

The influence of Peer Pressure on High-risk Sexual Behaviour among High School Students in Nakuru East Sub County, Kenya

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Abstract: This study's aim was to establish the relationship between peer pressure and high-risk sexual behavior among high school students in Kenya. Twenty-eight students were sampled per school from form 1 to 4, which summed to 138 students in Nakuru East Sub County. Primary data was gathered from the 138 students through a structured questionnaire. Interviews were conducted to the school head teacher. Only 120 respondents were able to fill in the questionnaires. This meant that the response rate was 87.6%. The focus group discussions were done successfully as well as the interviews scheduled with the head teachers. Quantitative data was analyzed through statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) using cross tabulation and chi-square to determine response frequency and percentage. Cross tabulation was used to analyze the variables using tables and was supported by qualitative data. The Pearson Chi Square was 0.00 indicating that peer pressure influenced high-risk sexual behavior among high school students in Nakuru East Sub County, Kenya. The study found that peer pressure influenced the students' decisions on sex and relationships. The study concluded that peer pressure was an influence to high-risk sexual behaviour among high school students and the youth in general. It influenced the decisions they made on dating, sexual relationships, and sex. The study recommended that sex education should be included in the curriculum in order to help the students on gaining knowledge on life skills.

Keywords: peer pressure, high risk sexual behavior, high school students.

INTRODUCTION

It is at adolescence stage that risky behaviours such as irresponsible sexual behaviours start. These risky sexual behaviours are associated with risky decisions. It is high-risk sexual behaviour because it contributes to infection of sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies. This is because adolescents engage in relationships before maturity without knowledge of what works [1].

An irresponsible sexual decision in adolescents is a problem because it has been known to be an indicator of sexual risk behaviors later in life [2]. It is High-risk behaviour because it happens at an early age that is early sexual debut at teenage and it is unprotected exposing adolescents at risk of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV and AIDS. This research aims to investigate the high-risk sexual behaviour among secondary school students. Over time, the youths have been on the spotlight on sexually transmitted infections. Sexually transmitted diseases have affected approximately 21% of young people in Nakuru County [3]. The effects associated with high risk sexual behaviours are high with number of youths tested with STIs daily, unplanned pregnancies,

abortion leading to death and dropping out of school [4].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Peer pressure has been regarded as one of the most influential factors among adolescents [5]. The influence comes in the behavior they engage in and choices they make as they grow. The intensity of adolescent's sexual activity in Sub-Saharan Africa is less researched. Vast knowledge of this issue would be easy to formulate sexual and reproductive health interventions [6]. Adolescents are influenced by attitudes of their peers about pre-marital sex, contraception and safer sex practices.

According to Kirby [7] when teenagers are inclined to their peer's sexual behaviour, there is a higher chance to engage in early sexual behaviour. This means that, teenagers relationship with their friends determine the behaviours that they involve in. they will have many partners if their friends are also doing the same. Similarly, adolescents will use condoms if their peers have expressed their attitudes towards use of contraceptives. Therefore, value systems among peers spread among them. If peers well educated in sexual health and believe abstinence is the

best way to maintain sexual health, then there is a high probability that the group will not be involved in pre-marital sex. Peer pressure is among the key influences into the life of an adolescent.

Peer influences are a major concern in adolescents' development of health related behaviours[8]. Sexual behaviour is mostly influenced by norms in the peer group [9]. Adolescence comes with curiosity to both boys and girls. When they meet in a school setting, they are able to quickly influence each other's behavior. Research shows that having friends who express delay in their sexual debut is much likely to influence more peers to not engage into risky sexual behavior [10]. Parents would want to monitor their adolescents 24 hours so they may not fall victims of the negative effects from irresponsible sexual behaviours such as unsafe sex, drugs, and many partners but monitoring reduces as with age [11].

