

Understanding Peer Sexual Norms, Attitudes, and Pressure: Correlates of Risky Sexual Behaviours among Secondary School Adolescents in Anambra State

ABSTRACT

Aims: Sexual behaviour initiation often occurs during the adolescent period, and it tends to be associated with unprotected sexual practises and other risky sexual behaviours. This study examined the relationship between peer sexual behaviour, sexual attitudes, pressure to have sex, and sexual risk behaviours in secondary school adolescents in Anambra State.

Methodology: The study was conducted using a correlational research design. A total of 1,200 students from a population of 19,048 SS2 adolescents in public secondary schools participated in the study. To assess internal consistency, Cronbach's Alpha statistics were used for the Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale (BSAS), the Pressure to Have Sex Questionnaire (PTHSQ), and the modified Sexual Risk Behaviour Scale (SRBS). The reliability coefficients were 0.86, 0.96, and 0.80, respectively, while Kuder Richardson statistics were used to determine the reliability index of the Adolescent Sexual Behaviour Index (ASBI), yielding a coefficient of 0.86. Data was collected through direct delivery of the instruments and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients was used to answer the research questions, while the null hypotheses were tested with a t-test for significant correlation.

Results: The findings revealed a low positive correlation between peer sexual behaviour, sexual attitude, pressure to have sex, and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State. Additionally, the results showed a significant correlation between these factors and the sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State.

Conclusion: In light of these findings, it was concluded that there is a low positive correlation among peer sexual behaviour, sexual attitude, peer pressure to have sex, and risky sexual behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State. Based on this, it is recommended that school management set up health programmes that can help young people adopt lifelong sexual behaviours that support their health and well-being, including behaviours that can reduce their risk for HIV and other STDs.

Keywords: Peer, sexual behaviours, sexual attitudes, pressure to have sex, risky sexual behaviours, school, adolescents

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical stage of development when much emphasis is placed on relationships with the opposite sex. This constant search for relationships increases the likelihood of adolescents engaging in intimate relationships with the opposite sex, which can lead to risky sexual behaviour. Adolescence is often defined as the period between puberty and adulthood. According to UNICEF (2018), this is a transitional period that begins with physical maturity and ends with the assumption of

social maturity, which includes the assumption of adult social, sexual, economic, and legal rights and duties.

World Health Organisation (2015) defined adolescents as those between 10 and 19 years of age. During adolescence, young people experience physical, emotional, and social changes that can have a significant impact on their sexual and reproductive health behaviours. As noted by Desale et al. (2016), adolescence is a time to develop knowledge and skills, learn how to manage emotions and relationships, and acquire attributes and abilities that will be essential for enjoying the adolescent years and assuming adult roles. Thus, adolescence in this study is a period of major physical, emotional, and social development, which can have a major influence on an individual's sexual and reproductive health behaviours. This study further explores the implications of this development for sexual behaviour.

Sexual behaviour is any activity that causes sexual arousal, including kissing, hugging, and other tactile contact (Laddunuri, 2013). This can also include activities such as intercourse, oral sex, anal sex, and manual sexual stimulation (Okafor & Akude, 2023). Sexual behaviours can be healthy or risky. Risky sexual behaviours are any activities that increase the risk of contracting HIV, other STIs, or pregnancy. This includes early sexual debuts, unprotected sex, inconsistent use of condoms, high-risk partners (injection drug users), survival sex (sex in exchange for money, drugs, food, or shelter), or sex with a partner who has other partners or more than one partner at a time (Envuladu, 2016). The consequences of these behaviours can be serious, and, in some cases, even lead to premature death.

Adolescent sexual risk behaviour is any activity that increases the likelihood of an adolescent engaging in sexual activity with another adolescent who may be infected with a sexually transmitted infection (STI), becoming pregnant, or causing a partner to become pregnant (Dimbuene, Emina, and Sankoh, 2014). It can include any behaviour that increases the risk of an adolescent contracting an STI, becoming pregnant, or entering into a sexual relationship before they are mature enough to understand what is healthy in a relationship. Factors that contribute to sexual risk behaviours among adolescents include smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, joblessness, family instability, age, and puberty. Adolescents who do not use substances are the least less likely to take risks with their sexual health (Potard, Courtois, and Rusch, 2018).

