

## **PEER GROUP PRESSURE AS A DETERMINANT OF ADOLESCENT SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS**

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**Abstract:** This study investigated peer group pressure as a determinant of adolescents' social adjustment in Nigerian schools, with a focus on the Ikeja Local Government Area of Lagos State. Two null hypotheses were tested using a random sample of one hundred and twenty adolescents from four secondary schools in the Ikeja Local Government Area. The instrument was a self-designed questionnaire. The collected data were analysed using an independent t-test and a Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. The results of the analysis showed that peer group pressure among adolescents is related to their social adjustment and that the gender of the adolescents affects their social adjustment as well. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made: parents should serve as role models for their children to emulate; parents should be watchful of the types of friends kept by their adolescent children; and parent-child relationship should be cordial enough to permit adolescents in discussing their problems with them. In addition, the management of adolescents (secondary school students) should be the joint responsibility of parents, guidance counsellors, school administrators and society at large.

**Keywords:** peer pressure, social adjustments, adolescents, Nigerian schools

**Abstrak:** Kajian ini menyelidik tentang tekanan kumpulan rakan sebaya sebagai penentu dalam penyesuaian sosial dalam kalangan remaja sekolah di Nigeria dengan memberi fokus kepada Kawasan Kerajaan Tempatan Ikeja di Negeri Lagos. Dua hipotesis Nul diuji menggunakan sampel rawak seramai 120 orang remaja dari empat buah sekolah menengah di Kawasan Kerajaan Tempatan Ikeja. Instrumen yang diguna pakai ialah soal selidik yang direka sendiri. Data dianalisis menggunakan *independent t-test* dan *Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient*. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan tekanan kumpulan rakan sebaya dalam kalangan remaja mempengaruhi penyesuaian sosial mereka. Berdasarkan dapatan kajian beberapa cadangan dikemukakan : ibu bapa perlu menjadi model peranan kepada anak untuk dicontohi; ibu bapa perlu mengawasi jenis kawan kepada anak remaja mereka; perhubungan ibu bapa perlu mesra supaya anak remaja dapat membincang masalah dengan mereka. Tambahan lagi, pengawasan anak remaja seharusnya menjadi tanggungjawab bersama oleh ibu bapa, kaunselor, pentadbir dan masyarakat keseluruhannya.

**Kata kunci:** rakan sebaya, penyesuaian sosial, remaja, sekolah di Nigeria

## **BACKGROUND OF STUDY**

In adolescence, young people begin to break away from their families and try out different roles and situations to figure out who they are and where they fit into the world. They spend more time with their friends and less time with their families. This is a normal, healthy stage of development, but the growing distance between parents and their children and the increasing importance of friends can be a source of conflict and anger within the family. The desire to feel accepted and to fit in is one of the strongest forces in adolescents; this can lead teens to do things that they know are wrong, dangerous, or risky. On the positive side, the pressure to keep up with the peer group can also inspire teens to achieve goals that they might never aim for on their own. In other words, young people prefer to be in the company of other young people, who offer mutual support in contrast to their parents, who they perceive as authoritarian. Perhaps this is why the issue of peer pressure is of great interest to the psychological and sociological fields. In Eric Erikson's theory of "Identity vs. Identity Confusion," adolescence is viewed as a developmental stage in which individuals are more susceptible to peer pressure due to the shift in emotional dependence from parents to peers (Wall, Power & Arbona, 1993; Berk, 2004).

"Peer pressure" can be described as the influence exerted by a peer group in encouraging a person to change his or her attitudes, values, or behaviours to conform to the group. A person affected by peer pressure may or may not want to belong to these groups. They may also recognise dissociative groups that they do not wish to belong to, and therefore adopt behaviours in opposition to those of the group (Adams, 1996). In the same vein, according to Harris (1998), peer pressure can cause people to do things they would not normally do, e.g., take drugs, smoke, date, marry, have a job, have children and buy expensive items. Research has shown that over the last 50 years peer influence/pressure has emerged as the chief source of values and behavioural influence for adolescents, replacing the influence of adults. Along with this new trend has come a rise in antisocial behaviour (Neufeld & Mate, 2005). Although the level of deviance varies between peer groups, the negative actions of one member of a group will increase the probability of other members taking part in similar behaviours. Affiliation with deviant peers predicts delinquent behaviour more strongly than community, school, or family characteristics (Gifford-Smith, Dodge, Dishion & McCord, 2005).

