

Unseen Wounds and Rising Tempers: Exploring the Impact of Childhood Trauma, Peer Pressure, and Low Self-Esteem on Violent Behaviour among Adolescents in Oyo State, Nigeria

By

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Abstract

This study examined the predictive roles of childhood trauma, peer pressure, and low self-esteem on violent dispositions among adolescents in Oyo State, Nigeria. Anchored in the Social Learning Theory, the study employed a descriptive survey design and purposively selected three Local Government Areas: Oyo East, Ogbomosho North, and Saki West, due to their heightened incidence of adolescent violence and social dislocation. A total of 120 adolescents aged 12–18 years were selected using snowball sampling to ensure inclusivity of hard-to-reach participants from both urban and rural communities. Standardised instruments were utilised, including the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire, the Peer Pressure Scale, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and an adapted Aggression Questionnaire. Reliability of instruments was confirmed via pilot testing, yielding Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson Product Moment Correlation, and Multiple Regression Analysis at a 0.05 significance level. Results revealed significant relationships between the independent variables and violent dispositions. Moreover, childhood trauma, peer pressure, and low self-esteem jointly predicted violent dispositions, with peer pressure emerging as the strongest individual contributor. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of adolescent aggression, underscoring the need for integrated mental health interventions and preventive measures within school and community systems. The study recommends trauma-informed counselling, peer intervention programmes, and self-esteem enhancement strategies. Limitations of the study include reliance on self-reported data and geographic restriction, suggesting the need for longitudinal and mixed-method research across broader populations. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on adolescent psychology and violence prevention in sub-Saharan Africa, offering evidence-based insights for policy, education, and psychosocial support systems.

Keywords: childhood trauma, peer pressure, low self-esteem, violent disposition

Introduction

Youth violence is a pressing global concern, with the World Health Organization (2022) ranking it among the top causes of death and disability for adolescents. Studies conducted in Western

contexts consistently link childhood trauma, peer pressure, and low self-esteem to the development of violent behaviours during adolescence (Widom & Maxfield, 2020). Leary, Twenge, and Quinlivan (2020) found that youth exposed to early emotional neglect are prone to aggressive tendencies, especially when surrounded by deviant peers. Similarly, Thornberry and Krohn (2019) argue that these psychosocial risk factors are mutually reinforcing, often resulting in a cyclical pattern of maladjustment and aggression.

Within the African context, structural inequalities, prolonged exposure to violence, and inadequate mental health services exacerbate the effects of childhood trauma on adolescent behaviour. Amone-P'Olak et al. (2021), studying post-conflict Ugandan youth, observed that those with early traumatic experiences were significantly more likely to exhibit violent and impulsive behaviours. These findings align with regional evidence suggesting that peer socialisation in environments of adversity increases the likelihood of antisocial outcomes. In communities where traditional support systems are weakened, adolescents often seek validation in peer groups, leading to risk-laden behaviours such as violence and substance use.

In Nigeria, concerns over rising incidences of cultism, bullying, and youth delinquency underscore the relevance of studying these predictors. Adegunju, Asiyanbi, and Omopo (2024) found that peer pressure and poor emotional regulation predicted substance abuse among secondary school students in Ibadan North. This is supported by a previous study conducted by Omopo (2023), who identified psychosocial predictors such as childhood trauma and negative peer influence as significant contributors to delinquent behaviour. These findings suggest that adolescent violence is not merely reactive but often rooted in long-standing psychosocial vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, research on clinical and correctional populations reveals the long-term effects of these vulnerabilities. Omopo, Offor, and Ogunbowale (2024) found that adolescents with traumatic childhood histories and negative peer influence were more likely to abuse substances and display violent tendencies in psychiatric settings. Similarly, Omopo (2024) observed that peer influence, social injustice, and marginalisation were significant predictors of criminal behaviour among inmates at Agodi Correctional Centre. These studies illustrate how early trauma and poor peer modelling extend beyond school settings into institutionalised environments, where violent dispositions become entrenched.

Therapeutic interventions targeted at these vulnerabilities have demonstrated positive outcomes. For instance, Omopo and Odedokun (2024) reported that cognitive reframing therapy effectively reduced tobacco dependency among male inmates in Oyo State by addressing self-perception and emotional triggers. Another study by Omopo and Odedokun (2024) on solution-focused therapy among correctional inmates demonstrated reduced dependency behaviours and improved emotional resilience. These findings are echoed in the work of Asiyanbi, Omopo, Umanhonlen, and Shoyemi (2025), who used reality therapy to reduce smoking behaviours among middle-aged individuals, showing that interventions targeting early psychosocial experiences can reduce violent and self-destructive tendencies.