Adolescence is a period of physical and cognitive development, with many changes occurring simultaneously. These include physical maturation, the drive for independence, increased social and peer interactions, and brain development (Adimora, Akaneme & Aye, 2018; Anagbogu, Nwankwo & Azuji, 2020; Rimande, Agu & Terzungwe, 2021). Adolescents may be more prone to risky sexual behaviours, increasing their vulnerability to reproductive health problems such as STIs, unintended pregnancy, and abortion. According to UNICEF (2018), over 2.1 million adolescents aged 10–19 years are living with HIV, largely due to risky sexual behaviour, and the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2017) reports that sexually active adolescents aged 15–19 years are at greater

risk of acquiring STDs. In south-eastern Nigeria alone, 17% of adolescents have STIs and HIV, while 32% have had unsafe abortions (Udigwe, Adogu, and Nwabuez, 2014).

Risky sexual behaviour can be seen as a way for adolescents to gain social status, just as engaging in pseudo-mature behaviour can be seen as a sign of independence and maturity. Thus, adolescents who are sexually active may be more popular with their peers, which in turn increase their sexual opportunities and behaviours. In addition, the digital age has also brought new risks to sexually developing adolescents, such as the potential negative outcomes of online peer sexual behaviour. Peer sexual behaviour is defined as the sexual practises and activities commonly engaged in among members of a peer group (Agan et al., 2015). In the Nigerian context, these activities include masturbation, oral-genital stimulation, penile-vaginal intercourse, and in some rare cases, anal stimulation or anal intercourse (Okafor & Akude, 2023). Additionally, Okafor and Akude observed that behaviours that can be seen as sexually stimulating, such as watching pornography, participating in sexual conversations or sex chats on social media, dating, and courting, may be included in this category.

Peer sexual behaviour can either be seen as healthy or unhealthy. Healthy sexual behaviours are those that positively affect an individual's health and enable them to fulfil developmental objectives in their sexual development. These behaviours also help them build healthy relationships with the opposite sex. Unhealthy sexual behaviours, on the other hand, are those that have a negative effect on an individual's health and wellbeing. Unhealthy sexual attitudes often lead to behaviours that have a detrimental effect on one's health and wellbeing.

Attitudes towards sexual behaviour are an important factor in understanding peer sexual behaviour. Attitude to sex refers to an individual's state of mind towards sexual activities, which is precipitated by their response to themselves, another person, a place, a thing, or an event, and can influence their thoughts and actions (Eagly and Shelly, 2018). The formation of sexual attitudes in adolescents can be attributed to their families, as they are the most basic unit of socialisation in society. However, research such as Valley (2015) study has indicated that dysfunctional family relations, parental abuse or neglect, poor parenting, peer pressure and family adversity may lead to the development of negative attitudes and behavioural problems.

Peer pressure is the direct or indirect influence that members of social groups with similar interests, experiences, or social status can have on an individual (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2016). Adolescents often face adjustment challenges dealing with peer pressure, especially when it involves sex and relationships (Azuji & Nwanna, 2019). While some people might choose to engage in sexual activity because their partner is pressuring them to, others might do it to blend in and gain acceptance from their peers. This can lead to the engagement in risky sexual behaviours as the individual may not be concerned with what is right or wrong, but rather with pleasing their peers. Studies have revealed that during the transition from childhood to adolescence, there is an increase in the amount of time spent with peers, which can lead to the exploration of sexual relationships and a greater risk of engaging in unprotected sexual activity (Wolf, Bazargani, Kilford, Dumontheil, 2015).

Risky sexual behaviours among adolescents are a major social and public health concern in Anambra State, Nigeria. Adolescents in this age group (ages 15–19) are more likely to engage in high-risk sexual behaviour than other age groups. Data based on a study conducted by Folayan, Odetoyinbo, Brown, and Harrison (2014), shows that 56 percent of sexually active boys and 39.6 percent of sexually active girls had unprotected sex with non-marital sexual partners in the last 12 months. Other risky sexual behaviours, such as transactional sex, multiple sex partnerships, and mixing of sexual partners, are also on the rise. It is believed that peer group pressure is a major factor in influencing adolescents' decisions to engage in risky sexual activities.

In a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2012), adolescents reported that they learn the majority of their information about sexual health from their peers. Moreover, a study by Adimora, et al. (2018) found that peer group pressure, as well as factors such as parental influence, social media, teachers, place of residence, culture, religion, and social circumstances all contribute to adolescents' engagement in risky sexual behaviour. Similarly, Cherie and Berhane (2012) reported that perceptions of peers' involvement in risky sexual practises were strongly associated with risky sexual behaviour in adolescents.