Research has also found relationships between deviance and other factors. Studies have shown young adolescents to be more susceptible to peer pressure than younger children or those in late adolescence (Pruitt, 1999). An increase in susceptibility is seen between grades five and eight, followed by a linear decline as older adolescents develop a sense of autonomy from their peers. A different

perspective by Pruitt (1999) showed that positive peer pressure can also have a strong effect and that even adolescents who are highly susceptible are more likely to be influenced by positive or neutral behaviour than antisocial behaviour. Additionally, while pressure from peer groups is undoubtedly influential, most teens choose friends that share common views about behaviours such as drinking or drug use. Pruitt stated that "the 'good kid' who falls in with the bad crowd is the exception, not the rule."

Youth peer pressure is particularly common because most youths are forced to spend large amounts of time in fixed groups (schools and subgroups within them) regardless of their opinion of those groups (Ungar, 2004). In addition, they may lack the maturity to handle the peer pressure. Young people are also more willing to behave negatively towards those who are not members of their own peer groups. However, youth peer pressure can also have positive effects. For example, if one is involved with a group of people who are ambitious and working to succeed, one might feel pressured to follow suit to avoid feeling excluded from the group.

It is commonly believed that socially accepted children fare best in high school. It is expected that people who are considered popular will have the most resources, the most opportunities and the most positive experiences. Much of the time this is true; however, research shows that being in the popular crowd may also be a risk factor for mild to moderate deviant behaviour (Peel, 1993). This is also in agreement with the view of Omoegun (1995), that popular adolescents are the most socialised into their peer groups and are therefore vulnerable to peer pressures regarding substance use and some other deviant behaviours. Adolescence is a time of experimentation with new identities and experiences, and socially accepted kids are often accepted because they conform well to the norms of teen culture, which includes good and bad aspects. Popular adolescents are therefore more strongly associated with their peer groups in which they may experiment with behaviours such as alcohol and drug use (Adams, 1996). However, though Sarka (1989) identifies a few risk factors correlated with popularity, popular adolescents' deviant behaviour is often only mild to moderate. Overall, social acceptance provides more protective factors than risk factors.

Social psychologists have also studied peer pressure, examining how it can influence people to match the opinions of others. In an experimental setting, Omoegun (1995) found that people consistently changed their answers from an obvious correct response to an incorrect response when others gave an incorrect answer. Social psychology experiments have also shown that individuals are more likely to stand their ground about what they know is right and stick to their original answers if just one other person joins or agrees with them. Such studies demonstrate that people can easily resist peer pressure together, and give new

meaning to the conventional wisdom that the friends a person chooses really do matter. The best way for teens, or people of all ages, to make peer pressure a positive rather than a negative force is to select friends whose values, goals, ambitions, habits, and behaviours they admire and believe are constructive.

The extent to which a person is influenced by peer pressure depends on many factors (Onwuamanam, 1998). People are less likely to be heavily influenced by their friends and more likely to make their own decisions if they have high self-esteem, individual goals, a positive outlook on the future, good social skills, the ability to interact with people from different backgrounds, and strong connections to family and community.

Further, Adams (1996) posited that people are more likely to be heavily influenced by their peers and less likely to make decisions for themselves if they have low self-esteem, are experiencing problems in their family such as divorce, alcoholism, drug addiction, or unemployment, come from families where there is little support or communication, strongly identify with only one ethnic group, feel distant from school and community activities, and are afraid of not belonging or fitting in.

Given the background presented above, it seems that the socialisation experience of adolescents is focused on peer interaction. Adolescents are more likely to discuss their problems with their peers than with their parents and are therefore more susceptible to their peers' perceptions of right and wrong. Evidence abounds to show that peer groups influence adolescents' value orientation and behaviour. Adolescents have also been found to be influenced by their peers in other aspects of life, such as sexuality and occupational choices. Some of the social vices that are found in Nigerian senior secondary schools and in society in general are the result of peer group influence on adolescents. Deviant behaviours such as cheating on exams, rape, theft, truancy, drug addiction, smoking, cybercrime, school tardiness and others are due to parents' lack of watchfulness over the types of friends kept by their adolescent children. Osarenren (2002) confirmed that peers, among other factors, encourage absenteeism, truancy and emotional disturbance. These problems may cumulatively lead to educational deficiencies such as poor study habits and academic underachievement. It can therefore be concluded that experiences with peers enable adolescents to acquire a range of skills, attitudes and roles that influence their adaptation to the social world (Rubin, Bukowski & Parker, 1998). In other words, peer groups are significant sites of socialisation beyond the influence of family and school because (a) they satisfy certain needs for a sense of belonging (Adler & Adler, 1998), (b) they are often preferred over other socialising agents (Harris, 1998), and (c) they influence not only social development, but cognitive and psychological development as well (Ladd, 1999).

