal conventions and cultural expectations related to parenting might exacerbate gender inequality by preventing women from expressing themselves freely and developing personally through education (Gilligan, 1982; Hooks, 1984).

Becoming a mother for the first time can positively or negatively affect scholastic endeavors. A study by Lester, Johnson and Rosario, (2017) among low-income women revealed that parenting is a major predictor of academic performance. In a similar vein, Wainwright, Marandet and Smith (2017) discovered that mothers with higher education levels expressed greater levels of self-efficacy and motivation in comparison to their counterparts who were not mothers. However, parenting can also pose serious obstacles to achieving academic achievement, especially when it comes to managing time and taking care of children. Also, Gatrell, Saunders and Swail (2017) stated that moms with greater levels of education reported feeling more guilty.

For new mothers, pregnancy and childbirth can be emotionally taxing, especially if they are to balance it with their academic obligations (Maluleke, Senekal, Munnik &

Somhlaba, 2023). Both high school and university students who gave birth while attending school are examples of students who are parents (Barnes, 2013; Nelson et al, 2013). According to Nelson et al (2013), there are signs of the existence of student women who have children while they pursue their education though statistical evidence has not been published in prior studies involving student mothers. Despite the diversity of parenting conceptions, research has also examined how the idealized mother influences the experiences of student mothers (Mayer, 2009). One's ongoing concern as a mother is for the well-being of her family, especially her children. However, regardless of the difficulties of motherhood, many women understand their role as women following what society believes to be acceptable and ideal (Coo et al., 2023; Barnes, 2013).

The gendered demands placed on women in the majority of African cultures have a significant impact on their education. For example, student mothers reported that their experience of motherhood was negative because they lived in fear of criticism and stigma from other people (Taukeni, 2014). Furthermore, Taukeni (2014) reported that it was hard for student mothers to perform everyday duties freely in their social and educational spaces because of this stigma. Women felt judged by people who did not acknowledge motherhood carried out in conjunction with studying and not as the only, or primary role. According to Taukeni some student mothers chose to be a student exclusively when in university and would leave the role of being the mother to the child's nanny, at home. It is therefore clear that mothers are affected by the dominant ideals of what constitutes motherhood as defined by society, institutions and popular media (Barnes, 2013; Mayer, 2009; Taukeni, 2014). Torres et al. (2020) suggests that the beliefs held by different sectors of society determine the kinds of behaviours that people from that context should associate with themselves.

2.4 Socio-Emotional Challenges of First-Time Student Mothers in an Academic Environment

First-time student-mothers face a unique set of challenges that can impact their academic success and socioemotional well-being in an academic environment. Research has shown that student mothers experience higher levels of socio-emotional issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression compared to their non-parenting peers which can negatively impact their overall well-being (Horton, 2018; Lester et al., 2017; Horton, 2018). A study by Lester et al. (2017) found that student mothers were more likely to experience academic setbacks, such as dropping courses or taking a leave of absence, due to parenting responsibilities. Meanwhile, Horton (2018) found that student mothers reported experiencing discrimination and stigma from faculty and peers, which can lead to feelings of isolation and marginalization. Additionally, Lester et al. (2017) found that student mothers reported feeling like they did not belong on campus, which can negatively impact their academic performance and overall well-being.

Both good and bad changes can occur in the lives of first-time student mothers since they have to play dual roles as mothers and students at the same time. Motherhood requires dedication, and they also have to give their education their all (Holmes & Nikiforidou, 2023; Kubeka 2016). Many of the difficulties faced by student mothers are as a result of the conventional view of a student as someone who is childless, unmarried, and primarily concerned with fulfilling the requirements of being an academic community member (Vyskocil, 2018; Barnes, 2013). It is possible that the population of students who are juggling motherhood and academics isn't included in this portrayal of the ideal student. According to Mayer (2009) and Shefer et al. (2013), universities exclusively serve the traditional stereotype of the student, and their

policies, practices, and services are designed to support this ideal. Anane et al. (2021) makes the case that, when Ghanaian institutions were first founded, their services were designed to serve the needs of students and not mothers. Moreover, Anane et al. (2021) note that pregnant students frequently receive little attention from colleges, which implies that their demands and struggles go unnoticed. For instance, Griffiths (2022) reports that, the Ministry of Education, Sport, and Culture in Namibia mandates that pregnant women must take a year off from school to care for their unborn child. This suggests that pregnant students have no place in educational settings.

Although acknowledging that female students are more likely to become pregnant while attending college is a positive step towards changing policy, it is nonetheless concerning that students do not receive the respect they are due from universities. This indicates that it is still difficult for first-time student mothers who are also students to get the necessary assistance to meet their academic demands and physical needs. The services offered on campus, which include counselling and health care, were developed to satisfy the needs of "ideal students" (Barnes, 2013). Policies guiding the provision of services to suit the demands of the university community are influenced by the norms and expectations of the educational institution (Shefer et al., 2013). A related study put out by Barnes (2013) revealed that the culture of the university dictates the kinds of behaviors that men and women should exhibit. For example, students are expected to be rational and detachable from their bodies' needs.

While pursuing a degree presents difficulties for many students, first-time mothers encounter an exceptionally difficult path (Barnes, 2013; Mayer, 2009). It's not simple for them to balance work, school, and childcare; some even have to manage a

household and a job (Serrano et al., 2022). Their already hectic lives are made more demanding by their academic work at university, and being a first-time mother can be a daunting experience (Mayer, 2009). Many times, single women juggle multiple responsibilities, including childcare, education, and work. and social activities, making it difficult to manage even small-unexpected changes (Serrano et al., 2022). This raises the need to explore the context in which female students fall pregnant and the decisions that follow in terms of either retaining or terminating the pregnancy (Nelson, Froehner & Gault, 2013).

2.5 Factors that affect the Psychological Wellbeing of First-time Student Mothers

Childbirth can be a significant psychological event, and first-time mothers may have various fears and anxieties about the process. Baakeleng and Bam (2022) found that psychological preparedness, such as having a positive attitude and feeling confident about childbirth, led to a better childbirth experience. However, first-time student mothers may face additional stressors due to academic pressures, financial constraints, and lack of social support (Miller & Sorrells-Jones 2019).

First-time student mothers find it very challenging to adjust to the demanding academic environment because traditionally, universities are designed with academic rather than pregnancy and maternity activities in mind (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018). The majority of academic institutions lack on-campus childcare services and have restrictive maternity leave rules for student moms (Kamanzi, 2019). Plath (2017) reported that first-time student mothers may find it difficult to attend lectures or take part in other academic activities because of the strict class schedules in academic settings, which may conflict with their mother's childcare duties. Kamanzi (2019)

believes this can be psychologically demanding and can compel first-time student mothers to either postpone their studies or give up on their academic career entirely.

Financially managing the expense of living, childcare, and education can be a challenging psychological issue to the first-time student mother, leading to internal and external exhaustion. When Gerrard and Roberts (2007) investigated student parents, hardship and debt and the consequence for the mental and physical health of student parents they found out that for the majority, financial adversity affected their psychological well-being. In many cases parents reported that their own stress adversely affected their children. Questions were also raised regarding parents' ability to meet the dietary needs of their children. Quality of home and family life also suffered as a consequence of financial hardship (Gerrard & Roberts, 2007). Furthermore, a study by Kensinger and Minnick (2018) showed that a lack of financial resources was the chief barrier for student mothers in their educational pursuits while social/emotional support was the most important contributor to student mothers' success in college. Participants in the study relied heavily on student loans to cover costs of childcare or family to help watch their children (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018).

The decrease in interpersonal communication and engagement as a result of caregiving and academic obligations can be very stressful to the first-time student mother. In addition to wanting to be the ideal mother, student mothers also feel pressure to perform academically well, which can result in inflated expectations and self-criticism (Gatrell, Saunders & Swail, 2017). The abrupt changes to their eating, sleeping, and living patterns often cause them to worry, which puts them in stressful situations that, if not managed properly, could result in psychological breakdown. Gatrell et al.

(2017) discovered that student mothers had higher stress levels because they had to juggle their obligations to their families and their studies. Among these stresses is the need on student women to manage their time well in order to balance taking care of their children with meeting the requirements of their academic programs. Often, this can lead to feelings of overwhelm. Stress related to role conflict: When student mothers are unable to meet their own expectations in any or both of these positions, they may feel guilty and ashamed. Whenever they fall short in one area, these student mothers feel bad because they want to do the best for their children and achieve academic success at the same time.

A study by Wainwright, Smith, and Marandet. (2017) showed that student mothers experienced higher levels of guilt and shame related to their decision to pursue higher education. Student mothers felt more guilty about their perceived lack of parental guidance (Pascoe, Gatrell & Saunders, 2019). Another set of issues that student mothers deal with is identity and self-worth. According to Lester, Johnson and Rosario (2019) student moms had lower levels of self-esteem than their classmates who were not mothers. In a similar vein, Williams, Phillips and Hall (2018) observed that student mothers faced difficulties in forging their identities due to conflicts between their responsibilities as mothers and students.

Moreover, student mothers face challenges related to social support and isolation. Lester, Johnson and Rosario (2019) found that student mothers experienced lower levels of social support compared to their non-mother peers. Similarly, Smith et al. (2020) noted that student mothers experienced higher levels of isolation and loneliness.

The responsibilities of caring for children can lead to a decrease in first-time student mothers' career aspirations, as they may feel that their caregiving responsibilities are incompatible with career advancement. They face challenges related to their academic performance and career aspirations. A study by Nguyen, Tran and Lee (2019) found that student mothers experienced lower levels of academic achievement compared to their non-mother peers. In addition, Brown, Miller and Tan (2020) found that student mothers experienced lower levels of career aspirations and expectations. Student mothers may internalize societal expectations that prioritize their roles as mothers over their career aspirations, leading to a decrease in their career ambitions. In addition, Eward et al. (2018) asserted that first-time student mothers may lack exposure to role models and mentors who are also mothers, making it harder for them to envision themselves in successful careers while balancing family responsibilities.

The fear of work-life balance challenge is also a psychological issue for these student mothers. Student mothers may anticipate difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities, leading them to lower their career aspirations to avoid perceived conflicts. They also may face barriers in accessing resources like childcare, flexible work arrangements, and career development opportunities, making it harder for them to pursue their career goals. Self-limiting beliefs and self-doubt and negative self-talk, leading them to question their abilities and lower their career aspirations.

