



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Influence of Social Anxiety and Peer Acceptance on Adolescents' Social Adjustment in Nigerian Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of social anxiety and peer acceptance on adolescents' social adjustment among secondary school students in Ikorodu, Lagos, Nigeria. To carry out the study, four hypotheses were formulated and tested. A descriptive survey research design was adopted in the study. The sample of the study consisted of 350 students comprising 175 males and 175 females selected through stratified random sampling. A questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents. The hypotheses formulated in this study were tested with t-test statistics at 0.05 level of significance. The results of the study showed a significant influence of social anxiety on adolescents' social adjustment, a significant influence of peer acceptance on adolescents' social adjustment, a significant gender difference in the extent of social anxiety among adolescents, and a significant gender difference in the extent of peer acceptance among adolescents. Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended that school authorities provide a learning environment that eliminates the potential for occurrences of social anxiety. Adolescents should be encouraged to avoid following peers or friends who have negative attitude or influence. Rather, they should follow only those who can influence them positively.

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a period of heightened “roller coaster” emotions, where changes in self-esteem develop gradually in a discontinuous manner that increases self-consciousness and anxiety over how individuals are perceived by others. The changes that young adolescents encounter upon entering middle school are often inconsistent with their developmental characteristics, which include a need for autonomy, heightened self-consciousness, advancing cognitive abilities, and close relationships with peers. Based on this theorized mismatch between adolescents' needs and the characteristics of the social environment, one might expect adolescents to experience adjustment difficulties during this development transition to adulthood. Peer acceptance is one of the peculiarities associated with the adolescents. Adolescents are loyal to their peers, more so than their parents. Problem arises when their peer groups no longer accept them. They become anxious. Even more, this un-acceptance may cause them to withdraw, affecting all area of their lives. Hence, they develop inferiority complex. They may think they are not beautiful or handsome and this will increase their desire for identity and social status.

Yousaf (2015) submits that social anxiety is the fear of arbitration and negative assessment by other people leading to feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, self-consciousness, embarrassment, humiliation, and depression. Social anxiety disorder is a common problem among adolescents (Bandelow & Michaelis, 2015). Millions of adolescents all over the world are traumatized by this condition every day, whether from a specific social anxiety or a more

generalized social anxiety (Frydenberg, 2018). Su et al. (2016) note that social anxiety is associated with a number of negative adjustment outcomes, particularly around adolescents' peer relations, while Khan, Gagné, Yang, and Shapka (2016) say that social anxiety disorder has an adverse effect on life satisfaction. It is typically characterized by an intense fear of what others are thinking about them (specifically fear of embarrassment, criticism, or rejection), which results in the individual feeling insecure, and not "good enough" for other people (Savage, 2016). The results of this are fear and anxiety within social situations such as speaking in front of the class and the assumption that peers will automatically reject them in the social situations (Spence & Rapee, 2016).

Social anxiety also is associated with discrepancies in social skills, attention difficulties, and learning problems in school settings (Lodder et al., 2016). Schneier (2006) reported that the achievement level of phobic children in school was found to be lower, while Jo et al. (2016) found that social phobia can hinder the career development of the person. As a result, socially phobic people accept the jobs below their ability levels, affecting their quality of life and their abilities and skills.

On the other hand, Ghaedi and Tavoli (2010) dispute that a patient's quality of life depends on his or her response to social conditions. The difference between social anxiety and normal apprehension of social situations is that social anxiety involves an intense feeling of fear in social situations and especially those that are unfamiliar (Heeren et al., 2018). The feeling of fear may be so great that a person will go to great lengths to avoid certain social situations (Jacoby, 2016). A number of studies have found that social anxiety disorder is more prevalent in females than males (Yukselturk & Bulut, 2009; Paulus et al., 2015; Coles et al., 2016). Mundia (2010) reported an intensification in the pervasiveness of social anxiety as children transition to adolescence. In preschool, children's friends and playmates tend to be the same sex (Coyle & Liben, 2016; Santos et al., 2015). In addition, Underwood (2004) showed that the majority of social interactions occur within same gender groups: boys are members of boys' groups and girls of girls' groups. Lee, Kesebir, and Pillutla (2016) report that girls spent most of their time playing in small, friendly groups with positive social skills, while boys focus on organized, competitive, large groups playing rough games.

