The Hidden Drivers of Substance Abuse: Understanding the Role of Childhood Trauma, Peer Influence, and Emotional Dysregulation among Adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria

By

Kikelomo Margaret Ilori
The Post Graduate College, University of Ibadan, Nigeria
kikeilori@gmail.com

Salaudeen Kehinde Kenneth
Department of Counselling and Human Developments Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria
kehindekenneth8@gmail.com

Gloria Oyeniran
Department of Counselling and Human Developments Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria
oyenirangloria5@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explored the relationship between childhood maltreatment, peer influence, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was employed, and three Local Government Areas (LGAs) Mushin, Agege, and Ikorodu were purposively selected based on their high population density and prevalence of socio-economic challenges. The study targeted adolescents aged 13 to 19 years currently enrolled in public secondary schools within these LGAs. A total of 150 adolescents participated, with 50 selected from each LGA using snowball sampling. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire that assessed demographic information, childhood maltreatment (using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire – Short Form), peer influence (via the Peer Group Influence Scale), emotional dysregulation (measured by the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale), and substance abuse (using the CRAFFT Screening Tool). The instruments were validated by experts and showed strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > 0.75) in a pilot test. Data collection occurred over three weeks, with ethical clearance obtained from the Lagos State Ministry of Education. Informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians, and assent was secured from participants. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's Product Moment Correlation, and Multiple Regression Analysis in SPSS version 26. The study found significant relationships between childhood maltreatment, peer influence, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse among adolescents, highlighting the importance of these factors in understanding adolescent substance use. The findings suggest the need for targeted interventions that address these psychosocial factors to prevent and reduce substance abuse among adolescents in Lagos State.

Keywords: Childhood maltreatment, peer influence, emotional dysregulation, substance abuse

Introduction

Childhood maltreatment is a global public health issue with enduring consequences on psychological and behavioural development. The World Health Organization (2020) estimates that approximately one billion children aged 2–17 years' experience various forms of violence or neglect annually. Childhood maltreatment, comprising physical, emotional, and sexual abuse as

well as neglect, is strongly associated with impaired emotional regulation, mental health disorders, and increased vulnerability to substance use. Neurobiological studies suggest that early trauma disrupts brain structures responsible for impulse control and emotional regulation, contributing to risky behaviours such as substance abuse (Norman et al., 2012; Offor et al., 2024). In high-income countries, evidence consistently links maltreatment to substance use disorders, with peer influence and emotional dysregulation acting as key mediating pathways (Hovdestad et al., 2015). Similarly, studies in low- and middle-income countries, including Nigeria, show that childhood maltreatment has a profound impact on adolescent substance abuse, further highlighting the need for culturally relevant interventions and support systems tailored to address these interconnected issues.

Across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including many African nations, child maltreatment often remains unaddressed due to limited awareness, under-resourced child protection systems, and cultural norms that perpetuate violence. Recent African-based research indicates a growing prevalence of trauma-related behaviours in adolescence, including substance abuse, often exacerbated by peer influence and inadequate emotional regulation skills (Meinck et al., 2017; Ndetei et al., 2016). These dynamics are worsened by economic deprivation, unstable family environments, and exposure to community violence. Although progress has been made in conceptualising these issues, empirical studies exploring the mediational roles of emotional dysregulation and peer influence in Africa remain limited. Additionally, there is a significant gap in interventions specifically tailored to address the cultural, social, and economic contexts of African adolescents, making it essential to develop region-specific strategies to mitigate the effects of childhood maltreatment and associated risky behaviours such as substance abuse.

In Nigeria, the intersection between childhood maltreatment and adolescent substance use is particularly salient. National data reveal alarming levels of physical punishment, emotional neglect, and sexual violence affecting children, with lifelong consequences for mental health and behavioural adjustment (UNICEF Nigeria, 2021). Urban areas like Lagos State, marked by intense socio-economic inequality and rapid urbanisation, present an ecosystem where these challenges are especially pronounced. Within such settings, peer groups often serve as alternative support systems for maltreated youths, albeit frequently reinforcing maladaptive coping behaviours such as smoking, drinking, and drug use (Atilola et al., 2014; Omopo et al., 2024).

This makes it critical to understand the interplay between childhood trauma, peer influence, and emotional dysregulation, as these factors amplify the risk of substance abuse among adolescents in these environments. Addressing these interconnected issues requires tailored intervention strategies that focus not only on the individual but also on their broader social context.

