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RISK FACTORS OF CALLOUS-UNEMOTIONAL TRAITS AMONG UNDERGRADUATES: THE ROLE OF PEER PRESSURE AND SOCIAL MEDIA EXPOSURE

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Abstract

Undergraduates are mostly adolescents and young adults; populations that are easily influenced due to their quest for identity and peers approval. Such dispositions could be among the silent factors that impact callousness among some undergraduates. Hence necessitated the need for this study that examined peer pressure and social media exposure as risk factors of callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates. Participants in this study were 493 undergraduates; selected using multi-staged sampling method, from five different departments in Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. Their ages ranged from 18 to 29 years; with a mean age of 22.21, and standard deviation of 2.54. Three instruments were used for data collection, they are: Peer Influence Scale, Content-based Media Exposure Scale and Inventory of Callous-unemotional Traits. This study was a correlational study that adopted multiple regression statistics for data analyses. From the results, it was found that the first hypothesis which stated that peer pressure would significantly predict callous-unemotional traits was accepted at β=.24, t=5.856, p<.001. It was also found that the second hypothesis which stated that antisocial media exposure would significantly predict callous-unemotional traits was accepted at β=.38, t=9.276, p<.001. However, the third hypothesis which stated that neutral media exposure would significantly predict callous-unemotional traits was rejected at β=.07, t=.945, p>.05. Based on the findings, the researchers recommended among others, that school psychologist should periodically organize programs that educate undergraduates on the impact of antisocial media exposure on their behaviour in order to reduce their internalization, and exhibition of callous-unemotional traits.

Keywords: Peer pressure, Social media, Exposure, Callous-unemotional traits, Undergraduates

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1. Introduction

Undergraduates are mostly adolescents and young adult; populations that are easily influenced, due to their quest for identity and peers approval (Onuoha et al., 2025). More so, majority of them spend most of their time on the internet in search of trending life styles to copy; making them prone to the influence of contents on social media. Noticeably, there are numerous antisocial contents on the internet. Thus, a breeding space for maladaptive behaviours. These antisocial media contents can influence these undergraduates into developing maladaptive behaviour through constant exposure, association, and modeling of such media contents uploaded by their peers as well as those they considered as influences or celebrities. The uncontrolled popularity on social media accorded to the flamboyant life styles of individuals known as non-compliances to social standard could have negative implications on the moral stand of undergraduates (Okeke et al., 2024). Hence, misuse of social media could distort the perception of undergraduates, and could influence their modeling of antisocial behaviours; which over time, can manifest as callousness. The forgoing necessitated the need to examine the role of peer pressure and social media exposure as risk factors of callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates; aimed at establishing, with empirical evidence, the role of these factors (peer pressure and social media exposure) in the development of callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates.

According to Vasconcelos et al. (2012), callous-unemotional traits in adolescent often potentiates psychopathy in adulthood; and it is closely associated with antisocial behavior (Waller et al., 2017; Zych et al., 2019). Thus, making the study of callous-unemotional traits and factors that act as their determinant pertinent, due to their associated maladaptation. Callous-unemotional traits comprises

of temperament dimensions; with features of low empathy or absence of empathy, limited affect, interpersonal insensitivity, superficial emotional expression and lack of concern for others (Frick et al., 2014; Waller & Wagner, 2019). Externalizing these maladaptive behaviors by youths that are high on callousness usually cause psychological and physical pain to their victims. Usually, callous-unemotional traits are high among children and adolescents with disruptive behavior disorder.

Within the university community, undergraduates who are high on callous-unemotional traits pose as threats to themselves, their counterparts and to the general university community; due to their recklessness and aggressive patterns of behaviors. Individuals that are high on callous-unemotional traits adopt maladaptive behaviour as instruments of obtaining their desired goals; while showing no concern about the repercussions of their actions on their victims, as well as the punitive measures that can result from their maladaptive behaviours (Wakschlag et al., 2018; Pardini & Byrd, 2012). This insensitivity to fear or punishment encourages more disruptive behaviors among youths or undergraduates with high level of callous-unemotional traits, placing them at risk of incarceration or even death. Callous-unemotional traits do not just form in a vacuum to build the personality of individuals, but have genetic etiology and environmental influence that act as triggers of these traits (Viding et al., 2008). It is very necessary to ascertain the etiology of callous-unemotional traits in order to curb the disruptive behaviors of undergraduates who possess them as well as its impact on their peers.

