

**Influence of Childhood Emotional Abuse, Peer Conformity, and Sensation Seeking on
Risky Behaviours among Senior Secondary School Students**

By

Rashidat Omowumi Ibrahim

Federal University of Education, Zaria, Nigeria
rashidatmowumi2018@gmail.com

Mutiat Asiyambi

Department of Psychology, Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo, Nigeria
asiyanbimutiat017@gmail.com

Kikelomo Margaret Ilori

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

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, sensation seeking, and risky behaviours among senior secondary school students in Ibadan, Nigeria. A total of 156 participants, aged 15 to 19 years, were purposively and snowball sampled from three schools in Ibadan: School A (63 students), School B (48 students), and School C (45 students). The study aimed to investigate whether these psychosocial factors significantly correlate with risky behaviours, determine their combined effect, and assess the relative contribution of each factor. Data were collected using standardized self-report questionnaires measuring childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, sensation seeking, and engagement in risky behaviours. The analysis revealed significant correlations between childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, sensation seeking, and risky behaviours. The regression results indicated a significant combined effect of these factors on risky behaviours, with childhood emotional abuse and peer conformity being the strongest predictors. The study highlights the critical role of early emotional experiences and peer influences in shaping adolescent behaviour, with implications for targeted interventions in educational settings. Limitations include the reliance on self-report measures and the cross-sectional nature of the study, which limits causal inferences. Recommendations for future studies include longitudinal research to better understand the causal pathways and interventions to reduce risky behaviours among adolescents. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on adolescent risky behaviours in Nigeria and offers insights for policy and practice in preventing harmful behaviours in school settings.

Keywords: childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, sensation seeking, risky behaviours,

Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental stage characterised by heightened emotional sensitivity and behavioural experimentation. Globally, this period is marked by an increased tendency toward risky behaviours such as substance use, unsafe sexual practices, truancy, and delinquency (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). These behaviours are often exacerbated by a range of

psychosocial and environmental factors including childhood adversity, peer dynamics, and personality traits. Evidence indicates that early exposure to emotional abuse plays a foundational role in shaping maladaptive behaviours, as it can impair emotion regulation, lower self-esteem, and foster a tendency toward external validation (Afifi et al., 2020; Norman et al., 2021). Additionally, peer conformity, a psychological need to align with group norms—has been identified as a significant driver of adolescent risk behaviour, especially when coupled with high sensation-seeking tendencies (Laursen & Veenstra, 2020; Shulman et al., 2021).

In the African context, adolescent engagement in risky behaviours has been further influenced by cultural, economic, and social disruptions. Widespread poverty, urbanisation, and weakened family cohesion have amplified children's exposure to abuse, neglect, and peer pressure (Akmatov, 2020). Research shows that such adversities, when unresolved, often manifest in adolescence as deviance or behavioural disorders. For example, Tenkorang and Owusu (2021) found that childhood emotional abuse in Ghana significantly increased the likelihood of adolescent substance use and delinquent affiliations. In South Africa, emotional maltreatment during childhood has also been linked to early sexual debut and aggressive tendencies (Pillay et al., 2020), underscoring the widespread nature of these psychosocial influences across the continent.

In Nigeria, these developmental challenges are prevalent across both urban and semi-urban communities. Empirical evidence supports the assertion that childhood trauma, peer influence, and sensation-seeking behaviours are critical predictors of adolescent deviance. Notably, Omopo, Offor, and Ogunbowale (2024) reported a significant relationship between childhood trauma and peer influence on substance abuse among psychiatric patients in Ibadan. Similarly, Omopo (2023) identified emotional abuse and peer conformity as salient predictors of delinquent behaviour among secondary school students in the same region. The psychological roots of these behaviours have been further explored in studies such as Offor, Ogunbowale, and Omopo (2025), who examined socio-economic and psychological factors influencing criminal behaviour among offenders in Agodi Correctional Centre, linking many to adverse childhood experiences. These findings corroborate other research in the region, which has increasingly documented the intersection between trauma, peer networks, and behavioural health (Ogunbowale et al., 2025).

Further insights from correctional and therapeutic settings in Ibadan show that unresolved childhood emotional issues often manifest in risky coping strategies during adolescence and adulthood. For instance, Omopo (2024) explored the use of cognitive reframing therapy to mitigate tobacco dependency among inmates with a history of abuse. His findings highlighted how past trauma and sensation-seeking tendencies contributed to addiction. Similarly, Omopo and Odedokun (2024) demonstrated how solution-focused therapy and cognitive behavioural approaches can reframe maladaptive behaviours rooted in emotional neglect. Their studies, though situated in correctional settings, provide robust evidence of the developmental trajectory from childhood abuse to risk-taking tendencies in adolescence.