Social adjustment is the psychological process through which individuals cope with the challenges that adolescents face daily (Sarka, 1989). Adolescents spend an increasing amount of time each day in the company of peers. Omoegun (1995) posited that young people have a tendency to associate with members of their age group. As a result of this association, the decisions of the group influence the decisions of the individuals who belong to it.

Young people experience physical and physiological changes during the adolescent period of development. Because of this, the young person comes to ponder questions such as "who am I," "where am I," and "what am I doing here?" In seeking answers to these puzzling questions, he then begins to identify with his/her age mates. Thus, a phase of peer group pressure is begun, as children desire separation from parents and elders and association with peers. Most of the adolescent's behaviours are influenced by the decisions of the group to which he belongs. This makes adolescents practice the behaviours of their age mates, not those desired by their parents. In explaining this situation, Onwuamanam (1998) argued that parents are largely responsible for lapses in adolescent behaviour because they are expected to serve as role models and pay attention to their children's development to inculcate an appropriate sense of discipline. In support of this view, Oloko (1996) noted that some deviant adolescents from reputable homes engage in the behaviour of selling their parents' belongings. This was attributed to the bad company kept by those adolescents.

Undergraff (2001) stated that adolescents spend more than half of their time in the company of their peers, and therefore it is not surprising that peers play an influential role in the adolescents' lives. He added that credibility, authority, power and the influence of peers are greater during adolescence (that is, senior secondary school age) than any other time in life. Similarly Omeogun (2002), argued that the peer group is the unit of social life during adolescence; therefore, the adolescent's personality is influenced by his/her social life and his/her group. The main values of the peer culture are social participation, group loyalty and individual achievement (Osarenren, 2002). According to Osarenren (2002), peer group influence has seven essential functions. These functions are: a replacement for family (though only to a certain extent); a stabilising influence; a source of self esteem; a source of behavioural standards; security in numbers; opportunities for practice; and opportunities for modelling. Peer relationships can therefore be a powerful positive or negative influence. This influence can take place when members of a group are compelled to do something they would not otherwise have attempted or when they are stopped from doing something they would have liked to do. Omeogun (1996) suggested that when friends smoke, they urge others to start smoking as well. Similarly, Adams (1994) and Omoegun (1996) both indicated that one of the most common observations of adolescents is that they tend to be highly conforming to the styles, behaviours and attitudes of their

peer groups. An adolescent wants to be accepted by his/her peer, therefore he/she experiences pressure from the group. Thus, the peer group can provide both positive and negative influences on an adolescent depending on the type of group he/she belongs to. It is the type of group that an adolescent belongs to that determines his/her social disposition.

The sociological view of adolescence takes a very different perspective than psychoanalytic theory. While the two disciplines have no disagreement concerning the importance of the transitional process, viewpoints diverge on the causes of this process. While psychoanalytic theory focuses on internal factors, sociology looks at society and to events outside the individual. Andrew (1994) stated that it is implicit in the sociological viewpoint that both socialisation and role assumption are more problematic during adolescence than at any other time. Why should this be so?

First, features of adolescence such as growing independence from authority figures, involvement with peer groups, and an unusual sensitivity to the evaluations of others all provoke role transitions and discontinuity, of varying intensities, as functions of both the social and cultural context. Second, any internal change or uncertainty has the effect of increasing the individual's dependence on others, and this applies particularly to the need for reassurance and support for one's view of oneself. Third, the effects of major environmental changes are also relevant, as the adolescent is exposed to a wide variety of competing socialising agencies, including the family, the school, the peer group, adult-directed youth organisations, the mass media and so on and is thus presented with a range of potentially conflicting values and ideals.