Peer influence during adolescence is an essential psychosocial variable that shapes behavioural choices. Adolescents affected by trauma may gravitate towards deviant peer groups to compensate for deficient emotional support at home, a process linked to increased experimentation with substances (Omopo, 2024; Ogunbowale et al., 2025). Similarly, emotional dysregulation characterised by difficulty in identifying, understanding, or managing emotional experiences—is often a by-product of unresolved trauma and has been shown to predispose individuals to impulsive decision-making and reliance on substances to numb psychological pain (Omopo, 2024; Offor & Omopo, 2025). Studies such as Omopo, Offor, and Ogunbowale (2024) have revealed that both peer influence and emotional instability significantly predict substance abuse in psychiatric and correctional populations, underscoring their mediating roles. In addition, the role of peer influence in shaping maladaptive coping behaviours is amplified in environments where adolescents lack positive role models or support systems, thus increasing the risk of substance abuse. Emotional dysregulation, compounded by childhood trauma, further heightens susceptibility to peer pressure, making it essential to address both factors in interventions aimed at mitigating substance use among vulnerable adolescents.

Although much of the existing literature in Nigeria has focused on psychiatric patients or correctional inmates (Omopo & Odedokun, 2024a; 2024b), there is a noticeable research gap regarding in-school adolescents who are presumed to be more socially integrated. Yet, even among this demographic, reports of drug abuse and emotional difficulties are rising (Omopo, 2023; Asiyanbi et al., 2025). The influence of trauma, especially in the context of educational environments, remains under-investigated. Additionally, socio-economic stressors in urban school settings often create pressure-cookers for emotional instability and social comparison, further fuelling maladaptive coping strategies.

Lagos State, Nigeria's most populous and urbanised region, provides a critical backdrop for this investigation. With increasing access to substances, porous school surveillance systems, and minimal school-based psychological interventions, adolescents who have experienced childhood

maltreatment are at heightened risk of adopting destructive behaviours (Omopo, 2024). Recent studies confirm that unresolved trauma combined with negative peer modelling contributes significantly to escalating rates of substance dependency (Offor, Ogunbowale, & Omopo, 2025; Omopo & Odedokun, 2024b). Despite this evidence, few studies have explicitly explored the roles of emotional dysregulation and peer influence among in-school adolescents in Lagos.

Hence, this study seeks to fill that gap by examining how peer influence and emotional dysregulation mediate the relationship between childhood maltreatment and substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State. The findings are expected to guide policymakers, educators, and clinical psychologists in formulating early intervention strategies tailored to the contextual realities of urban Nigerian adolescents.

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to investigate the relationship between peer influence, emotional dysregulation and childhood maltreatment on substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria. With the growing prevalence of substance use among Nigerian adolescents, particularly in urban centres like Lagos, it is crucial to explore how early adverse experiences such as childhood maltreatment may translate into harmful behavioural outcomes through psychological and social mechanisms. The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To examine the relationship between childhood maltreatment, peer influence, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria.
2. To determine the combined predictive effect of childhood maltreatment, peer influence, and emotional dysregulation on substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State.
3. To assess the relative contributions of childhood maltreatment, peer influence, and emotional dysregulation to substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses will be tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between childhood maltreatment, peer influence, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria.

Ho2: There is no significant combined effect of childhood maltreatment, peer influence, and emotional dysregulation on substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria.

Ho3: There is no significant relative contribution of childhood maltreatment, peer influence, and emotional dysregulation to substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive survey design to examine the relationship between childhood maltreatment, peer influence, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria. Three Local Government Areas (LGAs) were purposively selected: Mushin Local Government Area, Agege Local Government Area, and Ikorodu Local Government Area. These LGAs were chosen based on their dense population and known prevalence of socio-economic challenges, including youth exposure to domestic abuse, drug culture, and unstable family structures. The target population comprised in-school adolescents aged between 13 and 19 years, currently enrolled in public secondary schools within these LGAs. A total of 150 adolescents participated in the study, with 50 selected from each LGA through snowball sampling. This approach enabled the inclusion of participants who might have experienced maltreatment or engaged in substance use but were not easily identifiable through conventional means. Data collection instruments included a structured questionnaire divided into five sections: demographic information, childhood maltreatment (measured by the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire – Short Form), peer influence (assessed using the Peer Group Influence Scale), emotional dysregulation (measured by the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale), and substance abuse (evaluated using the CRAFFT Screening Tool).