Adolescents who suffer from social anxiety disorder may behave a certain way or say something and then feel embarrassed or humiliated (Svindseth & Crawford, 2019). They may also feel uncomfortable meeting people they do not know, and act distant when they are with large groups of people. Those who suffer from social anxiety disorder fear being judged by others. In particular, individuals with social anxiety are nervous in the presence of people with authority, and feel uncomfortable during physical examinations (Schneier, 2006). According to the stage-environment fit theory (Booth & Sheehan, 2008), individuals are likely to experience adjustment difficulties when a particular environment does not meet their psychological needs. Developmental psychopathologists focus on individuals' adaptation to essential developmental tasks, including normative transitions, because they offer a window through which to view developmental processes and an opportunity to guide individuals toward one set of paths rather than another, with long-term consequences (Ellis & Del Giudice, 2019).

Adolescents who do not have a strong social network (for instance, fewer friends, or lower-quality friendships) in late elementary school may not have a secure base to rely upon when navigating the transition. Graber, Turner, and Madill (2016) report that offering provisions such as, emotional support and promote resilience in peer relationships for coping with developmental challenges. Based on these principles, not only would we expect pre-transition peer experiences to be associated with post-transition adjustment, but involvement with peers would also likely lead to change in adjustment across time. Just as they are spending more time with peers, youth are at risk for a wide range of behaviour problems and psychopathology (for example, delinquency, drug and alcohol use, anxiety, depression) during the adolescent years (Sexton, 2017). Therefore, a closer examination of the role of peers across this transition may offer insights into potential intervention to place at-risk youth on more adaptive developmental pathways.

The peer group is the unit of social life during adolescence (Berndt, 2018) during which an adolescent may choose to do something they would not otherwise do in order to be accepted by their peers. Gordon and Pemberton (2018) added 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. Thus, the peer group can provide both positive and negative influences. Slaughter et al. (2002) revealed that children who interact well with their peers have high social skills due to positive attitude of their peers.

Overcoming social anxiety depends on the person and the situation. For many individuals, it can be just a matter of time, yet for some people social anxiety can become a very difficult, painful, and even a disabling and chronic problem. Social anxiety can be related to shyness or anxiety disorders or other emotional or temperamental factors, but its exact nature is still the subject of research and theory and the causes may vary depending on the individual. Social anxiety disorder places individuals at risk for chronic distress and impairment and differs from shyness and performance anxiety by its greater severity and pervasiveness (Schneier, 2006). This withdrawal from important activities, including school and work, results in lower achievements that can result in decreased occupational, academic, and family function. Consequently, the study examines the influence of social anxiety on adolescents' social adjustment, whether there are gender differences in the extent of social anxiety among adolescents, and if so, the extent of gender difference. It is against this background that this work was undertaken.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Anxiety disorders are reported to be the most prevalent mental health need in the general population (Kessler et al., 2009), with worldwide prevalence rates estimated to be approximately 6.5% in children and adolescents (Polanczyk, Salum, Sugaya, Caye, & Rohde 2015). In a survey of mental health of UK children and adolescents, according to Green et al. (2005) and Goodman (2001) found that approximately 4% of adolescent boys and 5% of girls had a clinically recognised anxiety disorder. Researchers have found that individuals who experience a higher number of anxiety disorders during adolescence are at increased risk of later anxiety disorders and educational underachievement (Woodward & Fergusson 2001). Further studies have found that adolescent anxiety predicts psychosocial outcomes in adulthood more effectively than does childhood anxiety. For example, anxiety in adolescence was found to be strongly associated with adverse outcomes at age 30, with adolescent anxiety significantly predicting poorer adjustment in adulthood, lower life satisfaction, poor coping skills, and high chronic stress (Essau et al., 2014). Moreover, adolescent girls are at increased risk of developing anxiety disorders than are boys (Essau et al., 2014). However, a paucity of research specifically aims to understand gender-specific risk factors in the development of clinical levels of anxiety

A specific social anxiety would be the fear of speaking in front of groups, whereas people with generalized social anxiety are anxious, nervous, and uncomfortable in almost all social situations. Social anxiety is associated with a number of negative adjustment outcomes, particularly with regard to adolescent peer relations. According to Vernberg (2002), social anxiety involves worry or excessive concern about social situations. It is typically characterized by an intense fear of what others are thinking about them (specifically fear of embarrassment, criticism, or rejection), which results in the individual feeling insecure, and that they are not good enough for other people. The results of this are fear and anxiety within social situations and the assumption that peers will automatically reject them.