In addition, Student mothers may feel pressure from family, friends, or society to prioritize their roles as mothers over their career aspirations, leading to a decrease in their career ambitions. These factors can result in first-time student mothers setting lower career goals, choosing fields with more flexible work arrangements but potentially lower earning potential, or delaying their career advancement. It's essential

for universities, policymakers, and employers to address these challenges that affect the first-time student mother's psychological wellbeing and provide support to help them achieve their full career potential.

2.6 Coping Mechanisms for First-Time Student Mothers

Life could be full of challenges, and those who face the challenges adopt strategies to help them overcome or adapt to these challenges. Baumeister (1991) attempts to clarify that life is full of both happy and sad occurrences and circumstances that may jeopardize or seem to have an impact on someone's welfare. In order to deal with these difficulties, individuals employ coping mechanisms, which can be either a positive or negative reaction. The ways in which student mothers balance dual duty have been the subject of numerous research (Esia-Donkoh, 2014; Klein, 2005; Treadway, 2021). Mothers enrolled in higher education reported employing alternative tactics to surmount obstacles encountered in an academic environment (Kisanga, & Matiba, 2023; Oyoo, 2024; Kanana, Obonyo, & Wambu, 2021). Oyoo (2024) stated that both problem- and emotion-focused coping techniques are used by student mothers.

First-time student mothers create a support network by surrounding themselves with friends, relatives, and others who can offer emotional support to them. Some student-mothers use social support networks heavily to deal with the demands of motherhood and school, particularly from older parents or caregivers (Esia- Donkoh, 2014). Esia-Donkoh, (2014) reported that social networks are used by student mothers to care for children while in class. Also, not-relative women like land ladies and housekeepers, as well as moms and mothers-in-law, are part of these social support networks. Depending on their prior experience caring for children, the majority of non-related

women were paid, while the majority of student mother's relatives who worked as babysitters received nothing in exchange except useful advice and a sense of belonging (Esia-Donkoh, 2014). Meanwhile, Esia-Donkoh (2014) reported that a number of student-mothers utilized their mobile phones as a means of communication with babysitters when their kids pestered them of which.

Additionally, Kisanga et al. (2023) highlight the importance of self-care, such as attending to one's physical and emotional health, for managing the rigors of parenting by student mothers. This can involve obtaining adequate rest, maintaining a healthy diet, working out frequently, and scheduling leisure activities and personal time. Also, setting reasonable expectations helps women learn to cope with their circumstances, even when balancing different duties (Brown, 2012). Brown (2012) believes that feelings of shame or inadequacy by the student mother might be lessened if they realize that it is okay to seek support and that perfection is not achievable. Meanwhile Obonyo and Wambu, (2021) reported that the first-time student mother's stress and pressure can be decreased when they understand that parenting is a learning process. Furthermore, a study by Klein (2005) revealed that routines and the development of efficient time management techniques can aid first-time mothers in balancing their obligations more effectively. The first-time student mother can improve her academic performance and parenting duties by prioritizing tasks, dividing them into smaller, more manageable steps, and using tools like calendars and to-do lists.

Importantly, Affum et al. (2013) believe stressors exposure generates a rise in certain hormones secreted by the adrenal glands, causing an increase in heart rate and blood pressure and altering the skin's electrical conductivity. As a result, first-time student mother would feel pressured to perform well, which could cause worry, tension, and

occasionally even sadness. Hence, consulting with a therapist or counsellor might be helpful if emotions of anxiety, despair, or extreme stress become chronic for the first-time student mothers (Anane et al., 2021), study participants thought that counselling might be a helpful resource for helping them balance their multiple roles as mothers and students. Therapy can offer a safe space to examine and confront underlying concerns and create coping mechanisms. When Treadway (2021) explored the concept of sense of belonging, he concluded that managing the ups and downs of parenthood requires flexibility and adaptability in the face of unforeseen obstacles. One might become more resilient and less frustrated by accepting that plans might need to change and being willing to modify one's strategy. First-time mothers can stay present, lower their stress levels, and develop a sense of serenity amid the turmoil of motherhood by engaging in mindfulness practices like yoga, deep breathing exercises, or meditation (Cushman, Doe, Leif & Brilliant, 2012; Vaamonde, Algar-Santacruz, Pettit, Chacon & Dillard, 2022). In addition, acknowledging and applauding minor as well as significant accomplishments can raise spirits and confidence of first-time student mothers. When first-time student mothers make the time to recognize and value any success, no matter how tiny they are, they can boost their self-esteem and provide the drive to pursue greater things.

Regardless of the first-time student mother's age or socioeconomic background, juggling several responsibilities would require community support (Breheny & Stephens, 2007). In general, a woman must work in tandem with others around her, including her partners, parents, siblings, in-laws, mates and lecturers to effectively manage both parenting and academic work. It is imperative that course mates, educators and lecturers support student mothers in utilizing both emotion- and problem-focused coping mechanisms. The latter strategy involves encouraging and

providing the much-needed moral and psychological support to the student-mothers, while the former strategy may involve offering extra teaching hours and/or remedial classes to make up for what they missed due to scheduling issues (Karimi, 2015). Esia-Donkoh (2014) discovered that student-mothers frequently utilized emotion-focused coping mechanisms including withdrawing and crying, with some finding solace from their friends and others confiding in them about their issues. Similarly, a pool conducted by Anane et al. (2021) revealed that majority of student-mothers handle issues connected to their relationships and social life by explaining the challenges they faced as a result of studying and mothering simultaneously to their friends.

2.7 Support Systems for first-time student mothers

Globally, university first-time student-mothers face significant barriers to completing their education. These barriers include balancing demanding academic responsibilities with the overwhelming duties of childcare, financial constraints that make it difficult to afford the costs of education and childcare, and limited access to flexible learning options that could better accommodate their family commitments (Nelson et al., 2013; Squires & Disano, 2018). Research has shown that university first-time student-mothers often feel unsupported and disconnected from their academic institutions (Aponte & Correa, 2012). Their children's needs can interfere with their ability to dedicate sufficient time to studying, negatively impacting their academic performance (Richardson & Harrington, 2022). Additionally, the social stigma and gender norms associated with balancing motherhood and academia can lead first-time student-mothers to feel isolated and marginalized within the university environment (Lynch, 2008).

Financial constraints remain a major hurdle for first-time student-mothers. According to a study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, financial aid, scholarships targeted at student-parents, and affordable childcare services are crucial for the success of student-mothers in higher education (Richardson & Harrington, 2022). For instance, the Child Care Access Means Parents in School program in the United States provides funding to institutions to support childcare services for low-income student-parents, which has been shown to increase retention and graduation rates among beneficiaries (Xia & Kirby, 2009; Smith, 2010; Nelson et al., 2013; Sullivan, 2013).

In many African countries, financial constraints are particularly acute. Hence, many countries in the region have made significant strides in supporting student-mothers. Universities in Kenya, for example, have initiated programs that provide bursaries and scholarships to student-mothers. According to Kanana and associates (2021), these financial aids significantly reduce the dropout rates among student-mothers, enabling more women to pursue higher education while balancing the demands of motherhood. Also, institutional policies play a crucial role in supporting student-mothers. In South Africa, the University of Cape Town has implemented policies that allow student-mothers to take maternity leave without penalty and provide access to on-campus childcare facilities (Phiri et al., 2021; Savage, 2021). These inclusive policies create an environment that acknowledges and supports the dual roles of student-mothers, facilitating their educational attainment and personal growth.

Additionally, the barriers faced by first-time student-mothers extend beyond financial considerations. Researchers have found that student-mothers often struggle to balance their academic responsibilities with their caregiving duties, which can lead to decreased study time and poorer academic performance (Sullivan, 2013; Nelson et al.,

2013; Richardson & Harrington, 2022). The perceived conflict between the roles of "student" and "mother" can also contribute to feelings of guilt and marginalization, further exacerbating the challenges they face (Lynch, 2008). Flexible learning options, such as online courses, part-time study programs, and evening or weekend classes, are vital for student-mothers. A study by Stone and O'Shea (2019) in Australia found that online learning provides the flexibility needed for student-mothers to balance their academic responsibilities with their parenting duties. Universities have increasingly adopted hybrid and fully online programs, as well as other flexible delivery models, recognizing the importance of providing the necessary flexibility for student-mothers to succeed in their studies.

Flexible study schedules enable mothers to balance their academic work with childcare duties, allowing them to attain their academic goals without having to sacrifice their responsibilities as mothers (Dankyi, Dankyi & Minadzi, 2019). A study by Robinson and Harris (2015) highlighted various challenges that student mothers encounter, including inflexible academic schedules and reduced access to educational resources. However, Thomas, Talbot & Briggs (2021) recommended that a broader consideration of platforms that could be used for academic management (e.g. Online teaching, Google Calendar, Information sharing) would enable student-mothers to confidently merge their family and student lives, rather than feeling they have to compartmentalise. Laws, Walsh, Hesketh, Downing, Kuswara and Campbell (2019) suggested that one way of ensuring flexible study schedules is the utilization of digital resources. According to Laws et al., (2019), first-time student mothers can use digital resources to gather information from multiple sources quickly and anonymously. The adoption of online teaching methodology, mobile apps, social media platforms, websites, blogs and forums can be invaluable for student-mothers (Pedersen &

Lupton, 2018). In addition, De Reuver et al. (2016) believe the domestication of commonplace technologies, such as mobile phones means that new social connections can move easily from the digital to the physical, with mobile apps that make it possible for first-time student mothers to connect with others and meet up face-to-face (Thomas et al., 2019).

On-campus childcare is another critical support system for student-parents. A survey by the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that student-parents with access to on-campus childcare are more likely to persist and graduate compared to those without this resource (Sullivan, 2013). This support not only provides a safe and nurturing environment for children, but it also allows student-mothers to fully participate in their academic pursuits, such as attending classes and study sessions, without the burden of finding and arranging external childcare services. (Squires & Disano, 2018; Riet et al., 2019; Richardson & Harrington, 2022) Unfortunately, on-campus childcare is not widely available, and many student-parents struggle to find reliable, affordable childcare options, which can negatively impact their academic performance and persistence (Nelson et al., 2013).

