



Research Paper: Parental Verbal Abuse, Substance Use and Self-Esteem as Predictors of Mental Health among In-School Adolescents in Lagos, Nigeria



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Citation: Uye, E. E., Omotuwa, J., Ehondor, E. (2024). Parental Verbal Abuse, Substance Use and Self-Esteem as Predictors of Mental Health among In-School Adolescents in Lagos, Nigeria. *Journal of Modern Psychology*, 4(4), 23-34. <https://doi.org/10.22034/jmp.2024.461810.1108>

<https://doi.org/10.22034/jmp.2024.461810.1108>

Article info:

Received date:

08 June, 2024

Accepted date:

01 Dec, 2024

Keywords:

In-school Adolescents,
Mental health, Parental
Verbal Abuse, Substance
Use, Self-esteem

Abstract

Objective: Mental health has remained an issue that affects various age groups with different levels of outcomes. One age group that needs urgent attention is the in-school adolescents. Studies have used various predictors to explore in-school adolescents' mental health with varied results. Therefore, this study investigated parental verbal abuse, substance use and self-esteem as predictors of mental health among in-school adolescents in Lagos, Nigeria.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted while purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used to select three local government areas and 200 in-school adolescents for the study. Data were collected using General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), Hare Self-esteem Scale (HSS), Verbal Abuse Questionnaire and Substance Use Scale and analyzed using multiple regression analysis.

Results: The results revealed that parental verbal abuse, substance use and self-esteem jointly predicted mental health among study participants [$R^2=.12$, $F(4,199) = 6.64$, $p < .05$]. Also, parental verbal abuse ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .05$) and self-esteem ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .05$) independently predicted mental health among study participants. However, substance use ($\beta = -.11$, $p > .05$) did not independently predict mental health among study participants.

Conclusion: The study concludes that parental verbal abuse, substance use and self-esteem are strong predictors of mental health among study participants. The paper recommended that in order to enhance the mental health of in-school adolescents, government and other stakeholders should advocate for the development and implementation of policies that prioritize mental health support and resources for adolescents within Lagos State and Nigeria.

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1. Introduction

Mental health, like physical health, is viewed to exist on a continuum from healthy living to chronic illness. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2018) defines mental health as the way our thoughts, feelings and behaviors affect life. Positive mental health leads to assertive self-image, satisfying relationships, constructive decision-making and dealing with one's challenges. It means how individuals look at themselves, their lives, and other people in their lives, evaluate their challenges and problems and explore choices (APA, 2018). Mental health is an important contributing factor to an individual's overall health status. One group of individual whose mental health needs to be monitored regularly is that of in-school adolescents. This is because they are constantly exposed to diverse physical, social and internal factors that affect their mental health (Omotuwa, 2024).

Some factors have been investigated as predictors of mental health among in-school adolescents. Three factors were investigated in this study. Parental verbal abuse is first considered in this study as predictor of mental health which refers to the use of words to inflict psychological pain on individuals such that the "child feel less favorable about his/herself leading to a negative effect on mental health (Nwankwo & Agu, 2018). Kirk et al. (2019) has identified humiliation, disrespect, unjustified criticism, yelling, bullying, harassing, name-calling, and threatening as some of common parental verbal abuse on adolescents. In this study, parental verbal abuse is the use of harmful

language or communication by parent or caregiver causing emotional, psychological and even physical harm to the child. Studies have shown that parents who frequently use abusive words on their children caused depression and anxiety on them which affected their mental health (Fitriana et al., 2021; Fairuzza et al., 2023).

In addition, substance use is considered in this study as a predictor of mental health. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2023) defines substance use as an individual's participation or engagement in the consumption, possession, distribution, or any other related activities associated with illicit or controlled substances. This involvement can manifest in various forms ranging from experimentation with drugs to regular use, addiction, or involvement in the illicit drug business (SAMHSA, 2023). Specifically, the use of drugs without prescriptions from medical officers (doctors) or advice from a pharmacist constitutes substance abuse. When applied to this study, substance use among in-school adolescents involves the use of un-prescribed drug that would affect their normal functioning and behaviors both in school and in other areas of lives. The common drugs widely use and abuse among in-school adolescents in Nigeria include alcohol, cigarettes, nicotine, caffeine, marijuana, Tramadol, codeine, Toluene, cocaine and other unspecified substances (James, 2023). Studies have revealed that substance use causes mental health problems. For example, Obosi et al. (2022) found substance use as a predictor of poor mental health among in-school adolescents.