In order to address this issue, it is necessary for all stakeholders to find ways to guide adolescents and monitor their activities. This study aims to investigate peer sexual behaviours, sexual attitudes, and pressure to have sex as correlates of secondary school adolescents' sexual risk behaviour in secondary schools in Anambra State. This will help to identify the underlying factors that may be leading to adolescents' engagement in risky sexual behaviour as well as potential solutions for addressing this problem.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Adolescence is a period of intimate relationship formation, exploration of desires and fantasies, and negotiation of sexual relationships. These activities may lead to risky sexual behaviours, such as unprotected intercourse, with increased exposure to STDs and unintended pregnancy. Peer pressure, male attitudes towards sex, age, substance use, psychological distress, school truancy, a lack of parental support, and pressure from peers are factors associated with sexual risk behaviour among adolescents. In Anambra State, Nigeria, there is a lack of data on sexual behaviour and its associated risk factors among adolescents in secondary schools. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the correlation between peer sexual behaviour, sexual attitude, and pressure to have sex and the sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore the correlation between peer sexual behaviours, sexual attitudes, pressure to have sex, and sexually risky behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State. Specifically, the study will seek to understand:

1. Correlation between peer sexual behaviour and sexually risky behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State
2. Correlation between sexual attitude and sexually risky behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State
3. Correlation between pressure to have sex and sexually risky behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State

1.3 Research Questions

The present study seeks to evaluate the connections between peer sexual behaviour, sexual attitude, pressure to have sex, and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State. Specifically, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. What is the relationship between peer sexual behaviour and sexual risk behaviours among secondary school adolescents in Anambra State?
2. What is the relationship between sexual attitude and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State?
3. What is the relationship between pressure to have sex and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State?

1.4 Hypotheses

The hypotheses that will be tested at a 0.05 level of significance are as follows:

1. There is no significant correlation between peer sexual behaviour and sexual risk behaviours among secondary school adolescents in Anambra State.
2. There is no significant relationship between sexual attitude and sexual risk behaviours among secondary school adolescents in Anambra State.
3. There is no significant relationship between pressure to have sex and sexual risk behaviours among secondary school adolescents in Anambra State.
4. There is no significant correlation among peer sexual behaviour, sexual attitude, pressure to have sex, and sexual risk behaviours among secondary school adolescents in Anambra State.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Research Design

A correlational research design was employed for this study in order to investigate the correlation between peer sexual attitude and sexual risky behaviour of secondary school adolescents in Anambra

State. The design was used because the study sought to establish the relationship that exists among the variables

2.2 Research Setting

Anambra State, located in the South-East Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria, was chosen as the location for the study due to the students in the area being in their puberty years and exposed to peer sex relationships. This high possibility of students engaging in different sexual activities at the secondary school level was the main factor in deciding the location.

2.3 Participants

This study utilized a multi-stage sampling approach to select 1,200 adolescents out of 19,048 SS2 adolescents from public secondary schools in Anambra State as the sample size.

2.4 Instrument for Data Collection

The four instruments for data collection used in this study are the Adolescent Sexual Behaviour Index (ASBI), a modified Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale (BSAS) developed by Hendrick (2006), Pressure to Have Sex Questionnaire (PTHSQ) developed by the researchers, and a modified Sexual Risk Behaviour Scale (SRBS) developed by Fino, Jaspal, Lopes, Wignall and Bloxsom (2021). The ASBI is a measure of the spectrum of sexual behaviours typical of adolescents within the past 12 months. It is a 14-item instrument with "yes" or "no" response options. The modified BSAS is a questionnaire of 21 items designed to measure the adolescents' sexual attitudes in four dimensions: Permissiveness towards an open relationship; responsibility in birth control; attitude towards the importance of meeting with a sex partner; and attitude towards enjoying physical sex. It is measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agreeing to strongly disagreeing, with scores ranging from 1.0 to 5.0. The PTHSQ is a 12-item questionnaire developed by the researchers, rated on a 4-point scale with response options of Never, 1, Rarely, 2, Sometimes, 3, and Always, 4. The modified SRBS focuses on key sexual risk behaviours among students and contains seven items with four response options: never 1, rarely 2, Sometimes 3, and always 4. Cronbach Alpha statistics was used to ascertain the internal consistency of the BSAS, PTHSQ and SRBS, with reliability coefficients of 0.86, 0.96, and 0.80 respectively. Kuder Richardson statistics was used to determine the reliability index of the ASBI, giving a coefficient of 0.86.

2.5 Data collection and analysis

The research instruments were administered to all the participants in the study through a direct delivery approach. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (Pearson r) was used to analyse the data collected for the research questions, and a t-test for significant correlation was employed to test the null hypotheses.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the data collected from the field for this study was analysed, and the results were presented in tables to showcase the findings:

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between peer sexual behaviour and risky sexual behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State?