Community and peer support networks are also essential. A study by Jidong and colleagues (2019) in Nigeria highlights the role of peer support groups in providing emotional and practical support to student-mothers. These groups offer a platform for student-mothers to share their unique experiences and coping strategies, which can significantly alleviate the stress associated with balancing the demands of motherhood and academic responsibilities. By creating a supportive community, these peer groups enable student-mothers to draw strength from one another, learn from shared

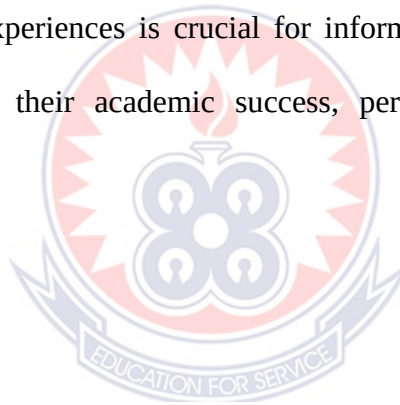
challenges, and develop effective ways to manage their complex lives as both students and parents.

In Ghana, university student-mothers face significant challenges compounded by socio-cultural expectations and limited institutional support (Nkrumah & Gbagbo, 2018; Amos et al., 2021). The absence of support puts student-mothers through stress, divided attention, and conflicting responsibilities between academic work and childcare. In light of this, some universities have started to recognize and address these needs. For instance, the University of Ghana has established childcare facilities and offers flexible academic programs to accommodate student-mothers. These initiatives are crucial in a country where balancing motherhood and education is particularly challenging due to limited family support structure (Nkrumah & Gbagbo, 2018; Dankyi et al., 2019).

Despite these efforts, the support systems in Ghanaian universities are still inadequate. Nkrumah and Gbagbo's (2018) study highlight the lack of comprehensive policies to support first-time student-mothers, pointing out that most interventions are ad-hoc and lack sustainability. Support systems for university student-mothers are essential for ensuring their academic success and overall well-being. Enhanced childcare services, flexible academic schedules, and targeted financial aid are critical components that can help these students thrive in their educational pursuits. The progress in Ghana is promising, but more comprehensive and sustainable strategies are needed to fully support this population.

2.8 Chapter Summary

The literature reviewed so far highlights the unique challenges faced by student mothers, particularly first-time mothers navigating the demands of higher education alongside their new roles and responsibilities. Factors influencing their socio-emotional and psychological experiences, such as financial strain, social support systems, and institutional resources, have been explored in various contexts. However, there remains a need for research specifically focused on the experiences of first-time student mothers in Ghanaian universities like the University of Education, Winneba. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the specific challenges, coping mechanisms, and support systems available to this understudied population. Understanding their experiences is crucial for informing targeted interventions and policies that promote their academic success, personal well-being, and overall development.



CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the method used to undertake research. Thus, the research paradigm, the research design used, the population studied and the sample and sampling procedures that were employed in the study. The research instrument, data collection and data analysis procedures are described in the chapter.

3.2 Research paradigm

This research adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which suggests that human experiences are best understood in their natural contexts. Paradigms are systems of interrelated ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). According to Creswell (2014) interpretivist paradigm shift refers to the move towards a more subjective, qualitative approach to research, emphasizing meaning-making and interpretation. Interpretivist research focuses on understanding participants' perspectives and experiences, rather than objective truth (Hesse-Biber, 2016). It also emphasizes empathy, contextualization, and collaboration between researchers and participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The interpretivist paradigm stresses the importance of placing analysis in context and understanding the world as it is seen from individual accounts (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The interpretivist paradigm differs from the positivist stance, which views the world as based on objective and neutral facts (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Interpretivists assert that research must capture the in-depth experience of subjects and understand this experience in its natural context (Myers, 2009). It relies on meaning rather than measurement-oriented methodologies, such as interviewing or participant observation.

This kind of approach to research magnifies and relies on the relationship between the researchers, and subjects (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This paradigm acknowledges that reality is constructed through individual experiences and social interactions (Guba & Lincoln, 2014). Moreover, interpretivist paradigms have been influential in various fields, including education (Clandinin & Connelly, 2016), healthcare (Finlay, 2016), and social sciences (Hesse-Biber, 2016).

3.3 Research Approach

The study employed a qualitative research approach which uses inductive methods of data gathering (Taherdoost, 2022). Qualitative research is flexible and has an interest in presenting reality through participants' eyes (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). It was employed to gain insight into the socio-emotional and psychological experiences of first-time undergraduate student mothers of the UEW before and after childbirth. Also, the various social support from family members, colleague students, lecturers and the general university community was examined using a qualitative approach. Furthermore, psychological factors and coping mechanisms and how they contribute to the overall well-being and mental health of first-time student mothers at the University of Education, Winneba was qualitatively explored.

Qualitative research allows researchers to access subjective reasons and meanings that lie behind social action (Hammersley, 2012). The meanings attached to experiences are explored and explained in the context in which they occur. For researching phenomena in context or in their natural environments, a qualitative research methodology is helpful. Turner (2010) posits that qualitative technique permits the researcher to ask follow-up questions, the participants to share their tales, and flexibility in the research process. The qualitative research approach allows the

researcher to pursue any concept that sounds challenging, intriguing, or worth examining with the participants (Howitt & Cramer, 2011). It does not limit any party in terms of how the phenomenon is explored in different ways

3.4 Research Design

The research design used for the study was a descriptive phenomenological design. Phenomenology is a wide-ranging form of study in which the researcher looks to gather information that explains how individuals experience a phenomenon and how they feel about it (Iser, 2022). This qualitative research design recognizes that there is no single objective reality; instead, everyone experiences things differently. The outcome is described from the point of view of the participants. However, the researcher is still able to derive a set of findings that can be used to identify themes surrounding the phenomena under study. Therefore, this design was used because it provides in-depth understanding, emphasizes individual perspectives on a situation, detailed exploration of the participants lived experience, also because phenomenology considers the context in which experiences occur, it will enable the examination of how academic and personal environments influences student mothers' experiences, thus the reason for this design.

3.5 Population

According to Taherdoost (2022), the criteria for the inclusion of a unit in a survey are based on the characteristics of respondents who are eligible for participation in the survey. For this reason, the target population for the study population was all first-time undergraduate student mothers of the University of Education Winneba, irrespective of their age, religion, ethnicity, programme of study or current year levels and they are estimated to be forty-eight of student mother population.

3.6 Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

This study focused on first-time undergraduate student mothers at the University of Education, Winneba, whose children are between six weeks and twenty-four months old. Only first-time undergraduate student mothers who were students before becoming mothers are eligible for this research work. This is because of their prior experience of student life before motherhood, excluding those who have experienced motherhood before becoming students. In addition, first-time undergraduate student mothers who were suffering from any significant mental or physical illness, or the child unwell were excluded.

3.7 Study site

The study site was UEW, Winneba campus. The campus is spread over three sites (North, Central and South) within the Effutu Municipality. The central administration of the university is located at the North Campus. The university is run under two broad divisions, that is the academic and non-academic divisions. The academic division of UEW comprises Faculties, Schools, Institutes, Centers and Offices. The non-academic division of UEW is the Central Administration, Municipal Services and Staff and Students' Services. Meanwhile, the Municipal and Staff Students' services include the following: Works and Maintenance (Construction & Woodworking), Electricity and Water, Transport, Grounds and Gardens, Security, Health Services (Clinic & Sanitation), Printing Press, Campus Radio and Halls of Residence (UEW, 2022). The UEW is tasked with training qualified teachers to lead a new national vision for education to refocus Ghana's efforts in the direction of quick economic and social growth. As a strategic goal, the university is to provide a favorable work

environment which promotes equal opportunities for faculties, staff and students including first-time student mothers.

3.8 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The sample was undergraduate first-time student mothers pursuing different academic programmes. All the participants were full-time students, their ages ranged from 22-32 years, and their children's ages ranged from six weeks to twenty-four months. To protect the participants' identity, pseudonyms were used to present extracts from the interviews. The reference was abbreviated as follows for individual interviews: *fsm1*, *fsm2*, *fsm3*, *fsm4*, *fsm5*, *fsm6*, *fsm7* etc. Participants from the focus group are named as “*fcp1*”, “*fcp2*” etc.

The study used convenience and homogenous purposive sampling techniques. Purposive sampling entails selecting participants with specific information that was investigated, and convenience sampling selects people because of their availability (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). The estimated number of first-time undergraduate student mothers among the student mother population was about forty-eight, with accessible population being twenty-seven.

It has previously been recommended that qualitative studies require a minimum sample size of at least between 12 and 20 to reach data saturation (Bekele & Ago, 2022; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Clarke & Braun, 2013; Fugard & Potts, 2014). The study interviewed eighteen first-time undergraduate student mothers who had their children whilst pursuing their academics and had a focus group discussion with a seven-member group. Participants selected for the research were typical of the

population the research seeks to study, and they were easily available. Homogenous purposive sampling was useful for the study, in this case, undergraduate students who are first-time mothers. Despite limitations, such as less generalizability, purposive sampling provides the research with criterion-centered cases focusing specifically on the information that the research is seeking. Furthermore, purposive sampling enabled the researcher to define the target sample and give succinct inclusion criteria to determine which participants to include in the research. Convenience sampling means that students, who are willing and available to participate in the study, were recruited.

Participants were recruited by using available data from the antenatal and postnatal records at the antenatal unit at the University of Education, Winneba clinic. The researcher discussed with the heads of the antenatal unit, to inform her client of the study and those who were willing to partake left their details with her, and they were contacted by the researcher.

3.9 Research Instrument

The research instrument used for this study was semi-structured interview guide (Appendices A & B) for both the individual interview and focus group discussion. A semi-structured interview guide is a research tool used in qualitative research to conduct interviews. It is a flexible guide that outlines the topics to be discussed but also allows for open-ended and spontaneous questions to emerge during the conversation (Bryman, 2016). The guide is "semi-structured" because it balances structure (providing a clear direction) with flexibility, allowing for emergent themes and questions. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). According to Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, (2021), a primary benefit of the semi-structured interview is that it permits

interviews to be focused while still giving the investigator the autonomy to explore pertinent ideas that may come up during the interview.