Besides substance use, another factor considered in this study as a predictor of mental health is self-esteem which describes the positive and negative evaluation of the self and the way individuals perceive themselves (Farid & Akhter, 2013). Also, it is the ability to realistically acknowledge one's strengths and limitations and accept oneself as worthy and worthwhile without conditions or reservations (Ersögütçü & Karakas, 2016). Self-esteem encompasses beliefs such as "I am competent" and "I am worthy", as well as emotions like triumph, despair, pride, and shame. Keane and Loades (2017) found an association between low self-esteem and negative outcomes for adolescents' behavioral and mental health problems. Therefore, a high sense of self-esteem is perceived as a factor that allows an individual to maintain a positive and optimistic outlook amidst negative circumstances in which they passed through. Studies have found low self-esteem as predictor of substance use among in-school adolescents which by extension affects their mental health (Badriyah et al., 2023; Fairuzza et al., 2023; Uba et al., 2013).

Some studies have examined parental verbal abuse on mental health among in-school adolescents with varied results. For example, Fairuzza et al. (2023) who investigated the effect of parental verbal abuse on mental health among found negative correlation between parental verbal abuse and mental health. Also, Badriyah et al. (2023) revealed negative relationship between parental verbal abuse and mental health. Another study by Lani (2018) indicated that verbal abuse as a predictor of

mental health among study participants. Earlier studies (Damodaran et al. 2014; Rizvi & Najam, 2014) supported psychological abuse by parents as significant predictor of mental health among adolescents). Finally, Coates et al. (2013) concluded that mothers' verbal abuse to be a stronger predictor of psychological distress (mental health) among adult daughters and sons than fathers' verbal abuse. All these studies confirmed that adolescents who perceived their parents as more abusive exhibited greater mental health problems.

Studies on substance use on mental health have consistently supported the negative implications of substance use on mental health. For instance, Obosi et al. (2022) found substance use to have a negative effect on mental health among in-school adolescents. Also, Diraditsile and Rasesigo (2018) confirmed mental health effects and substance abuse to be high among youths and the early onset of substance abuse preceded mental disorders such as depression, suicidal tendency and personality disorders. Extant study by Cranford et al. (2009) revealed substance use as a predictor of mental health problems among undergraduates.

Finally, studies that have been conducted to determine the effects of self-esteem on mental health have produced consistent results. For example, Cong et al. (2019) found self-esteem correlating with depressive symptom which is a part of mental health. Also, Fiorilli et al. (2019) and Peñate et al. (2020) revealed that self-esteem as a strong predictor of mental health (depression) among their study participants. Besides,

Yücens and Uzer (2018) who found in-school adolescents low in self-esteem reported low mental health while Nguyen et al. (2019) found prevalence of low self-esteem and mental health such as anxiety, depression, educational stress and suicidal ideation among in-school adolescents in Vietnam. Finally, Aboalshamat et al. (2017) reported an inverse relationship between self-esteem and mental health.

Studies have investigated parental verbal abuse, substance use and self-esteem as independent predictors of mental health among different populations and across different samples with varied results. Also, no study has investigated joint contributions of parental verbal abuse, substance use and self-esteem as predictors of mental health among in-school adolescents which left a gap in knowledge to be filled. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore parental verbal abuse, substance use and self-esteem as predictors of mental health among in-school adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design, Population, Sampling Method

A cross-sectional research design was adopted in this study while validated questionnaires were used to collect data from the study participants. The independent variables were parental verbal abuse, substance use and self-esteem while the dependent variable was mental health. The study was conducted in three Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Lagos State:

Iba LGA, Ojo LGA and Amuwo Odofin LGA. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the LGAs while convenience sampling technique was used to select participants for the study.