Furthermore, sociologists commonly assume that the socialisation of young people is more dependent upon the generation than upon the family or other social institutions. Onyejiaku (1991) called this "auto-socialisation". According to him, the crucial social meaning of youth is withdrawal from adult control and influence compared with childhood. Peer groups are the milieu into which young people withdraw. In most societies at least, this withdrawal to the peer groups is within limits and legitimated by the adult world. Time and space is handed over to young people to work out their auto-socialisation; the developmental problems of self and identity cannot be handled by the simple direct socialisation appropriate to childhood. There is a moratorium on compliance and commitment, and leeway is allowed for a relatively unguided journey with peers towards autonomy and maturity. Adolescence, from a sociological point of view, is therefore seen as a time dominated by stress and tensions not due to inner emotional instability, but as a result of conflicting external pressures. It is against this background that this study was constructed to examine peer group pressure as a determinant of adolescent social adjustment in Nigerian schools.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Adolescents spend an increasing amount of time each day in the company of their peers; Omoegun (1995) posited that young people have a tendency to want to associate with members of their own age group. As a result of this association with members of their own age group, the decisions of the age group influence the decisions of individuals who belong to the group. Adolescents experience some physical and physiological changes during the period of development that cause them to encounter numerous risks in their daily lives. The quest for peer acceptance is manifested in the way they dress, speak, walk and in their general interests so that they can fit in with the group. Therefore, peers are often publicly blamed for the onset of risk behaviours ranging from substance use to teen pregnancy (Oetting & Beauvais, 1987). Research has shown that over the last 50 years peer pressure has emerged as the chief source of values and behavioural influence in adolescence, replacing the influence of adults. Along with this new trend has come a rise in antisocial behaviours. Recent work has supported and extended this position, showing that friends play an important role in both harmful and positive activities (Gifford-Smith, Dodge, Dishion & McCord, 2004), and that peer pressure predisposes adolescents to many forms of deviance, including alcoholism, gangsterism, robbery and violent secret cult activities (Oni, 2006, 2007). This implies that, although adolescents acquire information regarding risk behaviours from parents, teachers, and the media, peers play a crucial role in an adolescent's development by shaping their normative beliefs and interpretations of information regarding risk activities (Cassimejee, 1998; Duck, 1995; Conger & Petersen, 1994). In essence, peer norms help determine whether a behaviour is hip, safe and desirable.

Given the foregoing, it can be expected that some of the social vices that are found in Nigerian senior secondary schools and in society in general are the result of peer group influence on adolescents. This study was therefore designed to assess the extent of the influence of peer group pressure on the social adjustment of adolescents in Nigeria, with a particular focus on the Ikeja Local Government Area of Lagos State.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent does peer group pressure correlate with an adolescent's social adjustment?

2. Is there a gender difference in the extent of peer group influence on adolescent social adjustment?

## **HYPOTHESES**

The following null hypotheses were tested in the study:

1. There will be no significant relationship between peer group pressure and the adolescent's social adjustment.
2. There will be no significant gender difference in the adolescent's social adjustment among peers.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study employed a descriptive survey design. The population of the study consisted of senior secondary school students in Ikeja Local Government Area of Lagos State. The sample comprised 120 students from four selected secondary schools. The selection was carried out using a stratified sampling technique. All students were aged between 13 and 19 years. The study used a self-designed questionnaire, with a Likert model as the major instrument. The questionnaires were administered by trained assistant researchers with permission from the school authority. During the administration, a researcher explained the questionnaire and then waited patiently for their completion. The completed questionnaires were collected personally by the assigned assistant researcher. Experts in measurement and evaluation validated the questionnaire.

The reliability of the questionnaire was determined by the use of a test – retest technique. The final questionnaires were administered over twenty days. The coefficient of reliability of the two sets of scores were calculated and found to be 0.69. These figures were found to be highly significant at  $p < 0.05$ , therefore indicating that the instruments were reliable. All of the respondents were scored according to their reactions to the items on the instrument. The analysis was done using a t-test and a Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. Both hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance.



## RESULTS

### Hypothesis 1

*There will be no significant relationship between peer group pressure and the social adjustment of the adolescents.*

The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient statistical method was employed to analyse the data. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Relationship between peer group pressure and adolescent social adjustment

Variables	Mean	SD	<i>N</i>	<i>r</i> -calculate	df	<i>r</i> -critical	Remarks
Peer pressure	39.90	10.37	120	0.43	188	0.17	Rejected
Social adjustment	38.36	8.29					

Significant at  $p < 0.05$

Table 1 reveals that the value of *r*-calculated (0.43) is greater than the value of *r*-critical (0.17), given 188 degrees of freedom at the 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis is hereby rejected, while the alternate hypothesis, which states that there will be a significant relationship between peer group pressure and adolescent social adjustment, is retained.

### Hypothesis 2 (i)

*There will be no significant gender difference in adolescent peer pressure.*

In testing this hypothesis, an independent t-test statistical tool was adopted to analyse the data. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** t-test of gender difference in adolescent peer pressure

Group	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD	df	<i>t</i> -calculated	<i>t</i> -critical	Remarks
Male	60	40.43	10.08	188	0.55	2.00	Accepted
Female	60	39.38	10.69				

Significant at  $p < 0.05$

Table 2 reveals that the value of *t*-calculated (0.55) is not significant because it is less than the value of *t*-critical (2.00), given 188 degrees of freedom at the 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis is hereby accepted.