The guide was developed by the researcher to capture the research objectives under study. Section A of the interview guide collected information on participants' demographic details such as age, level, programme of study, marital status and religious background. In addition, section B had open-ended questions that sought to look at socioemotional challenges by first-time student mothers. One of such questions is *'What socioemotional changes have you personally experienced as a first-time student mother in university.* The subsequent section C looked at psychological challenges and asked questions like *'How has the experience of motherhood impacted your psychological well-being while balancing the demands of university life?'*. Section D looked at the social support systems available for these first-time student mothers. An example of the question asked in this section is *'In what ways do you feel that university policies or practices could be improved to better support the physical challenges faced by first-time student mothers?'*. The last section E looked at the coping mechanisms that the student mothers used to overcome their challenges. An example of the question asked in this section is *"Are there any specific strategies or coping mechanisms that you put in place to help you manage these changes?"*

3.10 Data Collection Procedure

For this study, individual interviews with participants and a focus group discussion were held.

3.10.1 Interviews

An interview allows an interactive conversation to occur between the researcher and the participant and allows the participant to express his/her feelings (Crowe, Inder & Porter, 2015). It also allows both the participant and the researcher to establish a rapport that creates an environment for openness and trust (Crowe et al, 2015). Therefore, the individual interviews draw out issues, which would not be addressed in the focus groups due to their sensitivity. Individual interviews were conducted with first-time student mothers. These participants were first-time undergraduate student mothers who have children between the ages of six weeks and twenty-four months, and both mother and child are in good health, have had the experience of being pregnant and now play motherhood roles after childbirth. The interview was conducted once with each participant and lasted between thirty minutes to one hour per participant. Interviews involve one-on-one interaction between the researcher and a participant. Questions that are relevant to the study's aims and objectives were formulated to assess students' experiences before and after childbirth and tertiary education. For all interviews data collection was done in English language. There was an audio recording of interviews, and this was done with permission from participants.

3.10.2 Focus Group

According to Stewart and Shamdasani (2015), a focus group is an organized conversation where participants are selected based on research criteria to share their thoughts on a particular topic of interest. Focus groups are an effective way to gather data for qualitative research because they offer a forum for group conversations and interactions (Krueger & Casey, 2015). According to Morgan (2018), they present a special chance to investigate group viewpoints, beliefs, and experiences on a certain

subject. This study was best suited for a focus group discussion since it gave the researchers a brief window of time to watch an exchange of ideas on the subject (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). Focus groups offer an opportunity for people to get together and talk about a subject that interests them. They also contribute to the generation of information by allowing the group to share experiences and create meaning (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). First-time student mothers' socioemotional and psychological experiences were the topic covered in this study's focus group. The target population was first time undergraduate student mother whose children were between six weeks and twenty-four months. They were recruited through a social media platform (WhatsApp group), and a seven member group was formed.

The researcher served as the focus group facilitator. During the first portion of the focus group, participants were asked to write down their childcare arrangements. The researcher modeled this process for the participants. Each participant's status and childcare arrangements were discussed considering this write-up. These discussions were guided by an open-ended set of questions based on the research objectives. During the focus group discussion, the researcher noticed some participants with particularly interesting personal stories. Flyvberg (2001) states that such critical cases, whose lived experience provide rich stories, have strategic importance for understanding the research problem. Most of the participants had similar views on the topic as gathered in the individual interviews, and the data gathered was used to validate data from individual interviews. The focus group discussion was recorded, and consent was sought from the participants. Participants were requested to sign a confidentiality pledge to ensure that the information discussed in the focus groups is not shared with anyone outside the discussions.

1 Managing and recording data

There was audio recording during the individual interview sessions and the focus group discussion, after which the audio was transcribed manually. These collected data were transferred to the researcher laptop and secured with password known to only the researcher.

Trustworthiness of Data

In effort to ensure that the current research presents quality results and adheres to producing scientifically valid knowledge, measures were taken to maximize the quality of data and results. Qualitative research terms to ensure the quality of research results include credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability.

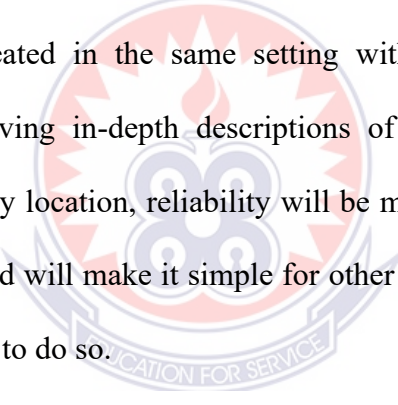
3.11.3 Credibility

As stated by Vasileou, Barnett, Thorpe, and Young (2018), credibility in qualitative research aims to ensure that the study discovered and reported what it set out to investigate. Babbie and Mouton (2005) emphasize that credibility notion is utilized to determine how closely the results match reality. Informed by earlier research, the current study used qualitative methodologies for data gathering and analysis. Additionally, a thorough data gathering and analysis procedure was offered, and all data was displayed exactly as it was given to participants. According to Silverman (2010), qualitative research is susceptible to presenting contradictory facts. According to him, the degree of plausibility and dependability of data and data analysis determines the degree of trustworthiness. This suggests that the credibility of the qualitative researcher depends on their comprehension of the research and their capacity to evaluate it.

The study ensured that all participation was voluntary in order to speak to those who are genuinely willing to share their experience to assure legitimacy. In interviews, iterative questioning was utilized to clarify the information offered by participants and prevent drawing conclusions about the findings. To achieve consistency and repeatability, all data collection techniques must be precise and yield reliable findings. This was done by allowing the participants themselves to contact the researcher and declare their interest in joining the study.

3.11.4 Dependability

Concerned with consistency are the findings of the research, which is dependability. It concerns whether the same participants and research procedures would be used if the study were to be repeated in the same setting with identical results (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). By giving in-depth descriptions of the study setting, participant demographics, and study location, reliability will be maintained. This guarantees that the information provided will make it simple for other researchers who might want to perform the same study to do so.

The logo of the University of Education, Winneba, is a circular emblem. It features a central shield with a cross-like design, surrounded by a wreath. The text 'UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION' is at the top and 'WINNEBA' is at the bottom of the circle. A banner at the bottom reads 'EDUCATION FOR SERVICE'.

3.11.5 Confirmability

Confirmability is to ensure that the findings of the study accurately represent the experiences and opinions of the participants rather than the researcher (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). The researcher is the primary data collector in qualitative research; however, it is impossible to claim that the researcher-maintained objectivity throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting. The way the researcher conducts interviews and extract's themes from the data to present has a big impact on this. The study will make sure that participants are not asked any leading questions during the interviews and that all responses are verbatim recorded to establish confirmability.

3.11.6 Transferability

According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022), transferability is the degree to which research findings can be used in a variety of settings and groups. By supplying and demonstrating precise information regarding the study's setting, participant demographics, and procedures for data collection and analysis, this study will guarantee transferability.

3.12 Ethical Considerations

Permission was sought from and granted by the University of Education, Winneba Clinic; Administration (Appendix C; Permission to administer research instrument letter) to enable me to administer the research instrument to first-time student mothers of the university. The permission obtained offered me the opportunity to introduce myself to the antenatal unit of the clinic. It also helped me in reaching out to first-time student mothers and to establish a good rapport with the respondents. The objectives of the study were also explained to the participants, and they were made aware of the purpose of the research, the procedures involved and how beneficial it will be to the participants,

Each participant's consent was also sought before involving them (and they were at liberty to opt-out from the study at any time they so wished). There was strict adherence to all ethical guidelines (for using human participants) such as voluntary participation, privacy, and confidentiality. Efforts were made to ensure minimal risk. The identity of participants was kept anonymous from any third party. Data and Information of participants was kept confidential, by locking it with a password on the researcher laptop. This study is purely academic work and there were no direct

benefits for participating. The researcher ensured that research subjects incurred no harm.

Positionality

As a Physician Assistant and a mother researching first-time student mothers' socioemotional and psychological experiences, I acknowledge potential biases stemming from my profession and personal experiences. My interactions with patients and understanding of health disparities informed me of my approach. To maintain objectivity, I employed peer debriefing and member checking to ensure validity in the data gathered. This was done by discussing data collected with senior researchers, my supervisor and other colleague researchers. My position as a Physician Assistant may have influenced participants' responses, potentially leading to guarded disclosures. However, my genuine interest in their experiences fostered trust. Through reflexivity, I recognized and addressed potential biases, ensuring data integrity by allowing other colleague researchers to read my gathered and analyzed data.

3.11 Data Analysis Procedure

The thematic analysis used in the research relies on the assumption that patterns of meaning are presented in the data through a process of interpretation (Pervin & Mohktar 2022). The first step in the analysis entailed familiarizing oneself with the data, which includes reading and re-reading transcripts and noting down initial codes. The second step involved generating initial codes across the data set. This step was done by feeding the data in software NVivo 14. The third step entailed searching for

themes. The fourth step was about reviewing themes, while the fifth step was about defining and naming the themes.

The transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method used for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). On analysis, the individual interviews were coded using a step-by-step approach suggested by Pervin and Mokhtar (2022). Similar responses from the participants were put together to form codes, these codes were then categorized. Similar categories were put together to form subthemes to answer the main themes which were the research questions.

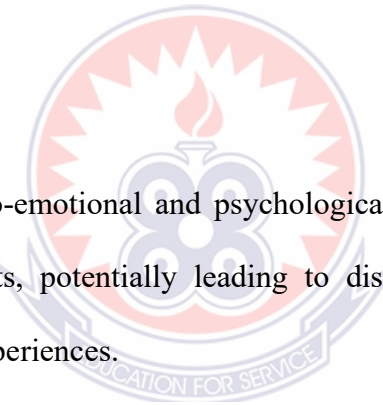
Thematic analysis allows the researcher to determine accurately the relationships between concepts and compare them with the whole content of the data. The themes are phrases or sentences that identify what the data means. They consist of ideas and descriptions with a culture that can be used to explain fundamental events, statements and morals derived from the participant's stories (Crowe, Inder & Porter, 2015). Themes do not require any calculations, and present ideas that are most salient in the data (Crowe et al., 2015).

The following themes and subthemes were identified in the data. First, the theme about socio emotional challenges of first-time student mothers is discussed, and the subtheme details, baby-related challenges, negative emotions, time management and balance, child illness and physical exhaustion. The second theme is about psychological factors for the well-being of first-time student mothers. The subtheme is excitement about having a baby, fear of child deformities, feeling unease and stigma, disturbed thoughts and concerns, knowledge and perceptions of motherhood. The third theme discusses the coping mechanisms used by first-time mothers to

overcome their challenges. The subtheme is positive mindset and resilience, time management and personal beliefs/self-efforts. The final theme details the support systems and resources available to first-time student mothers. The subtheme includes financial, family and institutional support.