The physiological manifestations that accompany social anxiety may include a racing heart, turning red or blushing, excessive sweating, dry throat and mouth, trembling (fear of picking up a glass of water or using utensils to eat), swallowing with difficulty, and muscle twitches, particularly around the face and neck (Pittler, 2011). The difference between social anxiety and normal apprehension of social situations is that social anxiety involves an intense feeling of fear in social situations and especially situations that are unfamiliar or in which one will be watched or evaluated by others. Overcoming social anxiety depends on the person and the situation. It can be just a matter of time for many individuals to adjust, yet for others, social anxiety can become disabling and chronic. The reasons are unknown (Pittler, 2011). Social anxiety can be related to shyness or anxiety disorders or other emotional or temperamental factors, but its exact nature is still the subject of research and theory. Recovery from chronic social anxiety is possible in many cases but usually only with some kind of therapy or sustained self-help or support group work (Pittler, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and Strengths-based approach (Fortune, 2018).

Ecological Theory

Boon, Cottrell, and King (2016) reveal that Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theoretical viewpoint is used to differentiate endurance and adjustment in the biophysical features of human beings. The theoretical model deals with the child's development in various aspects such as family, school, and peer group interaction (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Hence, this study linked this theory to social anxiety and peer acceptance in secondary schools. Bronfenbrenner

& Morris (2006) suggested that the environment of the child is a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next. He organized them in order of how much of an impact they have on a child. He named these structures the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and the chronosystem. Because the five systems are interrelated, the influence of one system on a child's development depends on its relationship with the others.

Strengths-based Approach

The strengths-based approach draws on studies of rejected children to inform experts such as psychologists and socio-psychologists and teachers about how accepted children could be affected when rejection took place. According to Olivares et al., (2005) strengths-based approach highlights that children and families have distinctive capacities, abilities, and life events. Thus, professionals who work from a strengths-based approach ask right questions to their clients (Haines et al., 2018). Researchers working from a strengths-based approach suggest that using assessments that focus on strengths allow experts to develop partnerships with families and children that may contribute to the child's enhanced performance and motivation (Burns et al., 2002). When applied to this study, the strengths-based framework used a definition of peer acceptance that focused on the positive nature of children's relationships rather than the identification of unsatisfactory relationships (peer rejection). This study looked at characteristics related to social anxiety and peer acceptance such as ratings of positive social skills.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A descriptive survey was used because it provides the basic data needed on respondents' experiences with and opinions on the problems under study. Similarly, a descriptive research design was used to give a picture of a situation or a population and therefore provides the basis for eliciting possible solutions for alleviating the problems under study.

The population comprise all senior secondary two (SS 2) students in all the public senior secondary schools in Ikorodu, Lagos, Nigeria. SS 2 students were considered most appropriate for the study because they are in the second terminal class in senior school that prepares them toward their senior secondary school certificate examination and therefore were not burdened with the pressure of preparing for external examinations. Three hundred and fifty (350) students from five schools were involved in the study using a stratified sampling technique. The sample size comprised 175 males and 175 females respondents totaling 350 respondents, which is mean that 35 males and 35 females were selected from each of the five schools as the sample of the study.

The questionnaire items were generated based on the relevant variables such as social anxiety, peer acceptance, social adjustment, and emotional support. Section A was devoted to the respondents' bio-data such as; gender, age, and class. B was designed to test the hypotheses which took the format of the Likert-type scale. Respondents had four optional responses vis-à-vis, Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Strongly Disagree (SD) and Disagree (D).