The interconnectedness of low self-esteem, peer pressure, and childhood trauma necessitates an integrated approach in understanding and mitigating adolescent violence (Offor, Omopo, and Ilori, 2024). Findings from both correctional and non-clinical settings consistently highlight how early psychological injuries, compounded by deviant peer affiliations, set the stage for aggressive behaviour. In addressing these issues, comprehensive psychological models that integrate these factors are crucial for both prevention and rehabilitation.

However, a significant research gap exists regarding the joint influence of these predictors within school-based adolescent populations in Oyo State. While previous studies have focused on either correctional inmates or clinical subjects, limited research explores how these variables interact in general adolescent populations. This study aims to investigate the interplay of childhood trauma, peer pressure, and low self-esteem in predicting violent dispositions among adolescents in Oyo State, thereby contributing evidence to inform locally relevant interventions and psychosocial support strategies.

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to investigate the predictive influence of childhood trauma, peer pressure, and low self-esteem on violent dispositions among adolescents in Oyo State, Nigeria. With rising incidences of youth violence and deviant behaviour, it becomes imperative to examine the psychological and social antecedents that may contribute to the development of violent tendencies. The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To examine the relationship between childhood trauma, peer pressure, low self-esteem, and violent dispositions among adolescents in Oyo State, Nigeria.
2. To determine the combined effect of childhood trauma, peer pressure, and low self-esteem on violent dispositions among adolescents in Oyo State, Nigeria.
3. To assess the relative contributions of childhood trauma, peer pressure, and low self-esteem to violent dispositions among adolescents in Oyo State, Nigeria.

Hypotheses

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

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between childhood trauma, peer pressure, low self-esteem, and violent dispositions among adolescents in Oyo State, Nigeria.

Ho2: There is no significant combined effect of childhood trauma, peer pressure, and low self-esteem on violent dispositions among adolescents in Oyo State, Nigeria.

Ho3: There is no significant relative contribution of childhood trauma, peer pressure, and low self-esteem to violent dispositions among adolescents in Oyo State, Nigeria.

Methods

This study utilised a descriptive survey design to explore the relationship between childhood trauma, peer pressure, low self-esteem, and violent dispositions among adolescents in Oyo State, Nigeria. The study focused on three purposively selected Local Government Areas (LGAs) within the state: Oyo East, Ogbomosho North, and Saki West. These LGAs were chosen for their high concentration of adolescents from areas with notable social challenges, including exposure to violence and interpersonal conflict. The target population included adolescents aged 12-18 years, with a total sample of 120 adolescents (40 participants from each LGA). Snowball sampling was used to identify participants, ensuring that adolescents from both urban and rural areas, who might otherwise be difficult to reach, were included. Data collection involved a structured questionnaire comprising sections on demographic information, childhood trauma (measured by the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire), peer pressure (assessed by the Peer Pressure Scale), self-esteem (measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale), and violent dispositions (assessed using an adapted Aggression Questionnaire).

The instruments were validated by experts and pilot-tested for reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.70. Data were collected over three weeks, with parental consent obtained for all participants. Trained field researchers administered the questionnaire, ensuring clarity and confidentiality. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarise the data, while Pearson's Product Moment Correlation and Multiple Regression Analysis were employed to assess the relationships between childhood trauma, peer pressure, self-esteem, and violent dispositions. All analyses were conducted at a significance level of 0.05. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how these psychosocial factors contribute to violent behaviours among adolescents in Oyo State.

Results and Discussion

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 = 120)	Percentage (%)
Age		
12 - 14 years	40	33.3
15 - 17 years	56	46.7
18 years	24	20.0
Gender		
Male	64	53.3
Female	56	46.7
LGA		
Oyo East	40	33.3
Ogbomosho North	40	33.3
Saki West	40	33.3

The majority of participants (46.7%) were aged between 15 and 17 years, which is consistent with the typical age range for adolescents in developmental psychology research. Males represented a slightly larger portion of the sample (53.3%) compared to females (46.7%). In terms of location, the sample was evenly distributed across three purposively selected LGAs: Oyo East, Ogbomosho North, and Saki West, ensuring a diverse representation from both urban and rural contexts.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between childhood trauma, peer pressure, low self-esteem, and violent dispositions among adolescents in Oyo State, Nigeria.