Familiarizing oneself with the data entails a vigorous analysis of the data, reading and re-reading (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This means that the research attempts to get a sense of the data objectively, without any preconceived ideas about the data.

Limitations

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- The logo of the University of Education, Winneba, is a circular emblem. It features a central torch with a flame, set against a background of a sunburst or starburst pattern. Below the torch, there is a banner with the text "EDUCATION FOR SERVICE". The entire emblem is encircled by a border.
- i. Discussing socio-emotional and psychological experiences was sensitive for some participants, potentially leading to discomfort or reluctance to fully disclose their experiences.
 - ii. Participants may have provided responses they believe are socially acceptable or favorable rather than their true feelings or experiences which has affected the findings.
 - iii. Participants had difficulty accurately recalling past events or emotions, leading to potential inaccuracies in the data collected.
 - iv. The study had a small sample size due to the specific population of first-time student mothers. This has limited the ability to generalize the findings to all student mothers at the university or to student mothers at other universities.
 - v. Moreover, the results, findings and conclusions of the study are only representative of the participants who agreed to take part in the study and not

the entire first-time student mothers of the university. This is because not every first-time student mother at the university took part in the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the socio-emotional and psychological experiences of first-time undergraduate student mothers in the University of Education, Winneba. The objective on which the exploration was : (1) investigate how first-time undergraduate student mothers experience socio emotional challenges as they balance the demands of motherhood and academics, (2) explore how psychological factors contribute to the overall well-being and mental health of first-time student mothers (3) explore the coping mechanisms used by first-time mothers to overcome their challenges and (4) identify the support systems available to assist first-time student mothers. The results and discussion have been presented based on the research question, and data from individual interviews and focus group discussion.

4.2 Research Questions

4.2.1 Research Question one: How do first-time undergraduate student mothers experience socio-emotional challenges as they balance the demands of motherhood and academics?

First-time student mothers experience various socio-emotional challenges and adaptations as they navigate the demands of motherhood and academics. This research question seeks to explore the factors that cause mothers to experience socio-emotional challenges. The sub themes that emerged from the analysis of the data are baby-related challenges, negative emotions, time management and balance issues, emotional distress related to child illness, and physical exhaustion.

4.2.1.2 Baby-related challenges

First-time student mothers face emotional challenges related to their baby's behaviour and needs. One mother described her baby as a *"professional crier"* saying,

"Sometimes you don't know what is wrong with her, you want to sleep small or read small and she is crying, this girl likes crying, from birth to now."(fsm4)

Another mother expresses frustration and anger when her baby cries and disturbs her, stating,

"Sometimes I get angry at myself, I don't know what to do, those circumstances I just shout at my baby, shouting at her, I feel like she is disturbing me, she doesn't sleep, she likes crying, it is too much and I can't do anything about it."(fsm6)

These experiences highlight the emotional toll that caring for a demanding baby can take on student mothers.

4.2.1.3 Negative emotions

First-time student mothers experience a range of negative emotions, and these include sadness, stress with sleep deprivation and tiredness

On the issue of sadness, one student mother mentioned

"[my baby] makes me worry and sad" (fcp7)

The sudden change in one's lifestyle could bring stress which was narrated by the student mothers. when one described feeling stressed and sleep-deprived, saying,

"I would be stressed, tired and lose sleep. Because after birth the first three months I felt, I was going to go crazy. Because the changes were rapid, fast, I use to sleep alone, suddenly I would have to wake up to care for somebody, it took a big toll on me. The pressure of caring for yourself."(fsm8)

In talking about tiredness,

One mother mentioned how she wakes up every morning feeling body aches rather than feeling relaxed after sleep when she said

"Hmmm, sleep is supposed to make you feel relaxed, but I go to sleep with body aches and wake up with body aches, I'm almost always tired" (fsm10)

These illustrate the emotional strain and exhaustion that student mothers face as they adapt to their new roles.

4.2.1.4 Time management and balance

First-time student mothers struggled with dividing their time between care for their baby and their studies. One mother stated,

"I would have to divide the time since the baby has come and attend to the baby,"(fsm15)

while other expresses concern about not having enough time to learn or rest due to the baby's demands, saying,

"Yes, because I won't get enough time to learn because of the baby, enough time to rest too I won't get because of the baby." (fsm17)

"Sometimes you perform badly in class because you could not learn and prepare enough for the quiz, just like my friend said, you don't have enough time for yourself oo" (fcp3).

These highlight the challenges of balancing the responsibilities of motherhood and academics.

4.2.1.5 Child illness

The study revealed another profound emotional aspect that is the impact of a child's illness on mothers. One mother expressed deep concern about her baby falling ill, expressing her worry that "[my] baby will surely get sick." She further conveyed anticipatory anxiety, stating, *"when my baby is not feeling well, my life comes to a halt because I cannot study until she gets better"(fsm14)*

Another mother recounted the harrowing experience of her child falling ill for the first time, recalling,

"For the first time, my child was sick, as for that one, eei, it was terrible, I really didn't know what to do."(fsm2)

These narratives vividly illustrate the emotional turmoil and sense of helplessness experienced by student mothers when their child is unwell.

4.2.1.5 Physical exhaustion

First-time student mothers also experience physical exhaustion due to the demands of caring for their baby. One mother describes feeling very tired in the morning after breastfeeding during the night, stating,

"By the time morning reaches I will be very tired, because I stay up sometimes most part of the night breastfeeding and attending to the baby" (fsm12)

Another mother mentions getting sleepless nights due to breastfeeding and other responsibilities, saying,

"Getting sleepless night, when I will be breastfeeding during the night and other stuff, and in the morning, I have to go to school." (fsm8)

These quotes illustrate the physical toll that motherhood takes on student mothers as they juggle their various responsibilities.

4.2.2 Research Question two: What psychological factors contribute to the overall well-being and mental health of first-time student mothers?

This question seeks to know the psychological factors that contribute to the overall well-being and mental health of first-time student mothers. The subthemes that emerged from the data gathered include excitement about having a baby, fear of child deformities, feelings of unease and stigma, disturbed thoughts and concerns, and varying knowledge and perceptions of motherhood.

1.2.2.1 Excitement about having a baby

Some first-time student mother's express excitement and anticipation about having a baby. One mother state,

"I was all excited about having a baby, that was all that I was thinking."(fsm10)

Another mother mentions,

"I didn't really ask but I was excited as my sister said because I was married and I was waiting to have a child, that was what was on my mind, ... so when I got pregnant, I was excited ... "(fcp3)

This excitement and positive outlook contributed to their overall well-being and mental health during pregnancy and early motherhood.

1.2.2.2 Fear of child deformities

Some mothers' express concerns and fears about the possibility of their child being born with deformities. One mother shares her thoughts, saying,

"I was thinking about a whole lot of things, is this baby going to be a normal child, because you see other mothers with children with deformities, and sometimes you think that God I don't want my child to be born with deformities."(fsm5)

These fears and anxieties impacted negatively on their mental well-being during pregnancy.

1.2.2.3 Feeling unease and stigma

First-time student mothers may face feelings of unease or stigma in certain situations. One mother describes an incident where she felt ashamed and uncomfortable when her baby was brought to class, and the lecturer questioned her about it. She states,

“And I felt somehow bad because my colleagues were looking at me and I felt ashamed of myself.” (fsm8)

This was confirmed by another first-time student mother in focus group discussion when she said, *“hmm I sent my child to class one time because my caretaker was absent, some of my colleagues made it look like I have sinned by having a child.” (fcp4)*

1.2.2.4 Disturbed thoughts and concerns

Some mothers express disturbed thoughts and concerns about their ability to balance motherhood and their studies. One mother wondered,

“Will it be possible for me to complete this school, should I defer my course and then take care of my baby?” (fsm3)

Another mother mentions the challenges of studying while caring for a crying child at night, stating both at individual interview and focus group

“Especially when we are about to write quizzes, mid semester, as at that moment too, my child will be crying all the night, trying to learn and other stuff. These are all negative perceptions I had.” (fsm9)

“Sometimes I feel like I should stop school and rather be a mother because I can’t study ooo, whether for quiz, assignment or even exams” (fcp3)

These disturbed thoughts and concerns negatively impacted on their mental well-being and overall sense of balance.

4.2.2.5 Knowledge and perceptions of motherhood

First-time student mothers had varying knowledge and perceptions of motherhood, which influenced their psychological well-being. Some mothers view motherhood as a tedious and financially burdensome task, while others see it as a beautiful and transformative experience. One mother state,

"I don't see motherhood as a burden, because I see some mothers and they look fresh and well taken as well. And then about the finance issue, keeping your baby and yourself clean, for others to see you that as for you this woman, after she has given birth, she looks good, having a glowing skin and all that. That is how I see motherhood but I can see that it is a beautiful thing all together."(fsm10)

Another mother emphasizes the comprehensive nature of motherhood, saying,

"Motherhood entails a whole lot, it is not only about bringing forth the child, but you are emotionally attached to the child, you are psychologically attached to the child, everything, your life actually revolves around your child."(fsm4)

4.2.3 Research Question three: What coping mechanisms do first-time mothers use to overcome their challenges?

This research sought to find out how the first-time mothers used their own ways to manage their challenges, some of the strategies they employed to help them face their situation. The sub themes that emerged from the data analysis were time Management, personal beliefs/ self-efforts and Positive mindset and resilience.

4.2.3.1 Time management

Time management was a coping strategy employed by some mothers to balance their responsibilities. One mother explains her approach, saying,

"I would have to divide my time, arrange everything, if I crumple everything up, the burden and pressure will crush you, so you just arrange." (fsm3)

Another mother describes her daily routine:

"What I'm doing now, in the morning I give my child to my mother and go for lectures, then when I close, I come for her and continue." (fsm8)

"We leave our babies with each other especially those of us here, we have form our own small group so that if you don't have lectures some of us can leave our baby with you." (fcp5)

4.2.3.2 Personal beliefs/ Self Efforts

Personal beliefs, such as faith in God, also served as a coping mechanism for some first-time mothers. One mother explains her approach to combining motherhood and studying by stating,

"So, I have to just combine the two and see what God can do." (fsm8)

Mothers rely on their faith to navigate the challenges of balancing their responsibilities as a mother, trusting in a higher power to guide them through difficulties.