Peers are critical in the life of every individual. According to Madtha et al. (2022), peers are individuals that readily interact with us. They exert some level of influence on us; which brings about behavior modifications. According to APA (2018), peer pressure is the influence exerted on an individual by a peer group in order for the person to fit in with, or to conform to the group's norms and expectations. Peer pressure has a negative connotation that involves compulsion (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021). However, it can exist in positive form. According to Morrison et al. (2004), negative peer pressure involves getting someone to take a wrong action while the positive form occurs when one is encouraged to do something good. Hence, undergraduates who belong to peer groups, whose members lack concern for others and always engage in disruptive behaviors can learn to act in the same way that is typical for individuals that are high on callous-unemotional traits. Bandura (1977) opined that people observe and imitate the behaviors of others. This can be the case of undergraduates that are pressured to become antisocial; who formerly did not exhibit antisocial behaviors, but because of their constant exposure to antisocial behaviour; either as a result of their membership to certain group, or through the media contents they consume.

Social media has become particularly popular among youths; and can shape both positive and negative behaviors (Onuoha et al., 2025). Although social media have become a platform where people especially youths communicate, make money and engage in other productive activities, it have also been observed to have potential negative influence on behavior and emotions of individuals (Onuoha et al., 2025; Anderson et al., 2010; Fanti et al., 2009). Since numerous variance of information are available on the social media; either in virtual or written form. With the popularity of social media influencers, netizens especially the young ones pattern the behavior of these influencers whether violent or not, as long as they identify with them.

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Fanti et al. (2013) asserted that there are high levels of violence on the mass media; and it is crucial to note that violent behaviors are typical of individuals that are high on callous-unemotional traits. With the high level of negative and violent information available on social media, it may perpetuate the development of callousness among undergraduates who feed on them. On the long run, such callousness can become part of their personality build- up, influencing how they act, feel, and think. Hence, it is safe to infer that repeated exposure to negative contents on social media can facilitate the development of callousness among undergraduates.

Statement of the Problem

Individuals who are high on callous-unemotional traits (CU traits) poses significant challenges to self and the society; due to their propensity for maladaptive behaviours. Such maladaptive behaviour can hamper the overall goal of student-hood, and can place them at risk of criminal behaviour, impulsivity and recklessness that can further complicate their life and that of the significant others in their life. Hence, identifying and understanding the etiology of these traits and related factors are crucial for developing effective interventions to mitigate these maladaptive and disruptive traits.

Among Nigerian population, many scholars have investigated factors that are associated with maladaptive behaviours. Scholars such as: Adeniyi and Jinadu (2021), Nwafor et al. (2021), Nnadozie et al. (2022), Nweke et al. (2023), Nweke et al. (2024), Tobih et al. (2024), Onuoha et al. (2024), Okeke et al. (2024), Onuoha, (2024), Onuoha et al. (2024), Okafor et al. (2024), Emekpor et al.(2024), Azuh et al. (2024), and Onuoha et al. (2025). However, none among them examined the impact of those psychological factors on callous-unemotional traits. More so, among those that investigated callous-unemotional traits among adolescents; such as: Allen et al. (2018), Goulter et al. (2023), Waaler et al. (2024), Ugwu (2024) and Wilke et al. (2024). None to the best of the researchers' knowledge examined peer pressure and social media exposure as risk factors of callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates in the South Eastern part Nigeria. Hence, the need for this study that examined the roles of peer pressure and social media exposure on callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra States, Nigeria. Aimed at filling the observed gap, as well as adding new literature and empirical evidence to the body of knowledge in respect to peer pressure, social media exposure and callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates.

Theoretical Framework/ Empirical Review

Theoretically, this study anchored on social learning theory developed by Bandura (1977) because it established the relationship between the factors of interest (peer pressure and social media exposure), and their predictive relationship on callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates. According to the theory, people observe others behave and pattern after the observed behavior. For instance, when undergraduates gain admission into institutions of their choice, they make friends and identify with them (cliques or peer groups). This association influences their behaviours to align with that of the members of the group and in line with the rules guiding the group. Due to these need to conform, undergraduates can model or copy callousness without

previous record of such behaviour at home. By implication, identifying with a group known for disruptive behaviors can influence the exhibition of disruptive behavior. Overtime, such disruptive behaviour can become part of the person's personality traits. Furthermore, through constant exposure to callousness and antisocial behaviour on the social media, undergraduates can model and internalize such behaviours; hence, their exhibition of callous-unemotional traits.