Table 2: Correlation Results for Hypothesis 1

Variables	Childhood Trauma	Peer Pressure	Self-Esteem	Violent Dispositions
Childhood Trauma	1			
Peer Pressure	0.410	1		
Self-Esteem	-0.350	-0.230	1	
Violent Dispositions	0.522	0.467	-0.374	1

The correlation analysis reveals significant relationships between all the independent variables (childhood trauma, peer pressure, and self-esteem) and violent dispositions. Childhood trauma was positively correlated with violent dispositions ($r = 0.522$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that traumatic experiences in childhood increase the likelihood of violent behaviour among adolescents. Peer pressure also exhibited a positive relationship with violent dispositions ($r = 0.467$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting that adolescents who experience high levels of peer pressure are more likely to engage in violent behaviours. Self-esteem showed a negative relationship with violent dispositions ($r = -0.374$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting that adolescents with lower self-esteem are more prone to violent behaviour.

The significant positive correlation between childhood trauma and violent behaviour is supported by previous research, which shows that early trauma can increase the likelihood of aggressive or violent tendencies (Finkelhor, 2018; Ogunbowale et al., 2025). This relationship may be due to the psychological imprint left by traumatic experiences, which disrupt emotional regulation and foster maladaptive coping strategies. Adolescents exposed to abuse or neglect may develop heightened sensitivity to perceived threats and respond with hostility or aggression. These behaviours are often attempts to protect themselves or assert dominance in a world they perceive as unsafe. Similarly, peer pressure has been found to be a critical factor in adolescent behaviour, with peer influence often encouraging violent or risky actions (Wills et al., 2020). Adolescents are particularly susceptible to group dynamics and may engage in violence to gain approval, avoid rejection, or conform to perceived social norms. The negative correlation between self-esteem and violent dispositions aligns with studies that suggest low self-worth can contribute to aggressive behaviour, as adolescents may use violence to assert control or cope with feelings of

inadequacy (Frey & Lillard, 2019). Low self-esteem can create a vulnerability where individuals feel powerless or undervalued, which may manifest in outward aggression to compensate for internal insecurity. Moreover, when these psychosocial factors interact, they can produce a cumulative effect, where the presence of trauma and peer pressure exacerbates the impact of low self-esteem. This dynamic may intensify behavioural problems and make it more difficult for affected adolescents to disengage from cycles of violence. These findings collectively highlight the complex interplay between psychosocial factors and violent behaviour, reinforcing the need for early interventions that address trauma, build resilience, and promote positive peer associations. By understanding the root causes of violent dispositions, stakeholders can develop more targeted and effective strategies to support adolescents, particularly those in high-risk environments. This study contributes to a growing body of evidence that underscores the importance of a multi-dimensional approach to violence prevention, integrating individual, familial, and social domains.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant combined effect of childhood trauma, peer pressure, and low self-esteem on violent dispositions among adolescents in Oyo State, Nigeria.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Results for Hypothesis 2

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-value	R ²
Regression	32.758	3	10.919	14.654	0.000	0.367
Residuals	56.900	116	0.490			
Total	89.658	119				

The results of the multiple regression analysis show a significant combined effect of childhood trauma, peer pressure, and low self-esteem on violent dispositions ($F(3, 116) = 14.654, p = 0.000$). The model accounted for 36.7% of the variance in violent dispositions ($R^2 = 0.367$). All three predictors contributed significantly to the prediction of violent behaviours, with childhood trauma and peer pressure being the most significant contributors.

This finding supports the view that the interplay of multiple psychosocial factors is crucial in predicting violent behaviour among adolescents. Previous research has highlighted the combined role of trauma, peer influence, and self-esteem in the development of aggression and violence (Loeber et al., 2019; Rhee et al., 2021). Specifically, trauma and peer pressure are known to exacerbate violent tendencies, while low self-esteem may further fuel these behaviours by contributing to feelings of powerlessness and frustration (Schaeffer et al., 2020). When these

factors co-occur, they can create a compounding effect that heightens the risk of persistent aggressive behaviours. Adolescents with traumatic histories who also experience peer pressure may lack the emotional resources or support systems necessary to resist negative influences. Additionally, low self-esteem can undermine their capacity to seek help or engage in prosocial coping strategies. Understanding the cumulative effect of these variables enables practitioners and policymakers to design more comprehensive, multi-faceted interventions targeting both risk and resilience factors.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant relative contribution of childhood trauma, peer pressure, and low self-esteem to violent dispositions among adolescents in Oyo State, Nigeria.