Peer conformity and sensation seeking, in particular, play a crucial role in this behavioural matrix. Omopo (2024) found that peer influence and social marginalisation significantly contributed to substance abuse and criminality among inmates in Agodi Correctional Centre, a pattern consistent with Offor, Omopo, and Ilori's (2024) work on trauma-related behavioural cues. Meanwhile, the trait of sensation seeking has been linked to behavioural impulsivity and risk preference, particularly in Nigerian youths exposed to early adversity (Jessor, 2020; Shulman et al., 2021). These findings are echoed in studies by Omopo and Odedokun (2024), who applied cognitive behavioural interventions to address these underlying traits in incarcerated populations.

The city of Ibadan, the largest urban settlement in West Africa, presents a complex socio-cultural backdrop in which adolescents are exposed to numerous risk factors. Socioeconomic disparities, fluctuating family dynamics, and increased exposure to Westernised media have contributed to rising levels of childhood emotional abuse and peer-related pressures. Asiyanbi, Omopo, Umanhonlen, and Shoyemi (2025) reported that smoking behaviour in Egbeda Local Government Area was significantly influenced by peer conformity and a desire for emotional escapism—both traceable to unresolved childhood issues. Furthermore, the limited implementation of mental health interventions in schools has left many adolescents without appropriate support, contributing to escalating behavioural risks. Research by Omopo and Odedokun (2024) also pointed out the neglect of school-based therapeutic measures that address emotional regulation and self-awareness, which are essential for curbing sensation-seeking behaviour.

Despite the growing body of research, few studies in Ibadan have specifically explored the combined influence of childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, and sensation seeking on adolescent risky behaviour within the general student population. Existing studies have largely focused on incarcerated or psychiatric samples, leaving a critical gap in understanding the broader adolescent context. This study, therefore, aims to address that gap by exploring the predictive roles of these three psychosocial factors among senior secondary school students in Ibadan. Grounded in psychosocial and ecological developmental frameworks, the study seeks to contribute to both the academic literature and practical interventions by informing school counsellors, psychologists, and policy stakeholders on effective prevention strategies tailored to the unique social environment of Ibadan.

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to investigate the predictive influence of childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, and sensation seeking on risky behaviours among senior secondary school students in Ibadan, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the relationship between childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, sensation seeking, and risky behaviours among senior secondary school students in Ibadan.
2. Determine the combined predictive effect of childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, and sensation seeking on risky behaviours among senior secondary school students in Ibadan.
3. Assess the relative contributions of childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, and sensation seeking to risky behaviours among senior secondary school students in Ibadan.

Hypotheses

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

- Ho1: There is no significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, sensation seeking, and risky behaviours among senior secondary school students in Ibadan.

Ho2: There is no significant combined effect of childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, and sensation seeking on risky behaviours among senior secondary school students in Ibadan.

Ho3: There is no significant relative contribution of childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, and sensation seeking to risky behaviours among senior secondary school students in Ibadan.

Methods

This study adopted a descriptive survey design to examine the influence of childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, and sensation seeking on risky behaviours among senior secondary school students in Ibadan, Nigeria. The research was carried out in three purposively selected public secondary schools within Ibadan North, Ibadan South-West, and Egbeda Local Government Areas, chosen for their diversity in social exposure and reports of adolescent behavioural issues. A total of 156 participants, aged between 15 and 19 years, were drawn through purposive and snowball sampling. Specifically, 63 students were selected from School A in Ibadan North, 48 from School B in Ibadan South-West, and 45 from School C in Egbeda. Guidance counsellors in each school assisted in identifying eligible students who had experienced emotional or behavioural difficulties, and these students further referred peers exhibiting similar tendencies, enhancing the inclusion of at-risk adolescents.

Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire composed of standardised and widely validated scales. Childhood emotional abuse was assessed using the Emotional Abuse Subscale of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire–Short Form (CTQ-SF); peer conformity was measured with the Peer Conformity Scale (PCS) developed by Mehrabian and Stefl (1995); sensation seeking was evaluated using the Brief Sensation Seeking Scale (BSSS-8); and risky behaviours were measured through the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) questionnaire. All instruments have demonstrated strong psychometric properties and were pilot-tested on 30 students from a separate school to confirm reliability in the local context, yielding Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.74 to 0.88. Ethical approval was obtained from the Oyo State Ministry of Education, while informed consent was secured from parents, guardians, and school authorities. Trained research assistants administered the instruments in private sessions during

school hours. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson’s correlation, and multiple regression analysis at a 0.05 level of significance.

Demographic Representation of the Participants

The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarised in the Table 1:

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Variables	Frequency (n = 156)	Percentage (%)
Age		
15 – 17 years	98	62.8
18 – 19 years	58	37.2
Gender		
Male	80	51.3
Female	76	48.7
School		
School A (Ibadan North)	63	40.4
School B (Ibadan South-West)	48	30.8
School C (Egbeda)	45	28.8

The participants in this study were aged between 15 and 19 years, with the majority (62.8%) falling within the 15-17 year age range, a typical developmental stage for adolescents in educational settings. The gender distribution was fairly balanced, with males representing 51.3% of the sample and females making up 48.7%. The participants were purposively and snowball sampled from three different schools located in various parts of Ibadan: 63 students from School A in Ibadan North (40.4%), 48 from School B in Ibadan South-West (30.8%), and 45 from School C in Egbeda (28.8%). This sampling approach ensured diverse representation across different areas within Ibadan, capturing both urban and semi-urban student populations, which is essential for understanding potential regional variations in risky behaviours among adolescents. Additionally, the variation in school locations allowed for a more comprehensive exploration of how environmental factors, such as urban versus semi-urban settings, may influence adolescent behaviours. This distribution also provided a well-rounded perspective of the student population across Ibadan.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, sensation seeking, and risky behaviours among senior secondary school students in Ibadan.

Table 2: Correlation Results for Hypothesis 1

Variables	Childhood Emotional Abuse	Peer Conformity	Sensation Seeking	Risky Behaviours
Childhood Emotional Abuse	1			
Peer Conformity	0.412	1		
Sensation Seeking	0.458	0.512	1	
Risky Behaviours	0.525	0.634	0.563	1

The correlation analysis reveals significant relationships between all the independent variables (childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, sensation seeking) and risky behaviours. Childhood emotional abuse was positively correlated with risky behaviours ($r = 0.525$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that students who experienced emotional abuse in childhood are more likely to engage in risky behaviours. Peer conformity also exhibited a strong positive correlation with risky behaviours ($r = 0.634$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting that students who tend to conform to peer expectations are more likely to partake in risky behaviours. Sensation seeking was also positively correlated with risky behaviours ($r = 0.563$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that students with a higher need for stimulation or excitement are more prone to engaging in risky behaviours.

These findings are consistent with previous research that suggests adverse childhood experiences, such as emotional abuse, can increase the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours later in life (Chauhan et al., 2021). Peer conformity has been identified as a significant predictor of adolescent risk-taking, as individuals often engage in these behaviours to gain social acceptance or avoid rejection (Gerrard et al., 2022). Sensation seeking, a characteristic associated with seeking new and stimulating experiences, has been shown to correlate with greater engagement in risky behaviours, such as substance use or reckless driving (Steinberg, 2023). The positive correlations among these factors point to a complex interaction in which childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, and sensation seeking collectively contribute to the development of risky behaviours among adolescents. Furthermore, the interplay of these factors suggests that

adolescents who experience emotional abuse may be more vulnerable to peer pressure, while those with high sensation-seeking tendencies may be more susceptible to risky social environments. This highlights the importance of addressing these variables in interventions aimed at reducing risky behaviours, especially for adolescents exposed to multiple psychosocial risk factors. Understanding the dynamics between emotional trauma, peer influence, and sensation-seeking tendencies can help in designing more effective, tailored approaches to mitigate adolescent risk-taking behaviours.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant combined effect of childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, and sensation seeking on risky behaviours among senior secondary school students in Ibadan.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Results for Hypothesis 2

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-value	R ²
Regression	53.246	3	17.749	22.982	0.000	0.343
Residuals	102.245	152	0.672			
Total	155.491	155				

The multiple regression analysis shows a significant combined effect of childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, and sensation seeking on risky behaviours ($F(3, 152) = 22.982, p = 0.000$). The model accounted for 34.3% of the variance in risky behaviours ($R^2 = 0.343$), indicating that these three predictors have a moderate impact on adolescents' engagement in risky behaviours. Specifically, peer conformity ($\beta = 0.422, p = 0.000$) emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by sensation seeking ($\beta = 0.314, p = 0.002$) and childhood emotional abuse ($\beta = 0.263, p = 0.005$).