Empirically, some researchers have delved into the factor of callous unemotional traits and have highlighted their finding. Scholars such as Perhamus and Ostrov (2024) assessed peer socialization processes in the development of callous-unemotional traits among adolescents; and found a positive relationship between irritability and callous-unemotional traits. Sattar and Malik (2022) examined peer pressure as predictor of delinquent behavior. Their findings revealed that a strong relationship existed between peer pressure and delinquent behaviors. Fanti et al. (2013) conducted a longitudinal study that investigated the association between conduct problems and media violence exposure with adolescents' callous-unemotional traits as a mediator. One of the study's findings showed that a bidirectional association exists between callous-unemotional traits and media violence exposure. Furthermore, Libisch et al. (2002) examined the role of peer pressure in adolescents' risky behaviors. Their findings suggested that adolescents that are associated with stable peer groups are less likely to engage in risky behaviors.

Hypotheses

In line with the objectives of the study, the following hypotheses were postulated to guide this study; that:

1. Peer pressure would significantly predict callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates.
2. Antisocial media exposure would significantly predict callous unemotional traits among undergraduates.
3. Neutral media exposure would not significantly predict callous unemotional traits among undergraduates.

This study aimed at understanding the role of peer pressure and social media exposure in the development of callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates. Hence, it is expected that the empirical findings in this study will show if there is a relationship between peer pressure, dimensions of social media exposure and callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates.

2. Method

Study Design

This study is a survey research that utilized a correlational research design to assess peer pressure and social media exposure as risk factors of callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. For the postulated hypotheses to be

tested, the researchers adopted multiple regression statistics as the appropriate statistics for data analysis, using SPSS version 25.

Participants

The participants in this study were 493 undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka; selected from the Department of Economics, Business Administration, Computer Sciences, Civil Engineering, and Adult Education. They were selected using multi-stage sampling method. Their ages ranged from 18 to 29 years, with a mean age of 22.21 and a standard deviation of 2.54. Among the participants, males were 211 while females were 282. Christians among them were 418, Muslim were 72. While the others 3 did not specify their religious affiliation.

Instruments

Three instruments were used in this study for data collection, they were: Peer Influence Scale, Content-based Media Exposure Scale, and Inventory of Callous-unemotional Traits.

Peer Influence Scale:

Peer Influence scale (PIS) was developed by Rigby and Slee (1993). It is a 10 items inventory designed to elicit the extent one is influence by peer group. These 10 items are rated on a 5-point likert-scale format, ranging from 1= (Strongly Disagree) to 5= SA (Strongly Agree). Sample items of PIS include: “Pressure to follow the rules”, “Pressure to skip important duties”, and “Pressure in bulling someone”.

Validity and Reliability

The authors reported an internal consistency of .88 for PIS. They further reported the Guttman Split half coefficient of .78; an equal length Spearman Brown of .73, and an unequal length of 0.71. From a pilot test conducted by Emekpor (2025) involving 45 undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, a reliability coefficient of .81 was reported. Furthermore, this present study reported a reliability coefficient of .83.

Content-based Media Exposure Scale (C-ME)

The Content-based Media Exposure (C-ME) is a 17 items inventory developed by den Hamer et al. (2017); with a 5-point Likert scale response format. C-ME measures the extent and frequency of one’s exposure to contents on media. The scale assesses the exposure to contents such as: violent, sexually explicit contents, substance-related contents, and pro-social content. Thus, the scale measures how each of these different types of contents on media influences one’s attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, particularly in relation to aggression, violence, and other social issues.

Validity and Reliability

The authors correlated Trait Aggressiveness with exposure to antisocial media for boys, and girls and reported r ¼ 0.43, $p < 0.001$, and r ¼ 0.41, $p < 0.001$ for boys and girls respectively. They further reported a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.87 for antisocial media exposure, .82 for neutral media exposure, and .72 for the total scale (den Hamer et al., 2017). The researchers tested the reliability of this scale, and found a reliability coefficient of .87. This indicated that the scale is reliable.

Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits

Inventory of Callous-Unemotional traits was developed by Frick in 2004 to measure lack of empathy; and contained 24 items. In 2006, Essau validated the scale (Essau, 2006). After the validation, 22 items were retained, and were rated on a four 4-point Likert scale format; ranging from 0= (not at all true) to 3= (definitely true). Some items of the scale were direct scored; while some were scored in a reverse format. The reversed scored items include: items number 1, 2, 4,7,11,13,14,15, 17, 21, and 22. The scale has three sub-scales; which are, uncaring, callousness, and unemotional. Sample items of the scale are: " I express my feeling openly", and "I feel bad or guilty when I do something wrong"
.

Validity and Reliability

Essau (2006) reported the internal consistency of the total scale as .81. More so, .81, .80, and .53 were reported for uncaring, callousness, and unemotional sub scales respectively. Nwafor (2018) validated the inventory among Nigerian's populations, and reported a Cronbach alpha of .75 for ICU 22. For the three sub dimensions, he reported a Cronbach alpha of .71, .71, and .56 for uncaring, callousness, and unemotional sub-scales respectively. The researchers, in this present study, reported a reliability coefficient of .72, .74 and .54 for uncaring, callousness and unemotional respectively; and .76 for the total inventory.

Procedure

From the nine faculties in Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka Campus, five faculties were randomly selected using simple random sampling method. They are Management Sciences, Education, Physical Sciences, Engineering, and Social Sciences. From the selected faculties, the researchers further selected one department from each, using convenient sampling method; they are, Department of Economics, Business Administration, Computer Sciences, Civil Engineering, and Adult Education. After selecting the departments for the study, the researchers applied for an introduction letter from the Head of Department of Psychology to help them access the selected departments, and undergraduates in the departments. After obtaining the introduction letter, the researchers went to the Departments selected for the study. With the help of the introduction letter, the researchers were able to access the undergraduates at their lecture halls. After the researchers

had introduced themselves and explaining the nature of this study to the undergraduates, those that agreed to be part of the study were administered the copies of the questionnaire; after signing the consent form. Each of the selected departments were administered 100 copies of the questionnaire, making it 500 administered copies in all. However, 497 copies of the questionnaires were returned. Of the 497 returned copies, 493 properly filled copies were selected, and coded in the SPSS, and were used for data analyses.

Statistics

Moderated regression statistic was adopted by the researchers as the main inferential statistical tool for data analyses, and testing of the three postulated hypotheses of this study; using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.

3. Results

Table 1: ***Summary of the descriptive and correlational statistics for age, callous-unemotional traits, peer pressure, antisocial media exposure, and neutral media exposure***

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
Age	22.21	2.54				
CUT	-	-	.01			
PeerP	-	-	.06	.15**		
AntiSoc M E	-	-	.03	.30**	.09*	
Neut M E	-	-	.02	.06	.-09*	.04

*NOTE, *=.05, and **.01 level of significance. PeerP means peer pressure, AntiSoc M E means antisocial media Exposure, and Neut M E means neutral media exposure*

Table 1 above showed that age did not correlate with callous-unemotional traits. Table 1 also showed that peer pressure did not correlate with age, but correlated with callous-unemotional traits. Also, antisocial media exposure is did correlate with age, but it was found to be correlated with callous-unemotional traits, and peer pressure. Furthermore, neutral media exposure did not correlate with age, callous-unemotional traits, and antisocial media exposure; but it negatively correlated with peer pressure.

Table 2: ***Multiple regression statistics table, predicting the relationship between peer pressure, antisocial media exposure, and neutral media exposure on callous-unemotional traits***

VARIABLES	R Square	Adjusted R2	df1	df2	F	*B*	SE	T	Sig
Model 1	.21	.20	3	490	43.82				
PeerP						.24	.02	5.856	000
Anti Soc M						.38	.04	9.276	000
Neut M						.07	.01	.945	.532

NOTE, significant at .05, and .001 level of significance. PeerP means peer pressure, AntiSoc M E means antisocial media Exposure, and Neu M E means neutral media exposure.