### Hypothesis 2 (ii)

There will be no significant gender difference in adolescent social adjustment. In testing this hypothesis, an independent t-test statistical tool was adopted to analyse the data. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** t-test of gender difference in adolescent social adjustment

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	t-calculated	t-critical	Remarks
Male	60	38.38	7.33	188	0.17	2.00	Accepted
Female	60	38.12	9.19				

Significant at  $p < 0.05$

Table 3 reveals that the value of  $t$ -calculated (0.17) is not significant because it is less than the value of  $t$ -critical (2.00), given 188 degrees of freedom at the 0.05 level of significance. Therefore the null hypothesis is accepted.

### Summary of Result

Based on the results of the data analysis, the following findings emerged.

1. Peer group pressure among adolescents is related to adolescent social adjustment.
2. The gender of the adolescents does not affect their peer pressure.
3. The gender of the adolescents does not affect their social adjustment.

### DISCUSSION

Hypothesis one states that there will be no significant relationship between peer group pressure and the social adjustment of adolescents. The results reveal that the value of  $r$ -calculated (0.43) is greater than the value of  $r$ -critical (0.17), given 188 degrees of freedom at the 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. This finding demonstrates that peer group pressure among adolescents is related to their social adjustment. This supports the findings of Undergraff (2001) who noted that adolescents, no matter their gender, spend more than half of their time in the company of peers. He stated that the peer influence is greater during adolescence than at any other time in life. The finding also supported those of Onyejiaku (1991), who stated that adolescents derive some measure of satisfaction from being together and that they discuss their problems with their peers rather than their parents. The findings also agree with

the findings of Grubb and Watt (1999), who asserted that peer experiences in adolescence are significantly related to subsequent adjustment during adolescence and adulthood. The finding also supports the work of Duckle (1995) who found that peer group pressure influences the future adjustment of adolescents.

Hypothesis 2 (i) stated that there no significant gender difference in adolescent peer pressure exists. The result revealed that the value of  $t$ -calculated (0.55) is significant because it is greater than the value of  $t$ -critical (2.00), given 188 degrees of freedom at the 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis is hereby accepted.

Hypothesis 2 (ii) states that there will be no significant gender difference in adolescent social adjustment. The result revealed that the value of  $t$ -calculated (0.17) is significant because it is greater than the value of  $t$ -critical (2.00), given 188 degrees of freedom at the 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis is hereby accepted. The overall findings agreed with Ungar's (2000) study of high risks adolescents, which revealed that youths indicated that the adoption of the behaviour and appearance of peers was a strategy consciously employed to enhance the individual's social adjustment and power. Identification with the peer group enabled adolescents to avoid feelings of alienation, especially if there were family problems, since peers served as a source of support. Youth respondents described peer groups as a means to assert both individual and collective identities. In other words, peer group pressures were bidirectional, as the members shaped the group and the group, in turn, shaped the members.

## **SUMMARY**

Previous studies have noted that peer group pressure plays a vital role in the lives and social adjustment of adolescents and that adolescents have a tendency to associate with members of their age group. As a result of this association, the decisions of the age group influence the decisions of the individual who belongs to that group. Therefore, adolescents practice the behaviours of their age mates, rather than those advocated by their parents, so it is imperative for parents to watch out for the types of company their adolescent children keep. Other studies have found that the main values of the peer culture are social participation, group loyalty and individual achievement. Based on peer relationships, members of a group are influenced to do something they would not have attempted on their own, or prevented from doing something they might have wanted to do. An adolescent wants to be accepted and he/she experiences pressure from the group. It is the type of group that an adolescent belongs to that determines his/her social disposition. Most of the crimes committed and deviant behaviours displayed by

the adolescents in our society result from peer influence because the adolescent wants to live up to group expectations or follow a particular fashion. Therefore, parents should serve as role models and be watchful of the types of friends kept by their adolescent children.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study and the conclusions reached above, this paper offers the following recommendations:

1. Parents should serve as role models for their children to emulate.
2. Parents should be watchful of the types of friends kept by their adolescent children.
3. The parent-child relationship should be cordial enough to permit adolescents to discuss their problems with their parents.
4. The management of adolescents (secondary school students) should be the joint responsibility of parents, teachers, school administrators and the society at large.

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