Peer influences spreads across among the boys and girls due to a need in fitting into the group or social circle [12]. To be accepted one has to adopt the way of life of the peers which include the risky sexual behaviour[13]. This is why the rate of sexually transmitted infections has been high among the young ones between 15-24years. Peers moves in packs and influences each other on the materials to watch such as pornography, the places to visit, and the clothes to wear. Girls from low-income areas such as slums face major challenges in their transition from childhood to adulthood [14]. Their older friends initiate most to these risky sexual behaviors at an early age. The environment is not safe for the girl child since parental monitoring is minimal [15]. Others are raped and engage with multiple partners in order to get money for education and to keep up with the peer pressure.

Peers engage with multiple partners with lack of knowledge on the effects that come with it. Peer attitude is the factor that leads to these behaviors. All this has brought adverse effects in the society by infections of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and death related problems due to abortion caused by unplanned pregnancies among the girls. Recent studies indicate that adolescents are having an early sexual debut at an average of 15 years old, the sexual act is usually unprotected which gives rise to early pregnancy, spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and AIDs [14]. Most of these adolescents are pressured by their peers to get money in order to live a luxurious life.

METHODOLOGY

The study covered secondary schools in Nakuru County, specifically Nakuru East Sub-county that has five sub locations. 28 students were sampled

per school from form 1 to 4, which summed to approximately 138 students in Nakuru East Sub County. Primary data was gathered from the 138 students through a structured questionnaire. Interviews were conducted to the school counselor or head teacher. The return was 120 questionnaires, 10 of which were spoilt and 8 incomplete. Quantitative data was analyzed through statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) using cross tabulation and with chi-square to determine response frequency and percentage as well as the statistical association between the independent and dependent variables. Quantitative findings were further supported by qualitative data collected from students through focus group discussions. The students participated voluntarily and the researcher had consent from the school heads. The study focused on certain ethical considerations including, keeping the respondents information private, and assuring the respondents that the research was to be used purely for academic purposes. The respondents were not required to write their names on the questionnaire for privacy.

FINDINGS

The following indicators were used to capture the concept of peer pressure: best friend's relationship status; best friends' number boyfriends/girlfriends; and use of condom by the best friend. As informed by previous research, the study hypothesized that these indicators of peer pressure had implications for the respondent's sexual behaviour.

Influence of Peer Pressure on Relationship Status

As illustrated in Table-1, approximately 70 percent of respondents whose best friend was dating also had a boyfriend/girlfriend. 88.0% who said their best friends were not in a relationship were also not in a relationship. This study reveals that the decisions made by their best friends influenced their decisions on having a boyfriend or girlfriend.

As noted in Chapter two of this study, Morton [5] in his research proved that peer pressure is regarded as one of the most influential factors among adolescents. The next characteristic illustrates the relationship between number of best friends' boyfriends/girlfriends and the respondents relationship status. 60 percent whose best friends had one boyfriend/girlfriend were also in a relationship and 40 percent were not. Over 60 percent of respondents whose best friends' had, two partners were also in a relationship compared to those who were not. This shows that although best friends' relationship status influenced the respondents' decision of having a boyfriend or girlfriend, the number of boyfriends or girlfriends was not very significant on their decisions.

Table-1: Distribution of respondents' relationship status according to best friends' relationship status

Characteristics	Categories	Percentage distribution		Pearson Chi-square
		Dating	Not dating	
Do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend?				
Does best friend have a boyfriend/girlfriend	Yes	70	30	0.00
	No	12	87	
Number of best friends boyfriends/girlfriends	1	60	40	
	2	70	29	
	3	62	37	

Source: Field data (2018)

The relationship between peer pressure and high-risk sexual behaviour was further confirmed by a focus group discussion done with the students who affirmed that peer pressure was indeed a key influence to the decisions they made on relationships and sex. The students shared their thoughts on this matter where the boys were positive about peer pressure influence on relationships and sex and said that what their friends did influenced their decision. One of the students shared that *'Peer pressure is a main influence because we do not want friends to think that we are cowards in having a sexual relationship.'* (Focus Group Discussion, Male Participant, 2018); while another supported the idea further by stating the following: *'Peer influence is something that we do not know how to overcome. It is what rules us mostly due to self-esteem issues. We would love talks on self-awareness.'* (Focus Group Discussion, Male Participant, 2018); the girls on the other hand confirmed that peer pressure was an influence to most of them.