The result from table 2 showed that peer pressure predicted callous-unemotional traits. Hence, the first hypothesis of the study which stated that peer pressure would positively and significantly predict callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates was accepted at (β=.24, t=5.856, p<.001). This finding indicated that for every additional unit of peer pressure, callous-unemotional traits increases by .24 units among undergraduates. It was also observed from table 2 that antisocial media exposure predicted callous-unemotional traits among undergraduate. Hence, the second hypothesis of the study which stated that antisocial media exposure would predict callous-unemotional traits was accepted at (β=.38, t=9.276, p<.001). This finding also indicated that for every additional unit of antisocial media exposure, callous-unemotional traits increases by .38 units among undergraduates. However, table 2 also showed that neutral media exposure did not predict callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates. Hence, the third hypothesis of the study which stated that neutral media exposure would not predict callous unemotional traits was accepted at (β=.07, t=.945, p>.05).

4. Discussion

This study examined peer pressure and social media exposure as risk factors of callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates. In line with the research objectives, the researchers formulated three hypotheses that were tested, using multiple regression statistics. The results revealed that peer pressure predicted callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates. Antisocial media exposure also predicted callous-unemotional traits. Furthermore, the result showed that neutral media exposure did not predict callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates. The first result of this study that showed the existence of a predictive relationship between peer pressure, and callous-unemotional traits. This led to the acceptance of the first hypothesis of this study which in consonance with that of Sattar and Malik (2022). They investigated peer pressure as a predictor of delinquent behaviour among adolescents; and found a strong relationship between peer pressure, and delinquent behaviour. Furthermore, the finding is also in agreement with that of Perhamus and Ostrov (2024) that assessed peer socialization processes in the development of callous-unemotional traits among adolescents; and found a positive relationship between irritability and callous-unemotional traits.

The second hypothesis of the study was accepted which indicated that a significant relationship existed between antisocial media exposure and callous-unemotional traits of undergraduates. This finding is in line with that of Fanti et al. (2013) that did a longitudinal study to examine the association between conduct problems and media violence exposure with adolescents' callous-unemotional traits as a mediator. Their finding indicated that an association existed between callous-unemotional traits and media violence exposure. Similarly, Purba et al. (2023) examined the association between media use and risky health behaviours; and found that young people that are frequently involved in antisocial contents on the media are mostly involved in risky behaviour. Nova et al. (2024) found that social media exposure does not only influence one's risky sexualities, but also their orientation of sexual behaviours. Furthermore, Onuoha et al. (2025) investigated the

relationship between social media exposure and risky sexual behaviour; and found that antisocial media exposure predicted risky sexual behaviour among undergraduates. The third hypothesis of the study was rejected which showed that neutral media exposure is not associated with callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates. This finding is in line with that of Burnay et al. (2022) that found no association between neutral media exposure and maladaptive behaviour. Furthermore, Onuoha et al. (2025) examined the role of social media in predicting risky sexual behaviour; and found that neutral media exposure does not predict risky sexual behaviour among undergraduates.

Implications of the Study

This study examined peer pressure and social media exposure as risk factors of callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates, and the findings of this study have significant implications. Theoretically, the findings in this study can be used for further expansion of the theoretical framework of this study; since it was found that constant exposure to patterns of behaviour could influence one's behaviour. Hence, the finding validates social learning theory of Bandura (1977) which holds that we can learn and model behaviours that we are exposed to over time. It also implied that the peer group one associate with is an important factor for their development and the exhibition of callous traits

Practically, clinical psychologist and school psychologist working with undergraduates should probe the media contents undergraduates are exposed to, as well as the company that they keep when dealing with callous behaviour.

Furthermore, this present study highlighted factors that are associated with callous-unemotional traits. Hence, keeping these factors in check will bring about reduction in the rate of callousness among undergraduates.

5. Conclusion

This study examined peer pressure and social media exposure as risk factors of callous-unemotional traits among undergraduates. Based on the objectives of the study, three hypotheses were formulated and analyzed using multiple regression statistics. The results revealed that the association that undergraduates keeps, and the social media contents that they are exposed to are among the silent factors that influences their callous-unemotional traits. Based on these findings, the researchers made the above recommendation, aimed at optimal reduction of callousness among undergraduates.

6. Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers recommended as follow:

1. That school psychologist should periodically organize programs that will educate undergraduates on the impact of antisocial media exposure on their behaviour; aimed at the reduction of their internalization, and exhibition of callous-unemotional traits.

2. That undergraduates should be mindful of their association with peers; putting into consideration the kind of peers they keep, and the impact of such association on their behaviour, and personality formation.
3. That the universities management should constantly organize seminars and workshops on the impacts of antisocial media contents, as well as the detrimental impact of negative peers on the development of maladaptive behaviour.

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