2.2. Instruments

General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12): Participants' mental health status was assessed using the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) developed by Goldberg and Williams (1988). The GHQ-12 utilizes a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (always) to 3 (never). Sample items include "Able to concentrate" and "Loss of sleep over worry." Higher scores indicate poorer mental health. The authors of the original scale reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85, while a Cronbach's alpha of 0.76 was obtained in this study, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Verbal Abuse Questionnaire (VAQ): For assessing parental verbal abuse, the VAQ (Teicher et al., 2006) was used, consisting of 15 items on yelling, swearing, blaming, threatening, demeaning, ridiculing, insulting, criticizing, screaming, belittling, and devaluating, among other types. It is presented on a 9-point Likert's format that ranges from 0 = not at all to 8 = every day. Sample items include: "My parents scold me" and "My parents yell at me". The authors reported Cronbach's alpha of 0.98 (maternal) and 0.94 (paternal). In this study, Cronbach's alpha of 0.88 was obtained.

Substance Use Scale: To assess substance use, the Substance Use Scale (Méndez et al., 2017) was applied. This scale consists of 19

items with a response format coded as "Yes (1)" or "No (0)". Sample items include: "Have you ever smoked a cigarette", "Have you ever used cocaine powder (coke, candy cane, cocaine hydrochloride) or freebased cocaine (base cocaine paste, basuco, crack, baseball)", and "Do you think that you carry out activities that put your health at risk". Méndez et al. (2017) obtained Cronbach's alpha of 0.92 for total scores. In this study, Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 was obtained.

Hare Self-esteem Scale (HSS): The HSS (Hare, 1980) was used to measure self-esteem. The scale is uni-dimensional. All items are presented using a 4-point Likert's format ranging from 1 = Strongly Agree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4= Strongly agree. Example of items include: "My parents are proud of the kind of person I am", and "I am an important person to my family". Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. The author obtained Cronbach's alpha of 0.75 while in this study, Cronbach's alpha of 0.71 was obtained.

2.3. Procedure

The researchers collected formal letter of introduction from the Department of Psychology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria for identification by the school authority. Principals of the selected schools were contacted and the purpose of the study was explained to them. Verbal approval was given to the researchers where they were directed to see the Vice-Principal or the School Counselors for assistance. The teachers helped the researchers to gather students in designated classroom to participate in the completion of the

questionnaires. The researchers addressed the students on the purpose of the study and verbal consents were sought for and obtained from them. The potential participants were told that participation was voluntary and anyone who is not interested in the study should put up his/her hands. In one school, four students put up their hands that they would not participate and were allowed to leave the classroom. Participants were told that their responses would be kept confidentially as no data would identify them. It took less than 15 minutes to complete the questionnaires. A total of 209 questionnaires were administered, 200 were completely filled while 9 questionnaires were halved filled and were discarded. The total questionnaires from each LGA were: Iba LGA has 41 (21%), Amuwo-Odofin LGA has 58(29%), and Ojo LGA has 101 (50%).

2.4. Data analysis

IBM SPSS version 23 was used for data analysis. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were computed. Hypothesis 1, 2 and 3 were tested using linear regression analysis while hypotheses 4 was tested using multiple regression analysis. All hypotheses were accepted at a $p < 0.05$ level of significance.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics revealed that 77(39%) of the participants were males while 123 (61%) were females with the age ranges from 13 to 19 years with mean age of 14.50 ± 1.78 years. In terms of their classes, 96 (48%) were in Junior Secondary School (JSS) while 104(52%) were from Senior Secondary School (SSS). The participants ethnic groups showed that 107(59%) were Yoruba,

57(29%) were Igbo, 8(4%) were Hausa and 18 (9%) belonged to other ethnic groups. In terms of their religious affiliations, 116

(58%) of the participants were Christians, 79 (40%) were Muslims and 5(2%) were traditional worshippers.