4.2.3.3 Positive Mindset and Resilience

Positive mindset and resilience fueled by marital status was another factor that influenced how some first-time mothers coped during their pregnancy. The study revealed being married seemed to provide a sense of readiness and happiness for some mothers, as evident in this quote:

"No, because I was married and I was happy when I realized that I was pregnant."(fsm5).

"Eii being pregnant is a miracle oo, although they say pregnancy is dangerous, I have made up my mind to go through it, I couldn't wait to have my baby" (fcp3).

The mother's marital status and the will to go through any difficulty situation associated with pregnancy appeared to have contributed to their positive outlook and coping mechanism on their pregnancy, reducing the perceived need for counselling or additional support.

4.2.4 Research Question four: What support systems are available to assist first-time student mothers in their socio-emotional and psychological experiences for university life?

This research question sought to know the available external support systems that these mothers get from their partners, other family members and the university community that aids them to balance their dual role. The subtheme that emerged from

the data were financial support, family support and institutional support. Family support emerges as the most prominent support system, with mothers relying heavily on their own mothers and other family members for assistance with childcare while they pursue their university education. Financial support from a husband is also mentioned.

4.2.4.1 Financial Support

Financial support is one of the crucial aspects that first-time student mothers rely on to navigate their university life. In the provided quotes, one mother mentions,

"My husband and I decided on how we were going to share the financial burden,"(fsm1)

And was supported by another participant at focus group when she said

"Although I got pregnant whilst in school instead of studying, my father now adds extra money for the extra care of my boy". (fcp4)

indicating that her husband plays a role in providing financial support. This shared financial responsibility helps alleviate some of the economic pressure that student mothers may face while balancing their studies and parenting duties.

4.2.4.2 Family Support

Family support emerges as a vital resource for first-time student mothers, with many relying heavily on their own mothers for assistance with childcare. One mother states,

"I made arrangements with my mother, to come and help me take care of the child since I'm in school, I would be needing her help to care for the baby, and she is here with me."(fsm3)

These findings highlight the crucial role that mothers play in providing childcare support, enabling student mothers to attend lectures and continue their education. Additionally, some mothers receive support from other family members, such as brothers, even after getting married, as evident in this quote:

"My brothers, although I'm married, my brothers have not stopped taking care of me." (fsm2)

4.2.4.3 Institutional Support

Some of the first-time mothers mentioned some of the institutional support which she claimed was not enough

"My department has a breastfeeding room but there is no one there that you can leave your child with" (fsm15)

"Sometime we wish there was even a daycare run by the school where we leave our children and pick them up, because if there is one, I'm not aware". (fcp7).

4.3 Discussion

This study explored the socio-emotional and psychological challenges of first-time student mothers at the University of Education, Winneba. It also looked at the support systems available to assist first-time student mothers and the coping mechanisms first-time student mothers use to overcome their challenges. The results show that first-time student mothers face many challenges in terms of being full-time students and mothers. The analysis identified several themes in relation to the results found on the experience of first-time motherhood by students. The discussion is presented based on the following topics: the socio-emotional experiences of first-time student mothers, psychological experiences of student mothers, coping mechanisms first-time student mothers use to overcome challenges of motherhood and education and the support systems available to first-time student mothers excel in a university environment.

4.3.1 Socio-emotional Challenges

The findings reveal a complex interplay of socioemotional challenges faced by first-time student mothers, mirroring findings from numerous studies on this vulnerable population. These challenges, far from being isolated incidents, form a tapestry of interconnected experiences that significantly impact their academic journey and overall well-being, often mirroring the struggles documented amongst student parents in various global contexts. The findings poignantly illustrate the experiences many first-time student mothers feel in the face of motherhood's emotional demands, a finding consistent with Lester et al.'s work (2017) on first-in-family women transitioning into university life. While some acknowledge the need for mental and emotional readiness, others confess to not having fully grasped the magnitude of the socioemotional challenges they would undergo. This lack of anticipation, echoing observations by Serano et al. (2022) on stress factors among rural first-year students, highlights a critical gap between the perceived and actual realities of being a student mother, leaving them grappling with unexpected emotional turmoil. This unpreparedness, as highlighted by Mayer (2009) in their research on African American mothers, can be attributed to various factors, including societal expectations that romanticize motherhood, limited pre-natal education focusing primarily on physical aspects, and a lack of open dialogues surrounding the emotional complexities of early parenthood. Adding to their emotional burden are the multifaceted challenges associated with caring for a newborn while simultaneously trying to meet academic demands.

The constant juggling act between attending to their infants' needs and fulfilling academic responsibilities creates a constant state of stress and exhaustion, a struggle mirrored in Barnes' study (2013) on challenges faced by teenage mothers re-entering

schools in Kenya. Sleep deprivation, a common experience for new mothers, further exacerbates these challenges, impacting their cognitive abilities, emotional regulation, and overall academic performance. This relentless cycle of exhaustion and pressure, similar to findings by Nelson, Froehner and Gault (2013) on resilience in school-going teenage mothers, can leave them feeling overwhelmed and inadequate in both their roles, leading to feelings of guilt, frustration, and resentment. The participants account further emphasize the pervasive nature of negative emotions experienced by these student mothers. Feelings of sadness, anxiety, and worry become unwelcome companions, fueled by a constant fear for their child's well-being, financial constraints, and the daunting task of balancing their dual roles. These negative emotions, if left unaddressed, can have a detrimental impact on their mental health, leading to anxiety disorders, depression, and a diminished sense of self-worth, echoing concerns raised by Anane et al. (2021) regarding barriers to addressing mental health in childbearing women in Ghana.

Time management emerges as a significant point of contention in their lives. The finite nature of time becomes even more apparent as they strive to allocate it judiciously between their academic pursuits, childcare responsibilities, and personal needs. The lack of time for self-care, socializing, and personal development can lead to feelings of isolation, resentment, and a loss of personal identity. This constant struggle for balance, a recurring theme in research on parenting stress like the one by Shefer et al. (2014), can leave them feeling like they are constantly falling short, further contributing to their stress and anxiety. The study's findings also shed light on the impact of child illness on the already fragile emotional equilibrium of these student mothers. The fear and anxiety associated with a sick child, coupled with the pressure of catching up on missed schoolwork, can be overwhelming. This situation

often presents a dilemma: prioritize their child's health or their academic responsibilities. This impossible choice, a common theme found across studies on student parents, can lead to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and resentment towards their situation. Furthermore, the physical exhaustion that accompanies motherhood, particularly in the initial months, cannot be underestimated. The constant demands of breastfeeding, sleepless nights, and caring for a newborn take a toll on their physical and emotional reserves. This physical depletion, combined with the emotional labor of motherhood, can leave them feeling depleted, overwhelmed, and ill-equipped to handle the demands of their academic life, a finding corroborated by numerous studies on the impact of sleep deprivation on cognitive function and emotional regulation.

4.3.2 Psychological Factors for Well Being

The findings do not just expose the socioemotional challenges faced by these women; it delves into the psychological factors influencing their well-being. This exploration revealed a nuanced understanding of their inner landscape, echoing themes found in broader research on motherhood and well-being, particularly among student populations. These findings highlight a spectrum of emotions experienced by these women, ranging from the excitement of impending motherhood to the fear of potential child deformities. This blend of joy and anxiety aligns with Baakeleng and Bam (2022) findings on the fluctuating psychological well-being of undergraduate students, suggesting that the transition to motherhood adds another layer of complexity to their emotional lives.

While the anticipation of a child brings immense joy, the fear of the unknown, particularly concerning the child's health, weighs heavily on their minds. This

resonates with Miller & Sorrells-Jones (2019) exploration of well-being in employed mothers, where the child's well-being is intrinsically linked to the mother's own sense of peace and happiness. The findings further reveal that the excitement surrounding the baby is often tempered by feelings of unease and stigma, particularly within the academic environment. This sense of being judged or not belonging resonates with the experiences of marginalized groups navigating academic spaces, as highlighted in Lester et al.'s work (2017) on first-in-family women in universities. The societal expectation to seamlessly integrate motherhood with academic pursuits can leave these women feeling like they must constantly prove themselves, adding to their emotional burden. This aligns with research on the "mental load" of motherhood, where women often bear the brunt of societal expectations and invisible labor associated with child-rearing.

Adding to their psychological burden are the disturbed thoughts and concerns that often accompany their unpreparedness towards those experiences. The fear of judgment, financial instability, and uncertainty about the future can lead to anxiety, depression, and a sense of being overwhelmed. This echoes findings by Anane et al. (2021) on the barriers to addressing mental health in Ghanaian childbearing women, highlighting the need for accessible and culturally sensitive mental health services for this demographic. The study emphasizes that these women are not simply grappling with the practicalities of a being a mother and student but also the emotional and psychological turmoil that can significantly impact their well-being. However, the findings also unveil the resilience and strength of these women, highlighting their diverse knowledge and perceptions of motherhood. While some view it as a burdensome task, others embrace it as a transformative and empowering experience. This aligns with Kamanzi (2019) research on psychological well-being, emphasizing

the importance of personal growth and self-acceptance in navigating life's challenges. The study suggests that despite the challenges, many student mothers find immense meaning and purpose in motherhood, drawing strength from their newfound roles. This resonates with Gerrard and Roberts (2007) work on the dimensions of psychological well-being, where purpose in life is identified as a key factor contributing to overall well-being. The study's findings highlight the importance of understanding the psychological complexities faced by first-time student mothers. Their experiences are not homogenous; they are shaped by a complex interplay of individual perceptions, societal expectations, and institutional support systems. Recognizing this complexity is crucial for developing effective interventions and support mechanisms that cater to their unique needs and empower them to thrive both academically and personally.

4.3.3 Coping Mechanisms

Students' views and experience of 'balancing' the roles of student and mother are consistent with previous research results in that students see no perfect balance of the roles but they manage (Estes, 2011; Funiba, 2011; Story, 1999). Previous research (Bosch, 2013; Buteau, 2007; Brown & Amankwaa, 2007; Estes, 2011) has shown that students have managed to perform their roles despite the challenges they face, such as not having enough for themselves or their child. Students spoke about the need to move on and 'be fine' despite having difficulties because they needed to complete their qualifications. For example, most felt compelled to succeed because other students expect them to know their work. Another participant mentioned that she feels that she needs to work harder, to prove to her children that she is successful. First-time student mothers needed to push themselves to find a balance between the roles,

but for those living away from their children they had to put more emphasis on the needs of their student roles.

