

## Correlates and Consequences of Dating Violence in Adolescent Relationships in Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examined the causes and effects of dating violence in adolescent relationships. Two thousand three hundred and eighty six (2,386) adolescents consisting of nine hundred and eighty-eight (988) males and one thousand three hundred and ninety-eight (1,398) females between the ages of sixteen (16) and nineteen (19) drawn from five (5) tertiary institutions in Rivers State using the convenient sampling procedure participated in the study. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire, and analysed using frequencies and percentages. The study discovered psychological, verbal, physical and electronic attacks as the most common forms of dating violence that characterize adolescent relationships, while intrapersonal (such as low self-esteem, poor anger management, deception and secretiveness, jealousy, domineering/controlling attitude etc.), interpersonal (such poor communication skills, poor social skills, etc.), and situational (such as lack of guidance, disagreement on partner's choice of friends, inability to meet partner's demand etc.) factors are discovered to be active triggers of dating violence among adolescents. The study also discovered that dating violence causes a range of ills that do not promote individual and societal wellbeing and concluded that dating violence is an issue that must be addressed seriously as we gradually progress towards violent free relationships in our societies. The study therefore recommends that guidance counsellors and educators should evolve programmes that can effectively change inappropriate perceptions held by adolescents about dating relationships, and also improve conflict handling skills among adolescents. The study also recommends that influential adults like parents, guardians, teachers and coaches should be trained to work with adolescents to prevent dating violence, while anomalous social behaviours such as use of drugs and alcohol should be discouraged.*

**Keywords:** Dating, violence, adolescents, relationships, counsellors

### INTRODUCTION

In healthy dating relationships, partners do not only respect and trust each other; they also accept and embrace each other's peculiarities and shortcomings. They effectively communicate their needs and work together to resolve conflicts in a rational and non-violent manner. But maintaining a healthy relationship requires skills that many adolescents are not patients enough to learn. The lack of conflict handling skills and growing up in environments that celebrate violence or in communities that experience high rates of violence, can lead to unhealthy and even violent relationships among adolescents (Adamo, 2014). The prevalent pervasiveness of dating violence among adolescents has become a very worrisome phenomenon in our society in the present age. Though dating violence is as old as human romantic relationships, it has assumed a dimension in recent times (often involving the use of dangerous weapon and lethal force) especially among adolescent that has attracted the attention of government agencies, researchers, counselling psychologists, civil society organisations, social commentators, and human right protection organisations.

Disagreement on issues among partners in a relationship is a common occurrence; however, such disagreements when mismanaged, degenerate and give impetus for the infliction of harm or threat of same, on one of the partners by the other (Etuk et al., 2012). A plethora of actions and behaviours that occur in relationships qualify as dating violence, and may include psychological attacks like ignoring, undermining, stalking and other acts which belittles, humiliates, scares threatens or ridicules, verbal attacks like teasing, yelling and name calling and physical attacks including punching, choking, stabbing, raping, shooting, scalding with hot water or acid, setting on fire, etc. the result of which can range from humiliating, bruising to killing; all pass off as dating violence, and either of the partners can be the victim, though research indicates that female partners suffer the most (Davis, 1994). Dating violence is a significant issue affecting today's youths, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, intelligence, and socio-economic status (Lamm, 2010).

The intentional and persistent abuse of a partner in a relationship in ways that causes pain, distress, injury or death; or the abusive treatment of one partner by another, thus violating the basic human rights of the other have been the subject of national and international discourse in the past few decades. Dating violence has existed since the dawn of civilization and has continued over the centuries, showing up in varied forms and manifestations in different societies and cultures. Occurrences of dating violence have been on the increase all over the world, and people of varying social, racial, economic, educational and religious backgrounds experience it in different ways.