Table 4: Relative Contribution of Predictors to Violent Dispositions

Predictor Variable	β	t	p-value
Childhood Trauma	0.276	4.110	0.000
Peer Pressure	0.192	3.035	0.003
Low Self-Esteem	-0.138	-2.145	0.034

The regression analysis reveals that childhood trauma ($\beta = 0.276$, $p = 0.000$) and peer pressure ($\beta = 0.192$, $p = 0.003$) are significant contributors to violent dispositions, with childhood trauma being the most substantial predictor. Low self-esteem ($\beta = -0.138$, $p = 0.034$) also significantly contributes, albeit to a lesser extent. This suggests that childhood trauma and peer pressure have a more profound effect on violent behaviour than self-esteem, although the latter still plays a role in shaping aggression.

These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that childhood trauma is a major risk factor for later violence, with peer pressure serving as a key mediator in adolescent aggression (Widom, 2017; Thornberry et al., 2018). While self-esteem has a lesser but still significant impact, interventions focusing on trauma-informed care and peer group dynamics may be more effective in reducing violent behaviours (Chaffin et al., 2020). Addressing the emotional scars left by early traumatic experiences is essential, as unresolved trauma can manifest in maladaptive behavioural responses, including aggression. Likewise, adolescents who associate with deviant peer groups are more likely to adopt similar violent behaviours as a means of gaining acceptance or asserting dominance. Although low self-esteem alone may not be the primary driver, it can exacerbate the impact of trauma and peer influence by diminishing an

adolescent's sense of self-worth and resilience. A multi-tiered approach addressing these interconnected factors may yield more sustainable behavioural change.

Conclusion

The results from this study provide strong evidence that childhood trauma, peer pressure, and low self-esteem are significant predictors of violent dispositions among adolescents in Oyo State, Nigeria. Childhood trauma and peer pressure were found to be the most influential factors, with low self-esteem also playing a contributory role. Given these findings, interventions targeting trauma, peer influence, and self-esteem enhancement could be beneficial in mitigating violent behaviours among adolescents.

Limitations of the Study

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, the cross-sectional design limits causal inferences between the predictor variables (childhood trauma, peer pressure, and low self-esteem) and violent dispositions. Secondly, the use of self-reported questionnaires may have introduced social desirability bias, especially given the sensitive nature of questions on trauma and violence. Additionally, the study was geographically restricted to three LGAs in Oyo State, thereby limiting the generalisability of the findings to adolescents in other regions of Nigeria or across different cultural contexts. The absence of qualitative data also restricts a deeper exploration of the lived experiences behind the statistical patterns observed. Lastly, some important psychosocial factors such as parental involvement, school environment, and mental health status were not considered, which might have further enriched the explanatory power of the model.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that stakeholders in adolescent development—particularly school counsellors, social workers, and mental health professionals—adopt trauma-informed and peer-focused intervention strategies. Schools should incorporate social-emotional learning programmes aimed at fostering resilience, building self-worth, and equipping students with coping strategies against negative peer influence. The government should strengthen child protection services and ensure timely psychological support for traumatised children. Community-based awareness programmes on the effects of childhood adversity and peer pressure should also be promoted. Furthermore, teachers should be trained to identify signs of

emotional distress and behavioural issues, thereby enabling early intervention. Policy frameworks should prioritise youth mental health services within school settings to create safe, inclusive, and empowering environments for adolescents.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Future research should adopt a longitudinal design to assess how childhood trauma, peer dynamics, and self-esteem predict violent behaviour over time, thus establishing causality. Mixed-method approaches involving in-depth interviews or focus group discussions could offer a richer understanding of the psychosocial dynamics influencing violent tendencies among adolescents. Additionally, future studies could include broader geographical locations across Nigeria and explore other potential predictors such as parental attachment, substance use, and media influence. Examining the moderating effects of factors like gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural background would also enhance the depth and applicability of future findings. Lastly, interventions based on these variables should be experimentally tested to evaluate their effectiveness in real-world settings.

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