The researcher found out that the girl child was more taken care of in terms of mentorship than the boys. This is because most of the students admitted that most of the sessions are arranged targeting the girl

child. This helped the girls make proper decisions. With the guiding question, the girls opened up to the interviewer that some of their friends were having sexual relationships with older men outside school for money and all this was as a result of peer pressure from especially their friends. They further said that their best friends contributed to some of them taking alcohol. One of them shared *'Yes peer pressure is an influence to most girls as their decisions are based on what their friends are doing.'* (Focus Group Discussion, female participant, 2018).

The head teachers and counselors confirmed the students narratives by indicating that peer pressure affected their students. Further, they pointed out that when the students join Form One they are usually *'innocent'* but that they get influenced into dating, sexual intercourse, and drug abuse. One of the head teachers stated; *"Peer pressure has been one of the major contributions. When teenagers meet, they share ideas; they learn and adopt different things from each other"* (Interview, Head teacher 1, 2018). The Table-2 illustrates the influence of best friends on use of condom among the students

Table-2: Distribution of Respondents' Condom Use in Relation to Best Friends' Condom Use

Characteristics	Categories	Use of condom by student		
		Percentage distribution	Pearson chi square	
Best friend use of condom	Yes	77.0	22.0	0.00
	No	50.0	50.0	

Source: Field data (2018)

As presented in Table-2 above, the study found that teen' decisions to use a condom or not are influenced by their best friend's best friends. For instance, 77 percent of respondents whose best friends used a condom in their last sexual act also used a condom while 22 percent did not, which contrasts with the finding that 50 percent of respondents whose best friends did not use a condom admitted to have used a condom. On the other hand, respondents whose best friends did not use a condom also admitted to not using a condom while 50 percent used it. This reveals that peer influence on use of protection is high. This confirms the findings in Table 2 that when adolescents believe that their peers prefer to use condom, they are

also more likely to use condoms. The ones who did not use them may have been shy to buy over the counter due to fear of judgment by the adults.

The students engaged in the conversation and narrated the influence of peer pressure to sexual behaviour, For instance one shared: *'Yes, friends pressure someone, for example my friend was influenced to masturbation which he was addicted to until he got help from the school counselor.'* (Focus Group Discussion, Male Participant, 2018). Interestingly one of the students shared his experience, which was supported by the group: *Peer pressure for me is a challenge. I come from the ghetto (slums),*

there is a gang that takes drug and engages in sexual behaviour. My friends from the gang are forcing me to join and am prompted to do so since I do not want them to see me as a coward and tease me.' (Focus Group Discussion, Male Participant, 2018).

The girls had different kind of peer influence. They said that they were in competition with each other where they needed to feel and look beautiful. Although not able to afford it this bred pressure. One of them explained, *'Girls always want to be beautiful especially at our age. Those who cannot afford it, influence each other and start sleeping with older guys who are working class in order to give them money.'* (Focus Group Discussion, Female Participant, 2018).

The respondents' went on to tell the researcher that they were in need on self-awareness talks as they believed it will empower them on how to say no to peer pressure. The boys expressed that it was hard to say no as men because they did not want to be judged. This was also researched by Tome [13] who found that for youths to fit in a group, they had to adopt the way of life of the peers which include high risk sexual behaviors such as early sexual debut and unprotected sex. The boys expressed that their relationships started as an influence from the elder boys whom they found as they joined secondary school. The researcher further probed and asked the students on where they learnt matters sex. Most of the boys and girls said that they learnt from their friends. This is because friends were easy to interact with and share information.