All instruments underwent expert validation for content adequacy by psychologists and education specialists. A pilot test was carried out with 30 adolescents from a non-sampled LGA to assess reliability, yielding Cronbach's alpha coefficients above 0.75, indicating strong internal consistency. Data collection lasted for three weeks, with ethical clearance secured from the

Lagos State Ministry of Education. Written informed consent was obtained from the parents or guardians of all participants, and assent was secured from the adolescents themselves. Questionnaires were administered in designated private spaces within schools by trained research assistants to ensure confidentiality and reduce social desirability bias. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations summarised the data. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation and Multiple Regression Analysis were employed to examine the relationships among childhood maltreatment, peer influence, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26 at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results and Discussions

Demographic Representation of the Participants

The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarised in the table below:

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Variables	Frequency (n = 150)	Percentage (%)
Age		
12 - 14 years	38	25.3
15 - 17 years	72	48.0
18 years	40	26.7
Gender		
Male	80	53.3
Female	70	46.7
LGA		
Mushin Local Government Area	50	33.3
Agege Local Government Area	50	33.3
Ikorodu Local Government Area	50	33.3

Most of the participants (48.0%) were between 15 and 17 years of age, representing the critical mid-adolescence period, when behavioural experimentation is often heightened. Participants aged 12–14 years accounted for 25.3%, while those aged 18 constituted 26.7% of the sample. This age distribution provides a balanced representation of early to late adolescence, a developmental phase associated with increased vulnerability to risk behaviours such as substance use. In terms of gender, the study had a slightly higher proportion of male participants (53.3%) compared to females (46.7%), which is reflective of observed trends in gendered access and engagement among out-of-school adolescents in many urban areas of Nigeria. The

overrepresentation of males may also suggest a gender disparity in school dropout rates or differences in willingness to participate in such studies. Geographically, the respondents were evenly drawn from three strategically selected LGAs in Lagos State - Mushin Local Government Area, Agege Local Government Area, and Ikorodu Local Government Area, each contributing 33.3% of the total sample. This equitable distribution enhances the generalisability of findings across diverse urban and semi-urban settings within the state.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis One: There is no significant relationship between childhood maltreatment, peer influence, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix for Hypothesis One

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Substance Abuse	1			
2. Childhood Maltreatment	0.491**	1		
3. Peer Influence	0.434**	0.472**	1	
4. Emotional Dysregulation	0.503**	0.465**	0.521**	1

$p < .05$

The correlation analysis shows significant positive relationships between childhood maltreatment, peer influence, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse. Childhood maltreatment was positively correlated with substance abuse ($r = 0.491$, $p < .05$), indicating that adolescents who experienced maltreatment in childhood were more likely to engage in substance abuse. Similarly, peer influence ($r = 0.434$, $p < .05$) and emotional dysregulation ($r = 0.503$, $p < .05$) showed positive associations with substance abuse, suggesting that adolescents who face peer pressure and emotional regulation challenges are more susceptible to using substances.

These findings align with previous research, which suggests that early maltreatment can have long-lasting effects on adolescent behaviour, including increased vulnerability to substance abuse (McCrory et al., 2019). Peer influence has also been well-documented as a significant factor in adolescent substance use, particularly in school environments where peer groups often serve as a primary source of validation and identity (Tindle et al., 2021). Adolescents are particularly susceptible to peer pressure as they seek acceptance and belonging, and the desire to fit in may lead to engagement in risky behaviours, including substance abuse. Emotional

dysregulation, which involves difficulty in managing emotional responses, can lead to maladaptive coping strategies such as substance use, especially in adolescents who struggle with emotional stability (Liu, 2022). Adolescents who have difficulty regulating emotions may turn to substances to numb negative feelings or to self-medicate. The positive correlations between these variables suggest that these psychosocial factors collectively contribute to substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State. The interplay between maltreatment, peer influence, and emotional dysregulation highlights the need for comprehensive interventions that address these factors holistically. By focusing on improving emotional regulation skills, reducing the impact of peer pressure, and intervening early in cases of childhood maltreatment, targeted programmes can help mitigate the risk of substance abuse in this vulnerable population.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant combined effect of childhood maltreatment, peer influence, and emotional dysregulation on substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Results for Hypothesis Two

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-value	R²
Regression	32.212	3	10.737	12.401	0.000	0.348
Residuals	60.413	116	0.520			
Total	92.625	119				

The results from the multiple regression analysis indicate a significant combined effect of childhood maltreatment, peer influence, and emotional dysregulation on substance abuse ($F_{(3, 116)} = 12.401$, $p = 0.000$). The model explained 34.8% of the variance in substance abuse ($R^2 = 0.348$), suggesting that these three psychosocial factors together account for a considerable proportion of the variability in substance abuse behaviours among adolescents.