Table 1
Zero-order correlation statistics of the study variables

S N	Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1	Parental Verbal Abuse	28.80	9.41	-	.		.
2	Adolescent Substance Use	21.64	3.02	.32	-	.	
3	Self-esteem	31.24	3.45	.22*	.03	-	
4	Mental Health	30.31	4.51	-.24*	-.19*	-.23*	-

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results in [Table 1](#) indicated that parental verbal abuse had a negative relationship with mental health [$r(199) = -.24, p < .05$]. Also, substance use had a negative relationship with mental health [$r(199) = -.19, p < .05$]. Furthermore, self-esteem had a negative relationship with mental health [$r(199) = -.23, p < .05$]. This means that as self-esteem increases, mental health

decreases. Based on the results of the zero-order correlation statistics, the variables were used for the linear and multiple regressions analyses.

Linear regression analysis was used to investigate the role of parental verbal abuse in predicting mental health and the result is presented in [Table 2](#).

Table 2
Linear regression analysis showing parental verbal abuse as independent predictor of mental health among in-school adolescents

Predictor	B	t	p	R	R ²	F	P
Parental Verbal Abuse	-.24	-3.42	<.05	-.24	.06	11.70	<.05

Dependent Variable: Mental Health

The results in [Table 2](#) revealed that parental verbal abuse independently predicted mental health among study participants ($\beta = -.24, p < .05$). Hypothesis one is confirmed.

Linear regression analysis was used to investigate the role of substance abuse in predicting mental health and the result is presented in [Table 3](#).

Table 3

Linear regression analysis showing substance use as independent predictor of mental health among in-school adolescents

Predictor	β	t	p	R	R ²	F	p
Substance Use	-.19	-2.73	<.05	.19	.04	7.45	<.05

Dependent Variable: Mental Health

The results in [Table 3](#) revealed that substance use independently predicted mental health among study participants ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .05$). Hypothesis two is hereby accepted.

Linear regression analysis was used to investigate the role of self-esteem in predicting mental health and the result is presented in [Table 4](#).

Table 4

Linear regression analysis showing self-esteem as independent predictor of mental health among in-school adolescents

B	t	p	R	R ²	F	P
-.23	-3.32	<.05	.23	.05	11.05	<.05

Dependent Variable: Mental Health

[Table 4](#) shows the linear regression of self-esteem on mental health among in-school adolescents. The result showed that self-esteem independently predicted mental health among study participants ($\beta = -.23$, $p < .05$).

Multiple regression analysis was used to investigate the role of parental verbal abuse, substance use and self-esteem in predicting mental health and the result is presented in [Table 5](#).

Table 5

Multiple regression analysis showing parental verbal abuse, substance use and self-esteem as joint predictors of mental health among in-school adolescents

Predictors	β	T	p	R	R ²	F	p
Parental Verbal Abuse	-.20	-2.82	<.05				
Substance Use	-.11	-1.49	>.05	.35	.12	6.64	<.05
Self-Esteem	-.20	-2.95	<.05				

Dependent Variable: Mental Health

The results in [Table 5](#) revealed that parental verbal abuse, substance use and self-esteem jointly predicted mental health among study participants [$R^2 = .12$, $F(4, 199) = 6.64$, $p < .05$]. This means that parental verbal abuse, substance use and self-esteem explained 12% variance observed in mental health among study participants. This supported the hypothesis.

4. Discussion

The study investigated parental verbal abuse, substance use and self-esteem as predictors of mental health among in-school adolescents in three Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Lagos State, Nigeria. Four hypotheses were tested and accepted at $p < .05$ level of significance.

The hypothesis that parental verbal abuse would independently predict mental health was supported. The result revealed that parental verbal abuse predicted mental health among in-school adolescents. The more verbal abusive the parents are to their children or wards, the more the children would experience mental health challenges. The result supported [Fairuzza et al.'s \(2023\)](#) finding that negative parental verbal abuse in childhood affects mental health right into their children adulthoods. The study finding also supported [Badriyah et al. \(2023\)](#) who found parental verbal abuse as a strong predictor of mental health among residents in Sumber Asri Village. Also, studies by [Lani \(2018\)](#) and [Damodaran et al. \(2014\)](#) supported the present finding. Specifically, mother's verbal abuse was stronger than the father's verbal abuse as the causes of mental

health problems among their children ([Coates et al., 2013](#)).