For students who lived with their child at home and still attended university, it was the opposite as they felt that their mother role received more attention. Most studies have found that student mothers value education and see their qualifications as paths to a good career path (Funiba, 2011; Mayer, 2009; Story, 1999; Taukeni, 2014). In this research, mothers asserted that they valued being able to contribute economically to their households while at the same time being a mother to their children. The balancing the student mothers do is evident in the way they try to maintain a good relationship with their family and perform well in their academic careers, this the first-time student mothers demonstrate by showing positive mindset and resilience. Student mothers are in a role where demands can be rewarding but motivational because of the positive energy they meet the roles with. This suggests that they are at an advantage to influence the way in which their roles are portrayed and exercised. For first-time student mothers, it would be meaningful in the sense that attaining university education opens a new world of opportunities for both mother and child. The experience of student mothers is also meaningful in that understanding it potentially contributes to the creation of effective university strategies and programs to help student mothers achieve their goals in higher education.

Student mothers play a role that is different and possibly the hardest role to play while pursuing tertiary education. Blending the two roles of student and mother is especially significant in determining the resilience of women and serves to challenge the perceptions of women as naturally fragile, dependent and irrational beings. Becoming a mother for the first time is particularly significant and poses many challenges for the

new mother, however, research shows that students have managed to do both roles (Buteau, 2007; Estes, 2011; Story, 1999). The first-time student mothers also feel their belief in the supernatural helps them to cope with their situation. Student mothers stated that they do cope despite the many challenges that come with their dual roles. Despite the feelings of shame and guilt associated with the ideals of mothering and being ‘nontraditional’ students, student mothers use private coping systems to meet their demands. As stated in the literature above, societies reinforce and recreate dominant ideals for generations. Although the dominant ideals serve the greater good and could be said to encourage ‘good morals’, it should be noted that generations of women have changed and so have their social circumstances. This means that the context in which women fall pregnant and start families has also changed, and societal structures should acknowledge the transitions this recognition might mean that students do not suffer at university by only accessing private support. Students should be enabled to exist with their dual identities in the spaces they occupy, that is at home and at the university.

4.3.4 Support systems

The findings of the study go beyond identifying challenges to highlight the crucial role of support systems in the lives of first-time student mothers. This aspect of the study aligns with a growing body of research emphasizing the importance of comprehensive support for student parents in higher education, echoing findings from various global contexts. The study identifies four primary sources of support: financial, familial, institutional, and counselling. This categorization reflects the multi-faceted nature of support required by this demographic, acknowledging that their needs extend beyond the traditional academic sphere. This resonates with the

multi-tiered system of supports framework, which emphasizes a holistic approach to student well-being, addressing academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs.

Financial support emerges as a critical need, aligning with findings from studies like Richardson & Harrington (2022) exploration of stress factors among rural first-year students. The financial burden of childcare, coupled with the costs of education, can be overwhelming for student mothers, often leading to difficult choices between their education and their children's well-being. The study suggests that access to financial aid, scholarships, and on-campus childcare subsidies could significantly alleviate this burden, enabling these women to focus on their studies without compromising their families' well-being. Family support, particularly from partners and extended family members, plays a crucial role in providing emotional, practical, and childcare assistance. This finding aligns with Mayer's (2009) research on African American mothers, highlighting the importance of strong family networks in navigating the challenges of motherhood. However, the study also acknowledges that not all student mothers have access to reliable family support, emphasizing the need for alternative support structures for those without such networks. Institutional support, encompassing resources and services provided by the university, is identified as a key factor influencing the academic success and overall well-being of students. This aligns with Lynch's (2008) emphasis on supportive learning environments that cater to diverse student needs. The study suggests that universities have a responsibility to create a supportive and inclusive environment for student parents, providing access to affordable childcare, flexible scheduling options, lactation rooms, and dedicated support groups.

Counselling as a support system for psychological well-being, the mind of the first-time student mothers needs to be supported alongside the physical support gotten, this will ensure a wholistic outcome for the student mothers in their dual role, encompassing community organizations, government programs, and non-profit initiatives, can provide additional resources and assistance to student mothers. This finding highlights the importance of collaboration between universities management and counsellors in creating a comprehensive support network for this demographic. This aligns with the principles of community-engaged scholarship, emphasizing the interconnectedness of universities and their surrounding communities in addressing societal challenges. The study's findings iterate the need for a multi-pronged approach to supporting first-time student mothers in higher education. By addressing their financial constraints, providing access to affordable childcare, fostering a supportive campus environment, and connecting them with external resources, counselling services, universities can empower these women to succeed academically while navigating the joys and challenges of motherhood.

4.3.5 Findings in the context of Theoretical Framework

This study explored the socioemotional and psychological experiences of first-time student mothers, offering valuable insights that resonate with Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the profound influence of social interactions on human behavior and development. This theory illuminates several key findings within the study. Firstly, observational learning, a core principle of Social Cognitive Theory, is evident in how student mothers develop perceptions of motherhood. Some perceive it negatively, influenced by observations of hardship, while others embrace it positively, having witnessed fulfilling experiences. This highlights the impact of diverse role models on shaping individual perspectives and

coping mechanisms. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of social support and its link to self-efficacy, another crucial aspect of SCT. Counseling emerges as a recommended coping strategy, particularly for unplanned pregnancies. This aligns with SCT's emphasis on social support networks as vital for bolstering self-efficacy, the belief in one's capacity to succeed. Counseling provides a supportive space for building confidence and skills to navigate the complexities of student motherhood.

The study also exemplifies SCT's principle of reciprocal determinism, which posits a dynamic interplay between personal factors, environment, and behavior. Student mothers' pre-existing knowledge, perceptions of motherhood, and personal challenges, such as financial concerns, represent personal factors influencing their experiences. Simultaneously, the university environment, availability of support services like counseling, and societal expectations constitute environmental factors shaping their adaptation. Their coping mechanisms, including self-efforts /personal beliefs and time management, exemplify behaviors influenced by this interplay of personal and environmental factors. In conclusion, the study's findings, viewed through the lens of Social Cognitive Theory, underscore the significant influence of social and environmental factors on the experiences of first-time student mothers. Recognizing these influences can guide the development of comprehensive support systems that empower these students to thrive.

4.3.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined the substantial socio-emotional and psychological experiences encountered by first-time student mothers attending the University of Education,

Winneba. These students frequently grapple with emotional fluctuations, stress, and anxiety stemming from the dual responsibilities of motherhood and academic commitments, compounded by societal expectations and stigmas. The findings revealed a deficiency in adequate psychological preparation and support systems, such as childcare, flexible academic schedules, and counseling services, which exacerbates feelings of isolation and negatively impacts their academic performance. While some mothers employ coping strategies, including seeking support from family and managing their time effectively, these approaches are often impeded by external constraints, including financial difficulties. The findings underscore the need for enhanced institutional support and policies to assist student mothers in navigating their multiple roles, thereby promoting their well-being and academic success.



CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter synthesizes the key findings of this study on the socio-emotional and psychological experiences of first-time student mothers at the University of Education, Winneba. It further presents conclusions drawn from these findings, offers recommendations for various stakeholders, and suggests avenues for future research.

5.2 Summary of Study

This section summarizes the key findings from the study.

5.2.1 Socio-emotional Challenges

The study revealed that first-time student mothers at the University of Education, Winneba, face significant socio-emotional challenges, through baby-Related challenges in that first-time student mothers had a difficulty separating from their children and that sometimes their children's illness made life unbearable for them which affected them emotionally. Negative Emotions such as worry, sadness, stress, and tiredness. The mothers sometimes have a feeling of guilt, anxiety, and stress leading to decreased confidence level, self-doubt and fear of failure and academic underperformance. The mothers had difficulty balancing academic and parenting responsibilities, which sometimes brought role conflict and stress in their lives. The first-time student mothers also had insufficient time for self-care and personal activities because they had to balance their time between their motherhood duties and academic lives. The student mothers constantly worry about the health of their children, leading to emotional stress. Some of the first-time mothers sometimes missed classes to attend to their baby's health. First-time student mothers also

experience physical exhaustion due to sleep deprivation and too much physical demands of caring for the baby. This negatively affected the mental and emotional health of the student mother.

5.2.2 Psychological Wellbeing

The study also explored the psychological experiences of first-time student mothers, revealing that emotional strain and excitement of impending motherhood are factors that affected their psychological well-being. Despite the challenges that first-time student mothers experienced, their anticipation of becoming a mother brought joy and excitement. This positive emotion provided them with a source of motivation and resilience, helping to counterbalance some of the stress. Fears of potential childhood deformities and feelings of unease and stigma also affected them since they felt if their baby is born deformed would worry them. Some of the student mothers reported experiencing stigma associated with being a young first-time student mother, leading to feelings of unease and isolation. This stigma exacerbated feelings of inadequacy which contribute to a sense of being judged or misunderstood.

5.2.2 Coping Mechanisms

The study showed that first-time student mothers employ various coping mechanisms to manage their unique challenges. The first-time students' mothers admitted that effective time management helped them as student mothers to balance academic responsibilities and parenting duties. They did these by using planners, setting priorities, and creating schedules which helped reduce stress and increase productivity for them. Some of the first-time mothers had a personal belief in God, and also consciously made time to engage in self-care activities, such as exercise, hobbies, and relaxation techniques. These activities were essential for managing stress levels. Also,

some first-time mothers who found themselves in the situation of motherhood and schooling had a sense of hope and determination focusing on their strengths and achievements which boosts their confidence and motivation.

5.2.3 Support Systems

Various support systems are available to assist first-time student mothers in navigating their experiences effectively. Institutional Support Some of the departments in UEW have rest and breast-feeding rooms for student mothers. The first time-student mothers had support from family members such as husbands, mothers, siblings and external family members. The family support is considered very crucial as its absence would have left most first-time student mothers stranded. Financial Support from their husbands and sometimes other members of was spent on baby products, academic materials, utility bills and feeding and this helped them very much.