Experts in measurement and evaluation validated the instrument. In order to establish the degree of reliability, consistency, stability, and accuracy of measurement. A pilot test of the questionnaire was administered with 20 respondents in a school that was not part of the main study. The data collected from the pilot study was statistically analyzed for the purpose of reliability co-efficient. The Cronbach Alpha Coefficient was used as it is the most accepted reliability test tools applied by social researcher. The co-efficient of 0.74 was obtained. Based on the high value of the co-efficient, the instrument was judged reliable. Copies of the questionnaire were administered to the selected samples in each schools by the researcher in their schools during the school hours with with the assistance of their teachers. The questionnaires were completed immediately, and collection was done immediately to ensure a 100% return rate. Thereafter, copies of the completed questionnaires were collected and collated. Both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used in the analysis of the data. The descriptive statistics involve the use of frequencies and percentages for the bio-data. For the inferential statistics, on the basis of the hypotheses formulated, independent t-tests were used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. T-test are widely accepted as a tool to measure difference between two variables and the influence of one variable on the other applied by social researcher.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

Descriptive Analysis of Bio-Data

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by Gender

| Gender | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------|-----------|----------------|
| Male | 175 | 50 |
| Female | 175 | 50 |
| Total | 350 | 100 |

Table 1 showed that 175 (50%) respondents were male, while 175 (50%) respondents were female. Thus, both genders were equally represented in the study.

Table 2. Distribution of Respondents by Age

| Age | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------|-----------|----------------|
| 13 - 14 years | 46 | 13.1 |
| 15 - 16 years | 197 | 56.3 |
| 17 years and above | 107 | 30.6 |
| Total | 350 | 100 |

Table 2 showed that 46 (13.1%) of the respondents were within the ages of 13 to 14 years; 197 (56.3%), were ages 15 to 16 years while 107 (30.6%) of them reported ages 17 years and above. It can be concluded that different age groups are represented in this study. However, the majority of the respondents fell within age bracket 15 to 16 years.

Testing of Hypotheses

- **Hypothesis One:** This hypothesis in the null form states that there is no significant influence of social anxiety on adolescents' social adjustment. In testing this hypothesis, the Independent t-test statistical tool was used. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. T-test analysis of the influence of social anxiety on adolescents' social adjustment

| Social Anxiety | N | Mean | SD | Df | t-calc | t-crit |
|----------------|-----|-------|------|-----|--------|--------|
| Low | 183 | 35.78 | 3.96 | 348 | 4.91 | 1.98 |
| High | 167 | 36.45 | 5.10 | | | |

$P < 0.05$

Table 3 showed that the calculated t-value (t-cal = 4.91) is greater than the critical value (t-crit = 1.98) at 0.05 level of significance and 348 degrees of freedom. Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected while the alternative hypothesis was upheld. It is therefore concluded that there is a significant influence of social anxiety on adolescents' social adjustment.

- **Hypothesis Two:** This hypothesis states that there is no significant influence of peer acceptance on adolescents' social adjustment. In testing this hypothesis, the Independent t-test statistical tool was used. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. T-test table analysis of the influence of peer acceptance on adolescents' social adjustment

| Peer Acceptance | N | Mean | SD | Df | t-calc | t-crit |
|-----------------|-----|-------|------|-----|--------|--------|
| Low | 186 | 36.40 | 3.95 | 348 | 4.12 | 1.98 |
| High | 164 | 35.58 | 5.03 | | | |

$P < 0.05$

Table 4 showed that the calculated t-value ($t\text{-cal} = 4.12$) is greater than the critical value ($t\text{-crit} = 1.98$) at 0.05 levels of significance and 348 degrees of freedom. Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected while the alternative hypothesis was upheld. This shows that there is a significant influence of peer acceptance on adolescents' social adjustment.

- **Hypothesis Three:** This hypothesis in the null form states that there is no significant gender difference in the extent of social anxiety among adolescents. In testing this hypothesis, the independent t-test statistical tool was used. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. T-test analysis showing gender difference in the extent of social anxiety among adolescents

| Social Anxiety | N | Mean | Sd | df | t-cal | t-crit |
|----------------|-----|-------|------|-----|-------|--------|
| Male | 175 | 15.67 | 2.87 | 348 | 3.65 | 1.98 |
| Female | 175 | 13.45 | 2.17 | | | |

$P < 0.05$

Table 5 showed that the value of t-calculated ($t\text{-cal} = 3.65$) is significantly greater than the value of critical value ($t\text{-crit} = 1.98$) given 348 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. This led to the rejection of the null hypothesis and the acceptance of alternative hypothesis. This shows that there is a significant gender difference in the extent of social anxiety among adolescents.