Many international documents stipulate that everyone (children, youths, adults and the aged) have the right to live work and learn without physical, psychological or sexual harm (Aminini-Philips, 2013). Despite the existence of legal instruments (both national and international) affirming the equality of all human beings with same degree of freedom and dignity without distinction of any kind, and the recognition of the fact that violence of any kind in relationships is anathema and does not promote human dignity and the welfare of society, prevents harmonious coexistence and cooperative social interactions, and hinders full development of the potentialities of individuals in the society, incidences of dating violence especially among adolescents have continued all over the world.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Dating violence in adolescent relationships as an anti-social behaviour is a phenomenon that has been in public consciousness for decades. It has also gained the attention of various stakeholder including governmental and non-governmental, psychologists and sociologists, parents, guardians and social workers, teachers and counsellors etc. Although a good number of research on the causes and consequences of dating violence in adolescent relationships has been conducted in the advanced societies, not much has been done in developing societies like Nigeria. This study is therefore an effort geared towards identifying the causes and consequences of dating violence in adolescent relationships in Nigeria.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The cardinal objective of this study is to identify the causes and consequences of dating violence in adolescent relationships in Nigeria, and to make recommendations on how parents, guardians and counsellors can work with adolescents to achieve healthy dating relationship, thus reduce the occurrence of dating violence in adolescent relationships in the society.

### **CONCEPTUAL REVIEW**

#### **Dating Violence**

According to Wikipedia (2014), dating is a part of human mating process whereby two people meet socially for companionship, beyond the level of friendship, or with the aim of

assessing the other's suitability as a partner in an intimate relationship or marriage. It is a form of courtship consisting of social activities done by parties involved in a relationship. To Albo (2011), dating refers to the activities two people share together with the intention of getting to know each other better on a potentially romantic level; while Strauss (2004) defined it as a dyadic relationship involving meeting for social interaction and joint activities with an explicit or implicit intention to continue the relationship until one or the other party terminates or until some other more committed relationship is established. Dating essentially, is getting to know someone over an extended period of time to determine if an intimate relationship is worth pursuing. While the meaning of the term can vary from one culture to another and from time to time, a common idea is two people trying out a relationship and exploring whether they are compatible, by meeting and engaging in some mutually agreed upon social activities together as a couple who may or may not yet be having sexual relations.

Violence on the other hand is the intentional use of force (physical, psychological, verbal, etc.) or power which may be threatened or actual, against oneself, another person or against a group of persons/community that either results in or has the likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation (WHO, 2013) in Aminini-Philips (2013). Violence includes any condition or act that creates a climate in which the individual feels fear or intimidation in addition to being a victim of assault, theft of vandalism (Aluede, 2011). Violence can also be conceived of as a continuum of intentional behaviour ranging from psychological, verbal, physical and electronic attacks meted by one party with the aim of humiliating, intimidating, scaring, causing bodily injury or psychological and emotional trauma or the outright death of another.

Dating violence is therefore the perpetration or threat of an act of violence by one member of a relationship on the other within the context of dating or courtship. It is a type of intimate partner violence that occurs between two people in a close relationship. It is a pattern of behaviours used to exert power or control over a dating partner or the deprivation of a dating partner's liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. Dating violence can also be defined as any behaviour including but not limited to verbal, physical, sexual and psychological abuses enacted by a dating partner and used to manipulate, gain control or power over the other; make a partner feel bad about him or herself; or make a partner afraid of his or her dating partner. Dating violence can take place in person or electronically, such as repeated texting, phone stalking or posting sexual pictures of a partner online (Wekerle and Wolfe, 1999).

According to Wingood et al., (2001), adolescents' perception of the prevalence of dating violence and their own experience of abuse may shape their beliefs regarding dating violence as normative and adversely influence their perceptions about safer sex and healthy relationships. These authors also stated that the prevalence of dating violence and its association with unhealthy behaviours that could lead to unintended pregnancy, STDs, and HIV infection have implications for clinical and public health practice. They contended that dating violence does not only threaten the immediate health of adolescents, but also thwarts the use of appropriate and healthy sexual health behaviours that prevent disease acquisition.