The head teachers confirmed the influence of peer pressure to high-risk sexual behaviour as one of them confirmed: *'Peer pressure is evident because I observe them in every step. The students influence each other's decisions on taking drugs where we have seen others dropping out due to addiction.'* (Interview head teacher2, 2018)

DISCUSSION

The study generally found that there was a close relationship between peer pressure high-risk sexual behaviour among students. This was evident through the survey questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions where the students admitted that they learnt sex education from friends. This was because friends were easy to talk to and they shared the same challenges. They therefore could learn and explore together. The study also established that when students joined Form one they were innocent and change of behaviour occurred after mingling and knowing each other. Through this there came the exchange of ideas and attraction to each other especially friends of the opposite sex. This encouraged coupling and dating. This association with each other influenced the decisions students made as individuals as they could now consult each other before taking

action. It was also observed that sexual behaviour was influenced by norms in the peer group. The study also found that the peers influenced each other on dating and use of condoms.

There was a close link on best friends' relationship status and the respondents also being involved in a relationship. It was observed that if a group of friends had a girlfriend or boyfriend; the respondents were most likely to also have one so as not to be rejected by the peers. The students also had an early sexual debut as all of them who admitted to have had sexual intercourse were still in high school. They were also aware of protection such as use of condom. Despite this awareness, some students admitted to not be using condoms. The study found that this could be due to ignorance, fear to buy over the counter due to judgment. Peer pressure stems to the location where the students lived and it was observed that the students were forced to make decisions due to fear of rejection, to fit in peer groups and to avoid judgment from their friends. Students especially boys felt a need to prove that they were not cowards and therefore had to engage with sexual multiple sexual partners, alcohol, and substance abuse which led to crime.

The students also confirmed this when one stated the challenges he is facing as his friends were influencing him into a group that takes drugs and alcohol. He could not avoid it since he did not want to be regarded as a coward. To maintain the expenses incurred by buying drugs he had sort to steal in order to have some money. As derived from the focus group discussions, the students admitted to the peer pressure and accepted that this would change if they got help on how they could avoid it. The students said that they would love to be taught more on self-awareness.

CONCLUSION

It was concluded that peer pressure was an influence to high-risk sexual behaviour among high school students and the youth in general. It influenced the decisions they made on dating, sexual relationships, and sex. The study concluded that best friend's decisions on sexual relationships influenced the respondents' decisions. Peer pressure has led to students becoming drug addicts, having multiple partners and casual partners at an early age that is while till in teenage years. The study also concluded that fear of rejection and need to fit in were the main reasons that high school students that influenced their decisions to move with peer norms.

The students were aware of the dangers that unprotected sex had such as spread of sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies. Despite this awareness, there were still students who had unprotected sex with their partners. This was due to ignorance such that the girls trusted their partners and felt that they could use other forms of

contraception to avoid pregnancy. This concluded that, adolescents were more concerned and feared pregnancy more than the dangers associated with unprotected sex such as sexually transmitted diseases and HIV and AIDS. On condom use, the study concluded that respondents whose best friends used condoms were also likely to report having used condoms too. The study concluded that peer pressure could be one of the main influences of high-risk sexual behaviors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that the students be taken through sessions on personal development that will help them have confidence and self-awareness in order to make firm decisions and prevent negative peer pressure. Additionally, parents should find time to spend with their children from a young age and much more in adolescence stage. As friends the students will be free to communicate what they are going through as they will have built trust with their parents/guardians. The study further recommends parental monitoring in every stage in order to take note of behavioral changes among the students. The study also suggested that sex education should be included in the Kenyan curriculum. This is because all round transformative knowledge is necessary to the students. The curriculum will empower the students holistically; academically, spiritually and also provide them with life skills. The resultant will remain visible through the development of community values and they will sensitize awareness.

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