- **Hypothesis Four:** This hypothesis in the null form states that there is no significant gender difference in the extent of peer acceptance among adolescents. In testing this hypothesis, the independent t-test statistical tool was used. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. T-test analysis showing gender difference in the extent of peer acceptance among adolescents

| Peer acceptance | N | Mean | Sd | df | t-cal | t-crit |
|-----------------|-----|-------|------|-----|-------|--------|
| Male | 175 | 16.25 | 3.52 | 348 | 4.02 | 1.98 |
| Female | 175 | 14.23 | 2.21 | | | |

$P < 0.05$

Table 6 showed that the value of t-calculated ($t\text{-cal} = 4.02$) is significantly greater than the value of critical value ($t\text{-crit} = 1.98$) given 348 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. This led to the rejection of the null hypothesis and the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis. Thus, it can be concluded that there is a significant gender difference in the extent of peer acceptance among adolescents.

4.2. Discussion

Hypothesis one found a significant influence of social anxiety on adolescents' social adjustment. The findings corroborate Khan et.al (2016), who found that social anxiety disorder has a hostile outcome on life contentment. It affects the quality of life of a person severely and thus makes him or her unstable both physically and psychologically. In addition, the finding is in agreement with Ghaedi and Tavoli's (2010) contention that a patient's quality of life depends on his or her physical, social, and psychological conditions. Similarly, Lodder et.al (2016) found that severity of social anxiety was correlated with deficits in social skills, attention difficulties, and learning problems in school settings.

Hypothesis two revealed a significant influence of peer acceptance on adolescents' social adjustment. This finding is in agreement with Slaughter et al. (2002), who reported that children who integrated well with their peers with their peers will likely show less hostility toward peers, while children who are disliked had high levels of belligerence and low social skills. The findings also support Su et.al (2016), who assert that children whose peers displayed these antisocial behaviours and conduct disorder often exhibits physical cruelty to other people.

Hypothesis three showed a significant gender difference in the extent of social anxiety among adolescents. This finding is in line with Yukselturk and Bulut (2009), that the psychological and social well-being of adolescents remained an essential protective factor in reducing risk for high levels of anxiety and avoidance.

Hypothesis four found a significant gender difference in the extent of peer acceptance among adolescents. This is also in agreement with Jones and Bouffard's finding (2012) that males, mental health was also revealed as a protective

factor for social anxiety. The higher the males' psychological and social well-being, the lower the social anxiety and avoidance rates in a male and that adolescents generally were characterized by high social anxiety and high avoidance. And more specifically Females more often were characterized by high anxiety compared to males.

5. CONCLUSION

We have seen in this study that pathways to social anxiety often reflect a set of complex and interacting factors that include both intrinsic and environmental factors. We have also established that social anxiety disorder is a condition characterized by a marked and persistent fear of being humiliated or scrutinized by others. Age-of-onset data point to adolescence as a developmentally sensitive period for the emergence of the condition, at a time when the peer group becomes increasingly important. The current study examined the influence of social anxiety and peer acceptance among secondary school students in Ikorodu in Lagos, Nigeria. Based on the results of the data analyses, the following conclusions were reached:

Identifying age and gender differences is vital especially for those taking care of children who are suffering from social anxiety disorder. Recognizing the potential threat of social anxiety in early childhood makes it easy for intervention and treatment for the victims.

Social anxiety significantly influenced adolescents' social adjustment. In other words, social anxiety disorder has a hostile outcome on life contentment. It can affect the quality of life of a person severely, making him or her unstable both physically and psychologically.

Peer acceptance significantly influenced adolescents' social adjustment. And a significant gender difference exists regarding social anxiety among adolescents. Similarly, significant gender differences exist in the area of peer acceptance among adolescents.

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher made the following recommendations: (1) The study recommends that the school authorities should provide a conducive learning environment for learning in order to eliminate the occurrences of social anxiety to improve the social adjustment of adolescents; (2) The study recommends that students should be encouraged to stay away from peers or friends who have negative attitude or influence. (3) Functional counseling service should be readily available in secondary schools and all other levels of education in order to provide social adjustment training to students; (4) Teacher/counselors should provide means of assisting students based on gender, so that students can benefit according to their ability and needs.

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