### **Adolescent Relationship**

An adolescent according to Merriam Webster online dictionary is a young person who is developing into an adult, or a young person who is going through adolescence, while adolescence describes the teen ages between thirteen (13) and nineteen (19) and can be considered as the transitional stage from childhood to adulthood. Adolescence is a period of

disorientation and discovering, it is a critical time in developing lifelong behaviours, attitudes, and expectations about intimate relationships. The transition from childhood to adulthood brings up issues of independence and self-identity (Wekerle and Wolfe, 1999). Developmental psychology suggests that adolescence is a crucial transitional period when the individual develops the tools to function as an independent adult. Social and emotional maturity is intertwined at this level of development and as adolescent's emotional maturity increases, their relationships with others (especially with the opposite gender) become more emotionally involved. Through the course of adolescence, adolescents generally progress from same-sex friendships, to mixed-gender friendships, to romantic and sexual relationships with the opposite sex (Karney et al, 2007).

Generally, adolescents of all ages value romantic relationships highly and seek them out for themselves even as healthy relationships during adolescence offers opportunities for growth and fulfilment that improve well-being and increase resilience in adulthood. A romantic relationship in this regard is one in which an individual perceive an on-going, reciprocated, emotional, erotically charged connection with a partner (Karney, et. al., 2007). It is usually characterized by a great deal of emotional involvement, including expressions of love, appearing in public as a couple, and exchanging gifts.

Data on the duration of romantic relationships during adolescence are rare, but what data exist suggest that the average romantic relationship during adolescence is not transient but rather lasts up to a year or more (Whitaker, et. al., 2000). Beliefs about the qualities that are important for successful romantic relationships evolve as youth move from middle school to high school and on to college and university, and this evolution in part reflects increasing clarity about the concept of "boy (girl) friend" across these years (Karney et al, 2007). In general, adolescents' ideas about romantic relationships emphasize physical attraction, intimacy and commitment; and adolescents of all gender categories, races, cultures view marriage as an important and desirable goal, and expect to get married themselves (Karney, et al, 2007).

### **Empirical Review**

Empirical research and statistical data on dating violence in adolescent relationships in Nigeria is very sparse, just as it is in other developing and traditional societies, as cases of dating violence are seldom reported because of stigma and the nonchalant attitude of law enforcement agents to issues of dating violence. However, available statistics and research reports from the advanced societies of the world suggests that dating violence among adolescents has risen to a level that requires the attention of public health practitioners, counsellors and other relevant stakeholders.

Several studies have been conducted to determine the correlates of dating violence, even as it is now widely recognized that dating relationships are more likely to witness violent behaviours than marital and co-habiting relationships (Strauss, 2004). Studies also show that girls and boys both use physical violence in dating relationships (Children Safety Network (CSN), 2012). Whereas girls initiate dating violence more often than boys (O'Keefe 2005, Mulford and Giordano 2008), they are more likely than boys to experience fear and serious injuries, including sexual abuse, as a result of teen dating violence (CSN, 2012). In fact, girls and young women ages 16 to 24 experience the highest rates of intimate partner violence (Noonan and Charles 2009), with anger commonly cited as the main reason. However, girls also give self-defence as a motive for their violent behaviour, while boys mention control of their partner as a factor in their use of physical aggression (O'Keefe 2005).

Albeit the non-existence of a unanimous agreement among scholars and commentators on the causes of dating violence, Centre for Disease Control (CDC) (2009) identified the following as risk factors for the perpetration of adolescent dating violence:

- i. Poor communication/social skills
- ii. Inability to manage anger
- iii. Belief in traditional gender roles
- iv. Association with friends who perpetrate dating violence
- v. Being a witness to family violence
- vi. Exposure to community violence
- vii. Acceptance of the use of dating violence
- viii. Use of alcohol and/or drugs

Research also indicates that low self-esteem correlates with dating violence perpetration for boys and with dating violence victimization for girls (O'Keefe 2005).

There is however conflicting evidence on the role of demographic factors, such as race/ethnicity, family structure, geographic location, and level of parent education, in teen dating violence. A study by Foshee et al, (2008) found that adolescents from minority groups, single-parent households, and homes in which parents have lower levels of education report more physical adolescent dating violence that is either moderate or severe, although it is not clear whether the greater prevalence is actually due to lower socioeconomic status, to residence in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, or to other factors (Offenhauer and Buchalter 2011).