The hypothesis that substance use would independently predict mental health among in-school adolescents was supported. The result shows that substance use significantly influenced mental health among study participants. The result of this study lent credence to the finding by [Obosi et al. \(2022\)](#) that substance use has negative effects on mental health among their study participants. Also, [Diraditsile and Rasesigo \(2018\)](#) result supported the present finding that substance use predicted mental health among adolescents. Finally, extant results ([Cranford et al., 2009](#); [Stewart et al., 2001](#)) also confirmed the negative effects of substance use on mental health among their study participants.

The hypothesis that self-esteem would independently predict mental health among in-school adolescents was accepted. The result indicated that self-esteem predicted mental health among study participants. This finding is consistent with previous results that self-esteem is a strong predictor of mental health across different samples and populations ([Cong et al., 2021](#); [Fiorilli et al. 2019](#); [Yücens & Uzer., 2018](#)). Specifically, [Nguyen et al. \(2019\)](#) finding supported the present result where they found low self-esteem as predictor of diverse types of mental health such as anxiety, depression, educational stress and suicidal ideation. Individuals low in self-esteem tended to have increase anxiety and depression levels over time thus affecting their mental health.

Finally, the hypothesis that parental verbal abuse, substance use and self-esteem would jointly predict mental health among in-school adolescents was accepted. Parental verbal abuse, substance use and self-esteem jointly predicted mental health among study participants. The result of the study supported finding by Rizvi and Najam (2014) who found parental verbal abuse as a predictor of mental health among adolescents. Also, Nwankwo and Agu (2018) finding that parental verbal abuse predicted psychological (mental) well-being among their study population supported the result of the present study. In terms of substance use among study participants, the result supported finding by Ham and Hope (2005) that a negative association exist between mental health and weekly alcohol consumption among students. Finally, Keane and Loades (2017) and Cong et al. (2019) findings supported the result of this study that self-esteem is a strong predictor negative mental health in term of depressive symptoms among adolescents. High self-esteem was related to higher mental health.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were proffered. To begin with, intervention programs that address parental verbal abuse, adolescent substance use, and self-esteem issues should be designed to target both in-school and out-school adolescents in order to provide supports and resources to improve their mental health outcomes. Also, education and awareness campaigns should be launched to create awareness about the detrimental effects of parental verbal abuse, substance use and low self-esteem on mental health.

These campaigns should target parents, adolescents, educators, and community members to foster understanding and encourage proactive measures to promote positive mental health.

Furthermore, counseling services should be provided for in-school adolescents experiencing mental health challenges related to parental verbal abuse, substance use and low self-esteem problem. These services should be readily available in schools, community centres and healthcare facilities in a confidentially and culturally sensitive environment to address in-school adolescents mental health needs.

Finally, policy development and advocacy that prioritize mental health supports and resources for in-school adolescents should be enacted and implemented in Lagos State and in Nigeria. These policies should address systemic issues contributing to parental verbal abuse, substance use, and low self-esteem and in-school adolescents.

5. Conclusion

The study concluded that parental verbal abuse, substance abuse and self-esteem are joint predictors of mental health among in-school adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria. Also, parental verbal abuse and substance independently predicted mental health among study participants. Some limitations of this study need to be mentioned. For example, the study sample size of 200 in-school adolescents from three out of 20 LGAs in Lagos State hindered generalization of the study findings. Further studies should increase sample size and the number of

LGAs. In addition, data for the study were collected using self-reported questionnaires in a control classroom environment which was not free of response bias. Further studies should include group interviews and documentary evidence from the school authority to triangulate self-reported data. Finally, the three independent variables investigated were not exhaustive. Further studies should include personality traits, social support and learned helplessness to explore mental health among in-school adolescents.

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank all the in-school adolescents who helped us to complete the questionnaires used in this study. Also, we thank the principals, the teachers and the counselors for their assistants during questionnaires administration.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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