These results highlight the combined influence of these psychosocial factors in shaping risky behaviours among adolescents. The significant effect of peer conformity aligns with research indicating that peer influence plays a central role in adolescent decision-making, often overriding individual risk assessments (Brown et al., 2020). Sensation seeking, which is inherently linked to the desire for novel experiences, further compounds this influence, pushing adolescents to engage in behaviours such as substance abuse, unprotected sex, and reckless driving (Steinberg et al., 2022). While childhood emotional abuse was also a significant predictor, its contribution was smaller in comparison to peer conformity and sensation seeking, suggesting that early experiences of emotional trauma may influence risk behaviours indirectly, perhaps by

contributing to lower self-regulation or susceptibility to peer pressure. This highlights the complex nature of risk behaviour development, where multiple factors interact in a way that amplifies the overall likelihood of engagement in such behaviours. It also suggests that interventions aimed at reducing risky behaviours should not only focus on addressing emotional trauma but should also consider peer dynamics and sensation-seeking tendencies, both of which may serve as immediate drivers of risky behaviours in adolescents.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant relative contribution of childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, and sensation seeking to risky behaviours among senior secondary school students in Ibadan.

Table 4: Relative Contribution of Predictors to Risky Behaviours

Predictor Variable	β	t	p-value
Childhood Emotional Abuse	0.263	3.144	0.002
Peer Conformity	0.422	4.862	0.000
Sensation Seeking	0.314	3.240	0.002

The regression analysis reveals that all three predictors - childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, and sensation seeking make significant contributions to risky behaviours. Peer conformity ($\beta = 0.422$, $p = 0.000$) was identified as the most substantial predictor, followed by sensation seeking ($\beta = 0.314$, $p = 0.002$), and childhood emotional abuse ($\beta = 0.263$, $p = 0.002$). These results suggest that while childhood emotional abuse does contribute to risky behaviours, peer conformity and sensation seeking have a stronger influence.

The findings align with the social learning theory, which posits that adolescents are heavily influenced by their peers, and engage in risky behaviours to gain approval or avoid social exclusion (Bandura, 2021). Sensation seeking, as a personality trait, has been consistently linked to increased risk-taking, especially in adolescence (Zuckerman, 2021). Childhood emotional abuse, while a contributing factor, may serve as a backdrop to the other influences, shaping vulnerability to peer pressure and a heightened desire for thrilling experiences. This underscores the importance of understanding how these factors interact to predict risky behaviours, highlighting the need for multifaceted intervention strategies targeting both individual characteristics and external influences. Effective prevention efforts should focus on addressing

peer dynamics, sensation-seeking tendencies, and the long-term effects of early emotional trauma.

Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, sensation seeking, and risky behaviours among senior secondary school students in Ibadan. The findings suggest that childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, and sensation seeking significantly influence risky behaviours. The combined effect of these variables was found to contribute to the prediction of risky behaviours, with each factor playing a notable role. This underscores the need for interventions aimed at addressing early emotional trauma, managing peer influence, and regulating sensation-seeking tendencies among adolescents to mitigate engagement in risky behaviours.

Limitation

One of the key limitations of this study is its cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationships between childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, sensation seeking, and risky behaviours. Additionally, the study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias. The sample was also limited to students from only three schools in Ibadan, which may not fully represent the broader population of secondary school students in Nigeria.

Recommendation

It is recommended that schools implement programmes focused on emotional resilience, peer pressure management, and responsible decision-making to reduce risky behaviours. Teachers and school counsellors should be trained to identify signs of childhood emotional abuse and provide early interventions. Furthermore, developing strategies that foster healthy peer interactions and redirect sensation-seeking tendencies towards constructive activities could significantly improve adolescents' behavioural outcomes.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to explore the causal relationships between childhood emotional abuse, peer conformity, sensation seeking, and risky behaviours.

Researchers could also examine the role of other psychosocial factors, such as family dynamics and community support systems, in moderating the impact of these variables. Additionally, studies involving a more diverse sample across multiple geographical locations in Nigeria would provide more generalisable results and a deeper understanding of the issue.

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