According to Wingood et al, (2014) and Wekerle and Wolfe (1999), ninety per cent (90%) of adolescents have begun dating by 16 years old, and fifty per cent (50%) have experienced an episode of dating violence by age 15 years. It has also been discovered that adolescents who witness domestic violence in their family of origin are at a higher risk of inflicting violence upon later romantic partners, although these findings have been somewhat inconsistent (Powers and Kerman, 2006), and this association appears to be stronger for males than for females. However, O'Keefe (2005) posited that the witnessing of inter-parental violence plays a less significant role in becoming a victim of dating violence for both genders.

Centre for Disease Control (CDC) (2000) in Powers and Kerman (2006) reported that the average prevalence of dating violence for high school and college students in the US is 22% and 32% respectively, while Silverman et al (2002) analysing data from the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behaviour Survey between 1997 and 1998 estimated that one in every five adolescent high school girls experienced dating violence. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health collected during the 1994-95 school year, Halpern et al (2001) found that 32% of adolescents in 7-12th grade reported experiencing some kind of violence in dating relationships. Other smaller scale studies have found prevalence rates of dating violence ranging from 9% to 57% (O'Keefe, 2005). Evidence also suggests that certain risky behaviours are strongly associated with perpetrating or being a victim of acts of aggression adolescent relationships. These include the use of alcohol and other illegal drugs, as well as risky sexual behaviour, such as promiscuity and unsafe practices (O'Keefe, 1997).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a descriptive research design. 2,386 adolescents consisting of 988 males and 1,398 females between the ages of 16 and 19 that are currently enrolled in tertiary

institutions of learning in Rivers State, Nigeria participated in the study. The study collected data through a structured questionnaire. Respondents were required to simply tick yes or no to a number of items on a checklist. The data collected was analysed using frequencies and percentages.

**RESULTS**

**Table 1. Checklist of Common forms of Dating Violence in Adolescent Relationships**

<i>S/N</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>%</i>
1.	Psychological Attacks	1,273	53.35	1,113	46.65
2.	Verbal Attacks	1,793	75.14	593	24.86
3.	Physical Attacks	1,201	50.33	1,185	49.67
4.	Sexual Attacks	1,121	46.98	1,265	53.02
5.	Electronic Abuse (repeated calls or texting, posting embarrassing comments on social networks etc.)	1,199	50.25	1,187	49.75

**Table 2. Checklist of Correlates of Dating Violence in Adolescent Relationships**

<i>S/N</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>%</i>
1.	Double-dating	2,013	84.37	373	15.63
2.	Low self-esteem	1,964	82.31	422	17.69
3.	Inexperience/Immaturity	1,498	62.80	888	37.20
4.	Peer pressure	1,214	51.90	1,172	49.10
5.	Upbringing/Being a witness to family violence	1,119	46.90	1,267	53.10
6.	Depression, stress, anxiety and mood swings	1,846	77.3540		22.63
7.	Domineering/Possessive/Controlling attitude of partner	1,762	73.84	624	26.16
8.	Use of drugs/Alcohol	1,369	57.37	1,017	42.63
9.	Disrespect for partner’s opinion and privacy	1,613	67.60	773	32.40
10.	Lack of guidance	918	38.48	1,468	61.52
11.	Disagreement on partner’s choice of friends	1,311	54.95	1,075	45.05
12.	Inability to meet partner’s demand (sexual, financial, etc.)	1,623	68.03	763	31.97
13.	Poor communication skills	1,812	75.95	574	24.05
14.	Poor interpersonal/social skills	1,318	55.23	1,068	44.77
15.	Jealousy/Insecurity	1,296	54.31	1,090	45.69
16.	Growing up in a violent neighbourhood	1,019	42.71	1,367	57.29
17.	Unhealthy sexual behaviour	1,801	75.48	585	24.52
18.	Poor anger management	1,318	55.23	1,068	44.77
19.	Deception and secretiveness	1,215	50.92	1,171	49.08