Table 1: Pearson r on the relationship between peer sexual behaviour and sexual risk behaviours

Variables	N	Peer sexual behaviour r.	Sexual risk behaviours r.	Remarks
Peer sexual behaviour	1079	1.00	0.197	Low positive relationship
Sexual risk behaviours	1079	0.197	1.00	

Table 1 show that the Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) is 0.197, which indicates a weak positive correlation between sexual behaviour and sexual risk behaviour among public secondary school students in Anambra State.

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between sexual attitude and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State?

Table 2: Pearson r on the relationship between sexual attitude and sexual risk behaviours

Variables	N	Sexual attitude r	Sexual risk behaviours r	Remarks
Sexual attitude	1079	1.00	0.02	Very low positive relationship
Sexual risk behaviours	1079	0.002	1.00	

The Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) in Table 2 is 0.002. This shows that there is a very low or no positive relationship between sexual attitude and sexual risk behaviours among public secondary school students in Anambra State.

Research Question 3: What is the relationship between pressure to have sex and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State?

Table 3: Pearson r on the relationship between pressure to have sex and sexual risk behaviours

Variables	N	Pressure to have sex r	Sexual risk behaviours r	Remarks
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Pressure to have sex	1079	1.00	0.109	Low positive relationship
Sexual risk behaviours	1079	0.109	1.00	

Table 3 reveals that the Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) is 0.109, indicating a low positive correlation between pressure to have sex and sexual risk behaviours among public secondary school students in Anambra State.

Null Hypotheses

4.4 Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between peer sexual behaviour and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State

Table 4: Test of Significance of Relationship between Peer sexual behaviour and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents

Variable	Cal. r	Df	Cal. t	P-value	Remark
Peer sexual behaviour	0.197	1077	6.181	0.000	*S

*Significant

At the 0.05 level of significance with 1077 degrees of freedom, table 4 shows that the calculated t-value was 6.181, and its corresponding P-value was 0.000. Since this value is less than 0.05, the first null hypothesis is rejected. This means that there is a significant relationship between peer sexual behaviour and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between sexual attitude and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State is not significant.

Table 5: Test of Significance of Relationship between sexual attitude and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents

Variable	Cal. r	df	Cal. t	P-value	Remark
Sexual attitude	0.002	1077	0.144	0.885	*NS

*Not Significant

The results of Table 5 show that, at the 0.05 level of significance and 1077 degrees of freedom, the calculated t value of 0.144 has a P value of 0.885, which is greater than 0.05. This means that the second null hypothesis is accepted; there is no significant relationship between the sexual attitude and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State.

Hypothesis 3: The relationship existing between pressure to have sex and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State is not significant.

Table 6: Test of Significance of Relationship between pressure to have sex and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents

Variable	Cal. r	df	Cal. t	P-value	Remark
Pressure to have sex	0.109	1077	2.787	0.005	*S

*Significant

The results of Table 6 indicate that, with 1077 degrees of freedom and a 0.05 significance level, the calculated t-value of 2.787 has a P-value of 0.005, which is lower than the 0.05 threshold. This means that the third null hypothesis is rejected, showing that there is a significant relationship between pressure to have sex and the sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State.

3.1. Discussion

Findings of this study are discussed as follows:

3.1.1 Relationship between peer sexual behaviour and sexual risky behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State

The findings of this study indicate that there is a weak, positive correlation between sexual behaviour and sexual risk behaviours among public secondary school students in Anambra State. This suggests that while there is a relationship between the two, it is not strong enough. The findings further indicate that the existing relationship between peer sexual behaviour and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State is statistically significant, although the strength of the relationship is low.

The results of this research may be due to a variety of factors. These include the level of knowledge of sexual health and the potential consequences of engaging in risky sexual behaviour among public secondary school students, the lack of access to accurate information and resources to support safe sexual practises, the inadequate quality of sex education in schools, and the potential stigma or disapproval associated with discussing sexual health and engaging in safe sexual practises in some communities. The findings of this study are in line with the findings of other studies, such as Udigwe, Adogu, and Nwabueze (2014); Pengpid and Peltzer (2015); and Chi, Yu, and Winter (2012). This suggests that there is a positive relationship between sexual behaviour and sexual risk behaviours among public secondary school students in Anambra State, although this relationship is not strong enough.

3.1.2 Relationship between sexual attitude and sexual risky behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State

The results of the research indicated that there is a weak, or no, correlation between sexual attitude and sexual risk behaviours among public secondary school students in Anambra State. This implies that an increase in the students' sexual attitude, which is defined as the individual's beliefs regarding sexuality exhibited through behaviour, would likely lead to an increase in their sexual risk behaviours. However, the magnitude of the association was very low, which could mean that there is no connection between the two variables. Moreover, the research found that the relationship between the sexual attitude and sexual risk behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State was not statistically significant. This could suggest that there is no relevant relationship between the two variables.