This finding is consistent with previous studies that underscore the role of multiple interacting psychosocial factors in shaping adolescent behaviour (Pettit et al., 2020). Childhood maltreatment can disrupt emotional regulation, making it difficult for adolescents to manage stress or emotional distress without resorting to harmful coping mechanisms such as substance use. Experiencing maltreatment in early life can impair the development of healthy coping strategies, leaving adolescents more vulnerable to negative outcomes. Similarly, peer influence often exacerbates these tendencies, with adolescents seeking validation through behaviours that

align with group norms, including substance use. This is especially relevant in school environments where peer groups play a crucial role in shaping attitudes and behaviours. The significant combined effect of these variables emphasizes the importance of addressing multiple factors in interventions aimed at reducing substance abuse among adolescents. Interventions should focus not only on individual coping strategies but also on altering the social context, such as peer dynamics, to foster healthier behaviours and reduce vulnerability to substance abuse. By integrating these factors, preventive and therapeutic programmes can be more effective in addressing the root causes of adolescent substance use.

Hypothesis Three: There is no significant relative contribution of childhood maltreatment, peer influence, and emotional dysregulation to substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria.

Table 4: Relative Contribution of Predictors to Substance Abuse

Predictor Variable	B	t	p-value
Childhood Maltreatment	0.261	4.121	0.000
Peer Influence	0.186	3.042	0.003
Emotional Dysregulation	0.347	5.520	0.000

The regression results reveal that all three predictors childhood maltreatment ($\beta = 0.261$, $p = 0.000$), peer influence ($\beta = 0.186$, $p = 0.003$), and emotional dysregulation ($\beta = 0.347$, $p = 0.000$) significantly contribute to substance abuse among adolescents. Emotional dysregulation was found to have the most substantial contribution, followed by childhood maltreatment and peer influence.

These results align with the understanding that emotional dysregulation plays a crucial role in the development of substance abuse, particularly as adolescents with poor emotional control are more likely to turn to substances to manage their feelings (Vassileva et al., 2021). Adolescents with emotional dysregulation often struggle to cope with intense feelings of anxiety, sadness, or anger, which increases the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours like substance use. Childhood maltreatment continues to be a significant predictor of maladaptive behaviours, as early trauma can leave lasting emotional scars, making adolescents more vulnerable to substance use (Widom et al., 2017). The presence of emotional and psychological distress can compel adolescents to use substances as a means of coping. Peer influence, although slightly less

influential, remains an important factor, as adolescents often succumb to group pressure to conform to behaviours that include substance use. These findings suggest that interventions focusing on emotional regulation, addressing childhood trauma, and modifying peer group dynamics could be effective strategies for reducing substance abuse among adolescents. It is essential for educational and community-based programmes to provide tools for managing emotions, as well as fostering healthy peer relationships, to mitigate the risk of substance abuse in this population. Providing support in these areas can help create a more positive environment for adolescents, thereby reducing the likelihood of substance misuse.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the psychosocial predictors of substance abuse among in-school adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria, focusing on childhood maltreatment, peer influence, and emotional dysregulation. The results revealed significant relationships between these factors and adolescent substance use, highlighting the complex interplay between early trauma, social dynamics, and emotional regulation. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive interventions that address these psychosocial elements, particularly in high-risk adolescent populations. By understanding the interconnectedness of these factors, this study contributes valuable insights into the prevention and management of substance abuse in adolescents, providing a foundation for future interventions and policies.

Limitations

Despite the valuable insights gained, this study has some limitations. Firstly, the use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships between the variables. Additionally, the study relied on self-report measures, which may have been subject to response biases, particularly in reporting sensitive behaviours like substance abuse. The sample was also confined to adolescents in Lagos State, which may not be representative of other regions in Nigeria. Finally, the study did not explore other potential predictors, such as parental involvement or socioeconomic factors, which could also influence substance abuse behaviours among adolescents.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that schools, communities, and health professionals collaborate to implement preventive measures addressing childhood maltreatment, peer pressure, and emotional dysregulation. Psychosocial support programs should be established to help adolescents manage emotional challenges and navigate peer influence in healthy ways. Schools could also benefit from including emotional regulation skills in their curricula and providing platforms for open discussions on the dangers of substance abuse. Interventions should focus on fostering resilience and improving coping mechanisms among adolescents to reduce the likelihood of substance abuse.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Further research should explore longitudinal designs to establish causal relationships between childhood maltreatment, peer influence, emotional dysregulation, and substance abuse. Additionally, future studies could examine the role of other factors such as family dynamics, socioeconomic status, and media exposure in adolescent substance use. It would also be valuable to investigate interventions that target these psychosocial predictors, assessing their effectiveness in reducing substance abuse and improving mental health outcomes for adolescents across different regions in Nigeria. Finally, qualitative studies could provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of adolescents, contributing to more nuanced intervention strategies.

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