**Table 3. Checklist of Consequences of Dating Violence in Adolescent Relationships**

<i>S/N</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>%</i>
1.	Unplanned pregnancy/STDs	1,824	76.44	562	23.56
2.	Use of drugs/Alcohol/promiscuity	1,227	51.42	1,159	48.58
3.	Depression/anxiety/fear/suicidal, etc.	1,311	54.94	1,075	45.06
4.	Feeling of humiliation/shame/guilt	1,374	57.58	1,012	42.42
5.	Loss of self-confidence and sceptical about long-lasting fulfilling relationship	1,502	62.95	884	37.05
6.	Abandonment of dreams and social withdrawal	1,208	50.62	1,178	49.38
7.	Physical injury/deformation/death	2,106	88.26	280	11.74

Form the analysis, it is discovered that psychological attacks, verbal attacks, physical attacks and electronic attacks are the most common forms of dating violence that characterize adolescent relationships. The study also identified the following as the most common causes of dating violence:

- i. Double-dating
- ii. Low self-esteem
- iii. Inexperience/Immaturity
- iv. Peer pressure
- v. Depression, stress, anxiety and mood swings
- vi. Use of drugs/Alcohol
- vii. Disrespect for partner’s opinion and privacy
- viii. Disagreement on partner’s choice of friends
- ix. Inability to meet partner’s demand (sexual, financial, etc.)
- x. Poor communication skills
- xi. Poor interpersonal/social skills
- xii. Jealousy/Insecurity
- xiii. Use of drugs/Alcohol
- xiv. Disrespect for partner’s opinion and privacy
- xv. Unhealthy sexual behaviour
- xvi. Poor anger management
- xvii. Deception and secretiveness

While the following are identified as effects of dating violence in adolescent relationships:

- a. Unplanned pregnancy/STDs
- b. Use of drugs/alcohol/promiscuity
- c. Depression/anxiety/fear/suicidal
- d. Feeling of humiliation/shame/guilt

- e. Loss of self-confidence and sceptical about long-lasting fulfilling relationship
- f. Abandonment of dreams and social withdrawal
- g. Physical injury/deformation/death

## **DISCUSSION**

Dating violence take different forms, while it is sometimes perpetrated personally, it can also occur electronically. From the data analysis, this study revealed that dating violence in adolescent relationships do not occur randomly but are caused by intrapersonal (such as low self-esteem, poor anger management, deception and secretiveness, jealousy etc.), interpersonal (such poor communication skills), and situational (such as disagreement on partner's choice of friends, inability to meet partner's demand) factors. The findings of this study cohere with findings from previous studies (such as O'Keefe, 2005, 2009; Silverman et al, 2001; CDC, 2000, 2009; Lamm, 2010; Miller et al, 2013, etc.).

Dating violence is not a socially acceptable behaviour and is therefore frowned against no matter the form it takes. Teens in dating relationship often enact violent behaviour towards one another both as an aggression and as defence; and irrespective of who is the perpetrator or the victim, dating violence has been discovered to affect adolescents negatively. This study has revealed that dating violence causes a range of ills that do not promote individual and societal wellbeing.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Dating violence is a serious issue that must be addressed seriously. Adolescents must be taught about the subtleties of dating violence, as well as the limits and boundaries they must observe in their dating relationships. They must be educated about the ills of perpetrating violence in dating relationships as early as possible so that they will grow up to understand and appreciate the gains of healthy relationships. Adolescents must be educated or guided on how to develop positive, healthy dating relationships that will be devoid of violence not only when they are adolescents, but also when they become adults (Wingood et al, 2001).

As we progress towards violent free relationships, the ultimate goal is to stop dating violence before it starts; hence strategies that promote healthy relationships must be contrived and propounded. During the adolescent years, individuals learn skills they need to form positive relationships with others. Adolescence is thus an appropriate phase of development to promote healthy relationships and prevent patterns of dating violence that can last into adulthood.

A variety of preventive measures should be engendered to reduce the occurrence of dating violence among adolescents. Guidance counsellors and educators should evolve effective programs that can change norms and inappropriate orientations held by adolescents about relationships, improve problem-solving, and address dating violence. Also, anomalous social behaviours, such as substance (drugs, alcohol, etc.) use must be discouraged. Furthermore, programmes that can prevent dating violence through the training of influential adults, like parents/caregivers and coaches, to work with youth to prevent dating violence (Mills et al, 2013) should be encouraged.



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