There are likely a number of explanations for why the research demonstrated a very low or no positive relationship between sexual attitude and sexual risk behaviours among public secondary school students in Anambra State. This is in line with the findings of earlier studies, such as Miller and Sneesby's (2018) research, which revealed a very low positive relationship between the students' sexual attitude and sexual risk behaviour among students in the United States. This could be due to the fact that sexual attitude is more closely linked to other factors that were not addressed in this study. It could also be due to the possibility that the majority of secondary school adolescents in this study expressed unfavourable sexual attitudes, which might have restricted their potential exposure to sexual risk behaviours. This negative attitude may have been acquired from their parents, peer groups, media, and classroom instructors, as well as from prior sexual encounters. Jahanfar and Pashaei (2022) found that there was only a slight positive correlation between risky sexual behaviour and religiosity, as well as a negative sexual attitude. The basis for this conclusion was the idea that those who actively practised their religion were less likely to engage in sexually risky behaviour than those who did not. The findings of this study are in line with those of Jahanfar and Pashaei.

3.1.3 Relationship between pressure to have sex and sexual risky behaviours of secondary school adolescents in Anambra State

The findings of the study suggest that there is a low but significant positive relationship between peer pressure to have sex and sexual risk behaviours among public secondary school students in Anambra State. This means that a small increase in pressure from peers could lead to an increased risk of engaging in sexually risky behaviours. This result is in line with previous studies, such as Rimande, Agu, and Terzungwe (2021), Adegboyega, Ayoola, and Muhammed (2019), and Adimora, Akaneme, and Aye (2018). These studies have all highlighted that peer pressure is a significant predictor of risky sexual behaviour among adolescents and young adults.

The reasons for this could be attributed to various factors, including exposure to multiple sources of peer pressure, a lack of access to comprehensive sex education, a lack of family support and guidance, and messages from the media and popular culture that portray sexual activities as a way to gain acceptance and respect. All of these factors could lead to adolescents feeling pressured to engage in sexual activities despite the potential risks. The increasing prevalence of sex among adolescents has made it easier and less intimidating for them to discuss the topic. This has made it

more difficult to manage them due to their being exposed to sex through their peers, social media, and television shows. As teenagers strive to discover their own identities, parental controls become less relevant, and their peers have a greater influence on them. When peers give approval for certain behaviour, adolescents are more likely to take on that behaviour and incorporate it into their lives.

4.CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study revealed a low but positive correlation between peer sexual behaviour, sexual attitude, peer pressure to have sex, and risky sexual behaviours among secondary school adolescents. The correlation was found to be significant, implying that the aforementioned factors are interconnected and must be addressed collectively in order to reduce the sexual risk behaviours among adolescents in Anambra State.

4.1 Implications of the Study

The findings of the study revealed a low positive correlation between sexual behaviour and sexual risk behaviours among public secondary school students in Anambra State. This highlights the need for health education and prevention strategies to be implemented to protect the sexual health of adolescents. It is essential that students and educators are aware of this relationship and take action to ensure they are properly informed of the risks associated with sexual activity. This can be done by providing access to resources and information, as well as fostering an open dialogue between students and adults. Ultimately, this study emphasises the importance of continued education and awareness surrounding the risks of sexual behaviour among young people.

4.2 Recommendations

The findings of the study have led to the following recommendations: :

1. School management should work collaboratively with guidance counsellors and health educators to start prevention programmes intended to broaden adolescents' aspirations for the future, increase their social and interpersonal skills, and engage them in more school and community activities in order to reduce their involvement in various deviant activities.
2. School health educators should collaborate with school guidance counsellors to organize school programmes that teach safe sex and the behavioural skills required for negotiation and refusal to effectively address peer group influence, social norms, and pressures to have sex. These programmes could be offered in various settings, such as health education classes, after-school recreational programmes, and school-based health or family planning clinics.
3. Parents should focus on strengthening family relationships as a key preventive measure against risky behaviour, particularly sexual behaviour involving their adolescent child. This should be included in policy-making, public education, and premarital, marital, and parent counselling.
4. Health educators should provide age-appropriate educational and counselling messages that are suited to secondary school adolescents' stages of sexual activity.

CONSENT

The authors have collected and safeguarded participants' signed consent in accordance with the required scholarly standards.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study has been reviewed and approved to have adhered to the ethical principles of research involving human subjects, including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The potential benefits of the study outweigh the risks, and appropriate measures have been taken to protect participants' rights and well-being.

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