5.3 Conclusions

Based on the findings presented in the previous section, this study draws the following conclusions regarding the socio-emotional and psychological experiences of first-time student mothers at the University of Education, Winneba:

- i. **Socio-emotional challenges:** First-time student mothers face significant socio-emotional challenges due to the need to balance multiple roles, baby-related challenges, the negative emotions they feel, their inability to balance time well for their dual roles, child illnesses and physical exhaustion. These challenges can deeply affect their mental health and overall well-being. Addressing these socio-emotional challenges requires a comprehensive approach, including institutional support from educational institutions,

accessible childcare services, and community-based support networks. Providing these resources can help first-time student mothers manage their multiple roles more effectively, reduce physical exhaustion, and ensure they have the support needed to succeed both academically and personally.

ii. **Psychosocial Well-being:** The psychosocial well-being of first-time student mothers is significantly influenced by the challenges of emotional strain, excitement of impending motherhood, fear of potential childhood deformities, and feelings of unease and stigma. These factors can lead to high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. However, the excitement of impending motherhood and the sense of purpose it brings can provide emotional resilience. Comprehensive support systems, including mental health services, peer support groups, and educational accommodations, are essential to help these mothers manage their responsibilities and promote a positive motherhood experience. Addressing these needs can enhance their psychosocial well-being and ensure they have the support necessary to succeed both academically and personally.

iii. **Coping mechanisms:** First-time student mothers rely on a combination of time management, social support, professional help, self-care, educational accommodations, and a positive mindset to cope with their unique challenges. These coping mechanisms are essential for maintaining their psychological well-being and achieving success in both their academic and parenting roles. Providing additional support and resources can further enhance their ability to manage these responsibilities effectively.

- iv. **Support systems:** A combination of institutional support, counselling, family support, financial assistance, health and wellness programs, and mentorship can significantly enhance the socio-emotional and psychological well-being of first-time student mothers. By leveraging these support systems, student mothers can better manage their responsibilities, reduce stress, and achieve success in their university life.

These conclusions highlight the urgent need for action to better support first-time student mothers at the University of Education, Winneba.

5.4 Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn from this study, the following recommendations are offered to various stakeholders to better support the socio-emotional and psychological well-being of first-time student mothers at the University of Education, Winneba:

5.4.1 Recommendations for the University

Enhance Existing Support Services: The University should prioritize enhancing existing support services to better cater for the unique needs of first-time student mothers. This includes:

- i. Increase the availability of affordable, high-quality childcare facilities on or near campus. This could involve partnering with local childcare providers or establishing a dedicated childcare center for student parents.
- ii. Review and revise financial aid policies to ensure greater accessibility and support for student mothers, who often face greater financial constraints.

Consider offering specialized scholarships or grants for this student population.

- iii. Provide specialized academic counseling services tailored to the needs of student mothers. This could involve offering flexible appointment schedules, guidance on balancing academic and family responsibilities, and support in navigating university resources.
- iv. Establish peer mentoring programs or support groups specifically for first-time student mothers. This would provide a safe and supportive space for them to connect, share experiences, and build relationships with others facing similar challenges.

5.4.2 Recommendations for Policy Makers

- i. Policymakers at the national level should review and consider revising existing policies related to higher education funding, childcare subsidies, and parental leave to better support student parents, particularly mothers who often bear the brunt of childcare responsibilities.
- ii. Implement policies that incentivize universities to provide comprehensive support services for student parents, such as allocating dedicated funding for childcare facilities, financial aid programs, and family-friendly policies.

5.4.3 Recommendations for student mothers on psychological well-being

- i. Proactively seek out support networks, both within the university and in the wider community. Connect with other student mothers, join support groups, and do not hesitate to reach out to university services for assistance.

- ii. Prioritize self-care amidst the demands of motherhood and academic life. Make time for activities that bring you joy and help you manage stress, whether it's exercise, spending time in nature, or connecting with loved ones.
- iii. Do not be afraid to advocate for your needs as a student mother. Communicate your challenges to professors, academic advisors, and university administration. Your voice matters in shaping a more supportive and inclusive learning environment.

By implementing these recommendations, the University of Education, Winneba can take significant strides in creating a more equitable and supportive environment for first-time student mothers, empowering them to thrive academically, personally, and professionally.

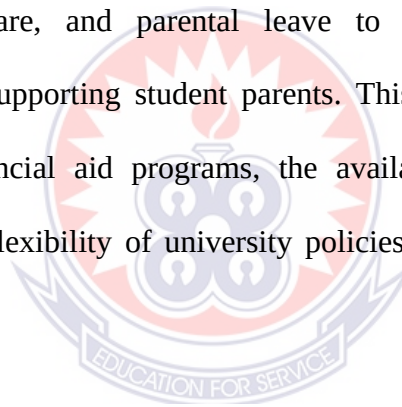
5.5 Future Directions

This study provides a valuable starting point for understanding the experiences of first-time student mothers at the University of Education, Winneba. However, further research is needed to deepen our understanding and inform more effective interventions. The following are potential avenues for future research:

- i. Conduct longitudinal studies to track the experiences of first-time student mothers over an extended period, from their entry into the university through graduation and beyond. This would provide insights into the long-term impacts of their experiences on their academic achievements, career trajectories, and overall well-being.
- ii. Conduct comparative studies across different universities in Ghana and other contexts to understand how institutional policies, cultural norms, and

socioeconomic factors influence the experiences of first-time student mothers. This would allow for the identification of best practices and the development of context-specific interventions.

- iii. Develop and evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions aimed at supporting first-time student mothers. This could include testing the impact of peer mentoring programs, tailored academic support services, or financial assistance programs on their academic performance, retention rates, and overall well-being.
- iv. Conduct a comprehensive analysis of existing national policies related to higher education, childcare, and parental leave to identify gaps and areas for improvement in supporting student parents. This could involve examining the adequacy of financial aid programs, the availability of affordable childcare options, and the flexibility of university policies to accommodate the needs of student parents.



By pursuing future research directions, we can contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by first-time student mothers in higher education. This knowledge will be essential for informing evidence-based policies, programs, and practices that empower these students to succeed and reach their full potential.



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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide for Individual Interview

DEMOGRAPHIC

Can you please tell me your name, age and religion?

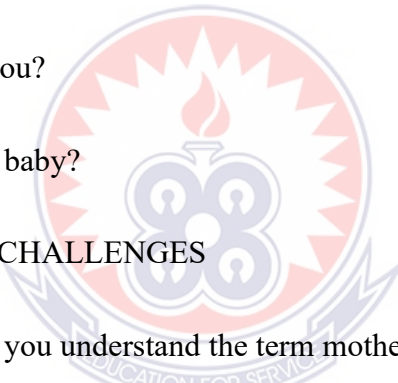
Are you resident on campus or non-resident?

Do you stay with you child or away from your child?

What level are you?

How old is your baby?

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES

- 
1. How did you understand the term motherhood before giving birth?
 2. What does motherhood mean to you now?
 3. What emotional changes were you expecting to face as a first-time mother and student?
 4. Did you for see how these emotional changes awaiting you would affect your academic demands?
 5. How has your emotional resilience and ability helped you to handle these emotional changes that has evolved since becoming a mother?
 6. Can you share any instances where your emotional well-being became a hindrance to your academic life?

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

1. What psychological challenges were you personally expecting to face?
Were you prepared?

2. Did you know that the experience of motherhood will affect your psychological well-being while being a student too?
3. How did you build your psychological resilience and self confidence
4. Did you expect stereotyping or judgmental comments from lecturers, classmates and even friends?
5. How prepared were you to deal with them?

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

1. What support system did you put in place before becoming a mother in respect to care of your child?
2. What was some of the support systems that you were relying on that made you start the journey of motherhood as a student?
3. Have they made you a success or failed you?
4. Which way do you think the university was going to support you as a mother?
5. In what ways did you think the university policies or practices was going to improve to support you?
6. In your opinion what support systems could be put in place by the university to better address the issues of first-time mothers.

COPING MECHANISMS

1. Are there any specific strategies or coping mechanisms that you put in place to help you manage these emotional changes during this phase?
2. Did you have any psychological support system?
3. Did you seek professional counselling before motherhood, if yes what made you?
4. If no, why not?
5. If yes, how effective has it been to you?
6. Would you recommend counselling for first time mothers and why?

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide for Focus Group Discussion

A piece of paper was provided for participants to write what their childcare arrangements.

Section 1: Socioemotional Changes

1. How has becoming a mother affected your sense of identity and self-concept?
2. Can you describe any changes in your relationships with family and friends since becoming a student mother?
3. How do you manage the emotional demands of motherhood and academics?
4. Have you experienced any feelings of guilt, anxiety, or stress related to balancing motherhood and studies?

Section 2: Psychological Factors

1. How do you think your mental health has been affected by becoming a student mother?
2. Have you experienced any symptoms of depression, anxiety, or burnout?
3. How do you prioritize self-care and stress management?
4. Can you describe any emotional challenges you've faced as a student mother?

Section 3: Coping Mechanisms

1. What strategies do you use to balance academic responsibilities with motherhood?
2. How do you manage your time and prioritize tasks?

3. Have you developed any self-care practices to maintain your well-being?

Section 4: Support Systems

1. What support systems are available to you as a student mother (e.g., family, friends, university resources)?
2. How accessible and helpful are these support systems?
3. Can you describe any gaps in support that you've experienced?
4. What additional resources or support would you like to see available for student mothers?



APPENDIX C

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
1. Socio-emotional Challenges	Baby-related challenges Negative emotions Time Management and Balance Child illness Physical exhaustion
2. Psychological Factors for Well Being	Excitement about having a baby Fear of child deformities Disturbed thoughts and concerns Feeling unease and stigma Knowledge and perceptions of motherhood
3. Coping mechanisms	Positive Mindset and Resilience Time management Personal Beliefs/Self Efforts
4. Support Systems	Financial support Family support Institutional support Counselling

APPENDIX D

Permission Letter



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2nd August, 2024

Nana Borsah Ackah
Sacred Heart Catholic Church
P.O. Box 36
Winneba

Dear Ms. Ackah,

RE: PERMISSION TO COLLECT DATA

I am pleased to inform you that your request to collect data for your thesis titled "*Exploring the Socioemotional and Psychological Preparedness of First-time Undergraduate Student Mothers*" has been approved. This research is crucial in understanding the unique challenges faced by this demographic and in developing strategies to better support them.

Please, if you need any assistance do not hesitate to contact the administration of the Directorate of University Health Services. We are committed to supporting you in your academic endeavors and look forward to the valuable contributions your research will bring.

We wish you the best of luck with your research.

Yours sincerely,



Yaw Obeng Osei-Mensah
Senior Administrative Assistant, Health Services
For: Director, Health Services